



ACCESIBILITY OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: AN ESSENTIAL NEED FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GHANA

Prosper Anthony Mensah¹, Abraham Gyamfi², Kennedy Nyeseh Ofori³, Theresa Agbezudor⁴

^{1,2,3}Wesley College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana, Department of Education

⁴St. Louis College of Education, Kumasi

Corresponding author: Prosper Anthony Mensah, anthonykobina1987@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Presbyterian College of Education, Akropong in Ghana the only institution among the pilot schools that admits three categories of students with disability; students with visual impairment, hearing impairment and the physically challenged. The aim of the study therefore was to assess Presbyterian College of Education as an inclusive educational institution. A case study design; in which tutors and students at Presbyterian College of Education, Akropong were interviewed, was adopted for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 35 students with disabilities and 15 tutors at Presbyterian college of education in the Eastern region of Ghana. In-depth interview and observational techniques were used to assess the views of the participants about inclusive education with regards to the nature of the physical and the built environments. The study revealed students with special needs have challenges in accessing the physical and built environment and that the challenges have negative impact on students with disability. Based on this finding, it is recommended that efforts should be made to improve the physical and built environments to make it accessible to persons with disabilities at the College of Education level to facilitate inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Accessibility, Mobility, Physical environment, Supportive environment.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of inclusive education is to ensure that every child of school age is able to access the mainstream school of his or her choice and be able to learn successfully. To this end, the learning needs of all

categories of students including those with disabilities need to be addressed. The concept of inclusive education is centered on the fundamental right to education for all as well as the right to non-discrimination and participation (Schultz, 2004).

Contrary to the perception that inclusive education is only a matter of providing education for children with disabilities in a general school setting, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is promoting a much broader view of inclusive education, which encompasses all children who are excluded on grounds of gender, ability, ethnicity, linguistic or poverty related reasons. Inclusive education system requires the adaptation of the general curriculum to make it accessible to all learners; the school's physical environment is to be devoid of any form of disadvantage to all learners, adequate resource room and teachers appropriately trained to meet the needs of all categories of learners. Opong (2003) stated that inclusive education refers to the adaptation of the school curriculum to make it equally accessible to students with special needs. In inclusive education, the school environment, the climate of the school, and the school plan – are all adapted to suit both able and students with special needs equally. In inclusive education, it is the responsibility of the school to adjust and adapt its environment to suit all categories of students with special needs.

Unlike the policy of segregation which separated special needs children from their peers and led to labelling and discrimination, this policy is to allow disabled children attend their neighbourhood schools, interact in the society and be participants in the society. This shift in paradigm from segregation to inclusion permits children with special needs to be enrolled full time in regular schools with adequate resource support. This implies that children of mild to moderate special needs will be educated in regular schools alongside their non-disabled counterpart. Prior to the 1990's very few students with disabilities were included in general education classrooms in Ghana. The needs of many of these children were also not met by the Government of Ghana and some parents (Avoke, 2001). Mitchell and Diane (2005) state that providing education to vast number of children with disabilities in regular school poses a number of challenges and issues to be addressed. As such, much attention is not given to issues concerning children with disabilities.

Ghana's educational strategic plan for 2015 was focused on including all persons with disability in the main stream schools by 2015-2016 academic year. As a preparatory strategy, some schools including Presbyterian College of Education, Akropong-Akwapem, were running the inclusive education programme on pilot basis until 2015 when it was fully implemented all over the country. Government is expected to provide equal educational opportunities for children and youth with special needs at pre-tertiary and tertiary levels to promote access and participation, quality and inclusion (National Report, 2004). This implies that as a result of providing education for all children, teachers in general schools must provide instruction and other educational services to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Also, teachers must be prepared to teach all kinds of pupils, including those who present special needs in the classrooms.

