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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study designed to assess the impact of problems in the system for the evaluation of student performance on student disengagement from high school. The study is guided by the theory of evaluation and authority developed by Dornbusch and Scott. Surveys administered to a 5 percent sample of students (N=293) in four suburban high schools in the midwest provided data on the incidence of these problems and on three forms of student disengagement: apathy, disruptive behavior, and withdrawal from school. Analyses revealed that students who reported more frequent problems with the evaluation system for their academic work also reported higher levels of apathy, disruptive behavior, and withdrawal. Students reporting higher levels of problems in the evaluation system also reported when asked to describe the work they did for each class in concrete terms that they were putting forth less effort in class. These same students were more likely to describe themselves as putting forth more effort in class, when they were asked to subjectively assess their effort. (These students were working less and feeling it more.) The study suggests that evaluation processes can have substantial effects on the extent to which students become disengaged from high school. (Author/PN)

Evaluation Processes and Student Disengagement from High School*

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Evaluation Processes and Student Disengagement from High School

There has long been considerable interest in securing student participation in school. This is particularly true at the high school level where the problems that result when students do not participate actively in the program of the school become quite visible. Recently the attention of researchers and policy makers has focused on three menifestations of lack of student involvement in the school program: apathy or low level participation, violence and vandalism or participation in negative activities, and absenteeism or non-participation.

Although often cited as a problem by educators, apathy or low level student participation has not received a great deal of attention from researchers. The studies that have focused on the level of student effort in school suggest that the problem of low level effort is pervasive. For example, in a study by Massey, Scott, and Dornbusch (1975) fewer than 45% of the White students reported a high level of effort in school, and minority group students were even less likely to be devoting a high level of effort to school tasks.

The most visible problems of lack of student participation in school are discussed under the rubrics of student violence and vandalism. In recent years educators, legislators, and the public at large have become increasingly concerned with the high levels of crime and delinquency associated with students in American schools. (McPartland and McDill, 1977) This problem has been most clearly documented in the NIE Safe School Study (National Institute of Education, 1978) where 12% of the secondary school teachers reported that they were threatened with injury by students at school, and 48% of the teachers reported that some student has insulted them or made

obscene gestures to them within the last month.

Although the problem of student non-participation or absenteeism has been with us as long as we have had compulsory schooling (Everhart, 1977), the situation seems to have grown worse in recent years. Absenteeism is seen by school administrators as their major discipline problem. (Duke, 1978) High schools across the nation typically report absenteeism rates ranging from 15% to 25%. (Birman and Natriello, 1980)

In the present study, these common problems of apathy, violence and vandalism, and absenteeism are treated as indicators of a more general concept of student disengagement. Student disengagement is used to refer to the extent to which students refrain from participating in the activities offered as part of the school program. As used here, the concept of disengagmeent differs from more general estrangement phenomena (Seeman, 1959) in that it is task-specific. That is, while terms like alienation have been used to refer to an estrangement from a social collective or organization, disengagement refers to an estrangement from or lack of participation in certain tasks associated with a social collective or organization such as a school. Thus, a student may be disengaged from some tasks associated with the school (e.g. academic tasks), but not disengagement from other tasks (e.g. extracurricular activities).

A number of potential causes have been offered to explain the estrangement of students from school. Researchers have examined student origins, school policies and procedures, the school environment, the community environment, and anticipated student futures as potential sources of student alienation. (McPartland and McDill, 1977) In the present study attention is directed to school policies and procedures, particularly practices for the evaluation of

student performance.

The impact of school policies and procedures on student disengagement has been discussed from several perspectives. McPartland and McDill (1977) discuss school policies and procedures in terms of the school's "responsiveness" to student student behavior. They argue that schools that are most responsive by distributing rewards for desired behaviors, placing costs on misbehavior, and providing access for students in school decision-making procedures will be most successful in reducing delinquency.

Spady (1974) points to the importance of the institutional arrangements of schools and in particular to the perceived illegitimacy of the evaluation and reward structure of the school in any explanation of student disruption. For example, he cites the "premium paced on the student's ability either to achieve fixed standards of performance under time constraints or to meet and surpass standards determined by the performance levels of others" as aspects of the illegitimacy of the school evaluation system.

