



Inclusive education policy and learning assessment practices : A sociological perspective on equity for children with special needs

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education policy aims to ensure that all children, including children with special needs, have equal access to meaningful and appropriate learning opportunities. However, the implementation of inclusive education is not only determined by school access, curriculum flexibility, or classroom participation, but also by how learning assessment is designed and practiced. Conventional assessment systems that rely on uniform standards may fail to represent the diverse abilities, developmental progress, and learning barriers experienced by children with special needs. This article examines the impact of inclusive education policy on learning assessment practices from the perspective of educational sociology. Using a literature-based conceptual approach, this study analyzes how assessment functions not only as a pedagogical instrument but also as a social practice shaped by school culture, teacher expectations, institutional structures, and perceptions of diversity. The discussion shows that inclusive policy encourages a shift from standardized and result-oriented assessment toward more flexible, individualized, authentic, and development-oriented evaluation. However, this shift faces several challenges, including limited teacher competence in adaptive assessment, lack of technical guidelines, administrative burden, weak collaboration among teachers and specialists, and school cultures that still prioritize academic uniformity. From a sociological perspective, assessment may either reproduce inequality and stigma or become a tool for educational justice, depending on how schools interpret and implement inclusive values. This study highlights the need to develop inclusive assessment practices that recognize student diversity, support individual growth, and promote equity in regular school settings.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become an important policy direction in many countries, including Indonesia, as part of the effort to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children. In principle, inclusive education affirms that children with diverse abilities, including children with special needs, have the right to participate in regular school environments and receive appropriate educational support. This policy orientation shifts education away from segregation and toward accessibility, participation, and recognition of learner diversity. In the Indonesian context, inclusive education has been formally supported through national regulations, including Permendiknas

No. 70 of 2009, which emphasizes the responsibility of schools to provide educational services for students with disabilities and students with special talents or exceptional abilities [1, 2].

However, the implementation of inclusive education cannot be measured only by the physical presence of children with special needs in regular schools. Inclusion is not merely a matter of school admission, classroom placement, or curriculum access. A deeper question concerns whether students are fairly recognized, supported, and assessed according to their individual learning characteristics. In this regard, learning assessment becomes one of the most important dimensions of inclusive education. Assessment determines how students' abilities are identified, how progress is measured, how teachers make instructional decisions, and how schools define academic success [3–5].

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Conventional assessment practices often rely on uniform standards, standardized tests, and result-oriented evaluation. Such practices may be appropriate for measuring general academic achievement, but they may not fully represent the learning progress of children with special needs. Students with disabilities may experience barriers related to communication, cognition, sensory processing, behavior, mobility, or social interaction. If assessment is conducted using the same instruments, time limits, criteria, and performance expectations for all students, it may create unfair academic judgments. In this situation, assessment does not merely measure learning; it may also reproduce inequality by privileging students who fit dominant academic norms [6, 7].

Inclusive education policy requires a transformation in the meaning and practice of learning assessment. Assessment should not only measure final achievement, but also recognize individual growth, learning processes, functional abilities, social participation, emotional development, and adaptive progress. Inclusive assessment may include portfolio assessment, direct observation, modified tests, project-based assessment, performance assessment, narrative feedback, and individualized evaluation. These forms of assessment allow teachers to understand students more holistically and provide learning support that is more responsive to their needs [8–10].

From the perspective of educational sociology, assessment is not a neutral technical activity. It is a social practice shaped by school culture, teacher expectations, institutional norms, power relations, and social perceptions of ability and disability. Assessment can determine how students are labeled, how their potential is interpreted, and how their position in the classroom is recognized. For children with special needs, assessment may either become a tool of inclusion or a mechanism of exclusion. When assessment is rigid and standardized, it may reinforce stigma and marginalization. When assessment is flexible, authentic, and individualized, it can support recognition, participation, and educational justice [3, 11].

This sociological perspective is important because inclusive policy is often implemented within schools that still operate under conventional academic cultures. Many schools continue to emphasize uniform achievement, numerical scores, standardized examinations, and administrative accountability. Such cultures may conflict with the principles of inclusive education, which value diversity, individual progress, and differentiated support. As a result, there may be a gap between inclusive policy ideals and assessment practices in classrooms. Children with special needs may be officially included in regular schools but still evaluated through systems that do not fully accommodate their learning needs [12, 13].

