

The COVID-19 Crisis and Homeschooling: A Reflection of a Parent, a Teacher, and a Scholar

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Abstract: This article reflects my perceived experiences as a female parent, teacher, and scholar in the province of Alberta during the COVID-19 crisis. Such a crisis has impacted education worldwide, and “homeschooling” has become forcibly popular to prevent the community spread of the coronavirus. Overnight, homes became the new school environment. Classroom teachers had to adjust their teaching approaches to accommodate the new reality of working from home, often relying on technology. Parents suddenly became teacher aides, and students were required to take on a new level of responsibility towards becoming distant learners, a more independent role. This article offers an insight into the emerging branching of the concept “homeschooling” into “home-learning,” seeking to conceptualize it and instigate further conversations around teaching and learning. Ultimately, I hope to encourage more studies, perhaps using what we know about homeschooling as a baseline to further investigate this new, COVID-19-ignited educational approach.

Keywords: remote learning, COVID-19 crisis, mental health, education

As a teacher, a scholar, and a mother of an elementary school-age child in the Canadian province of Alberta, I assumed that I had a fair understanding of a variety of teaching delivery methods. After all, I have often used technology to expand the classroom context while teaching many elementary and high school students, as well as post-secondary students, over the years. As the mother of a Grade 2 child, I often help my son with his homework and to improve his French reading and math skills. Besides, I have a few friends who, for various reasons, chose to fully educate their children at home—something I had never considered.

I initially thought that all these experiences were enough to understand what “homeschooling” was until the COVID-19 pandemic became widespread, schools closed down, and classes moved online. I had to quickly adapt to a new reality where the physical school space was no longer an option.

The word “homeschooling” instantly became popular among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The questions that came to my mind were these: Is what we are doing now homeschooling? If not, then what is it? Is this a new teaching model, where the physical space in which we teach and learn becomes virtual for both teachers and students? What can we learn from the homeschool practices currently being implemented in many Canadian households?

This paper is contextualized in a third space where my imagination and curiosity reside. It is the journey of a parent, a teacher, and a scholar exploring what we know about homeschooling in Canada. The article articulates a reflection of the present understanding of homeschooling and the spread of what I would call *home-learning* in the current COVID-19 crisis context.

Reflection of the Literature

It is important to acknowledge that I am an avid reader and what I read is often added to my experiences to make sense of a broader world. This aspect of my personality is reflected throughout my writing as I am telling you my story during this pandemic.

I will start by explaining the two main terms that I will be using in this paper: homeschooling and home-learning. Homeschooling, also known as home education, is an educational choice available to parents in Canada which gives them the option to teach their children at home. These parents are responsible for designing lesson plans and implementing the curriculum outside of the school setting under different degrees of governmental and educational supervision and support (Van Pelt, 2015). I believe parents have a deep understanding of their children and can be instrumental in supporting their children's learning. In this sense, developing collaborative relationships between parents and schools is key to the success of education (Chen & Harris, 2009).

In the context of the global COVID-19 crisis, a new conceptualization of homeschooling has emerged which I will refer to as home-learning. The term home-learning is used in this article to address the phenomenon of learning (commonly associated with the learning taking place in school buildings) that was abruptly transferred to students' homes while still being mainly supported by teachers in a type of partnership with parents.

The overall literature on homeschooling in Canada is scarce (Arai, 2000; Davies & Aurini, 2003; Eaton, 2018), and literature on this newly conceptualized term of home-learning derived by the COVID-19 crisis is in its early stages, or is a novelty, especially in the context of education. I will be focusing on providing the reader with an insight into what happened in one specific household of an educator and a parent, hoping that this paper will instigate further attention to the home-learning phenomenon taking place during the COVID-19 crisis.

The history of homeschooling in Canada is often associated with the beginning of formal education. However, the general understanding of education can be amplified beyond the boundaries of the school's physical spaces and its formal organization. As Dewey (1938) suggests, learning is often constructed and amplified through experiences, and perhaps mutual active exchanges between teachers and students. One way in which such interactions take place is storytelling. Throughout history, many different civilizations have taught youngsters through storytelling.