Referring to Merton's (1957) analysis of the ways in which individuals adapt to alienation from a given social structure, Spady notes that students in such situations may respond with rebellion, protest, apathy, or withdrawal. Evidence in support of his interpretation comes from the Safe School Study. Analysis of the data from a national sample of schools revealed that both the extent to which school personnel devote effort to governing students and enforcing school rules and regulations and the degree of fairness in school rules and in the administration of the rules are negatively related to the level of violence in the school. (National Institute of Education, 1978) The implication is that to minimize such negative behavior, schools should be reorganized and run in clear explicit ways (Gottfredson and Daiger, 1979)

The current study examines the relationship between problems in the evaluation and authority system of high schools and the three indicators of student disengagement. The indicators of student disengagement are fairly well recognized and understood as pervasive problems. The dimensions of evaluation and authority systems that may affect the extent to which students become disengaged are less well recognized and understood and require a more formal theoretical analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is an application of the theory of evaluation and authority developed by Dornbusch and Scott (1975). The theory addresses the relationship between features of evaluation and authority systems and individual disengagement. More specifically, the theory presents two concepts, incompatibility and instability, which are used to describe authority systems in organizations.

Authority System Incompatibility

The definition of incompatibility rests on several assumptions. First, the theory assumes that the organizational participants being evaluated place some value on the performance evaluations they receive. A second assumption asserts that participants establish an "acceptance level" or minimum level of a performance evaluation that is satisfactory to the performer. The theory further assumes that participants will attempt to maintain evaluations of their performance at a level that is acceptable to them.

Acceptance levels plays a central role in developing the cocnept of authority system incompatibility. According to the theory, an authority system exhibits incompatibility when it prevents performers from maintaining evaluations of their performance at or above their acceptance level. Thus authority system incompatibility involves the

receipt of evaluations by a performer below acceptance level and the perception that it is the authority system itself that keeps the performer from attaining evaluations at or above acceptance level. Incompatibility is a property of the authority system; it is not a characteristic of the performer. Incompatibility entails problems in the authority system that would affect any individual performer who had at least the same acceptance level.

Dornbusch and Scott (1975) develop a typology of authority system incompatibilities by considering the requirements of the simplest case of a compatible authority system. First, the performer would receive an unambiguous task assignment which did not conflict with other assignments received for the same or similar tasks. Second, the performer's activities would affect the values of the relevant properties for performances and outcomes on which the performer would be evaluated. Third, the sample taken of the performer's work would provide valid information as to the values actually achieved in the full performance. Fourth, the standards for evaluation would be set appropriately so that the performer could expect to receive evaluations at the acceptance level by adjusting the level of effort. The four types of authority system incompatibility discussed by Dornbusch and Scott (1975) involve the violation of one or more of these requirements for a compatible authority system.

The first type of incompatibility identified by the theory is termed "contradictory evaluations." Contradictory evaluations occur when performers are put in a situation where the receipt of one evaluation at or above a level acceptable to them necessarily entails receiving another evaluation below a level acceptable to them. Such contradictory evaluations may occur when performers receive conflicting task allocations, when they are evaluated on the basis of

conflicting standards, when conflicting properties of tasks are used as the basis for evaluation, and when conflicting samples of performance are the basis for evaluation.

Uncontrollable evaluations are a second source of authority system incompatibility. Uncontrollable evaluations occur when performers receive evaluations below a level acceptable to them for performances or outcomes they do not control. Such uncontrollable evaluations arise when there is a coordination failure in the organizational control system, when performers are working interdependently on tasks, and when tasks are active or unpredictable.

A third type of incompatibility, unpredictable evaluations, occurs when performers receive evaluations below a level acceptable to them because they are unable to predict accurately the relationship between attributes of their performances and the level of evaluations they receive. Unpredictable evaluations may occur when performers misunderstand task allocations, when they misunderstand the criteria used for evaluation, and when the samples of performances and outcomes used for purposes of evaluation are nonrepresentative.

