

# The role of museums in learning to teach with a critical lens

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*(Received 19 August 2016; accepted 8 May 2017)*

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## Abstract

This study set out to explore the potential of student teachers learning to teach apartheid era history to learners in the primary school when learning in apartheid museums is blended with coursework. Using qualitative methods of inquiry, the findings show that student teachers learning in museums that dovetail with coursework at the university strengthens their ability to ‘know, think, feel and act like a teacher’. The multiple narratives contributed towards addressing misconceptions, strengthened citizenship and pedagogic content knowledge, fundamentals that can equip student teachers to teach apartheid era history with an informed lens. The study highlights the importance of developing in student teachers investigative skills before and after museum visits so as to ensure that they are not merely consumers but are able to interrogate multiple narratives, resulting in them being active producers of knowledge.

## Background to the research

This study sets out to explore the effects of blending learning in apartheid museums with coursework on student teachers learning to teach apartheid era history to learners in the primary school. Second year Social Science Intermediate Phase student teachers from a university in Johannesburg study the apartheid era in their coursework. Dovetailing with coursework, student teachers are taken to museums in Gauteng that depict the apartheid struggle to gain a hands-on learning experience from different sources of knowledge. The museums visited are the Liliesleaf Farm, Constitution Hill, Apartheid Museum, Mandela House and Hector Pieterse Museum.

In designing the museum visits, I draw on Rohlf (2015), who indicated that advanced, critical learning can be achieved in field trips through designing a field trip in three phases: the pre-trip, the trip itself, and the post-trip. In

coursework, prior to the visits to the different museums, students were given an assignment whereby they had to design and present their own interactive museums depicting any South African leader of their choice from the past. This activity involved researching, designing and presenting their interactive museum to second year intermediate phase history students. The intention of student teachers designing their own interactive museums prior to visiting the different museums was twofold. I firstly wanted student teachers to learn how to interpret and evaluate the artefacts that they select for their interactive museums. It also serves as a means to think critically and reflectively on why they select specific artefacts. The aim was for student teachers to recognise that they are personally responsible for selecting materials that they think will influence the audience most and are thus subjective. Here, I draw on Gardner (2004, p.13) who argues that museums too “have perspectives, make choices, present arguments, just like our colleagues elsewhere in the profession.” The trip itself involved analysis of knowledge and skills and the post-trip involved synthesising and evaluating what was learned.

There is an abundance of research that supports the value of learning in museums from a visitor’s perspective or from the experiences of children on a school field trip (Baines, 2007; Griffin, 2004; Paris, Yambor & Packard, 1998; Stronck, 1983; Taub, 2016). However, research on the learning potential of museums from a student teacher’s perspective is limited. Moreover, research on how student teachers engage with their learning in apartheid museums, dovetailed with their learning in coursework, to teach apartheid era history to learners in the primary school is also limited. This research therefore sets out to explore the following questions:

1. How do student teachers experience learning about apartheid era history in South Africa when coursework dovetails with learning in museums?
2. To what extent does the experience strengthen student teachers learning to teach apartheid era history to learners in the primary school?

## Learning potential of museums depicting the apartheid era in South Africa

The educational value of field trips to museums have been noted to show improvements in students cognitive skills (Stronck, 1983), increased

motivation and aesthetic appreciation, and strengthened personal identity (Schauble, Beane, Coates, Martin, & Sterling, 1996). The reasons for museums being able to foster learning is that the environment created is such that it enables individuals to construct their own meaning (Griffin, 2004; Paris, Yambor & Packard, 1998) as visitors are free to make their own choices in activities (Andre, Durksen & Volman, 2016; Griffin, 2004). In addition, museums present a multi-faceted narrative, with the visitor presented with choices to interpret in one of many ways (Taub, 2016). Thus, museums can be viewed as active producers of knowledge (Baines, 2007).