In this sense, the beginning of homeschooling in Canada could be traced to the transmission of knowledge taking place among the diverse indigenous groups living in Canada before the arrival of the Europeans. Knowledge of the land, culture, and traditions, and everyday life was passed down from elders to youngsters from generation to generation (Bruchac, 2014; Semali, 1999). Different from formal curriculum models, which often prioritize a more structured plan, indigenous teaching is guided by problem-solving daily needs; relying on the wisdom, experiences, and resources of the elderly and the community; and finding creative and intuitive ways to prioritize what needs to be learned (George, 1999).

It is important to note that the pedagogical perspectives of indigenous knowledge have played a vital role in the lives of indigenous peoples, strongly contributing to their survival (Semali, 1999). Indigenous knowledge is vital to process and cope with present changes, informed by the past while looking forward. Such knowledge points to community-effective practices to problem-solving developed over time by our ancestors through trials, fails, and successes (Semali, 1999). As we address the challenges of this pandemic and the damage it has inflicted on global communities, I think about how valuable this sense of “coming together” is as a community to address the challenges imposed by these rapid changes in the way we live, the respect and appreciation for interconnected lives, and the notion of a global tribe, where the well-being of one is the well-being of all.

Currently, indigenous knowledge does not always find its validation in the formal school curriculum, but this does not discredit its pedagogical worth (Semali, 1999). As indigenous communities strive to maintain the practice of “homeschooling” their youngsters on matters that will impact their lives, valuable lessons of knowledge and wisdom are passed on to future generations.

The indigenous perspective on homeschooling is an important one. It is one that opens other possibilities on how we, as parents, decide what education our children should receive, which brings us to the birth of formal homeschooling education in Canada.

Homeschooling has been a practice in Canada prior to its foundation, but it was only in the late 1970s that homeschooling started to establish itself as an educational option for parents dissatisfied with the school-based public education available (Van Pelt, 2015). The reasons why some parents choose to homeschool their children are broad—for instance, parents’ religious convictions; concerns about the quality of the education being offered to gifted children; as well as a damaging negative environment often found in schools, where children may be teased and/or excluded by other peers during unsupervised times, have all been listed as factors in the decision to homeschool (Arai, 2000).

It is estimated that between 47,500 to 95,000 children out of 4.86 million students in K-12 public schools are homeschooled in the different provinces and territories in Canada (CHBL, 2020; Statista, 2020). Homeschooling is legal in all provinces and territories in Canada, but each province and territory has its own rules and regulations (Fletcher, 2020).

According to the Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents (OFTP, 2020), school boards were in charge of overseeing homeschooling in the past, but since 2002, a new policy stated that school boards were no longer allowed to make curriculum-related demands on parents without “reasonable grounds” to open an investigation into the education students are receiving at home (OFTP, 2020).

In Alberta, parents do not require permission to homeschool, but they have to register by submitting a notification form to the school authority. Parents or legal guardians are required to engage in a “supervised partnership” with the school board of their choice to support teaching and learning at home (Fletcher, 2020).

The province of Alberta may provide funding to parents who choose to homeschool their children, but it will assign a school board “facilitator” to oversee the homeschooling education being offered at home (Fletcher, 2020). Similar approaches to homeschooling are implemented in other provinces, such as British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Homeschool funding is also available to all three territories in Canada.

Other provinces in Canada have different regulations regarding funding and oversight of educational requirements when it comes to homeschooling. Some local provincial governments such as Manitoba, Québec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, and Labrador, do not support homeschooling through funding (Fletcher, 2020).

Homeschooling in Canada

The acknowledgment of what homeschooling is and how it is implemented throughout the country was very important in this reflection. Homeschooling was the closest connection I have found to what happened when I received that e-mail from the school board stating that schools were to be closed starting the following Monday—that learning would continue at home.

Despite the fact that recent homeschooling research has shown some progress, there are not nearly enough studies on homeschooling in a Canadian context (Van Pelt, 2015). Further studies are vital to evaluate homeschooling’s long-term outcomes, to address challenges and gains, and to inform and develop effective practices (Van Pelt, 2015).

Homeschool approaches often depend on the educational rules and regulations in place in each province and territory in Canada. Each province offers a different set of options for parents. The following are some of the examples of homeschooling programs and approaches in Canada.