Several challenges may affect the implementation of inclusive assessment. Teachers may have limited competence in designing adaptive assessment instruments. Schools may lack technical guidelines, collaborative support, and adequate resources. Classroom teachers may also experience administrative burdens that make individualized assessment difficult. In addition, collaboration among classroom teachers, special education teachers, parents, psychologists, and other professionals may not be sufficiently developed. These challenges show that inclusive assessment is not only a pedagogical issue, but also an institutional and sociological issue [6, 14, 15].

The gap between policy and practice highlights the need to examine inclusive assessment from a broader perspective. While many discussions of assessment focus on methods and instruments, fewer studies analyze assessment as a social process that can shape educational equity or reproduce inequality. Therefore, this article positions learning assessment as a key site where inclusive education policy is translated into practice. The article argues that the success of inclusive education depends not

only on access to schools, but also on how assessment systems recognize student diversity and support meaningful learning progress.

This study aims to analyze the impact of inclusive education policy on learning assessment practices for children with special needs from the perspective of educational sociology. Specifically, this article addresses the following research questions:

- How does inclusive education policy influence the paradigm and practice of learning assessment for children with special needs?
- What challenges do schools face in implementing inclusive assessment practices?
- How does educational sociology explain the role of assessment in promoting educational equity or reproducing inequality?
- What principles should guide inclusive assessment practices in regular school settings?

The contribution of this article lies in its attempt to connect inclusive education policy, learning assessment, and educational sociology. By viewing assessment as a social practice, this article offers a conceptual understanding of how evaluation can function either as a mechanism of exclusion or as a tool for educational justice. This perspective is expected to provide insights for teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and researchers in developing more equitable, flexible, and meaningful assessment practices for children with special needs.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design

This study employed a critical conceptual literature review to analyze the impact of inclusive education policy on learning assessment practices for children with special needs from the perspective of educational sociology. This design was selected because the study does not aim to test a statistical relationship or evaluate a specific intervention, but to develop a conceptual understanding of how inclusive education policy reshapes assessment practices and how assessment may function as a social mechanism within schools.

A critical conceptual literature review allows the researcher to examine policy documents, theoretical literature, and previous studies in order to identify key concepts, tensions, and patterns of meaning. In this study, the analysis focused on the relationship between inclusive education policy, learning assessment, school culture, teacher practices, and educational equity. The review also explored how assessment can either support recognition and inclusion or reproduce stigma and inequality for children with special needs [4, 16].

2.2. Sources of literature

The literature used in this study consisted of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and reports related to inclusive education, learning assessment, children with special needs, and sociology of education. The sources were selected from national and international literature to provide both global theoretical perspectives and contextual understanding of inclusive education policy in Indonesia.

The reviewed literature covered several major themes: inclusive education policy, inclusive assessment, authentic assessment, differentiated assessment, educational equity, school culture, teacher expectations, labeling, social reproduction, and educational justice. Policy documents such as Permendiknas No. 70 of 2009 were used to understand the formal basis of inclusive education in Indonesia. International literature on inclusive

education was used to examine broader principles of access, participation, and equity, while sociological literature was used to interpret assessment as a social practice.

2.3. Literature selection criteria

The literature was selected based on its relevance to the focus of the study. Sources were included when they met one or more of the following criteria:

1. Discussing inclusive education policy and its implementation;
2. Explaining learning assessment practices for children with special needs;
3. Addressing inclusive, authentic, adaptive, or differentiated assessment;
4. Examining educational equity, stigma, labeling, school culture, or social inequality;
5. Providing theoretical insight from the perspective of educational sociology.

Sources were excluded when they focused only on general assessment without relevance to inclusion, children with special needs, or educational equity. Literature that discussed disability only from a clinical or medical perspective was also excluded unless it contributed to the analysis of educational practice. Sources that were not academically credible, lacked clear authorship, or were unrelated to the conceptual focus of the study were not included [17, 18].

