

Rural Education and Social Justice: Analyzing the Theoretical Foundations

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Abstract: Rural education is frequently addressed through the lens of material disadvantage highlighting issues such as inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher availability, and restricted access. While these concerns are valid, they often obscure the deeper structural injustices that shape educational experiences in rural contexts. This paper examines the theoretical foundations connecting rural education and social justice, arguing that equity must be understood not only in terms of redistribution, but also in relation to recognition and representation. Drawing on the work of Fraser, Sen, and Young, the paper applies a multidimensional justice framework comprising distributive, recognitional, and representational justice to analyze how rural learners are marginalized in policy, curriculum, and governance. Through engagement with critical education theory, rural sociology, and place-based pedagogies, the paper highlights the need for context-sensitive, culturally sustaining, and participatory approaches to rural education. Reframing rural schooling as a site of agency, knowledge, and possibility, the paper calls for a justice-oriented reimagining of education systems that center the voices and values of rural communities.

Keywords: Rural education, social justice, educational equity, distributive justice, recognitional justice.

1. Introduction

Despite global commitments to educational equity, rural communities continue to experience systemic educational disadvantage. From under-resourced schools and inadequate infrastructure to chronic teacher shortages and limited digital access, learners in rural areas face a constellation of barriers that restrict their opportunities for meaningful participation in education (Maharaj, 2024)(UNESCO, 2021). While these challenges are widely acknowledged in policy discourse, the dominant solutions often emphasize distributive concerns providing more funding, building more schools, or redistributing qualified teachers. Though essential, these interventions

frequently fall short of addressing the deeper, structural injustices that shape rural learners' educational experiences (Cuervo, 2012).

Rural education is not merely about access or geography; it is about how certain populations are positioned within national systems of value, power, and voice. Rural learners are often portrayed through a deficit lens seen as isolated, behind, or lacking aspiration rather than as bearers of legitimate knowledge, culture, and potential (Roberts and Green, 2013). Such representations reinforce policies and practices that marginalize rural communities, not only materially but symbolically and politically (Halfacree, 2017).

This paper argues that to meaningfully address educational inequity in rural contexts, we must move beyond narrow definitions of equality and toward a multidimensional concept of social justice. Drawing on theoretical work from scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2005), Iris Marion Young (1990), and Amartya Sen (1999), this paper applies key concepts of distributive, recognition, and representational justice to the field of rural education (Dorrien, 2021, Blackmore, 2016, Dutka, 2023). By doing so, it seeks to uncover the underlying social, cultural, and political dimensions of rural educational exclusion dimensions that are often overlooked in mainstream education policy.

The goal is not simply to critique existing approaches, but to offer a theoretically grounded framework for reimagining rural education as a space of possibility. Through engagement with social justice theory and rural education scholarship, this paper calls for a reframing of rural learners not as marginal beneficiaries of top-down reforms, but as active agents whose knowledge, culture, and voices are central to building more just and inclusive education systems.

2. The Rural Education Context

Understanding the theoretical foundations of social justice in rural education requires first situating rural contexts as both materially and symbolically marginalized spaces. While rural education systems vary across national and regional lines, they share a common pattern of exclusion in comparison to urban-centric models of schooling. This marginalization is not limited to disparities in resources, infrastructure, or teacher allocation it also manifests in how rural learners, educators, and communities are positioned within educational discourse. Often framed as lagging behind or in need of remediation, rural education is treated as a problem to be solved, rather than a legitimate context with its own cultural, social, and pedagogical strengths (Roberts and Green, 2013, Cuervo, 2016, Roberts, 2016).

Across most global regions, rural students consistently face lower access, weaker educational quality, and reduced academic outcomes relative to their urban counterparts. These disparities are evident in infrastructure gaps rural schools frequently lack adequate classrooms, sanitation facilities, electricity, internet, and reliable transportation (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, teacher shortages are more acute in rural areas, especially in core subjects such as mathematics, science, and language (Mulkeen, 2005). Curricula are typically designed around urban economic and cultural contexts, offering little relevance to rural learners' lives, knowledge systems, or local economies (Sifuna, 2007). As a result, rural students often perform lower on standardized assessments, a trend seen across both high-income and low-income countries (Halsey, 2018,

Diwan, 2015, Seetharamu, 2010). These educational disadvantages are compounded by geographic isolation, fragile local governance structures, and chronic underinvestment, positioning rural learners as structurally disadvantaged within national education systems (Shi and Sercombe, 2020).