In Alberta, for example, the Calgary Board of Education also known as CBE (CBE, 2020a) offers some funded programs, such as the Blended Program. In this approach, parents may decide to take part in a shared responsibility partnership with a school. The school will provide the learning plan and parents will support the student’s learning from home. The teaching delivery of project-based learning is supervised by a school facilitator, and students are subjected to formative and summative assessments (CBE, 2020b).

Another program offered by the CBE is the Parent-Directed Program in which parents have the freedom to make decisions on how to teach their children and also evaluate their progress; however, their teaching plan is still aligned to the school board learning plan and approved by the school board (CBE, 2020b).

In other parts of Canada, such as the Yukon, homeschooling is also supported and funded. The homeschooling process is overseen by educational authorities and the educational plan is subject to approval by the Ministry of Education. Parents may choose from three different programs: “100% home education, cross-enrollment with a local public school, or cross-enrolled through the AVS,” the Aurora Virtual School (Yukon Education, 2015, p. 5).

However, in other provinces such as Manitoba and Québec, homeschooling options are more limited, and parents are responsible for financing their children's educational resources and other costs related to homeschooling.

The following Arai (2000) and Eaton (2018) studies provide a glimpse of homeschooling in Canada.

In the Arai (2000) study with a total of 23 homeschooling parents in Ontario and British Columbia focusing on the reasons why parents choose to homeschool, he notes that parents in the study were not practicing teachers, and only four of them had a degree in education. Arai (2000) argues the parental demographic on homeschooling is comprised of diverse parents from a wide range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. He did not find strong evidence for religion as a primary reason for these parents choosing to homeschool their children, even though parents embraced religion.

According to Arai (2000), a key reason pointed to by the interviewed parents was dissatisfaction with the public education being offered in schools. Interestingly, some of these parents suggested they were not initially aware of homeschooling as an educational alternative to public schools. Parents in this study also argue that choosing to homeschool their children was a well-thought-out process.

The Eaton (2018) multiple case study investigated the experiences of four post-secondary students who were homeschooled. The study points to some important findings regarding the progress of homeschooled students as they transition into higher education.

The students benefited from an acute developed degree of learning independence acquired during their homeschool years as they learned how to balance their educational time and daily life activities. Another positive aspect suggested by this study is that homeschooled students, who were not necessarily educated in an environment that stressed high grades, did well academically as they transitioned into university.

Eaton (2018) also listed some of the challenges that homeschooled students may face, such as the fact that these students often work alone may affect the development of their collaborative learning skills. They could also be more prone to academic anxiety as they might not be accustomed to having their progress compared to their peers attending university.

Overall, I noticed that curriculum design was a recurring theme in the homeschool narrative as in most provinces, parents are asked to provide public school authorities with an educational plan aligned with the official provincial curriculum implemented in schools. The development of such home education lesson plans is often supported and/or supervised and subject to approval by the provincial educational body.

When starting homeschooling, parents may count on some available formal and informal resources, as well as skill support throughout the process to develop and implement lesson plans. In contrast, the same cannot be said about what happened during the COVID-19 crisis where

often-unprepared parents were asked to implement rapidly designed lesson plans without much support. In another article, I explain that

what happened in many households during the March-June school lockdown cannot be characterized as “traditional homeschooling” as parents did not choose to teach their children at home. This new “homeschooling” process or model was created by the unexpected and urgent circumstances during this period.

(Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021a, p. 2)

As for teachers, the abrupt changes “forced” them to promptly adapt their approaches to the unfamiliarity of teaching online exclusively, while everyone else in the educational setting was also naive as to what was about to unfold as we all adjusted to a new teaching and learning environment. This is not to say that online education was unfamiliar to educators, parents, and students, but that the conceptualization of teaching and learning in an imaginary virtual space that would replace school buildings during this pandemic is not “simply” online education.

What follows is my reflection divided into three spaces linearly organized where my experiences during this crisis reside, even if these experiences are intricately connected and often interwoven with each other.

A Teacher: The Mental Health of the Most Vulnerable Students

Over the last few years, I have worked mainly with English Language Learners (ELL), many of whom are recent arrivals. I have a strong connection with my students and to the classroom. My teacher and scholar identities are intrinsically connected, and I have a deep appreciation for how my experience as a researcher allows me to improve my teaching practice and vice-versa.

