


Teachers' social and emotional competence: A new approach of teacher education in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades more and more studies have emphasized the central role of teachers' social and emotional competence in their teaching performance. In spite of this, there are not enough programs focused on developing teachers' social and emotional competence that are integrated into teacher education. This is particularly true in Vietnam where the concepts of social and emotional competence (SEC) and social and emotional learning (SEL) are rather new. In the study, we present four main emerging impact aspects of teachers' SEC including teachers' well-being and career motivation, teacher-student relationship, classroom management, and the effectiveness of SEL implementation. The article gives some recommendations for teacher education regarding SEC issue in Vietnam as well. These recommendations would contribute to develop a new approach of teacher education to meet the country's new general education curriculum enacted in 2020.

KEYWORDS

social and emotional competence, social and emotional learning, teacher training

INTRODUCTION

In Vietnamese education context, there is no competence criteria directly relating to social and emotional competence (SEC) to teachers. As such, both in-service and pre-service teachers are

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assumed to have little or not at all sufficient perceptions of SEC importance for their professional and personal life, as long as for their students SEC development. In addition, in teacher education program, teaching skills are more focused than social and emotional skills. This article offers a review from theoretical background and experiential evidence how teachers' SEC influences their teaching quality and students' SEL, and how we can promote it. In order to do that, a selective literature review was employed to select sample from the available body of knowledge on the subject to describe in detail how each element of SEC affects on teachers. The literature review is based on an evaluation to demonstrate its viability considering the current body of the information but exhausting the literature. A literature search was conducted using two main research engines (PsychInfo and Google Scholar). The search terms were defined as "social AND/OR emotional skills AND/OR competence AND teacher", "social emotional learning AND teachers", "social emotional education OR social and emotional competence AND teachers". The timeframe for the search was limited with custom range from the years 2010 through 2020. The review employed content analysis techniques to identify four main aspects regarding the influence of teachers' SEC. The results shed light on the requirement of training and supports for teachers regarding social and emotional competence in Vietnamese educational context. Only when the issue is accurately understood do they know how to implement SEL effectively in school for students' social and emotional development. The findings are also the foundation to propose several measures to promote the pre-service teachers' SEC in pre-service teacher education in Vietnam.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

Social and emotional competence (SEC) has its root from social competence and emotional competence. However, there is the interdependency of the two competence fields. On the one hand, the interpersonal function of emotion is central to other aspects of emotional competence (Denham, von Salisch, Olthof, Kochanoff, & Caverly, 2002). On the other hand, social interactions and relationships are regulated by emotional process (Halberstadt, Dunsmore, & Denham, 2001). As such, the two competences are intimately intertwined (Denham et al., 2002; Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001).

For the divergence in social competence and emotional competence themselves, it is assumed that there is no common agreement on the definition of social-emotional competence as a combined structure. Considering the main characteristics of these individual competences, however, SEC could be defined as:

the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development. (Elias et al., 1997, p. 2)

This definition emphasizes the self-regulation and other's relationships. The emotional factor here relates to self-awareness, which focuses primarily on emotion and feelings, but also includes thoughts and perceptions that are related to emotion. Meanwhile, the social aspect relates to the various dimension of interpersonal relationship (Hoang, 2016). Despite the different definitions relating to social and emotional aspects which arise from divergent approaches, social and



emotional competence at least includes the following characteristics: (a) a multifaceted and ever-changing system instead of individual abilities or skills (Zsolnai, 2015); (b) the development outcomes as effectiveness in interaction and adjustment to the norm, social expectation, conviction to the social moral and value; (c) cognitive process, affection/emotion, and behavior are three main core components; (d) the demonstration of self-efficacy.

SEC is recognized as important and teachable characteristics of any individuals, and it should be acquired by both children and adults (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017; Huitt & Dawson, 2018; Inna, 2017; Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson, 2017). SEC could be indicators or predictors of one's adjustment through their life course, either for short term and long term concerns (Farrington et al., 2012; Greenberg et al., 2017). In the short term, SEC enhances children's ability to conduct favorable behaviors, build and sustain healthy relationships with others and have better school performance (Elias, 2019; Greenberg et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). In the long term, SEC plays a significant role in preventing risk behaviors, and possible consequences of being exposed to risk factors (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017; Elias & Haynes, 2008).

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL EDUCATION

To explain social and emotional processes in education, a number of terms have been used. One of the most popularly used terms is "social and emotional learning" (SEL) developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Through the process, as defined by CASEL, individuals "acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, n.d.). As such, the main focus of any SEL programs is building a supportive learning environment where students find learning as a challenging and meaningful activity (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). There are five core competencies defined in SEL module according to CASEL namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2003, 2012; Zins et al., 2004).