Despite the systemic nature of these issues, rural education continues to be framed through a deficit lens. In dominant policy narratives, rural schools and students are seen as lacking resources, aspiration, innovation and are expected to catch up to urban benchmarks. This framing pathologizes rural communities, casting them as inherently underdeveloped or culturally deficient. It also normalizes urban standards as the default indicators of educational success, leaving little room to acknowledge rural strengths such as community cohesion, intergenerational learning, and deep connections to place. These assumptions drive policies that attempt to replicate urban schooling models in rural settings standardized curricula, digital learning platforms, and centralized assessments rather than designing education that is responsive to rural realities (Corbett, 2000b, Corbett, 2000a).

This symbolic marginalization is reinforced by the political invisibility of rural communities in national education agendas. Rural stakeholders are rarely consulted in the development of education policy, resulting in one-size-fits-all reforms that fail to account for local needs or voices. National investments tend to prioritize urban infrastructure and reform initiatives, while rural schools remain peripheral. The absence of participatory policymaking processes leads to uniform strategies that often misfire in rural settings. As Fraser (2005) argues, justice involves more than redistribution; it also requires recognition of cultural identities and representation in decision-making dimensions that rural communities are frequently denied (Fraser, 2009, Fraser, 2006, Fraser, 2005).

The rural education context, therefore, is shaped by a complex web of material, cultural, and political disadvantages (Roberts and Green, 2013, Meng and Gray, 2025, Cruz-Arcila et al., 2025). Yet dominant policy frameworks often focus narrowly on improving outcomes without addressing the deeper structures of exclusion. A justice-oriented approach reframes rural education as a critical site for advancing equity, inclusion, and democratic participation. Rather than asking how rural students can "catch up" to urban norms, a justice-based perspective poses deeper questions: Whose knowledge counts in the curriculum? Whose languages are used and valued in instruction? Who decides what education looks like in rural communities? These are the guiding questions that inform the theoretical exploration in the next section.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Social Justice in Education

To meaningfully address rural educational inequality, it is essential to engage with social justice not only as a policy goal but as a theoretical framework that redefines what fairness and equity mean in education. Traditional approaches to justice in education have focused primarily on distributive concerns who gets what resources, how much, and from whom. (Antony-Newman, 2025).

This section outlines three core dimensions of social justice theory distributive, recognitional, and representational justice and their implications for rural education. Together, they form a

multidimensional justice framework that moves beyond narrow equality metrics toward a deeper understanding of educational fairness.

3.1 Distributive Justice

Rooted in liberal egalitarianism, distributive justice concerns the fair allocation of material resources such as funding, teachers, infrastructure, and learning materials across individuals and groups (Sen, 1999, Rawls, 1971, Sarafa and Oyewole, 2023, Sharma, 2021). In educational terms, distributive justice raises critical questions: Do all students have access to basic educational opportunities? Are resources allocated based on need rather than distributed equally? How are essential public goods such as school infrastructure, trained teachers, and learning materials prioritized across different regions? These questions underscore the importance of resource allocation in shaping educational equity. Amartya Sen's capability approach deepens this perspective by shifting the focus from inputs alone to the actual freedoms individuals have to achieve outcomes they value (Sen, 1999). From this viewpoint, rural learners are not just underserved materially; they experience capability deprivation, wherein the lack of infrastructure, qualified teachers, and relevant learning environments restricts their agency, aspirations, and life trajectories. Addressing material gaps is therefore a necessary first step in promoting equity in rural education, but it must be done with a nuanced understanding of how geographic isolation, poverty, and systemic neglect interact to limit both educational access and meaningful learning outcomes. Raphy, poverty, and institutional neglect interact to limit educational capabilities.