When I reflect on my experience as a teacher, my mind is on the many ELL students I have taught over the years. Their struggle indirectly partakes in the experiences of their parents, who seek socioeconomic advancement while trying to make sense of and sometimes fit into the new culture they experience daily, learning a new language, and attending school.

Language is a serious issue among ELL students, especially recent immigrants, as some research suggests that often ELL students are academically disadvantaged compared to their mainstream Canadian peers in the same age-grade group due to language deficiencies (Khan, 2020; Roessingh & Douglas, 2012; Watt et al., 1996).

Most ELL parents are adjusting to work-life with often limited understanding of the English language needed to function in mainstream Canadian society, as well as adjusting to laws and regulations to navigate areas such as education and the healthcare system. There is a noticeable reliance on community among ELL students, who are usually in constant communication with their heritage community (Chen & Harris, 2009; Khan, 2020; Shvidko et al., 2015).

I believe the biggest impact that the COVID-19 crisis had on these families was the possible break in communication and the survival of community reliance to develop socioeconomic and

cultural navigation skills, including the frequent need for language translation. These factors might deprive these parents and students of the extra support they need to integrate into a new country. For many ELL students, this may have added to the pressure of going to school and carrying the responsibility of academic success to meet their parents' expectations.

Parental academic expectations may also add to the stress of these new Canadian students (Kaplan et al., 2001). Parents' hopes for the future are sometimes geared towards the academic expectations they have for their children to succeed in this new environment as children and young adults seem to adapt to spoken English more easily than their parents.

There is an expectation that as students' English skills improve, academic adequacy follows. In my experience as a teacher, I can say that it will take time for most ELL students to catch up academically with their peers at the same grade level, even if they become more fluent in the spoken language (Watt et al., 1996).

The mental health of these ELL students struggling in school was already concerning, and now it is even more challenging as this new style of homeschooling is demanding on both parents and students, especially the most vulnerable. Not only ELL students, but also those with learning disabilities who need highly differentiated teaching approaches, are the focus of my concern.

Parental involvement is important in children's academic success (Chen & Harris, 2009). In these daring times, how will these ELL parents be able to follow the teachers' plans and deliver the support students will need at home? What will be the impact of this crisis on the most socioeconomically destitute student communities? These are valid questions that I do not have answers for.

Overall, I am of the opinion that there is an underlying struggle and resilience in the school community. Schools are trying their best to support the learning taking place at home. Teachers are reinventing themselves, adapting their teaching to this new classroom reality by appealing to all sorts of online resources that may support their teaching. School administrators are striving to support teachers, parents, and students, while everyone is coping with this stressful time on a personal level as well. My concerns are specially focused on the well-being of students who

went through rapid changes in which they had to develop coping mechanisms to make sense of this new social reality. This greatly impacted their routine and social interactions potentially prompting emotional distress and changes in behaviors. (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021b, p. 2)

The outcomes of the online home-learning approach adopted during the COVID-19 crisis are hard to predict, and I look forward to research initiatives in the field of education and psychology to inform teacher education on how we can move forward more safely in the aftermath of this crisis.

A Parent: My Experience as a Working Parent of a School-Age Child

As a parent of an elementary school child, I have been puzzled by the “homeschooling” that is taking place in my home and the homes of many other parents I know. Writing this article was a way of coping and moving forward, hoping to open a window of understanding to what was going on with parents during this crisis. I would like to start by sharing the wisdom of my science-loving seven-year-old son on the COVID-19 crisis:

Mom, some things are so complicated that not even science can explain, like “us,” humans. We might not even understand ourselves. The hardest part of this Corona thing is that we are all stuck together on this big flying rock in space, that we have no way to get off of! (A. Fontanelle-Tereshchuk, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

I felt fortunate that the week that I started working online coincided with the week off for planning at my son’s school. He had a week off to think of Pokémon and watch his favorite science shows. It felt like summer break for him, even though we could still see snow on the ground.