South African museums are viewed as providing “material form to authorised versions of the past, which in time become institutionalised as public memory” (Baines, 2007, p.9). Visitors construct meaning by assuming that what they see in museums is authentic and accurate (Gardner, 2004). But, Gardner (2004) raises concerns about this level of trust placed by visitors on the authenticity and accuracy of what they see in museums. I agree with Gardner (2004, p.15) that the public needs to understand the social and political contexts that influence the formation of museums, “that the selection of artefacts. . .is itself a subjective act, a way of shaping perspective, establishing (a) point of view” and thus cannot be regarded as objective historical authorities. Exhibits and artefacts in museums generally reflect the dominant discourse of society (Baines, 2007) depicted through the selection of artefacts that shape the way visitors perceive the past (Gardner, 2004).

Soudien (2008) draws attention to the discourses of post-apartheid museums, namely that of nostalgia and of reconstruction. Witz (2010, p.4) suggests that one of the reasons put forth for the “apparent historiographical crisis” in South Africa is a tendency in museums to present narratives that are “consistent with the dominant frameworks of a new national history.” Examples provided of this new national history include “assertions of an indigenous precolonial nationhood, a paradigm that continually couples apartheid and resistance, centrality given to the ‘emergence’ and ‘triumph’ of the African National Congress in the anti-apartheid struggle, . . . ‘victory’ by iconic figures, primarily Nelson Mandela, culminating in the emergence of a multicultural South Africa” (Witz, 2010, p.4). Soudien (2012, p.183), in discussing the Apartheid Museum, draws attention to that which is omitted such as “the complex social structures, relations and habits that surround, precede and follow the horror.” The emphasis on the narratives of a country’s history, also referred to as national master narratives, results in students

having limited access to what is controversial about their country's history, thus hindering the development of a critical perspective (Carretero & van Alphen, 2014).

## The role of museums in influencing how student teachers learn and teach about South Africa's 'difficult past'

I use Feiman-Nemser's (2008) themes, namely, "learning to *think* like a teacher, learning to *know* like a teacher, learning to *feel* like a teacher and learning to *act* like a teacher" ( p.698) to argue that student teachers learning in museums dovetailed with coursework at the university could strengthen the way they will eventually teach apartheid era history in the classroom.

In *knowing like a teacher*, Feiman-Nemser (2008) refers to the knowledge that student teachers need to develop for the teaching profession. I draw on a framework for Understanding Teaching and Learning (in Darling-Hammond, 2008) to discuss the knowledge that is needed for teaching. Although the framework identifies three "key concepts within several domains of knowledge that are critical for teachers" (Darling-Hammond, 2008, p.1320–1321), I focus specifically on one of the key concepts, namely, curriculum content and goals, which highlights the importance of knowing the content to be taught. I am also reminded that historical narratives constructed by students about their own countries generally resemble historical master narratives (Carretero & Van Alphen, 2014).

According to Feiman-Nemser (2008), learning to *think like a teacher* involves student teachers critically examining their existing beliefs about teaching, against a backdrop of new ideas and understandings of good teaching. Student teachers have already internalised a range of teaching and learning experiences, acquired from the 'apprentice of observation' (Lortie, 1975) through the number of years spent at schools. I argue that museum visits dovetailed with coursework can provide the backdrop of new understandings about the teaching of apartheid era history.

Feiman-Nemser, in describing learning to *feel like a teacher*, recognises that "teaching and learning to teach are deeply personal work" as it connects

emotions, identity, and intellect (2008, p.699). In discussing learning to feel like a teacher, I focus mainly on identity development as integral to learning to feel like a teacher as the development of a professional identity emerges as a key element in the literature influencing the way student teachers question who 'I' am as a teacher (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006; Beijaard, Meijer, Verloop, 2004; Nieto, 2003). Student teachers' conceptualisation of who 'I' am is influenced by history. Cultural background and upbringing influences learning in museums (Falk & Dierking, 2000) and inevitably influences the growth of personal identity (Schauble *et al.*, 1996). I draw on Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) to reflect on the role of identity in museums. These scholars (Fienberg and Leinhardt, 2000) describe identity as part of a social context that takes into consideration the different kinds of knowledge and patterns of experience that individuals have pertaining to a given activity.

In the fourth theme, learning *to act like a teacher*, Feiman-Nemser makes the case that teachers need to integrate a range of "skills, strategies, and routines and the judgement to figure out what to do when" (2008, p.699). Using the multi-sensory exploration of museum objects can expose student teachers to its uses as a teaching tool and strategy in their own classrooms (Guy & Kelley-Lowe, 2001). I argue that student teachers can draw on a museum setting to strengthen their skills and strategies to teach this content area effectively.