3.2 Recognitional Justice

Recognitional justice, as developed by scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2005) and Iris Marion Young (1990) (Sheth, 2025), addresses the symbolic and cultural dimensions of injustice specifically how certain groups are misrepresented, stereotyped, or rendered invisible within public discourse and institutional frameworks (Basu and Hunt, 2026, Dinsmore, 2025, Fraser, 2020). In the context of education, recognitional justice calls for the active acknowledgment and inclusion of cultural diversity, including rural identities, traditions, and worldviews that are often marginalized within dominant urban-centric education systems. It also requires the integration of non-dominant languages, alternative epistemologies, and community-based pedagogical traditions into curricula and teaching practices. Crucially, it challenges deficit narratives that portray rural learners as less capable, less ambitious, or inherently disadvantaged, rather than as holders of valuable cultural and intellectual capital. As Fraser (1995) argues, misrecognition is not merely a symbolic offense; it constitutes a form of status subordination that reinforces economic and political inequality. For rural communities, this means that symbolic exclusion through curricula that ignore rural life, language policies that devalue local languages, or public narratives that depict rurality as backward often occurs in tandem with material deprivation.

Thus, in rural education, justice must include cultural validation. It is essential that rural learners see their lives, histories, and identities meaningfully represented and valued within the education

system. Without this, policies aimed at achieving equity risk being superficial, reinforcing rather than dismantling deeper structures of exclusion.

3.3 Representational Justice

While redistribution and recognition are critical components of equity, Fraser (2005) argues that a full account of justice also requires representational justice the assurance that all groups can participate meaningfully in decision-making processes that affect their lives. In rural education, representational injustice frequently manifests through centralized policymaking that affords little opportunity for rural consultation or community input. Schools in rural areas often operate with limited local governance, minimal autonomy, and weak mechanisms for community oversight, resulting in policies that fail to reflect local priorities or cultural contexts. Moreover, educational planning is frequently guided by assumptions that urban-based policymakers or external “experts” inherently understand rural needs, thereby reinforcing hierarchical relations and excluding rural voices from shaping their own educational futures. This dynamic sidelines rural perspectives at the very stages where curricula, resource allocation, and school governance frameworks are determined, perpetuating one-size-fits-all policies that rarely align with rural realities.

Achieving justice in rural education therefore requires institutional reforms that ensure rural communities have genuine influence over policymaking, curriculum development, and governance structures. Representation must extend beyond token consultation and involve sustained, participatory engagement that positions rural stakeholders as equal partners in shaping educational systems.

3.4 Toward a Multidimensional Justice Framework for Rural Education

Justice in education cannot be reduced to any single dimension. Fraser’s tripartite model redistribution, recognition, and representation offers a powerful framework for understanding how rural inequality is not just about underfunding, but also about symbolic and political exclusion. Table 1, shows multidimensional justice framework for rural education

Table 1. Multidimensional Justice Framework for Rural Education

| Dimension | Focus | Rural Education Example |
|------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Distributive | Material resources | Unequal teacher distribution, poor infrastructure |
| Recognitional | Cultural and identity validation | Erasure of rural knowledge and local languages in curriculum |
| Representational | Political voice and agency | Rural communities excluded from national education policymaking |

This multidimensional approach sets the foundation for rethinking rural education policies and practices in ways that move beyond technical fixes toward structural, cultural, and institutional transformation.

4. Applying Social Justice Frameworks to Rural Education

Applying a multidimensional social justice framework to rural education offers a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by rural learners and communities. Rather than addressing inequality solely through resource redistribution, this approach also considers how cultural misrecognition and political exclusion shape rural educational disadvantage. This section explores how each dimension of justice distributive, recognitional, and representational manifests in rural education systems and why integrated, justice-oriented solutions are essential.

4.1 Distributive Justice in Rural Education

The most visible and frequently addressed form of injustice in rural education is distributional inequality. Across both developed and developing countries, rural schools are commonly under-resourced compared to their urban counterparts. They often face severe shortages of qualified teachers, especially in subjects such as mathematics, science, and languages. Inadequate infrastructure including insufficient classrooms, poor sanitation, lack of electricity, and limited access to digital technology further exacerbates the educational divide. Support services such as school counselors, libraries, and special education are often absent, and per-student investment in rural areas tends to be significantly lower, particularly when accounting for indirect costs like transportation.

In regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, chronic underinvestment in rural schools contributes to overcrowded classrooms, multi-grade teaching, and elevated dropout rates (UNESCO, 2021). Although some governments aim for equal resource distribution, such parity fails to account for historic marginalization and geographic disadvantage. True distributive justice requires resource allocation based on the principle of proportionality that is, investing more in rural schools to overcome entrenched structural barriers.

4.2 Recognitional Justice: Valuing Rural Cultures and Identities

Distributive solutions alone are insufficient without addressing the symbolic and cultural marginalization that rural learners often face. Educational systems, including curricula, school norms, and assessment standards, are typically built around urban, middle-class, and linguistically dominant norms. As a result, rural students are expected to succeed within structures that often disregard their lived realities.

Examples of recognitional injustice in rural education include the exclusion of local knowledge from formal curricula such as agricultural, ecological, or artisanal expertise rooted in rural communities and the privileging of national or colonial languages as the medium of instruction, marginalizing Indigenous and regional languages (Trudell, 2005). Furthermore, rural students are frequently framed as "behind" or "lacking," rather than being recognized as culturally and intellectually rich. These deficit narratives diminish students' confidence, reduce engagement, and deepen the disconnect between home and school. Addressing recognitional justice requires the intentional validation of rural identities, the inclusion of local knowledge systems in teaching, and the adoption of culturally sustaining pedagogies that affirm rather than erase learners' communities and histories (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

4.3 Representational Justice: Inclusion in Decision-Making

Rural education is also shaped by representational injustice the systematic exclusion of rural voices from the policymaking and governance processes that define educational priorities. Centralized education systems often dictate curricula, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms with little or no input from rural stakeholders. This top-down approach marginalizes rural communities and perpetuates a vision of education success that is often urban-biased and misaligned with rural needs.

Rural communities frequently lack formal representation in national education forums, policy consultations, or research initiatives. Local participation in school governance is often symbolic or absent altogether. Without representation, rural concerns remain unaddressed, and policies are poorly implemented or rejected by communities who had no role in shaping them. Achieving representational justice therefore requires the creation of institutional mechanisms that ensure rural communities can participate meaningfully in educational decision-making such as local school boards, participatory curriculum development processes, and guaranteed rural representation in national policy bodies.

4.4 Intersections of Injustice: The Need for Integrated Solutions

These three forms of injustice distributive, recognitional, and representational are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. A lack of resources (distributive injustice) is often justified by negative stereotypes and deficit narratives about rural communities (recognitional injustice), which in turn support centralized, non-participatory decision-making (representational injustice). Conversely, the absence of rural representation in policymaking helps perpetuate underinvestment and the exclusion of rural culture from education systems.

For example, a rural Indigenous community may experience underfunded schools, curricula that ignore their language and traditions, and no representation in national education reform discussions. In such cases, material inequality is inseparable from cultural erasure and political disempowerment. Effective educational reform must therefore be coherent across all three dimensions, addressing not just the distribution of resources, but also the need for cultural inclusion and democratic participation.

4.5 From Theory to Action: The Role of Justice Frameworks

Viewing rural education through the lens of social justice shifts the focus in fundamental ways. It moves the emphasis from "fixing" rural students to reforming the systems that exclude them. It replaces the pursuit of equal treatment with the pursuit of equitable outcomes grounded in dignity, context, and participation. It reframes policy from a technical exercise to a transformative process rooted in ethics and inclusion.

Justice in rural education is not simply a matter of improving test scores or increasing enrollment; it requires reimagining how education is structured, whose knowledge it values, and who has the power to shape it. Rural learners and communities must no longer be viewed as peripheral, but rather as central actors in the co-construction of equitable education systems. Figure 1, summarizes the multidimensional justice framework proposed in this paper. It highlights how distributive, recognitional, and representational justice intersect to inform coherent and integrated strategies for transforming rural education. Effective reform must move beyond resource provision alone, toward culturally relevant, participatory, and equitable systems of learning.