Statement of the problem

The right to be educated as stipulated by both international laws and declarations and that of Ghana has made it necessary for the Government of Ghana to provide access to formal education for all school aged children. This does not exclude children with disabilities. In their case, the Government of Ghana and for that matter the education ministry settled for the provision of segregation school for children with disabilities. In effect, special schools such as schools for the blind, schools for the deaf, and schools for the intellectually challenged are dotted around the country. Due to the few number of these schools, the distance between the schools and children with disabilities, coupled with human right issues; thus the right to education, it was agreed at the Salamanca world conference that all children regardless of their disability should be allowed to school in the mainstream system in 2003. The Government of Ghana took up the challenge and began to implement this directive by piloting few schools in the country as inclusive schools. Subsequently, Ghana is now running inclusive education system.

The provisions in the Persons With Disability Act 715 section 17 enjoins the ministry of education to provide the necessary facilities and equipment that enables students with disabilities to benefit from education (Disability Act 715, 2006). Although Presbyterian college of Education is practicing inclusive education, we do not know how effective it is being implemented and the associated constraints to the implementation are also not known. We do not know the extent to which the physical and built environment is accessible and disability friendly. The study is therefore to assess the accessibility of the physical and built environment of Presbyterian College of Education, Akropong Akuapem, as an inclusive institution. Since the pilot project was started in 2003, no systematic study has been carried out to ascertain the extent to which the institution has been able to implement the concept of inclusive education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of accessibility

Article nine (9) of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities provides that state parties should take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with other, to the physical environment (UN Convention, 2006). The article emphasized that obstacles and barriers should be identified and eliminated to promote accessibility. Section six (6) and seven (7) of disability law 715 of Ghana also agrees with the UN Convention on making all public facilities accessible to persons with disabilities (Disability Act 715, 2004). Key among them is architectural accessibility. Architectural accessibility concerns the physical development (buildings, roads etc) and how to get in and out of these physical structures, it may be a parking lot, a resident, a lorry station, or the pedestrians walk way. (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2004) concludes that the non-availability of architectural access affect a lot of individuals with divers forms of disabilities. Let us consider how a building or facility with several staircases would affect a person with a mobility impairment, but a truly architecturally accessible structure would put into account the needs

of individuals with a range of disabilities, such as visual, mobility, hearing and cognitive impairments (Corporation for National & Community Service, 2004). This is why an architecturally accessible environment is sometimes referred to as “barrier-free”. Similarly, Sari (2007) would want teachers of children with special needs to appreciate the fact that the caliber of environment in which the student learn is important in determining their achievement.

Principles of accessibility and Its Impact on student with disabilities

An inclusive learning environment is one with proper layout characterized by direction indicators, provision of ramps and rails making it accessible to all students, pleasant to work in and appropriate for teaching and learning (Golder et al, 2005). Planners of schools should therefore ensure all students can physically access teaching and administrative spaces, space to manoeuvre around classes and offices with wheelchair. Consider the width of the doorway, the windows and every aspect of the school environment. All areas of the classroom should be accessible to all students (Scott, Leach, & Bucholz, 2008) this is because learning environment can either enhance or mar a child’s effort to learn and feel protected and well-situated or at ease as a member of the school. Some areas to think carefully about when developing an atmosphere of interactional respect are classroom design; class procedure and classroom strategies (Jessica and Julie 2009).

Moreover, Patton, et al (2001) substantiates the claim that tables and chairs arranged in clear and appropriate rows would ensure free movement throughout the classroom. After a survey study about the classroom, Patton et al (2001) found that 94 percent of the K-3 teachers they surveyed use a semi-circle or cluster to arrange the desks in their classrooms. They therefore came to the conclusion that putting children in groups comes with a lot of positive effects such as encouraging group learning, raising the sense of class togetherness and making good use of space. Similar results are reported by Jessica & Julie (2009) in their assertion that the arrangement of tables and chairs in the classroom is essential so there will be a lot of space for all students to easily move about in the classroom.