## Research methods

A qualitative research paradigm was suited to this study as it allowed for an in-depth enquiry into understanding the meaning as constructed by research participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) on the potential of blending learning in apartheid museums with coursework in enabling their learning to teach apartheid era history. This study can be further described as a qualitative case study as it involves the description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The bounded system that defines this case study is second year student teachers taking the module that integrates coursework with museum visits. These are student teachers who have selected Social Science as one of their subject specialisations to teach in the Intermediate Phase in the primary school. Sampling is therefore purposeful as it involves all student teachers taking the module (n=25).

As this research aims to instil in student teachers the ability to reflect on their learning in coursework, museums and their prior learning experiences, a critical theoretical framework is used. Patton (2015 cited by Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) describes critical research as that which critiques prevailing circumstances and through such critique, change is brought about. Critical theory involves asking questions about power relations and structures in society that reinforce how power is distributed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Museums do advance their own perspectives (Gardner, 2004), with exhibits and artefacts in museums generally reflecting the dominant discourse of society (Baines, 2007). In this research, it is envisaged that by student teachers analysing, questioning and reflecting on their learning of apartheid history from different sources and through different pedagogies, they will be able to think critically about what and how they will teach apartheid era history to learners in the primary school. It also offers an important approach towards improving “citizenship education by emphasising the political nature of history curriculum” and provides opportunities for students to not only understand, but to “disrupt and challenge the official curriculum” (Salinas & Blevins, 2014, p.38).

The methods of data collection included open-ended questionnaires with all student teachers (n=25) and individual interviews with five student teachers selected randomly from the group. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the theoretical framework informs how data will be collected. From a critical theory perspective, asking questions in interviews or other forms of data collection about their experiences can bring about a change in consciousness and encourage change (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data analysis was inductive as the study set out to combine information from interviews and open-ended questionnaires, which were then ordered into larger themes, “as the researcher works from the particular to the general” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used content analysis, as described by Patton (2002) to reveal the patterns that emerged from the large volume of data collected which then led to the formulation of major themes. Patton describes content analysis as reducing a large amount of qualitative data in order to make sense of the data by identifying “core consistencies and meanings” (2002, p.453).

The validity and dependability in terms of data analysis were ensured through the triangulation of sources (Patton, 1999) from interviews and open-ended questionnaires.

## Findings

### Multiple narratives on apartheid era history strengthens knowledge for teaching

Student teachers have acknowledged that their prior knowledge about apartheid era history was acquired from parents, grandparents, the media and from teachers at school. There was however one student teacher who recalled personal encounters of the apartheid era when she was in primary school, of how “the students will protest and the police would come, we used to call them hippos and they would fire teargas. We would quickly run to the taps to wash our eyes.” Student teachers therefore have personal narratives about apartheid era history.

A few students recognised that narratives acquired as a learner at school on apartheid era history lacked depth (n=5). For example, at schools, “we were just told that black people were mistreated” and “they will not go into depth to explain how.” One of the students also explained that their learning at schools was limited to “Mandela and Walter Sisulu.” Student teachers acknowledged that if they did not have the knowledge and experience from coursework and the museums, they “would have taught it (apartheid era history) the way I was taught growing up, I would just tell them what happened,” and “it wouldn’t really be all the information they will need, I will lack the content knowledge.”

On visiting the different museums sites and engaging with the narratives presented by each, student teachers’ misconceptions about apartheid from their prior learning experiences emerged. For example, at Liliesleaf Farm, the majority of student teachers (n=17) did not know that “white people actually fought against apartheid” as “I thought that only black people are the ones that were fighting for freedom.” After the museum visit, student teachers’ perspectives changed as “I know that not all white people were cruel but some of them were really against the law of apartheid.” Another misconception that was addressed was at the Hector Pieterse Museum were student teachers

