

The Dehumanizing Nature of Competition in Christian Classrooms

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Abstract

Competition is an inherited part of our education system. Much of what we do in the Christian classrooms inadvertently includes competitive structures that actually serve to inhibit a scriptural understanding of community in general, and good learning in particular. In this paper, competition will be shown to be destructive to both learning and the creation of Christian community. As such, it will be argued that competition is dehumanizing in nature, especially in regards to its application in education.

Competition in Christian classrooms is detrimental on a number of levels. Not only will it be shown in this paper that competition inhibits student learning, it will also be shown that competitive structures and methodologies undermine the very community which is described in scripture as the preferred structure of organizing Christian people.

Preamble

Although there are many areas in schools which are rich in competitive structures (Physical Education games, intramural sports, book club battles, band competitions, etc.), we see competition within classroom environments primarily in the assessment and evaluation structures that are used. In many schools and classrooms, it is not possible for all students to do well because the grading scheme assumes and determines that only a few will – only those that are able to achieve a certain standard will get an ‘A’, for example. Or, only those who are good at ‘X’ get to go to the regional ‘Y’, for another example. Sport is an example that won’t be tackled here. In many circumstances, competition in sports is open to those who ‘opt-in’ and is participated in voluntarily. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on those competitive structures that Harvey (1917) calls ‘Involuntary’.

If the above premise is true, that competitive structures within the classroom serve to undermine Christian community and are a detriment to learning, why do schools use competitive structures? There are a few explanations that are clear to me on this question. Often competition is claimed to “stimulate students to do their best, and to excel” (Sadler, 1996, p. 45). In this explanation we see that competition, or striving to singularly achieve ‘X’ is a motivator for learning. The assumption here is that an

extrinsic motivator is required to coerce learners to learn, or to do their best at a given task. As we will see later in this paper, this claim is not substantiated by research.

Another explanation which uses the same motivational premise is that competition is a product of a capitalist society and in some ways is inevitable. Sadler argues that competition is

widely espoused in a free enterprise economy because it is believed to lead to efficiency in production and distribution of goods and services, and to reward those with initiative, drive, imagination and skill...[it is] is claimed to dispel apathy and stagnation, lead to higher standards, protect against monopolistic practices, and promote progress and enhancement” (p. 45).

While even in commerce and economics the wisdom of a system based on competition and scarcity has been questioned (Kohn, 1986, p. 70-79), its use in education is even more questionable, especially if it is adopted unquestioningly in Christian schools.

Simply because a practice exists does not mean that it is ideal, or that it even aids in accomplishing our goals. McWhirther (1985) uses a rather crude analogy to make this same point: “it is no more legitimate to use competition as a motivation for classroom performance than it is to use sex as a motivation for selling cars. That such tactics are apparently effective does not make them right” (p. 58).

My premise is the same as Purpel’s (2004); that there seems to be a contradiction in our approach to education, especially in the language we use to describe our system: “We are a culture that simultaneously celebrates equality and inequality, community and competition – one that rejects the notion of any person as having special privileges as immoral and unfair and yet at the same time actively creates and legitimates possibilities

for this to occur” (p. 48). We are entrenched in a paradoxical system that makes claims regarding outcomes that do not materialize. Within our Christian schools we adopt methodologies in our classrooms that don’t necessarily reflect the kingdom purpose from which we claim to have originated, and for which we claim to exist. “Any competition that dehumanizes the participants is harmful” reminds Rich (1988, p. 187). It will be argued throughout this paper that competition within classrooms and in use in pedagogical methodologies is harmful and that it dehumanizes its participants. Its dehumanizing structure will be illustrated in light of the Biblical understanding of the communal ideal of the Christian Body of Christ. Competition will be shown to prohibit the building of Christian community by encouraging individuality over communality, and in this light will be shown to be detrimental to Christian learning in general.

It will not be argued as Kohn (1992) does that competition is never acceptable, but rather as Johnson & Smith (Date unknown) do that “competition, like many types of human behaviour, has advantages and disadvantages” (p. 8), and that “Differences in conclusions about competition often are based on differences in calculating and weighting the perceived costs and benefits of a competitive activity” (p. 8). I believe that if it comes down to a metaphorical cost-benefit analysis in Christian Schools, that the Return on Investment of competitive structures and pedagogies will be negligible and even detrimental to fostering Christian communities and Christian learning classrooms.