A condition of unattainable evaluations, the fourth type of incompatibility, arises when the standards used to evaluate performers are so high that they cannot achieve evaluations at a level acceptable to them. Performers are subjected to unattainable evaluations when the standards used to evaluate them are inappropriately high, when their tasks are unpredictable, and when they lack the facilities necessary to perform their tasks.

The four types of authority system incompatibility suggest a strategy for developing indicators of problems in school authority and evaluation systems. This strategy will enable a more precise delineation of the problems noted by McPartland and McDill (1977) and Spady (1974).

Authority System Instability

According to the theory, authority systems are unstable to the extent that they contain internal pressures for change. Pressures for change are internal when they are generated by the operation of the authority system itself rather than by a source external to the authority system and its participants.

Scott, et al. (1967) argue that incompatibility is a sufficient condition for instability of authority systems. When participants are subjected to incompatibility in authority systems, they are likely to be frustrated and under tension. To cope with such tension they may adopt one or more "coping responses" in an attempt to resolve the incompatibility. Each of these "coping responses" is considered to be an indicator of the presence of instability.

Dornbusch and Scott (1975) note three general ways in which participants attempt to cope with incompatibility in an authority system. First, performers may lower the level of performance they deem acceptable. Second, performers may create pressures for change in the organization by expressing dissatisfaction, communicating dissatisfaction to others in the organization, suggesting changes to others in the organization, or refusing to comply with those in authority in the organization. Third, performers may attempt to resolve incompatibility in the authority system by leaving the system. These three reactions parallel the three forms of student disengagment discussed earlier: apathy, violence and vandalism, and absenteeism.

The theory of evaluation and authority thus suggests that the greater the level of incompatibility experienced by performers in organizations, the greater the level of authority system instability. This hypothesis was tested in the current study of evaluation and

disengagement from high school.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study was designed to provide student self-report data on the levels of authority system incompatibility experienced by students in high school as well as data on the levels of the various indicators of authority system instability. The theory of evaluation and authority suggests, first, that incompatibilities in authority systems are fairly common in organizations such as schools, and, second, that they lead to instability.

Sample

The study was conducted in the four senior high schools of a large suburban school district in a major metropolitan area in the midwest. The district which spent $2052.92 per pupil during the 1979-1980 school year, is generally considered among the best in the area. The overwhelming majority of students in the four high schools are White. The mean SAT math and verbal scores in each school are above the national average, and over two-thirds of the students at each school have made plans to continue with their education beyond high school.

The student survey was administered to a random sample of 5% of the students at each high school. The final sample of 293 students contains 291 students from the original sample and 2 students drawn from a randomly selected list of alternates.

The Student Survey

A student survey was developed to assess the extent to which students experienced incompatibilities in the authority system of the school and the relationship between such incompatibilities and student disengagement. A structured interview dealing with the incompatibilities likely to arise in school authority systems was developed. This interview form was pilot tested using sixty students

from two of the four high schools in the Spring of 1980. The results of the pilot tests (Natriello and Scott, 1981) led to the development of a preliminary student survey which, after further pilot testing, was refined to the form used for the present study.

The student survey was administered in the Spring of 1981. The survey contained five sections and took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Items from two sections are used in the present analyses; the entire instrument is described elsewhere (Natriello, 1982). During the administration of the survey, members of the research team were available to answer questions that arose about the interpretation of certain items. Since the survey had been extensively pretested and re-worded using language familiar to the students, there were few questions. Each student completing a survey received a $10 gift certificate.

Measures of Incompatibility

Attempting to assess the extent to which students in high schools experience incompatibility in the authority system highlights the fact that high school students, in contrast to individuals in most organizational positions, have a large number of potential supervisors and evaluators. The typical students in the four high schools had at least six different teachers who might evaluate academic work in class. In addition, the high school students were supervised by school administrators and other staff members, including teachers from whom they were not currently taking courses. Students who participated in extracurricular activities had additional supervisors who evaluated their performance and behavior in these activities.

Because of the multiple supervisors who exercised authority over students in the high schools, it was necessary to direct the items on the survey to incompatibility in the evaluation and authority systems

of specific classes. Students were asked to report how frequently they experienced various instances of incompatibility in the evaluation and authority system for academic work in each of their current classes. The eleven items related to eleven instances of incompatibility appear in the center column of Table 1 organized according to the typology developed by Dornbusch and Scott. For each item students were asked how frequently they experienced the incompatibility so that they received evaluations below a level which they found acceptable. Response categories included "Always", "Almost Always", "Usually", "Fairly Often", "Sometimes", "Seldom", "Almost Never", and "Never".