(n=7) realised that Hector Pieterse “was actually not the first person to die.” Responses from students that confirmed that misconceptions were being corrected are: “I noticed that there were lots of learners who died;” and “it was not only Hector killed on that day.” At the Apartheid museum, one student was “really hurt to see that blacks were against each other. They did not support one another in some aspects.” An intersection of the narratives from prior experiences with the multiple narratives presented in museums revealed and clarified some misconceptions that student teachers had. The data supports the view that student teachers’ prior knowledge and understandings on apartheid era history were expanded after the museum visits. After the museum visits, student teachers’ views expanded from “it was more than a court” to “it is also a prison where black prisoners were treated unfairly” and learning about “how the black people were treated in jail, the brutality they were faced with, having to eat next to a dirty toilet, eating from a dirty plate, and being tortured” (Constitution Hill). They also acquired “more knowledge of the brutality, pain and struggles” through “a somewhat personal experience of what it was like for both black and white person (people) during apartheid” (the Apartheid Museum). Student teachers’ views of Liliesleaf Farm changed from expecting “the information we were going to get there was going to be related to farming” towards discovering “where the political struggle heroes were meeting and what led to the raid” and “gained knowledge about people involved in fighting against apartheid” (Liliesleaf Farm). Other student teachers reported that they gained “primary knowledge from recordings of what truly happened” and “how other whites worked with blacks to fight for freedom.” Student teachers stated that they “gained a lot of information about other young anti-apartheid activists” and “learnt how the youth changed the political history of the country.” “I think being in Soweto and being in the same place where the events had taken place was very powerful” (Hector Pieterse Museum and the Mandela House). Thus, the field trips “added to my knowledge of what I learnt at school and in coursework. It made the implicit, explicit” and “it showed exactly what happened.”

From the above narratives, student teachers continuously reiterate that they are gaining “more knowledge” at each of the museum sites, and misconceptions are brought to the fore, which should translate into teaching the content with a more informed lens. However, it would seem that gaining ‘more knowledge’ did not prompt a critical engagement of different or similar perspectives from each of the museum sites. In addition, they take for granted

the ‘grand narratives’ presented in museums by stating that “it showed exactly what happened.”

### Harnessing sentiments in museums to stimulate reflection

The museum visits were very emotional for all students and “made me very sad; I cried on this day,” an indication that some student teachers were not prepared on how to deal with these emotions. One student teacher indicated that she was “very emotional seeing the ropes, how black and white had different entrances, often I found myself wiping tears from watching the videos.” Another scene that evoked similar emotions was seeing “photographs of primary school children being shot. That hurt me quite a lot. Kids being burnt. The poems.”

Some of these emotions translated into feelings of national pride and patriotism as some student teachers (n=12) indicated that “I have a sense of pride to be South African,” and “it gave me a sense of belonging. We should be proud of where we are right now because we are very privileged.” These feelings were stimulated by a sense of realisation about “how fortunate we are to have the freedom we have. It made me more passionate” and “it made me appreciate my rights, appreciate being a South African more.” However, some of these emotions (n=6) elicited “feelings of hatred for white people,” “anger” and “I felt I want revenge.” Such feelings were elicited when “I saw photographs of primary school children being shot. I understand that is important” but “that hurt me quite a lot” that “when you leave, little to heal you.” These examples suggest that student teachers’ national identity was being influenced both positively and negatively.

Student teachers expressed the importance of “calm(ing) people down when they leave” by “maybe a quote from him (Mandela)” who “pushed for reconciliation.” Another example provided was at the Apartheid museum “on our way out they played the South African national anthem. That inspired me. I started singing along as I felt proud to be South African.” The importance of ‘healing’ before you leave a museum can be viewed as an example of student teachers not just analysing the knowledge gained but they are now evaluating and synthesising what they learnt. It would seem that emotions spurred student teachers to analyse, reflect and provide solutions on how to manage emotional narratives.

The museums stimulated student teachers curiosity and reflection which encouraged further independent research. It made student teachers aware that “there is a lot that I need to learn about history” and that “there is a lot that I need to know about my country” which “delivered me to a point of wanting to know more and conduct more research.” Most student teachers were also critically reflecting on their different experiences at each of the museums (n=20). Some student teachers “felt that the place [Liliesleaf Farm] was not as celebrated/publicised as it should be because it is rich in history.” At the Mandela House in Soweto, student teachers described their experience as “not gain(ing) much because the house was changed,” “looks fake and renovated to suit some guests” and looking at “only pictures and pictures were not enough for me.” These experiences resulted in students feeling a “lack of attachment to the place” as “I did not feel the presence of him in the house” and “the Mandela family struggles.”