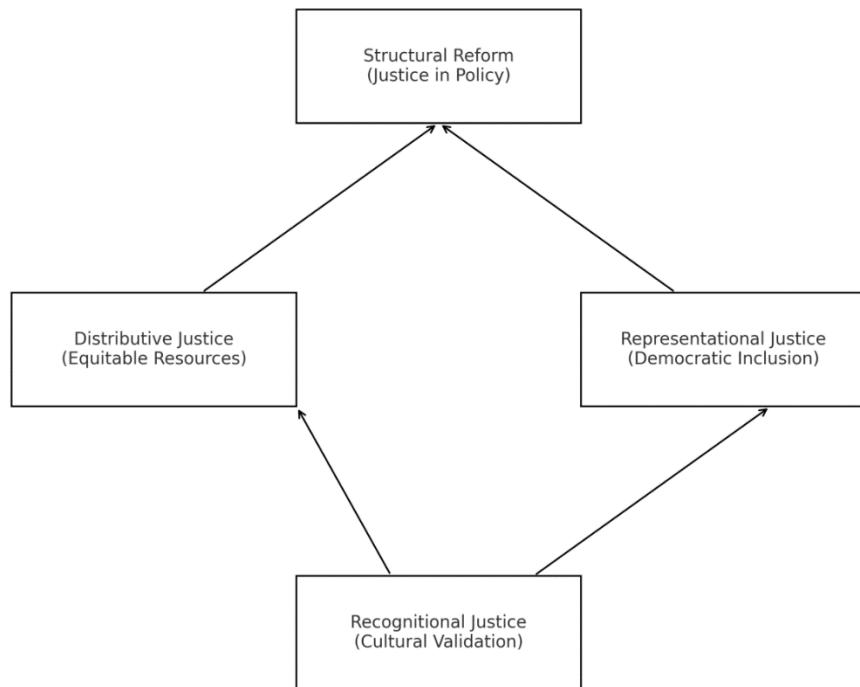


Figure 1. A Multidimensional Framework for Justice in Rural Education. Adapted from Fraser's (2005) theory of justice.

The model illustrates how equitable rural education requires simultaneous attention to material resources, cultural validation, and political representation. Sustainable reform emerges only through the intersection of these three domains.

5. Implications for Policy and Practice

Viewing rural education through a multidimensional social justice framework reveals the need for fundamental shifts in how education systems conceptualize equity, design policy, and implement practice. Distributive, recognitional, and representational injustices do not operate independently; rather, they intersect to reinforce a cycle of material deprivation, cultural marginalization, and political exclusion. Addressing rural educational inequality therefore requires a holistic approach that attends simultaneously to resource distribution, cultural and linguistic recognition, and democratic participation. The following subsections outline the

implications of this framework for policy and practice and argue for systemic reforms that position rural communities as central actors in the co-construction of equitable education systems.

5.1 Targeted and Needs-Based Resource Allocation

From a distributive justice perspective, equitable rural education demands investment strategies that reflect differential levels of need rather than an assumption of equal starting points. Rural schools often begin at a significant structural disadvantage due to historical underfunding, geographic isolation, and weak institutional support. As such, resource allocation must prioritize proportional not equal distribution. This includes equity-weighted funding formulas that direct greater financial resources to rural regions, comprehensive strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers in hard-to-staff areas, and sustained investment in core infrastructure such as sanitation, transportation, electricity, and digital connectivity. Without addressing these foundational disparities, rural learners remain structurally constrained in their capacity to participate fully in educational opportunities.

5.2 Decolonizing Curriculum and Pedagogy

A recognitional justice lens highlights the need for education systems to affirm, rather than erase, the cultural and linguistic identities of rural learners. National curricula and pedagogical practices remain overwhelmingly urban-centric, privileging dominant languages and epistemologies that do not reflect rural realities. This misalignment fosters symbolic exclusion, reduces learner engagement, and deepens the disconnect between school and community. Transformative recognition requires embedding rural and Indigenous knowledge systems into curricula, expanding mother-tongue and multilingual instruction, and promoting place-based pedagogies that take rural learners' experiences, environments, and livelihoods as legitimate foundations for teaching and learning. Moreover, teacher education programs must incorporate rural cultural competency to challenge deficit narratives and prepare educators for meaningful engagement with rural communities.