The eleven items for incompatibility in the authority system for academic performance were used to create summary measures of incompatibility for academic tasks. If any of the eleven incompatibilities for academic tasks was reported as occuring at least "Sometimes", the summary measure for incomptibility in the authority system for academic tasks was coded to indicate the presence of incompatibility. Otherwise, the measure was coded to indicate absence of incompatibility. In addition to the summary measure for the presence of incompatibility used here, measures were constructed for the number of instances of incompatibility and the relative frequency of incompatibility. These other measures produce results similar to those reported in this paper.

Measures of Instability

The indicators of authority system instability covered the three areas corresponding to the three forms of student disengagement noted earlier: apathy, violence and vandalism, and absenteeism. These, of course, correspond to the three forms of instability specified by the theory: lowered acceptance level, dissatisfaction, and withdrawal.

Apathy or lowered acceptance level was assessed through two items

on the survey which asked students to report what they would consider a satisfactory report card. On one item students were asked to indicate what they would consider a satisfactory academic grade in each of their classes. On a second item students were asked to indicate what they would consider a satisfactory citizenship grade in each of their classes. Responses to the questions were the grades used by the school district: "A", "B", "C", "D", or "F" for academic grades and "O", "S", "I", and "U" for citizenship grades. If students reported that they would be satisfied with a "C" or lower for an academic grade or an "S" or lower for a citizenship grade in a particular class, there were classified as lowering their acceptance level.

Four items on the student survey were used to construct a summary measure of student participation in negative activities. Students were asked to report how often they a) disturbed the teacher and disrupted the class, b) complained to the teacher about an assignment in class, c) complained about the class to other students, and d) refused to do work in class. Response categories included: "Every Day", "Almost Every Day", "Few Times a Week", "Once a Week", "Few Times a Month", "Once a Month", "Few Times a Year", and "Never". The summary measure was constructed so that students who engaged in any of these behaviors more than "Once a Month" were coded as engaging in negative activities. Obviously, the concept of student engagement in negative activities as measured here differs from the broader set of behaviors that fit under the rubric of violence and vandalism. The more limited set of behaviors indicated here should be more likely to occur among students in the present sample and should also be more likely to be related to the incompatibility in the authority system. More severe forms of violence and vandalism probably stem from

external factors.

Five items from the student survey were used for the measure of non-participation or withdrawal from classes. Students were asked how often they: a) cut class, b) would like to cut class, c) wished they could drop the class, d) would schedule a doctor's appointment during the class, and e) would come to class late on purpose. Once again, a summary measure was constructed by coding as not participating those students who reported doing any of these four things more than "Once a Month".

In addition to these measures of instability, we used two measures of student effort developed by Massey, Scott, and Dornbusch (1975) for their study of students in urban high schools. Three items on the survey were used to create a measure of lowered effort-engagement. Each item asked students to report on the frequency with which they engaged in relatively concrete behaviors related to effort in a class. Students were asked how often they came to class unprepared, how often their mind wandered in class, and how often they actively participated in class. A summary scale indicated the lowering of student effort on school tasks according to these rather objective indicators.

Three additional items on the survey were used to create a measure of lowered self-assessment of effort. These more subjective items asked students to report on how hard they worked in each of their classes, on how how hard they tried to get a better grade when they received a poor grade, and on how hard they tried to do better when they found they weren't learning a subject. A summary scale indicated the lowering of student self-assessment of effort on school tasks.

All data for the present study come from the student surveys. Admittedly, these student perceptions tell us less about the general

"objective" nature of the evaluation systems than they do about the systems as experienced by the individual students. Nevertheless, we rely on student perceptions because those things perceived to be true by the students are most likely to have consequences for their level of disengagement from the school.