There are several terms which are closely used alongside SEL, but social and emotional education (SEE) is mostly seen and sometimes used interchangeably (Cefai, Bartolo, Cavioni, & Downes, 2018). SEE has been significant recognized by the Network of Experts working on the Social dimension of Education and Training (NESET) as a move towards a broader perspective of social and emotional matters in school. According to Cefai et al. (2018), SEE refers to the educational approaches that embed relational and contextual curricular to develop SEC for key aspects of individual development including personal, social and academic. The concept, on the one hand employs SEL core module while integrating more recent advanced concepts including positive education which is the blend of academic learning with character and wellbeing, and mindfulness, on the other hand (Bott et al., 2017; Cefai et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a shift from SEL to SEE which is intended to include a wider view of teaching and learning, taking into account classroom environment, entire school ecology, parental engagement, and teacher effectiveness in both SEL illustration and implementation (Cefai et al., 2018).



THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN EDUCATION

Giving past findings that SEC plays as a significant indicator of any individual's life achievements both in short term and long term, it is surprising how little research and programs relating to improving SEC for teachers. [Schonert-Reichl \(2017\)](#), in one of her investigations involving 3,916 compulsory courses in teacher education programs in the America, remarks that in the country, the fatherland of SEL with prevalent SEL research and training programs, SEL theory and functional practice have started to be adopted into teacher training programs in just few programs. There is a paradox that majority of preschool to high school teachers believe in the positive outcomes of SEL, believe that SEC is important to learning, they, nevertheless lack the belief in themselves to be the key deliverer of any program, they need strong support to operate it effectively ([Loinaz, 2019](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Accordingly, it is suggested that in many needed supports for teachers' competency confidence, teachers' own SEC seems to be a crucial factor ([Elias et al., 1997](#); [Inna, 2017](#); [Loinaz, 2019](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Therefore, it is necessary to assess in detail the importance of SEC for teachers' performance. In the literature, four emerging viewpoints regarding the significance of teachers' SEC have been investigated.

Social and emotional competence maintains teachers' wellbeing and their career motivation

Wellbeing is the first favorable conditions for any other conditions which contribute to teachers' professional and personal life. However, teacher wellbeing in the literature is often related to the negative impact of stress on teachers' burnout and retention problems ([Roffey, 2012](#)). Teaching is listed on "caring profession" group in which the actors mainly demonstrate their caring to others ([Tu Anh et al., 2017](#), p. 25). As such, teachers are always expected to be experts in every aspect in their schools from teaching, lifelong learning, administration, assessment, even psychology. As the result, teaching profession is one of the most challenging professionals along side with medical staff ([Bailey, 2013](#); [Milburn, 2011](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). High level of chronic stress can lead to severe physical and mental illnesses. Physical health concern, for instance, high stress tremendously affects quality and quantity of sleep ([De Souza, De Sousa, Belísio, & de Azevedo, 2012](#)). Apart from physical diseases, stress is responsible for a high incidence of workplace burnout, which is marked by mental fatigue, depersonalization, and a poor sense of achievement ([De Souza et al., 2012](#); [Jennings & Greenberg, 2009](#); [Schonert-Reichl, 2017](#)). Particularly, according to [Darling-Hammond \(2001\)](#), stress and poor emotion management diminish teachers' intrinsic motives, reduces feelings of self-efficacy, and they are the most common causes of teacher dissatisfaction and resignation.

SEC helps teachers to maintain their wellbeing and career motivation. Teachers with positively emotional experience are likely to have resilient motivation, and feel more equipped to deal with the complex demands of teaching. In particular, as stated in Jennings and Greenberg' review (2009), self-awareness and self-management could strongly provide teachers with crucial ability to deal with teaching's emotional demands. With these abilities, teachers are capable of controlling, regulating and navigating their emotions and behaviors more effectively. As a result, teachers could stay in well mental state which helps them utilize appropriate energy, capabilities to become the most responsive, helpful to their students' ever-changing needs. The effects could



be illustrated by positive outcomes from several intervention programs built on SEL concept such as CARE (Cultivation Awareness and resilience in Education), Emotionally Intelligent Teacher Training or TRUST (Test of Regulation in and Understanding of Social Situations in Teaching) (Aldrup, Carstensen, Köller, & Klusmann, 2020; Brackett & Katulak, 2007; Jennings et al., 2011, 2017; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Having participated in these programs, teachers report fewer symptoms of depersonalization, more feelings of efficacy, and appraise their teaching as meaningful, joyful and satisfying, ready to devote themselves for the teaching and supporting students (Johnson et al., 2005; Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Social and emotional competence influences the positive teacher-student relationship