5.3 Democratizing Decision-Making and School Governance

Representational justice demands that rural communities be active participants in shaping the policies and governance structures that define their educational experiences. Centralized systems tend to privilege urban expertise and marginalize rural voices, resulting in policy decisions that lack contextual relevance and legitimacy. Strengthening representational justice therefore requires institutional mechanisms that provide rural communities with meaningful decision-making authority. These may include empowered local education councils, community-led school governance models, participatory curriculum development processes, and guaranteed rural representation in national and regional policy forums. Only when rural stakeholders are institutionally recognized as equal partners in educational decision-making can reforms reflect local priorities and foster community ownership.

5.4 Integrating Justice into Policy Frameworks

Embedding social justice within education policy requires rethinking how success is conceptualized and measured. Overreliance on narrow indicators such as enrollment, completion, and standardized test scores fails to capture dimensions of belonging, relevance, and agency that are essential to equitable rural education. Justice-oriented policy frameworks should incorporate indicators that assess linguistic inclusion, cultural relevance, student engagement, and community participation. These measures should inform national policy development, teacher education, and resource allocation. In addition, research on rural education must move beyond extractive approaches and adopt participatory methodologies that involve rural communities as co-researchers. In doing so, policy becomes not merely a technical tool but a mechanism for advancing structural justice.

5.5 Reframing Rural Education in Public Discourse

Sustainable reform requires reshaping how rural education is understood within public discourse. Deficit-based narratives portray rural learners as lacking aspiration, motivation, or preparedness, reinforcing stereotypes that justify underinvestment. A justice-oriented reframing highlights the cultural, intellectual, and social assets inherent in rural communities such as intergenerational knowledge, strong community cohesion, and place-based expertise. Promoting these narratives in media, teacher education, and policy dialogue can generate broader political will for justice-oriented reforms. Reframing rural education as a site of innovation and resilience, rather than deficiency, is essential for cultivating both societal recognition and long-term structural change. Table 1, synthesizes the multidimensional justice framework discussed in Section 5, emphasizing that genuine rural education reform requires simultaneous attention to material, cultural, and political dimensions.

Table 2. Summary of Justice-Oriented Policy Directions for Rural Education

| Justice Dimension | Core Focus | Required Policy / Practice Actions |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Distributive Justice | Resource equity | Proportional funding; investment in infrastructure; rural teacher recruitment and retention |
| Recognitional Justice | Cultural & linguistic validation | Place-based pedagogy; local and Indigenous knowledge; mother-tongue and multilingual instruction |
| Representational Justice | Democratic participation | Community governance; rural representation in policy bodies; participatory curriculum development |
| Structural Integration | Justice as a systemic policy principle | Justice-oriented indicators; inclusive accountability frameworks; participatory research |

6. Conclusion

Conventional efforts to address rural educational inequality have often prioritized expanding access, improving infrastructure, and raising standardized outcomes. While such strategies are important, they tend to operate within an urban-centric framework that overlooks the deeper structural, cultural, and political forces sustaining rural marginalization. This paper has argued that rural education must be understood not simply as a domain of service delivery, but as a site of contested justice, where inequities manifest across material, symbolic, and institutional dimensions. Through a multidimensional social justice framework drawing on distributive, recognitional, and representational theories it becomes evident that rural learners are

systematically disadvantaged not only in terms of material resources but also through cultural misrecognition and political exclusion. These interlocking injustices are rarely addressed by policies that treat rural schools as neutral spaces to be brought in line with national or urban standards. Instead, the paper calls for a justice-oriented rethinking of rural education that centers context, culture, and community agency.

A justice-informed approach entails three essential shifts:

- (1) Redistribution of resources based on structural need rather than uniform equality;
- (2) Recognition of rural identities, languages, and knowledge systems in curricula, pedagogy, and public discourse; and
- (3) Representation of rural voices in educational policy, planning, and school governance.

Rather than viewing rural students as needing to “catch up” to urban norms, education systems must adopt context-sensitive, participatory, and culturally sustaining models that treat rural communities as co-constructors of knowledge and change. This requires moving beyond inclusion as access, toward transformation as justice. In reframing rural education as a justice issue rather than a technical problem, this paper underscores the need for both theoretical clarity and policy commitment. Addressing rural inequality demands more than narrow interventions it requires transforming the structures that produce and maintain exclusion. For rural learners, justice begins not with being saved, but with being seen, heard, and valued within the systems that shape their educational futures.

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