Defined

It will be helpful, before we begin, to clarify the competition that will be explored and objected to in this paper. There are many differing conceptions of what competition is and whether or not it is detrimental. Some of this will be solved by clarifying what is

meant by competition as it relates to Christian learning and Christian community. Some may think of the joy derived through watching competitive sporting events, or of the enjoyment had during a competitive board game. What should be made clear from the start is that the competition being objected to in this paper is the competition that is explicitly or implicitly employed in classrooms through a variety of pedagogical methodologies.

Wilson (1989) claims that education as we know it has been set up in such a way that “Competition...is inevitable” (p.28). He argues that even the notion of performing well pits student against student “since the notion of performing well is relative to other performers, all of whom are out to satisfy certain standards” (p. 28). Wilson is not here claiming that competition is a constant inevitability, but rather that when performance standards are built into a system as the ultimate goal, competition to attain those standards is inevitable. The setting up of identical performance standards to which all should aspire is in itself an endorsement for competition. Rich explains this competitive structure using an algorithm. He claims that “Three conditions obtain when persons are in competition with one another” (p. 185). First, two or more persons or groups vie for R (reward). Second, R is in short supply, and only one or a limited number of persons can gain it. And last, the activities are rule governed (p.185). In this we can easily see that assessment and evaluation methods within classroom structures are often replete with competitive situations, ie. R=grades, only a certain few can attain the best grades, and there are rules to attain these best grades.

However, as stated above, competition must be seen to have both benefits and deficiencies depending upon the circumstances. Harvey (1917) clarifies that we must

think of competition in two different ways. He distinguishes between Deliberate and Involuntary competition. Deliberate competition, Harvey explains, sees individuals “striving with other people in order to: do something better, be thought more of, obtain more power, possess more material wealth, than those other people” (p. 10-19). On the other hand, Involuntary competition is “the act of striving for identical objects which cannot be possessed or enjoyed in common”, but rather that those involved strive solely “for the sake of the object and not with reference, conscious or unconscious, to the other people concerned” (p. 10-19). In a similar fashion, Kohn (1992) distinguishes between Structural Competition, involving a win/lose framework, and Intentional Competition, involving an individual and internal framework (p. 3-4). “Structural competition”, he says, “involves the comparison of several individuals in such a way that only one of them can be the best” (p. 4). This is destructive because “competition itself sets the goal, which is to win; scarcity is thereby created out of nothing” (p. 4).

I believe that in our classrooms we have set up systems which promote the striving for objects or rewards which are only obtainable to a select few. We have set up systems involving both Structural and Involuntary competition. Because the rewards are only obtainable for a select few, we unknowingly (or knowingly) pit student against student in a competition which is not conducive to the creation of a Christian classroom culture and which makes the end goal of learning one of scarcity and not abundance.

Christian Foundation for Argument

The primary basis for an argument against competitive structures within Christian Schools is the belief that the Christian School should at its finest reflect as closely as possible a Biblical understanding of community, which is described in the New

Testament as the Body of Christ. This is not to say that the church and the school have the same function or that that they should be constructed similarly. The Christian School should, though, in its structure enable individuals within it to grow in their capacity to be and become effective followers of Christ in community.

It is my belief that the sole job of all Christians is evangelism. Christ's last commands were to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and to "be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere" (Acts 1:8). In this regard I see the job of the Christian School to be, at the very least, a place where children are trained to be and become effective evangelizers for Christ. This, of course, is simplistic, but the primary objective of all Christian schools must be the training of people who become more effective at working to bring forth Christ's Kingdom with Him

The New Testament provides us a glimpse of ideal structures with which to accomplish the aforementioned commission. Again and again in scripture we are presented with a communal ideal as opposed to an individual ideal. In chapter 2 of the Book of Acts, we get a glimpse of what Christian communities are called to become. Verse 42-43 tells us that following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." Clearly Christians were called to be people who were less concerned with themselves, and more concerned with the communal good. The Apostle Paul expands on this in 1 Corinthians 12 when he uses the analogy of the human body likened to the Body of Christ. He writes "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (Verse 12). In Verse 18 Paul expands further and claims that God has given certain members of the body certain

functions, each to glorify the entire body. Helpful verses for our discussion regarding competition are Verses 22-25 where Paul shows us that there are no weak parts of the analogous body, and conversely that there are no extra special parts:

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.”