Together with instructional methods in class, how teacher and student connect and interact with each other is a decisive factor to determine student's academic attainment and social development (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). Teachers' wellbeing and their skills dealing with the diverse needs to students could impact strongly on teacher-student relationship. Firstly, it is a matter of fact that teachers' wellbeing has direct link to students' wellbeing. In an empirical research, Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) remark that cortisol levels in the morning in students can be related to teacher burnout. The researchers also comment that students will normally perceive teachers' negative emotions and its manifestation, and the negative emotions are contagious which could pose the harm on teacher-student healthy relationship (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In contrast, teachers with high SEC are those who recognize an individual student's emotions, understand the cognitive appraisals behind that. These teachers in turn are able to make sense for their students' emotionally motivated reasons and the sequence behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roffey, 2012). When teachers are able to understand their students' emotional expression and the respective appraisals, they have more feelings of their meaningful roles by their students' sides, likely to get closer to students' circumstances, understand them more and find the best way to support students overcoming their daily difficulties either physical and psychological ones. As such, teachers become the reliable and effectively supportive sources for students. As a result, both teachers' and students' wellbeing are ensured and it warrants the significantly healthy relationship of them which considered as "two sides of a same coin" (Roffey, 2012, p. 1).

Social and emotional competence impacts on general successful classroom management

Effective classroom management is built on the constructive and healthy teacher-student relationships in the classroom (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Classroom management is one of important responsibilities of teachers in school as creating socially and emotionally healthy classroom climates is a prerequisite to achieve any academic objectives in schools (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2009). When teachers effectively manage their in-charge classrooms, they arrange students, place, time, and resources in a way that promotes the most efficient learning process (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015). According to Wiseman and Hunt (2008), the management involves teachers into a number of unplanned situations in which teachers need to demonstrate their abilities to use effective classroom management skills or techniques. It also highly requires teachers to successfully discipline students' behaviors because every single



behavior of one student could influence on other students' behaviors, classroom safety, the relevant learning activities, and particularly teachers' overwhelming (Wiseman & Hunt, 2008). Sieberer-Nagler (2015) remarks that students' misbehavior is a main reason of a high rate disrupted lessons reported by teachers. Today, teachers experience a bigger problem with class discipline than ever before (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015).

In Jennings and Greenberg's theoretical model (2009), they propose that when SEL skills are used effectively, they create a cyclical mechanism or "feedback loop" that, when positive, leads to better outcomes for everyone, but when negative, leads to teachers "burnout cascade" (p. 492). Teachers with stronger SEC build more productive relationships with their students, participate in more skilled and efficient classroom management, and more efficiently adopt SEL curriculum (Jones, Bailey, & Jacob, 2014). Moreover, they are more likely to be constructive in the classroom, be skillful in expressing their emotions, using sufficient language to create motivation and enjoyment of learning, as well as to direct and control student actions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers' own social-emotional learning skills help students directly deal with their occurring problems by teachers' consultancy or demonstration. As such, employing their own SEC, teachers not only are likely to manage classroom well, but also tend to apply SEL skills effectively in their other teaching activities (Esen-Aygun & Salim-Tasking, 2017).

Social and emotional competence plays significant roles to teachers' performance

Several studies claim that supportive classroom climate and healthy teacher-student relationships benefit students either in academic achievement and social and emotional development (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). When teachers are successful in classroom management and building positive relationships with their students, they are on the right track of implementing SEL.

In school contexts, more than any other stakeholders, teachers serve as excellent role models for positive social and emotional activities. Being the direct and primary SEL deliverers, teachers with higher SEC are likely more confident of themselves not only in demonstrating the skills animatedly but also helping others to develop the skills. As the result, competent teachers are expected to perform effective practice of social and emotional curriculum (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2017).

Besides, teachers with high SEC also possess high self-awareness. They are first and foremost fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses regarding emotional management skills. As such, teachers develop their strategies to identify and decide on how to make the best use of their emotions in motivating and encouraging students to learn. This competence is especially beneficial for SEL operation.

Moreover, teachers who have social and emotional knowledge are assumed to be culturally sensitive. Their awareness that others' viewpoints may vary from their own aids them in negotiating constructive conflict management (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This creates favorable condition to build up school-wide SEE context where every school's social capital is supportive for their students' SEL exposure (Roffey, 2012).