Teachers should also expand safety procedures to all students, including those that are identified with disability and when teaching, repeat printed directions orally (Scott, Leach & Bucholz, 2008). Ensure safe floor covering for safe passage for any child, including, for example, a child who is in a hurry, has visual impairment, or uses a wheeled stander (Michael et al, 2006). Similarly Torrey & Ashy (1997) suggest that physical activities are conducted with children in a safe and supportive environment. These authors believe schools and teachers that create safe and supportive environment will not only protect students from injury, but will also encourage their lifelong participation in regular activity. However, James (2000) found that although educators in general endorse these requirements, they disagree over its implementation, particularly in connection to the concept of inclusion. Their varied perspectives have direct implications for the design and use of school facilities. A survey conducted by Mc Cain and his group on class size suggest that large classes may have a negative impact on classroom performance in part because of reduced student/teacher interaction (Mc Cain et al, 1985). In contrast,

Baun & Valins (1979) assert that changes in overall school population independent of classroom size are more likely to result in increased levels of uncertainty, goal interference and cognitive load. The purpose of this study was therefore to assess the accessibility of physical and built environment and its impact on students with disabilities in Presbyterian College of Education.

Research Question

1. How accessible is the physical and built environment of Presbyterian College of Education for students with disabilities?
2. What is the impact of accessibility of physical and built environment on students with disabilities?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design is a case study in which teachers and students of Presbyterian College of Education Akropong were interviewed. Gal et al, (2007), explained case study as the in-depth study of one or more instances of a phenomenon in its real-life context that reflects the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon. The researcher settled on this design since he intended to undertake an in-depth study of the phenomenon in the real-life situation in order to unravel the actual perspective of the participants regarding inclusive education at Presbyterian College of Education.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE

The study population comprised of all tutors and students with disabilities in the Presbyterian College of Education, Akropong. Overall, sixty (60) teachers and fifty-five (55) students with disabilities constituted the population. According to Creswell (2005), population of the study is the sum total of the phenomena which are of interest to the researcher. Convenience sampling and census were used to select the students and tutors respectively. The sample size for the study was 15 tutors of the College and 35 students with disabilities. Even though there were students with several forms of needs only those with visual, hearing and physical disabilities were included in the study. In the case of tutors all of them were qualified because they (tutors) all teach students with disabilities. Therefore, study participants were selected for interview until saturation was reached.

INSTRUMENTATION

The following instruments were used for the study; observation and interview

Observation

Observation of tutors and students in their activities during break and college activities was conducted. Observing students during the classroom activities enabled the researcher to examine the kind of activities and interactions that go on during teaching and learning in relation with access to the physical and built environment.

Observation was used because it enables the researcher to obtain information in its primary form, besides, observation put little or no pressure on the respondents. The observation also gives the researcher the opportunity to investigate things on the ground personally and to crosscheck the results with other

instruments. Additionally, observation affords the researcher the opportunity of recording events spontaneously as they occur and provides data that relate to the typical behavioural situations. The observation was naturalistic using an observation guide to collect information on the following issues: location of school and physical environment, architectural design of buildings, material resources available and their efficiency, classroom activities, out of classroom activities, dormitory all other extra-curricular activities.

Interview

In-depth one-on-one interview was conducted for tutors and students in the College. Robson (2003) stated that interviews typically involve a researcher, asking questions and hopefully receiving answers from people being interviewed. Although interview involves asking series of questions and following a procedure decided upon beforehand, the interviewer is largely free to arrange the form and timing of the questions. Also, the interviewer can rephrase the questions, modify them and add some new questions to the list (Robson, 2002). The interview guide was in two sections. The first section specifically sought demographic data of respondents: gender, number of years of teaching, educational qualification and grade levels taught. In section two, the items sought information on how accessible the physical and built environment of the College was. The interviews were recorded by the researcher using audio tape recorder. In addition, important points raised by respondents were written down by my research assistant. Each interview lasted for 50 minutes.

After the instruments were designed, they were read over several times to identify mistakes that might have been overlooked during the setting stage. Ambiguous items were restructured or deleted. To ensure validity of the findings, respondents' views, which was recorded manually, was read to them. This gave the respondents the opportunity to determine if their views were accurately recorded. Furthermore, the use of in-depth interview and observation in the study, allowed triangulation of the data. According to O'Donoghue and Punch (2003), triangulation is a method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data. The use of triangulation in the research therefore increased the credibility and validity of the result.

RESULTS

Assessing the physical and built environment and how it affects the inclusion of the Disabled.

Two major themes emerged with regard to physical and built environment of an inclusive institution: the nature of the physical and built environment and its impact on inclusion.