2.4. Analytical procedure

The analysis was conducted through four stages. The first stage was policy and concept identification. In this stage, key concepts from inclusive education policy and assessment literature were identified, including inclusion, accessibility, learning evaluation, assessment accommodation, individualized assessment, and adaptive assessment. The second stage was sociological interpretation. Concepts related to assessment were examined through the lens of educational sociology. This stage focused on how assessment practices are shaped by school culture, teacher expectations, institutional norms, and social perceptions of ability and disability. Assessment was interpreted not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a social practice that can classify, label, recognize, or marginalize students [3, 6, 16].

The third stage was thematic organization. The literature was organized into several analytical themes: the transformation of assessment under inclusive education policy, inclusive assessment as recognition of diversity, barriers to implementing inclusive assessment, and assessment as a mechanism of either equity or exclusion. The fourth stage was conceptual synthesis. In this stage, the themes were integrated into a conceptual argument that inclusive assessment should be understood as a practice of educational justice. The synthesis emphasizes that assessment in inclusive education must move beyond uniform measurement and toward flexible, authentic, individualized, and development-oriented evaluation.

2.5. Trustworthiness of the conceptual review

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the review, the study used literature from multiple areas, including inclusive education, special education, assessment studies, educational policy, and sociology of education. The analysis did not rely on a single theoretical source but compared ideas across different bodies of literature. This cross-field reading allowed the study to identify recurring patterns and conceptual tensions between inclusive policy ideals and classroom assessment realities [7].

The conceptual synthesis was developed by ensuring that each argument was connected to the central focus of the study: the relationship between inclusive education policy, assessment practice, and educational equity. Although this study did not involve field data

collection, it provides a theoretical foundation that can be further examined through empirical research in regular schools implementing inclusive education [6, 14, 15].

2.6. Ethical considerations

This study was based entirely on published literature and policy documents. It did not involve human participants, interviews, observations, or personal data collection. Ethical considerations were addressed by accurately representing the ideas of previous scholars, avoiding plagiarism, and ensuring that all cited sources were acknowledged properly.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Inclusive education policy and the reframing of learning assessment

Inclusive education policy changes the meaning of learning assessment in schools. In conventional education systems, assessment is often understood as a tool to measure academic achievement based on standardized criteria. Students are expected to demonstrate learning outcomes through the same instruments, procedures, time limits, and performance standards. This approach may appear objective, but it does not always reflect the diverse learning conditions of children with special needs [19–21].

In inclusive education, assessment must be reframed as a process of understanding individual development, identifying learning barriers, and providing appropriate educational support. Assessment is no longer limited to determining whether students meet uniform academic standards. Instead, it should help teachers understand how each student learns, what kind of support is needed, and how learning progress can be recognized fairly. This shift is important because children with special needs may demonstrate achievement in different ways, depending on their cognitive, sensory, communication, emotional, or behavioral characteristics.

Inclusive education policy encourages schools to move from assessment of learning toward assessment for learning and assessment as support. Assessment of learning focuses mainly on final results, grades, and comparison among students. Assessment for learning emphasizes feedback, progress monitoring, and instructional improvement. Meanwhile, assessment as support recognizes that evaluation should help students participate meaningfully in the learning process. For children with special needs, this shift is essential because learning progress may not always be visible through conventional written tests or standardized examinations [14, 22, 23].

The policy implication is that schools must provide flexible and adaptive assessment practices. These may include modified tests, oral assessments, portfolios, performance tasks, direct observation, project-based assessment, narrative reports, and individualized assessment criteria. Such practices allow teachers to capture broader dimensions of student development, including independence, social interaction, communication, self-regulation, and functional skills.

3.2. Assessment as a social practice

From the perspective of educational sociology, assessment is not neutral. It is a social practice that reflects the values, expectations, and power relations within schools. Assessment determines what kind of knowledge is considered valuable, which forms of ability are recognized, and who is categorized as successful or unsuccessful. Therefore, assessment has social consequences beyond academic measurement [24].