Social and emotional competence plays undeniably significant roles to teachers' performance. Among many of them, SEC tremendously affects teachers' wellbeing, teacher-student relationships, classroom management and the success of SEL implementation. These above impacts, however, are not isolated; they interact in significant ways (Jennings & Greenberg,



2009). When teachers are in physically and mentally healthy states, they are willing, energetic and capable to perform the best every single responsibility either subject teaching or other educational activities. Both teacher-student relationship and positive classroom climate contribute to students' social, emotional, and academic outcomes which in turn impact on teachers' career satisfaction, happiness, and later on wellbeing and motivation. Finally, with sufficient competence in SEL, healthy class climates and relationship, teachers who are enthusiastic about SEL are supposed to implement the best SEL to promote their students' SEC, create better conditions for further positive learning environment and better educational activity outcomes.

TEACHER SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AS A NEW APPROACH FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

Pre-service teacher education in Vietnam

In Vietnam, pre-service teachers refer to those who enroll in, and are educated and trained in a pedagogical college or university to be qualified and certified as teachers before entering the teaching profession. A teacher education program takes 3 to 4 full years with coursework and 10 week practicum in K12 schools. The general academic sections, the specialized academic section, and the technical pedagogy methodology section are the three main sections that courses of education typically cover. Philosophy, English language (French for prospective English teachers), general theories in education and psychology disciplines, and Vietnamese culture are among the subjects covered in the general academic section. The specialized academic section emphasizes on practical learning-teaching theories for subject teaching applications. This section also focuses on preparing teacher candidates to teach and improve students' competences in accordance with the subject program designed in national general curriculum. The pedagogical profession's preparation accounts for 25% of the overall pre-service teaching training and includes students' experience teaching in practicum K12 school (Nguyen, Nguyen, Vu, Hoang, & Nguyen, 2020). Teacher applicants can earn an education college certificate and become nationally accredited teachers after they have completed all requirements.

Social and emotional competence and teacher preparation

In Vietnam, there are more than two million teachers. In general, the teaching force is qualified and has been performing effectively in their professional career. However, recently, the teaching force has been encountering a number of challenges, particularly relating to teacher's morality decrease, attrition and lack of commitment. Unfortunately, as mentioned by one Ministry of Education and Training leader in the launch day of the project "application of information technology in management, care, counseling to help relieve psychological stress for teachers" that the main reason for many of teaching force crisis is that teachers have been in a state of stress for a long time without knowing how to relieve themselves, lack of behavioral skills, emotional management, as well as lack of timely counseling (MOET, 2020). In addition, in a research on current teaching force to meet new requirements of the National general curriculum reform, the Institute of Pedagogical Research, Hanoi Pedagogical University presents a great deal of significant data connected to teachers' SEC. Accordingly, just more or less than one fifth of



teachers state that they are confident of their skills in communication and emotional regulation during their classroom performance; able to adapt with the diverse and ever-change teaching conditions and situations; 27% of them reckon that they are likely to manage and create constructive learning environment (including initiating positive learning, independent, friendly, warm, cooperative, beneficial and safe) (Kim Anh, 2016). One logical and significant approach to explain the above shortcomings happening in the nations' teaching force is analyzing its pre-service teacher training program.

While the concepts of SEC and SEL are new in Vietnamese education and teacher education, educational policies pay great attention on life skills, soft skills and other non-academic skills. In teacher education program, pre-service teachers are more provided with teaching skills directly relating to the targeted subjects, while a little concerned about other skills such as communication, emotional management, classroom management which are proved to be crucial to teaching career (Blewitt et al., 2020; Ee & Cheng, 2013; McCabe & Altamura, 2011; Sieberer-Nagler, 2015). In addition, according to Schonert-Reichl (2017) teachers' awareness of their students' social, emotional, and cognitive development is a decisive factor of effective teaching and learning process. As observed in education and training operation in the nations' pedagogical institutes, these related context courses are delivered by Education and Psychology faculty with every general knowledge for every teacher student cohort, which results in less connection with the classroom (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Moreover, for the limitedly designated credits for these courses, the contents delivered mainly are the classic and abstract concepts which are scientifically important but hard to understand. These contents, therefore, are rarely employed concerning child and adolescent development during classroom instruction, leaving teachers to make up their own examples (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

In conclusion, the concepts of SEC and SEL are new in Vietnamese educational context, therefore not much attention paid on these theories. Regarding pre-service teacher education program, there is very little concern of providing teachers needed knowledge, skills to improve their own SEC, as well as the necessary equipment for their prospective SEL implication to their students.