Sadler (1996), in his helpful exploration of competition and Christianity, shows that in this light, “There is no spirit of competition (in the Body of Christ)...with all parts mutually fitted together for the glory of God” (p. 51). Rather, he argues,

“Within the life of the church, each believer is expected to identify and develop personal abilities, and to see themselves as part of an integrated fellowship of believers. Paul makes this explicit when he employs the metaphor of the human body; differentiated parts and functions, an organic and vital unity, with all members equally valued” (p. 51).

“God has given Christians gifts within...social groups”, NH explains (1997, p. 3). And, he reminds and warns us that the gifts are not given to be used for individual purpose or gain, but rather for the edification, growth, and understanding of the community (p. 3).

Concluding with this metaphor for Christian community, Sadler reinforces that “The doctrines relating to the body-life of the school have to do with the creation and maintenance of a harmonious whole, with all parts supporting one another” (p. 54).

There are other areas of scripture where we can glean evidence for the promotion of community over individuality, and communal versus private use of God-given gifts. McWhirther (1985) uses an exploration of Jesus' life and ministry to remind us that Jesus' "emphasis was on loving one's neighbour as oneself, sharing resources, and being generous. He called people to develop and exercise their gifts in the service of others, not in self-aggrandisement" (p. 57). Certainly the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:12 reflect this: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted". The Other is more important than the Self, and gifts are to be used in exaltation and development of the Body of Christ, not simply in the exaltation and development of the individual. Service to others is a central Biblical theme. McWhirther stresses this: "The Christian faith is built upon the life and teaching of one who was materially and politically a failure, leaving no writings and no natural heirs. Central to his teaching was the service of others" (p. 57).

In light of this Biblical foundation, it is difficult to view competition as being an edifying and constructive aspect of the individual and communal Christian's life. Regarding competition in both a Structural and Involuntary manner helps us to see that there are certainly aspects of our classrooms and general pedagogies that can detract from our ability to build Christian community and use our God-given gifts in the service and edification of others. There is much in the literature about competition in education that will be helpful in illustrating this point further.

The Problem with Competition – A Literary Review

In this section I'd like to outline what some of the literature regarding competition in education claims and provide a brief analysis of how this relates with our study of the detracting elements of competition in building Christian community.

Competition Promotes Individualism

Competition is based on a very individualistic view of the human person and how the human person relates with those he/she encounters. Lam, et al. (2004)¹ remind us that competition “Forces students to focus on their ability to win or outperform others, and in turn their self-perception of ability becomes a function of how they perform relative to others” (p. 282). When the focus is on the extent to which an individual is able to attain a certain level of performance as compared to others, the gifts given by God for the service of community become second place and thus induce a preference to what the individual is able to attain him/herself instead of what he/she can offer the community.

Lowers self-esteem and self-confidence

It is not the place of this paper to argue the merits or demerits of having a good self-esteem and self-confidence. However, it is generally assumed that those who have high levels of both are better able to function well in society and in relation to others. In light of that assumption, research has shown that students in classrooms organized with a preference towards cooperation, as opposed to competition, report higher levels of self-esteem (Meeker, 1990, p. 206). Competition “makes self-esteem precarious and conditional” because one’s “value is contingent on how many people one has beaten (Kohn, 1993, p. 25). In addition to this, Sadler argues that Christians may be “less

¹ It should be noted that this study is based on Chinese classrooms. I have no reason to believe that these results wouldn't be representative of classrooms in North America or in our Christian schools.

effective in their personal, professional and Christian lives” if they never or rarely experience the success associated with competitive pedagogies (p. 52). Competition negatively affects self-esteem and self-confidence and thus prohibits the Christian in his/her ability to effectively serve those within the Body of Christ.

Competition Negatively Affects Achievement

It may seem redundant to say, but schools are in the business of helping their students to learn and consequently to achieve well academically. Contrary to popular belief, competition has been found to “be associated with a negative change in motivational orientation and a decline in academic performance (Lam, et al, p. 282). Kohn (1992) takes this a step further and concludes, following his analysis of the available research, that “Superior performance not only does not *require* competition; it usually seems to require its absence” (p. 47). The literature seems to suggest that competition acts as an inhibitor to good achievement as it relates to academic performance.