For children with special needs, assessment can influence identity formation and social positioning. When assessment practices are rigid and uniform, students who cannot meet standard expectations may be labeled as weak, slow, incapable, or problematic. These labels can affect teacher expectations, peer acceptance, parental perception, and students' self-confidence. In this way, assessment may contribute to the reproduction of stigma.

Conversely, inclusive assessment can function as a practice of recognition. It recognizes that children learn in different ways, develop at different speeds, and require different forms of support. It also acknowledges that achievement should not be measured only through standardized academic performance, but also through individual

progress and meaningful participation. In this sense, inclusive assessment is closely connected to educational justice.

Assessment becomes inclusive when it respects diversity rather than forcing all students into the same evaluative framework. This does not mean lowering expectations. Instead, it means creating fair opportunities for students to demonstrate their abilities according to their learning profiles. Fairness in inclusive assessment is not sameness, but responsiveness to difference [20, 21, 25].

3.3. Standardized assessment and the reproduction of inequality

One of the main sociological concerns in assessment is the possibility that standardized evaluation systems reproduce inequality. Standardized assessment assumes that all students can be measured through the same criteria and procedures. However, children with special needs often experience unequal starting points, different learning barriers, and diverse modes of expression. When these differences are ignored, assessment may become a mechanism that legitimizes inequality [16, 26, 27].

For example, a student with visual impairment may understand the learning content but be unable to access a printed test without appropriate accommodation. A student with hearing impairment may struggle with oral instructions but perform well when visual support is provided. A student with autism may understand concepts but have difficulty expressing answers under time pressure or in socially demanding situations. A student with intellectual disability may show functional progress that is meaningful but not captured by standard academic tests [14, 22, 23].

In such cases, poor assessment results do not necessarily indicate lack of ability. They may reflect the mismatch between assessment format and student needs. From a sociological perspective, this mismatch reveals how institutional systems may privilege certain forms of ability while marginalizing others. Standardized assessment can therefore produce an illusion of neutrality while hiding structural barriers. Inclusive assessment attempts to address this issue by modifying assessment procedures, providing accommodations, and recognizing multiple forms of achievement. These practices are not special privileges. They are necessary adjustments to ensure that assessment measures learning rather than disability-related barriers.

3.4. School culture and the implementation of inclusive assessment

The implementation of inclusive assessment is strongly influenced by school culture. A school culture that values uniform achievement, ranking, and test scores may find it difficult to accept flexible assessment practices. In such a culture, modified assessment may be seen as less rigorous or unfair to other students. This perception can become a barrier to inclusive education [28, 29].

In contrast, a school culture that values diversity, individual growth, collaboration, and student well-being is more likely to support inclusive assessment. Teachers in such schools are encouraged to view assessment as a tool for understanding and supporting students, not merely as a mechanism for grading. School leaders also play an important role in shaping this culture by providing guidance, resources, and institutional support for adaptive evaluation.

Teacher expectations are also part of school culture. If teachers believe that children with special needs have limited potential, assessment may become minimal, symbolic, or merely administrative. However, if teachers believe that every child can grow, assessment can become a meaningful tool to identify progress and plan support. Therefore, inclusive assessment requires not only technical competence but also a change in mindset.

Collaboration is another important element. Inclusive assessment should not depend solely on classroom teachers. It requires cooperation among classroom teachers, special education teachers, parents, school leaders, psychologists, therapists, and other professionals. Through collaboration, assessment can become more accurate, contextual, and responsive to students' actual needs [14, 22, 23].

3.5. Forms of inclusive assessment practice

Inclusive assessment can be implemented through various forms of evaluation. Portfolio assessment allows teachers to document student progress over time. This is useful for children with special needs because it captures learning development gradually rather than relying on one-time test performance. Portfolios may include student work, teacher

notes, photographs, learning records, and evidence of participation [24].

Direct observation is also important because many aspects of development cannot be measured through written tests. Teachers can observe communication, social interaction, independence, emotional regulation, attention, and participation in classroom activities. For children with special needs, such observations provide valuable information about functional and social development [19-21].