To assess the physical and built environment of Presbyterian College of Education tutors and students with disabilities were interviewed. The tutors and students were interviewed to ascertain their views on the physical and built environment. In the first place, it is worth noting that not all the students expressed to be facing challenges in interacting with the physical and built environment but these categories were the least thus; the hearing impaired. This is because most of them (students with disabilities) indicated their unique challenges when interacting with the environment. The challenges highlighted have been

categorized under the following areas namely: the physical environment of the male Hall, the physical environment of the female hall, the physical environment of the various class room blocks, the toilet and bath facilities, the resource room, the college chapel and the dining hall.

In relation to the first challenge- the female Hall, a number of students explained that they found it difficult to use the cane when accessing the physical environment. This was found among the visually impaired in the school. One of the participants stated: *“in fact we find it very difficult to move in and out of this hall even with the white cane due to the depressions, gutters and erosions around it”* (a first year female blind student, aged 21)

Also students who are physically challenged expressed that there are a lot of pot-holes, uncovered gutters and several stair cases leading to the hall. This is because the environment is not tiled, a lot of erosions can be seen around the hall block and the ground floor is very deep about 8 metres tall. This has compelled students who are physically challenged in the College to rely on their able counterparts in terms of making movement to access the needed facilities in the College. This is evidenced in an expression of a student: *“It is very difficult for me making movement using my wheel chair or clutches because the environment is full of obstacles* (a second year female physically challenged student, aged 22)”.

Among the tutors, they opined that, had it not been for the sighted counterparts of the students in the College students with disabilities would find it difficult to move from one place to another due to the uncovered gutters and no guide rays to lead them to their destination. This is typified in the following expression by one tutor; *‘the front of the female Hall to the ground is not accessible at all using the wheel chair and the white cane* (a female tutor)”.

It was noted that their emphasis was on how they depend on sighted guide among the visually impaired and how the physically challenged call for assistance before they can access the environment. This is because the floor of the female hall is not accessible as erosion has taken the whole place. As a result, some of the students said that they get frustrated even when they are moving from the hall to the classroom and limits their desire to learn in the school.

Directly linked with the above concern is the issue of the physical and built environment of the male hall not being accessible which a number of the students raised. Accordingly, they opined that there is a big uncovered gutter and a tall staircase in front of the male hall and as a result limits their desire to move about when their colleagues without disabilities are not there. Whereas it is true that consistent practice and use of the cane helps a user to develop familiarity with his physical environment, it was realized this familiarity has not been fully developed among majority of the visually impaired students. Even though the College gives them orientation and mobility training, the students perceived the amount of time spent in teaching orientation and mobility in the College as being limited. In expressing a viewpoint on this, one student states; *“There is inadequate time for practice and this has affected my*

mobility skills. Therefore I could not move freely in this Hall since a lot of physical barrier exist...” (A third year blind student, aged 24)”.

For most of them, they argued that, as a result of their impairment, their ability to identify obstacles within the classroom environment is hampered and this is because the environment is not accessible. The students therefore complained that it takes extended practice time to be able to develop familiarity with the various classroom blocks. Even though, they understood that there was an assigned time to teach them mobility skills. Their general impression was that the classroom environment is not accessible to visually impaired and the physically challenged. In front of the main classroom block there are no ramps and rays to assist these individuals tray to their destination. In order to develop their skills in mobility and to move without bumping into any obstacles within their classroom environment there should be proper guide rays and ramps in all the parts of the class room environment to support trailing to their destination. One student also shared his view: *“it is a burden moving to and from the classrooms because there are no guide rays to make our trailing easy. This has made entering the classrooms scaring. We would be grateful if something is done about it.”*(A second year physically challenged student, aged 25)

Another challenge that was raised on the physical and built environment is the College chapel. It is well known that gaining familiarity in one’s environment increases the person’s ability to move about freely to their destination. However, most of the students indicated that they find it difficult to move to the chapel which is of much concern to students with special needs because it is one of the essential social gatherings. This is because there is a big gutter between the ground and the staircase, also from the school entrance to the chapel there are deep gutters and staircases both left and right along the road leading to the chapel. In connection with this, one visually impaired said: *“The staircase leading from the chapel to the toilet is very high and steep so am always afraid to move around there.* (A female visually impaired student, aged 23)”. A blind student said that: *“We are mostly deprived from worship because the staircases and gutters around the church premises are too many. No wheelchair can go there”*. (A third year male physically challenged student, aged 21)”.