This home-learning process felt as if there was a piece missing. One thing I could not provide my child with was the same experiences he was accustomed to having in a real school environment. He missed the collaboration with friends during class assignments, the science “discoveries” he made in the schoolyard, all the meaningful experiences he had playing with his friends in the playground, and all the other little things, some positive and others negative, that may help build his character. He missed “the school” dearly.

I suggested to my parent-friends with no teaching experience, who were feeling overwhelmed by home-teaching and venting their frustration on social media channels, to “plan a lot, do their best, and call it a day!” I believe that it is essential for parents to nurture beneficial mental health habits and attitudes in order to build a positive home-learning environment, and feelings of guilt and desperation do not contribute to that.

The frustration at the beginning of the process was very evident as my child and I, along with the rest of the school community, were adjusting to this new reality. It was clear that teachers were also struggling with sudden changes while working very hard and trying their best to meet their students’ needs. It felt like a constant learning process as “the plan” was often subject to change based on the online resources available. Teachers seemed to be trying to evaluate which resources would work best and bring the best results—which would, somehow, bear even slight resemblance to their envisioned learning plans prior to the crisis—based on the students’ progress (John, 2006).

While I have an appreciation for ready-made online resources, as they can be useful and sometimes inspiring, each classroom context is unique (Martin, 2015). In my experience as a teacher, I have found that over-reliance on online premade teaching materials, including lesson plans, is often ineffective to deliver adequate curriculum results that provide parents and students

with clear expectations and learning outcomes. I strongly agree with researchers who point to the importance of effective lesson planning in student academic achievement (Borich, 2007; Cicek & Tok, 2014; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

These researchers suggest that effective curriculum design requires a contextualized reflective plan, which is aligned with curriculum standards; contains clear objectives, modeling, and expected learning outcomes; and at the same time is flexible enough to allow changes during the plan implementation guided by a careful and responsive examination of the pace of learning framed around a classroom growth mindset. Finally, the plan must report constructive gains and enduring challenges to be addressed as students continue to learn. Teachers also greatly benefit from investigating their own pedagogical growth while facilitating learning during this period (Cicek & Tok, 2014).

In terms of curriculum design, I agree with John (2006) that many experienced teachers, who have been teaching the same subject to different grades and think they know their students well, may feel comfortable teaching without a written step-by-step lesson plan. They instead often rely on the flow of class dynamics and lessons to create learning opportunities, at times improvising to respond to emerging learning needs (John, 2006). Interestingly, John (2006) adds that often experienced teachers “consider the nature of the content and activities before they consider other curricular elements, even though pupils might seem to be their central concern” (p. 488). This practice may impact the alignment among the different parts comprising the curriculum design, such as assessment. I believe that teaching experience does provide these seasoned teachers with an accumulative understanding and knowledge of content and classroom best practices, but it may also interfere with the need for ongoing professional reflective growth, especially as Canadian classrooms are becoming increasingly more diverse and complex. For some teachers, this crisis drastically altered their routines and curriculum approach preferences, potentially stretching and reshaping their lesson planning skills developed over the years.

As a teacher myself, I also find it complicated to reflect on what I know when I do not have a well-thought-out plan. I prefer to have clear expectations and pedagogical tools for implementing the curriculum and assessing learning outcomes from the beginning, which helps to further make sense of my teaching and learning successes and struggles. However, I also sympathize with the pressure of having to write a detailed daily step-by-step lesson plan at short notice to share with parents and the school community when this style of planning might not be preferred and/or habitual. In my experience, it is often hard to find the time to reflect and develop detailed daily lesson plans when designated “prep time” is insufficient, and professional development initiatives do not always address this issue. I would speculate that this might have significantly added to the stress level of practicing teachers during this pandemic.

As this crisis continues to unfold—and teachers continue to provide students with the tools to develop the skills required to work independently and collaboratively—perhaps more attention to the needs of these teachers is necessary. This attention could come in the form of professional development initiatives to promote teacher growth.

The role of parents in their children’s education has also been highlighted as they might also

reflect to the best of their abilities on the relationships they develop with their children and their educators to better support learning at home. However, this can be a complex issue, as socioeconomic and cultural challenges impact the lives of so many families, especially struggling working parents from minority groups.