Project-based assessment allows students to demonstrate learning through practical tasks. This form of assessment is more flexible because students can show understanding through actions, products, presentations, drawings, models, or other alternative expressions. It can also support collaboration and social participation. Modified tests are necessary when students require adjustment in format, time, language, difficulty level, or response mode. Modifications may include simplified instructions, additional time, visual support, oral response options, assistive technology, or reduced item complexity. These adjustments should be based on student needs and learning objectives.

Narrative feedback is another important practice. Instead of relying only on numerical scores, teachers can provide descriptive feedback that explains student progress, strengths, challenges, and recommended support. Narrative feedback is especially useful in inclusive education because it provides a more holistic picture of learning. These assessment forms show that inclusive evaluation is not a single method but a set of responsive practices. The central principle is to ensure that assessment recognizes student diversity and supports meaningful learning progress.

3.6. Barriers to inclusive assessment

Despite the importance of inclusive assessment, schools face several challenges in implementing it. The first challenge is limited teacher competence. Many teachers are trained to use conventional assessment methods but may not have sufficient knowledge of adaptive assessment, assessment accommodations, or individualized evaluation. As a result, teachers may feel uncertain about how to design fair and meaningful assessments for children with special needs [19-21].

The second challenge is the lack of technical guidelines. Inclusive education policy may provide general principles, but schools often need more practical guidance on how to assess students with different needs. Without clear guidelines, assessment practices may vary widely among teachers and schools. The third challenge is administrative burden. Teachers are often required to complete many administrative tasks, prepare lesson plans, conduct assessments, and report student achievement. Individualized assessment requires time and careful documentation, which may be difficult in classrooms with large numbers of students.

The fourth challenge is weak collaboration. Inclusive assessment requires the involvement of multiple actors, but collaboration between classroom teachers, special education teachers, parents, and professionals is not always well established. Without collaboration, assessment may fail to capture the full picture of student development. The fifth challenge is conventional school culture. Some schools still define success mainly through academic scores and standardized achievement. This culture may make inclusive assessment difficult because individual progress and functional development may be undervalued.

These challenges suggest that inclusive assessment cannot be implemented only by asking teachers to change their assessment instruments. It requires systemic support, professional development, collaborative structures, and cultural transformation within schools.

3.7. Inclusive assessment as educational justice

The central finding of this conceptual review is that inclusive assessment should be understood as a practice of educational justice. Educational justice means that students are not treated equally in a superficial sense, but are supported according to their needs so that they have fair opportunities to learn and demonstrate progress [19-21].

In inclusive education, justice does not mean giving the same test to every student. It means ensuring that assessment does not punish students for disability-related barriers. It also means recognizing diverse forms of achievement and valuing individual growth. Inclusive assessment therefore requires flexibility, fairness, and recognition.

Assessment justice has three main dimensions. The first is access. Students must be able to access assessment tasks through appropriate formats, tools, language, and accommodations. The second is recognition. Assessment must recognize students' strengths, progress, and diverse ways of demonstrating learning. The third is support.

Assessment results should be used to plan meaningful learning assistance rather than merely to classify students [30].

When these dimensions are present, assessment becomes a tool for inclusion. It helps teachers understand students, supports learning development, and strengthens students' sense of belonging. However, when assessment ignores diversity, it can become a mechanism of exclusion. It may label children with special needs as incapable and reinforce unequal educational experiences [3, 11].

3.8. Toward a sociological model of inclusive assessment

Based on the conceptual analysis, inclusive assessment can be understood through a sociological model consisting of five interconnected elements: policy, school culture, teacher agency, assessment practice, and educational equity.

Inclusive education policy provides the formal basis for recognizing the rights of children with special needs. However, policy does not automatically change classroom practices. It must be interpreted and implemented by schools. School culture determines whether inclusive values are accepted or resisted. Teacher agency influences how assessment is designed, adapted, and used to support students. Assessment practice then becomes the concrete space where inclusion is either realized or weakened. The outcome of this process is educational equity or continued inequality.

This model shows that inclusive assessment is not merely a technical adjustment. It is a social process shaped by institutional values and human decisions. Therefore, improving inclusive assessment requires policy support, teacher training, school leadership, collaborative culture, and a commitment to recognizing student diversity [31-35].