Student teachers’ emotions seemed to have stimulated analysis and reflection on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their learning during the field experiences. Curiosity and reflection that stimulates further research in student teachers suggests that the skills of lifelong learning needed for good teaching are being developed.

Learning in multiple contexts stimulated creativity on how to teach

Student teachers expressed the view that their learning in multiple contexts stimulated their creativity and vision of the type of teacher they would one day want to be. From coursework, learning creative teaching pedagogies was prompted when “we designed our own interactive museums. We knew what we were going to expect. It gave us prior knowledge that when you get there, this is what you are going to see. We came back and we studied some of the leaders. When I was studying, it brought to life what I was studying.”

All student teachers (n=25), from their learning in coursework and the museum field trips, indicated that they will employ different strategies to teach learners. For example, “you need to be practical, sometimes you need to act like you were there” and “I would teach learners by bringing my own learning aids such as my homemade museum, I still have it so I am still going to use it in the future.” Other student teachers indicated that “I would make use of pictures that depicts what really happened, not the ones that we usually see” and “I want them to know and feel what was happening at that time, not

just that it was here-say” by “play(ing) them songs to evoke those feelings, bring pictures, play them a video.” These views emanate from student teachers personal experiences at the museums being “very informative and technological;” “the letters. . .the technology that made the stories so real” and “the songs and sounds that they played made you feel that you were part of that struggle.” As such, many student teachers responded that they too will “bring my learners there (museums) one day to get a first-hand experience about the emotions and experience that people went through.”

In addition, student teachers’ views about History as a subject was changed as some (n=6) indicated that “I thought History was a boring subject. I did not do History in school” and “I have learnt that there are strategies that you can use to make it interesting.” For example, in coursework, student teachers were asked to design their own museums choosing one South African leader of their choice. For student teachers, the experience “got me to use my imagination and then to go and actually experience that first hand; be at the places, see and hear what people have gone through, made my understanding easier.” These experiences “helped me to set a standard as a teacher one day. I would also like to get my children to experience like touch, senses and use their own imagination about how museums are and what they should represent and the experience it brings to an individual.”

## Discussion of findings and recommendations

The majority of the student teachers in this research had not directly experienced apartheid. The knowledge that they acquired is the stories that are told from parents, grandparents, community, school, texts and the media. Student teachers learning about South Africa’s difficult past through museum visits, dovetailed by their learning in coursework before and after their field trips did strengthen their ability to think, know, feel and act like a teacher. Feiman-Nemser (2008) emphasises the importance of an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter as one of the components to ‘know’ like a teacher. The data suggests that student teachers subject matter knowledge required to teach apartheid era history is strengthened, a finding that is also consistent with research conducted by Rohlf (2015) that field trips reinforce what has been already learned and provides new knowledge. A good grasp of the subject matter would in turn enable teachers to organise and teach the school curriculum to suit the needs of the learners in the classroom (Ball & Bass, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). However, the data also

suggests that student teachers were taking for granted what they see in museums, even though the aim of the pre-trip museum activity, constructing their own interactive museum, was to enable them to recognise the subjectivity that surrounds the selection of materials. Gardner (2004), in earlier research also made similar assertions, that visitors construct meaning by assuming that what they see in museums is authentic and accurate. What is needed is for student teachers to learn to become reflective, pedagogical thinkers by ensuring that they are equipped with the skills and the knowledge to operate “autonomously as an academic professional and developer of their field” (Krzywacki, Lavonen, & Juuti, 2015, p.92). Thus, the post-museum trip needs to extend student teachers further by introducing them to skills that will enable them to interrogate grand narratives. Students need to be taught skills and knowledge to become both consumers and producers of educational research (Krzywacki *et al.*, 2015: p.95), which I argue are necessary to assist them to interrogate the prescribed curriculum at schools and not accept taken for granted ‘grand narratives.’