Another important place that concerns were raised strongly about was the dining hall. Since this hall is a must go facility, the visually impaired and the physically challenged complained about its inaccessibility. Due to the topography of the campus, the dining hall is also surrounded by uncovered gutters and a lot of staircases making it very difficult to reach by the special needs students. One of the participants expressed that: *“we find it very difficult to visit the dining hall three times a day because of this staircases and the tables in the hall are not well spaced so we cannot move easily the hall”*(a male physically challenged student, aged 20)

However there are no guide rays to assist these individuals to their destination. This actually impedes movement using the white cane. While it is undeniable that navigating along ones environment among the visually impaired does not come handy but with a great deal of practice and application of the

use of the white cane, the aforementioned challenges have thwarted students' efforts to develop mobility skill effectively since the barriers exist in this regard.

Lastly, one of the students expressed his difficulty in accessing the resource room. This is because the tables and chairs are not well arranged for easy location of one's desk. A number of the students also had difficulty in accessing the resource room for the disabled students. This is because, tables and chairs in the resource room are spread in haphazard manner and this actually limits students desire to assess their own resource room. One student said: "*A times, I am afraid when assessing my own resource room because of how materials are scattered in the room (A blind student)*".

In the case of the hearing impaired they acknowledge what their colleagues physically challenged and the visually impaired said but with them because they have their sight they did not face any challenge when moving. These students directed the researcher to talk to the other groups with disabilities in terms of physical accessibility.

Impact of accessibility of physical and built environment

The interview revealed how the present state of the physical environment impacted on the lives of students with special needs as far as inclusion is concern. The views expressed by the participants indicated that students with special needs were unavoidably absent from some social gatherings including the dining hall, church activities and even the assembly hall where important information are given. Due to this drawback, the participants expressed that they feel excluded in the school community. One of the participants stated: "*even though this College is supposed to be inclusive institution we are rather excluded and sometimes we have to receive second hand information.*" (A male physically challenged student, aged 21).

Again, the inaccessible nature of the classroom blocks has made it uncomfortable to visit by the students with special needs. They expressed that they are unable to attend all classes since they had to move from one lecture hall to another. The participants said the situation made them lose vital lessons which affect their academic performance. One participant shared her view: "*.....the situation affects our academic performance because we are unable to attend some lectures. In fact we cannot be moving up and down as our able counterparts in this kind of environment*" (a female physically challenged student, aged 22).

Findings from the Structured Observation

In addition to the in-depth interview, a structured observation was conducted to supplement the findings from the qualitative interviews. The structured observation focused on how accessible campus was to students with disabilities in connection to the nature of the physical and built environment of the institution. The results from this aspect of the study are presented in the ensuing paragraphs:

It was observed that the College is located on a hilly area. This has rendered the entire campus slopy. As a result, most of the buildings are connected with very tall staircases and uncovered gutters. It was observed that the dining hall is connected with several staircases which could be cumbersome for

the blind and physically challenged to access. An open gutter had been constructed just at the entrance to the dining hall which apparently posed challenges to students with visual and mobility impairments. Inside the dining hall, it was observed that the tables were not arranged in a manner that would enable students with special needs to move freely without bumping into the tables and chairs. The pictures below show the entrance and inside of the dining hall. It was also observed that the chapel is surrounded by very tall staircases and inside is characterised with congestion because the pews provided were too narrow for the use of the physically challenged

Again, it was observed that the pavements leading to the dormitories were full of potholes and there were uncovered gutters at the entrances of the dormitories. Inside the dormitories, it was observed that there is total congestion because the beds were too close to each other and a visually impaired student could find it difficult to move about in such a place. The paths that lead to the toilet and bathhouses were also not disability friendly. The classroom blocks were also observed not to be disability friendly. This is because no pavements were constructed to connect the classrooms but staircases. Some of the classrooms are story buildings which could pose accessibility challenge to the physically challenged as well as visually impaired students. It was again observed that inside the classrooms, the tables and chairs were scattered about which could create difficulty for some special needs students to locate their seats in the classroom. The pictures below show in and around the classroom blocks.