The discussion confirms that the success of inclusive education depends not only on access to schools but also on fair assessment practices. Children with special needs may be physically present in regular classrooms, but if they are assessed through rigid and uniform systems, their inclusion remains incomplete. Assessment is one of the key mechanisms through which schools define ability, success, and legitimacy.

From the perspective of educational sociology, conventional assessment may reproduce inequality because it reflects dominant academic norms. Students who fit those norms are more likely to be recognized as successful, while students who require different forms of support may be marginalized. This does not mean that assessment should be eliminated. Rather, assessment must be redesigned so that it supports learning, recognizes diversity, and promotes justice [36].

Inclusive assessment challenges the idea that fairness means treating all students identically. In inclusive education, fairness requires differentiated support. Students with special needs may require accommodations, modified instruments, alternative forms of expression, and individualized criteria. These practices do not reduce academic quality. Instead, they make assessment more valid because they allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do without being blocked by unnecessary barriers [37-40].

The findings also indicate that assessment reform requires cultural change. Teachers, school leaders, parents, and policymakers need to understand that inclusive assessment is not an exception to normal assessment, but a necessary part of inclusive education. Schools must move from a culture of ranking and standardization toward a culture of recognition, growth, and support [41].

Overall, this article argues that inclusive assessment should be positioned as a central component of inclusive education policy. Without assessment justice, inclusive education may remain limited to physical access. With assessment justice, schools can create learning environments that recognize children with special needs as capable learners with diverse pathways of development [42].

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of inclusive education policy on learning assessment practices for children with special needs from the perspective of educational sociology. The main argument of this article is that inclusive education cannot be understood only as school access, classroom placement, or curriculum adaptation. Inclusion must also be reflected in how students are assessed, recognized, and supported in the learning process. Assessment is therefore a central dimension of inclusive education because it determines how schools define ability, progress, achievement, and educational success.

The conceptual review shows that inclusive education policy encourages a shift from standardized, uniform, and result-oriented assessment toward flexible, authentic, individualized, and development-oriented evaluation. For children with special needs, this shift is essential because conventional assessment may fail to capture diverse learning pathways, functional progress, social participation, and individual development. Inclusive assessment allows students to demonstrate their abilities through different forms, such as portfolios, observation, performance tasks, modified tests, project-based assessment, and narrative feedback. From a sociological perspective, assessment is not a neutral technical instrument. It is a social practice shaped by school culture, teacher expectations, institutional norms, and perceptions of ability and disability. When assessment is rigid and standardized, it may reproduce stigma, labeling, and educational inequality. However, when assessment is adaptive and responsive, it can become a tool of recognition, participation, and educational justice. Therefore, inclusive assessment should be understood not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as a social commitment to fairness and equity.

The study also identifies several challenges in implementing inclusive assessment, including limited teacher competence, lack of technical guidelines, administrative burden, weak collaboration among classroom teachers and special education professionals, and school cultures that still prioritize academic uniformity. These challenges indicate that inclusive assessment cannot be achieved only through individual teacher effort. It requires systemic support, school leadership, professional development, collaborative assessment teams, and policy guidance that is practical and context-sensitive.

This article contributes to the discussion of inclusive education by positioning learning assessment as a key site where inclusion is either realized or weakened. The proposed sociological perspective emphasizes that assessment practices can either function as mechanisms of exclusion or as instruments of educational justice. Thus, schools need to move beyond the assumption that fairness means treating all students identically. In inclusive education, fairness means providing appropriate support so that every child has a meaningful opportunity to show growth and learning progress.

The limitation of this study lies in its conceptual literature review design, which does not include direct empirical data from schools, teachers, students, or parents. Future research is recommended to examine inclusive assessment practices through field studies, classroom observations, interviews with teachers and parents, and case studies in regular schools implementing inclusive education. Further empirical studies are also needed to explore how teachers design adaptive assessment instruments, how schools interpret inclusive policy, and how children with special needs experience assessment in everyday classroom settings.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Syahfitri Purnama: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.
Fajri Farid: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Software, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis.
Sitti Hartinah: Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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