RESULTS

Levels of Incompatibilities in High School

Since this part of the theory of evaluation and authority had not previously been applied to schools, a first question for the analysis concerned the levels of incompatibilities experienced by students. Table 1 shows the average levels of incompatibilities reported by the students in the four high schools. Table 1 presents the average proportions of students reporting that they experienced incompatibility in the evaluation and authority system for academic work at least "Sometimes" in classes.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Reviewing the incidence of incompatibility, the most frequently reported instance is that relating to the active or unpredictable nature of academic tasks. Over 40% of the students reported that they received evaluations of academic work low enough to make them dissatisfied despite working hard in a class. Applying effort to these tasks did not predictably result in satisfactory evaluations. Over 30% of the students were dissatisfied, on average, with evaluations due to inappropriately high standards, and misunderstanding the criteria by which they were to be evaluated. The high proportion of students reporting inappropriately high standards or problems with the evaluation of active or unpredictable tasks suggests that teachers are not entirely successful in teaching at a

level of difficulty appropriate for students of differing abilities. The problem of misunderstanding the criteria suggests that for some students teachers do not make it sufficiently clear exactly what is important in a class.

Nearly thirty percent of the students, on the average, reported that they received evaluations low enough to make them dissatisfied because of being given only a limited amount of time to complete an assignment. The fact that, in any given class, nearly one-third of the students experience this problem, speaks to the prevalence of problems linked to time limits on assignments and tests.

Almost one-fourth of the students reported that the tests and assignments given in a class didn't measure what they had learned. The non-representative samples led to students receiving evaluations below their acceptance level.

On average, about one-sixth of the students received evaluations below their acceptance level due to misunderstandings of allocations. These students were unaware of assignments or tests until it was too late. Nearly one-sixth of the students reported that working in a group in a class led to the receipt of evaluations low enough to make them dissatisfied despite the fact that their own performance was acceptable. In view of the relatively limited use of group work in most classrooms, this figures suggests that developing a soundly based system for evaluating student performance is one of the problems to be addressed by a teacher wishing to increase the amount of group work in a plan of instruction.

An average of 10% of the students reported experiencing an evaluation below their acceptance level due to a coordination failure in the control system. These students found themselves being evaluated on academic work with which they had nothing to do. A similar proportion of students reported conflict between the criteria for

evaluation used by school staff and the criteria used by their peers. Only slightly more than 3% of the students found themselves in a situations where they had to displease one school supervisor in order to please another school supervisor.

Incompatibility and Instability

The theory of evaluation and authority asserts that incompatibility in an authority system will lead to greater instability. Table 2 presents the results of an analysis of the relationship between the presence of incompatibility in the class authority system for academic work and the indicators of instability or student disengagement.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The results for the relationship between incompatibility in the authority system and the three indicators of authority system instability are consistent with the predictions of the theory of evaluation and authority. First, there is a positive relationship between incompatibility and lower student acceptance levels. Students who report experiencing incompatibility are more likely also to report being satisfied with a less than optimum grade.

Second, there is a strong positive relationship between incompatibility and student engagement in negative activities. Students who experience incompatibility in the authority system for academic work in their classes are more likely to engage in negative activities in those classes.

Third, there is a positive relationship between incompatibility and student non-participation and withdrawal. Students who experience incompatibility in classroom authority systems for academic work are more likely to withdraw from participation in their classes. Overall,

there is strong evidence that incompatibility in the authority system for student academic work leads to student disengagement from class.

A word of caution is in order. In the absence of experimental confirmation of the findings in this survey study, the direction of causation between incompatibility and disengagement is not totally certain. The theory of evaluation and authority suggests that incompatibility is a sufficient condition for disengagement.

The results of the analysis of the relationship between incompatibility and the two measures of student effort reveal a provocative pattern. On the one hand, there is a strong positive relationship between incompatibility in the authority system for academic tasks and lowered student effort-engagement in class. Students who experience incompatibility are more likely to describe themselves as engaging in fewer concrete behaviors indicative of effort. On the other hand, there is a negative relationship between incompatibility and lowered student self-assessment of effort. Put more directly, students who experience incompatibility are more likely to believe that they are putting forth more effort.