DISCUSSION

Accessing the physical environment and its impact on inclusion of the disabled.

The findings reveal that most of the students with special needs face unique challenges when interacting with the environment. Both interview and observation exposed the poor nature of the access routes to the essential facilities in the College. Thus, the roads that lead to the dining hall, assembly hall, the various dormitories, the chapel, classroom blocks and places of convenience are not accessible to students with disabilities because they are not properly developed with pavements, ramps and rails which would make movement easy for wheelchair and the white cane user. This is not consistent with the United Nations convention (2006), Disability Act 715 (2004), and corporation for national & community service (2004) who are unanimous in the assertion that measures should be taken to ensure that persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment. This implies that obstacles and barriers should be identified and eliminated to promote accessibility to all public facilities. The situation currently seriously affects students with special needs since it restricts their movement and their freedom for that matter. For the College to provide inclusive service environment, efforts must be made to build all roads that leads to essential facilities with tiles pavements, ramps and rails to enhance easy movement of all students. Opened gutters must be properly covered to prevent accident.

Another area of concern realised was about the very entrances into the buildings on campus. Due to the nature of the landscape of the College, almost every block is connected with tall staircases which makes entrance very difficult to the blind and physically challenged. This is in contrast to reports by Sari

(2007), Trinity college Dublin (2011) and the Disability right movement (2001) who preached equal access to public places, social, and school environment, political and economic life which involves not only physical access but also access to the required equipments, services, establishments and facilities. These authors explained that the absence of architectural access impedes the inclusion of several individuals with a range of disabilities. The ministry of education and the Ghana education service should have conducted an accessibility survey to ascertain the feasibility of the college before choosing it for the inclusive programme. The way forward is that, ramps should be constructed alongside the staircases so that students with disabilities can have alternative means of entering. The doors to the buildings should also be wide enough for easy entering of wheelchair and white cane users.

Coupled with the issues of the entrance is the internal features of the facilities especially the classrooms, resource room, dining hall and dormitories. The tables and chairs in classrooms and dining hall were not properly arranged to create enough space for wheelchair and white cane users to freely move through. In the case of the dormitories the beds were too close creating much congestion and poor visibility. Meanwhile, Scott et al (2007), Jessica and Julie (2009), and Patton et al, (2001) said all areas of the classroom should be accessible to all students this is because classroom surroundings can either ameliorate or worsen a pupil's effort to learn and feel safe and at home as one of the learners in that room. One of the areas to look at when developing an atmosphere of shared respect is classroom arrangement. To ensure accommodation of all students in an inclusive institution internal arrangement that provides for easy movement, comfort and good visibility must be catered for in the classrooms dining hall and the dormitories. All this architectural access provision is to inure to the benefit of all students in terms of safety. This is in line with Scott et al, (2008), Michael et al, (2006), Torrey & Ashy (1997) who states that safety should be ensured for safe passage of all students, including, students using white cane and wheeled chair. The authors believe that physical activities are conducted with these categories of students in a safe and supportive environment. These authors also believe schools and teachers that create safe and supportive environment will not only protect students from injury, but will also encourage their lifelong participation in regular activity.

Even though some authors such as James (2000) and Mc Cain et al, (1987), expressed doubt about the implementation of inclusion as a result of cost involved, Baun and Valins (1979) disagreed with the assertion that inclusion could be achieved there is the willingness to support each other in our communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that the physical and built environment is not accessible to students with disabilities especially the visually impaired and the physically challenged students considering the numerous obstacles such as staircases, uncovered gutters, narrow and congested rooms and undeveloped roads on the campus. Also, the fact that there are no guides rays to assist these individuals to their destination and

to interact with their physical environment, which will engender smooth running of inclusive education at Presbyterian College of Education.

The management of the college should liaise with ministry of education to ensure that the school's physical environment is designed to meet the unique needs of students with special needs in the school so that it will help these students to interact with school environment without any fear and maximise their social relationship.

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