This home-learning experience may also signal to teacher preparation programs the importance of curriculum design training and avoiding an over-reliance on “practicums” as a vehicle for learning, especially for novice teachers. I concur with John (2006) when he argues that “the lesson plan should not be viewed as a blueprint for action but should also be a record of interaction” (p. 495). That is to say, there is no sure recipe for lesson plan design, and unforeseen circumstances such as the one created by this crisis put us all in the position of humble learners. It may also highlight the importance of teachers, parents, and students working together and sharing responsibilities for learning.

A Scholar: The Literature on Homeschooling and its Intersection with Home-Learning

Reflecting on the COVID-19 crisis as an educator, and inspired by the indigenous way of coming together as a community to address challenges that affect us all, I thought about the human diversity found in our schools and the need for what I have defined as

a human-centered approach to diversity, which is an acknowledgment of the relevance of human differences in an increasingly global world, independent of race, culture and social-economic backgrounds as well as beliefs found in all teachers, students and other members that also contribute to the learning environment in the educational community. (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020, p. 430)

Schools became the focus of despair narratives in the educational community. The cruelty of the COVID-19 virus was borderless, genderless, colorless, and vicious enough to force us to rethink education as we knew it and immerse ourselves as scholars, teachers, parents, and students into the unknown. The closest approach available to school was homeschooling as we, the school community, started addressing what happens next as we rapidly transitioned to relying on parents to support the mostly online home education.

In a sense, we have reimagined the physical school spaces as we expanded and transformed this new understanding of school into our households. As a parent, as a teacher, and as a scholar, I embarked on this mission knowing very little about homeschooling and much less about this novel home-learning ignited by the unfolding COVID-19 crisis.

This adaptation process affected everyone in schools, including teachers who might have felt pressured to adapt quickly to these unexpected changes in teaching practices caused by this global pandemic. It is important to further research and examine these experiences, especially with reference to mental health, as some teachers might have sustained substantial professional and personal stress as parents as well as educators.

After reading the literature on homeschooling in Canada, one realizes that the kind of

homeschooling taking place in the context of the COVID-19 crisis has some similarities with traditional homeschooling; the teaching and learning are contextualized outside of schools, and parents and students often rely on available technology such as online literacy programs as well as online library materials to support learning (Fletcher, 2020; Van Pelt, 2015).

A key difference between homeschooling and home-learning is the contextualized set of choices parents have available. Homeschooling is a choice made by parents for various reasons to have their children educated at home under their pedagogical care (Arai, 2000; Fletcher, 2020; Van Pelt, 2015). The home-learning phenomenon due to the COVID-19 crisis that took place in Canadian schools differs, generally speaking, as it was a government-mandated decision for students attending schools to be integrated into a partnership system where students learn from home and are often supported by their parents, but where the main responsibility to provide content and assess learning still lies on their assigned teachers.

Another contrasting point between homeschooling and home-learning may be noticed in this new understanding of homeschooling emerging from the need for continuity in educating students when school buildings are no longer an option; this new understanding has created an entirely new concept with roots in the traditional conceptualization of homeschooling. This new concept has evolved into a more complex term that I have previously mentioned: home-learning, which can be described as a coexisting partnership between schools and parents to support learning outside of school buildings. Home-learning expands the descriptive understanding of the school-based education learning space.

In the home-learning process, the content is provided by teachers, while parents are expected to play the vital role of “teacher-aids” to support students as they learn from assignments provided by teachers. This system offers little freedom for parents’ pedagogical choices, most likely adding to the stress of family lockdown adjustments and challenging dynamics. The concept of the physical workplace for many parents has also shifted, and juggling working from home and homeschooling may lead to an unhealthy mental environment for learning.

In conclusion, this article is intended as a reflection of an educator and a parent’s insights into the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on school-based education. I believe that the school community was brought together to overcome the challenges caused by this pandemic. The learning routine of students around the world has changed drastically, and especially as a parent in Alberta, I felt the weight of being an educator working from home and home-teaching my child.

This duality of roles inspired me to examine research papers to find a possible explanation for what was happening in my household, only to realize that we still have a long way to turn these challenging experiences into learning opportunities for teachers, students, and parents—in other words, the whole school community—to grow our understanding of the needs of human-centered diverse schools in learning, teaching, and well-being (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2019; 2020).

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