The data also supports the notion that student teachers are beginning to feel like a teacher. Feiman-Nemser, in describing learning to feel like a teacher, recognises that “teaching and learning to teach are deeply personal work” as it connects emotions, identity and intellect (2008, p.699). Student teachers, by describing how they will use the experience to teach their own learners one day shows that they are already visualising the type of teacher they want to be. As such, their professional identity as a teacher is being developed. One of the elements that also influence teacher professional identity is the perception of being an expert in terms of subject matter and pedagogy (Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt, 2000). The module designed to link coursework to museum visits was an attempt to develop student-teachers towards becoming experts in subject matter and pedagogy. The data did suggest that student teachers content knowledge was strengthened. However, what is needed is for student teachers to engage with the subject matter more critically and analytically. Discussions after the museum visits must move students from being mere consumers of what they see to becoming active producers of knowledge.

This study has also found that museum visits were able to address misconceptions acquired from student teachers prior learning experiences, an important finding that is suggestive of student teachers beginning to think like a teacher. They are able to engage in self-critique and self-awareness by admitting that there is still “a lot that they need to learn.” Student teachers do need powerful and convincing alternatives that will enable new images of

good teaching to be developed (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) if they are to begin thinking like a teacher. Museums do present a multi-faceted narrative, with the visitor presented with choices to interpret in one of many ways (Taub, 2016).

In acting like a teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 2008), student teachers did acknowledge that their own interactive museums in the pre-visit to museums, followed by learning in museums could strengthen their teaching strategies to teach learners. It was clear that they intended to teach with passion and use strategies that will invoke feelings in learners as if they were really ‘living the experiences of that era’. The multi-sensory exploration of museum objects (Guy & Kelley-Lowe, 2001) has exposed student teachers to its uses as a teaching tool and strategy in their own classrooms.

Student teachers described their museum visits as very ‘emotional’. Interpretive displays that provoke emotion, described as a ‘hot interpretation’, are aimed at engaging visitors emotionally so as to challenge them to examine their attitudes with respect to the specific and contentious issues displayed (Ballantyne & Uzell, 1993). The emotions elicited from the museum visits did challenge student teachers to examine their attitudes and actions. The result was that some student teachers experienced a sense of national pride and unity while other student teachers experienced emotions such as hatred and revenge. These very diverse attitudes point to the difficulties experienced by some student teachers in dealing with their emotions. What is needed are critical discussions to be held after field trips or as described by Ragland (2015, p.617), “discomforting dialogues” which provide opportunities for reflection on one’s experiences, thoughts and feelings. While student teachers did acknowledge that post field trip discussions in lectures were helpful, they raised concerns about how learners from schools will deal with similar emotions. I interpret this response as indicative of student teachers beginning to think, feel, know and act like a teacher. While they are able to talk about their feelings and why they feel this way, they are simultaneously thinking about their learners and its effects on teaching and learning. Student teachers did indicate that museums will need to do more to ensure that visitors leave with feelings of appreciation, national pride and unity and not hurt and hatred. Ballantyne (2003), from a study of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, also raised the question of whether the museum could do more to enable visitors to channel their emotions towards promoting justice, peace and understanding in their own communities. Drawing on the responses from student teachers, I agree that museums need to do more to ‘heal’ visitors.

## Conclusion

Student teachers learning in museums dovetailed with coursework did point to a number of immediate benefits for student teachers learning about the apartheid era and about how to teach this content area to learners in the classroom. Their ability to ‘know, think, feel and act’ like a teacher was strengthened. Integrating museum visits into one’s pedagogy recognises the importance of merging prior knowledge and experiences with new knowledge and understandings. It is a valuable method that can engage student teachers to think critically and reflectively about what and how they teach history. However, it would seem that student teachers developed more substantive knowledge (key facts) but perhaps still did not engage with the syntactic knowledge of the discipline (rules of evidence). Thus, teaching investigative skills is essential if student teachers are to begin interrogating ‘grand narratives’ to become both consumers and producers of knowledge. In so doing, student teachers will not only understand, but be able to challenge and transform how they teach the official school curriculum.

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