Embedding social and emotional learning in Vietnamese teacher training

Teachers must improve their own SEC, understand how to specifically teach social and emotional skills, and possess the expertise, dispositions, and skills necessary to foster a healthy, inclusive, and sensitive school and classroom environment (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). However, in the scope of this paper, strategies to improve teachers' own SEC will be brought up. According to CASEL (n.d.), there are 4 popular approaches to promote SEC for students; these could be successfully applied to teacher education in Vietnamese context.

Firstly, free-standing lessons designed to enhance students' SEC explicitly could be the optimal choice for the SEC improvement goals. This kind of independent course provides explicit SEL instruction in which teacher students are instructed to promote their own SEC, experience themselves as the learners. In this approach, teacher candidates not only promote their own SEC but understand the case for their future students when they become teachers. Being an independent course, SEL should be treated equally to other course works with teaching and learning curriculum, planning, designated schedule, and assessment.

Second approach is integrating SEL into other courses. SEL could be integrated in other courses as elements added in. In current teacher education program, there are a host of courses



available for the integration such as General psychology and school psychology, Pedagogical Practices and the Development of Social and Personal Skills, Psychological Counseling in Schools. These courses definitely have their own working functions, but SEL could be added in for more practical application in real practice and in term of SEC concern. Furthermore, a number of courses which for several reasons have been removed from the original program should be brought back, for instance, Pedagogy Communication, Social Psychology, Psychology Practice. Apparently, when a course is added on, another course in another area has to be omitted (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), still, it is necessary to make a consideration since the matter is providing significant supports for teachers for the sake of not only themselves but their many student generations later on. Apart from these directly relevant content courses, it is also possible to interweave SEL elements in any other subject knowledge courses such as Vietnamese and Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Study. By acquiring a great deal of subject knowledge served their teaching later on, in college of education, pre-service teachers expose themselves with SEL, improve the SEL competence for themselves, develop competence to choose which knowledge areas, which lesson, and how to integrate SEL in their teaching. For instance, Vietnamese and Language arts could be one of them. Teacher students learn by themselves how to understand others, events from different perspectives, how to show their empathy to others by analyzing the disposition, characteristic of the characters in each work of literature. The learning helps them identify the relevant and available contents to integrate SEL.

Third way is the integration SEL in teaching practices to create favorable classroom climate. Given the comprehensive understanding of classroom climate significance, throughout teaching-learning processes, teacher educators are able enhance their teacher students' SEC naturally by ensuring learning authority. By that, the learners have chance to choose the learning content, manage their own learning with specific goal set. In addition, in this approach, teacher educators are suggested to create cooperative, interactive, and project-based learning with practical implications, associated with cultural and social characteristics, attached to real life. According to collaborative learning theories of Vygotsky and Bruners, every single step in this approach could navigate to the accumulation of SEL skills (Hagaman, 1990).

The last but not least possible approach is to use organizational setting to support SEL as a school-wide program that develops a learning-friendly environment and community. In Vietnam schools in general, and particularly in pedagogical schools (colleges of education), the practice of rigorous moral values is always ensured which provides warm, safe and supportive environment. However, for the strong will of SEL implementation and enhancing SEC for every stakeholder, the matter could be taken more serious attention to avoid any unexpectedly deconstructive events occurring in the school-wide setting. Besides, extra curriculum activities inside or outside school such as communist Youth Union, charity or community projects also need more careful consideration for its positive and actual effectiveness. These activities importantly create chances for teacher students exposing themselves with school-wide, society-wide actually circumstances where they experience, assess and adjust their own competences, including SEC.

CONCLUSION

With the ever and unexpected changing society and schools, teachers nowadays have to involve themselves in many new and unfamiliar roles than what have seen in the traditional school. It



requires them to have the best wellbeing state and be equipped with the most transferable, flexible and changing-adapting competences, SEC must be a pivotal one. This review describes in detail how SEC contributes to teachers' professional and personal life. As such, SEL has been proven to be a critical element which maintains teachers' wellbeing and career motivation, impacts strongly on teacher-student relationship, the effectiveness of classroom management, and SEL implementation.

In the Vietnamese educational system and teacher training, the concepts of SEC and SEL are both new, but it doesn't mean that they have completely ignored regarding the issue of enhancing the wellbeing and sufficient performance of teacher in their teaching career. It also significantly relates to student generations' SEC as the result of their teachers' performance. In this paper, we emphasized the awareness of teachers' SEC importance; and then, the recommendations of integration SEL in current teacher education program according to CASEL will serve as the initiative for effort to promoting Vietnamese teachers' SEC. Together with the increasing attention to students' as well as teachers' social and emotional competence, it is expected that SEL will be adopted, developed and implemented in Vietnam as a response to the acknowledgment of SEC importance.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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