DISCUSSION

The levels of incompatibilities reported by the students in the four high schools in the present study suggest that Spady's (1974) advice to pay closer attention to the processes by which student performance is evaluated in schools is well taken. Moreover, the typology of authority system incompatibilities developed by Dornbusch and Scott (1975) through studies of various organizations can be profitably applied to schools. The theory of evaluation and authority not only highlights what are likely to be common problems in school evaluations systems, but also provides a strategy by which to develop indicators of those problems. The items on the student survey dealing with authority system incompatibility produced a detailed portrait of

some of the common problems experienced by students.

Overall, there is strong and consistent evidence that incompatibility in the authority systems for academic tasks leads to authority system instability as evidenced by: apathy, engagement in negative activities, and withdrawal. Students who perceive the systems for the evaluation of their academic performance in class as having high levels of incompatibility are likely to lower their acceptance levels, engage in negative activities, and withdraw from participation in class activities. The present study thus provides confirmation for the argument made in the theory of evaluation and authority that incompatibility leads to instability.

Moreover, the effects of incompatibility in the authority system for academic tasks on the indicators of student effort suggest a provocative explanation for student apathy. Students who experience high levels of incompatibilities in the authority system for academic work in their classes not only set their sights lower and engage in fewer behaviors indicative of effort; they also feel as if they are working harder and putting forth more effort. These students are working less and feeling it more!

With this pattern in mind, it is easy to see how such students may become caught in a downward spiral. Confronted with evaluation systems containing incompatibilities, these students lower their expectations and find themselves striving for much less desirable outcomes. Unable to see a clear and powerful relationship between their efforts and the evaluations of those efforts, they reduce their efforts and become inured to the evaluations they receive. Finally, because very little of their work is connected to any valued outcome, the small bit of effort they do put forth assumes great proportions in their thinking.

Table 1

Average Percentages of Students Reporting that they Experienced Incompatibility in the Authority System for Academic Work at Least "Sometimes" in Class

Types of Incompatibilities and Items from the Student Survey	Average Percentages
Type I: Contradictory Evaluations	
A. Conflicting Criteria	
How often do you find that you are supervised by more than one person in a class and in order to please one supervisor you have to displease the other?	3.4%
Your course work may be evaluated by both teachers and other students. How often do you find that in order to please one you have to displease the other?	9.5%
B. Conflicting Properties	
How often do you receive an assignment that has to be done in such a short period of time that you can't do a good job and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied?	29.5%
C. Conflicting Allocations	
How often do you receive so many assignments in a class that you can't do a good job and complete them all and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied?	24.8%
Type II: Uncontrollable Evaluations	
A. Coordination Failure in the Control System	
How often do you find that you are evaluated on something you had nothing to do with and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied?	10.6%
B. Interdependence of Performers	
When you are working in groups in class how often do you find that although you are doing a good job, others in the group are not and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied?	16.8%
Type III: Unpredictable Evaluations	
A. Misunderstandings of Allocations	
How often do you find that you didn't know about an assignment or a test until it is too late and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied?	18.7%

B. Misunderstandings of Criteria

Sometimes students don't know what a teachers considers important on an assignment or a test and so they receive evaluations low enough to make them dissatisfied. How often does this sort of thing happen to you? 31.5%

C. Nonrepresentative Samples

How often do you find that the tests and assignments a teachers gives really don't measure the things you have learned and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied? 24.4%

Type IV: Unattainable Evaluations

A. Inappropriately High Standards

How often do you find that the course work assigned to you in your classes is just too difficult for you to do and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied? 34.2%

B. Active Tasks

How often do you find yourself working hard in a class but still not able to do as well as you would like and so you receive evaluations low enough to make you dissatisfied? 41.1%

Table 2

Relation of the Presence of Incompatibility in the Classroom Authority System for Academic Work to the Presence of Student Disengagement

Form of Disengagement	Avg. N	Avg. Gamma	Average Proportion of Incompatible Authority Systems Showing Disengagement	Average Proportion of Compatible Authority Systems Showing Disengagement
Lowered Acceptance Level	264	.36	.82	.67
Negative Acts	269	.58	.68	.35
Withdrawal	269	.29	.49	.34
Lowered Effort Engagement	268	.50	.79	.56
Lowered Self-Assessment of Effort	265	-.29	.36	.51

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