Competition Incites Anxiety

A common reaction to an argument against competition is that it can be both exciting and motivating. Most of us, however, have been on the opposite side of this argument and can attest to the anxiety that competition can cause. Anxiety, for many people, can (as also shown above) prohibit good academic performance. Everyone has a personal story regarding how they ‘choked’ under pressure, under a situation that caused them heightened levels of anxiety. Anxiety is a common by-product of competition and can be generated by it (Kohn, 1993, p. 25). If this is true, and even if it is the case for

only a few children, a good argument could be made that competitive structures have no place in classrooms where the ability to opt-out of them is not available.

Competition Promotes Performance and Activity as an ends instead of a Means

The following argument against competitive structures within the classroom is a bit more intricate than the others. Lam, et al., argue that competition in classrooms is “inclined to induce performance goals instead of learning goals among students” (p. 282). This argument will resonate with those who hold the view that good education should have the goal of helping learners to become self-motivated people who understand the importance of the learning process as opposed to simply the ends of education, whether those ends are jobs, money, status, etc. Christian schools will have the added goal of ensuring that students are learning in an environment where God-given gifts are honed in the anticipation of raising up responsive disciples of Christ who are and become evangelizers for Christ.

Competition in the school environment can create an understanding that “activity is a means to some other end, rather than an end in itself” (Lam, et al. p. 282). It is destructive to think that the importance of activities in schools is about an end product rather than the process in attaining that end product and the important lessons and skills learned in the process. If performance of individuals, as compared to other individuals, becomes the primary importance of what happens in the classroom, we have lost sight of a true understanding of Christian education. Further, if the product that is developed becomes the goal of our educational activities rather than the process involved in creating a certain product, then we may also have become deluded by goals that don’t reflect our Christian ideals. Again, competitive structures within classroom environments can

emphasize performance goals instead of learning goals, and activity as an end instead of a process.

Competition Decreases Collaboration

It is difficult to think of competitive situations that involve true collaboration. One can argue that there are some instances of intergroup competition which involve some type of collaboration. But, even these situations involve the striving of one group to better another group and the individuals within that group. It is quite obvious that the presence of competition denies the presence of true collaboration. Research shows that collaboration is more effective in education than competition. Johnson, et al. (1981), make three conclusions in their meta-analysis of 122 studies regarding competition in classrooms: first, that “Cooperation is superior to competition in promoting achievement and productivity” (p. 56), second, that “Cooperation is superior to individualistic efforts in promoting achievement and productivity” (p. 57), and finally that “Cooperation without intergroup competition promotes higher achievement and productivity than cooperation with intergroup competition” (p. 57).

It is clear from this research, that collaborative structures within classrooms should be our preferred method if achievement is our goal. Of course, and as outlined above, our goal in Christian Education is more lofty: in addition to excellent academic achievement, we strive to construct Christ-like communal structures within our schools. It is my belief, which is corroborated by the research, that cooperation rather than competition is better positioned to enable both of these goals to occur.

Competition Lowers Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivators in learning situations are preferable to extrinsic motivators. The promotion of extrinsic motivators is a mistake in classrooms because we are trying to offer our students the ability to become lifelong and self-motivated learners. Extrinsic motivators are those that promote short-term learning goals, while intrinsic motivators are those that promote long-term learning goals. Competition has been shown to undermine intrinsic motivation (Lam, et al. p. 282) and functions as an extrinsic motivator which reduces “interest in the task and creative performance just as other artificial inducements have been repeatedly shown to do” (Kohn, 1993, p. 25).

Competition Promotes Negative Attitudes towards Others

We’ve all heard others say “there’s nothing like a little friendly competition”. This adage is questionable and depends entirely upon the context from which it is uttered and upon the personality of the person who uttered it. It is certainly questionable as to whether or not a competitive structure creates the type of environment that we hope to create in Christian schools. Based on the words of New Testament scripture, it can be well argued that the environment that we’re hoping to create in Christian schools is one of unconditional love, forgiveness, trust, humility, etc. Kohn (1993), argues well that competitive structures create “envy for winners, contempt for losers, and hostility and suspicion toward just about everyone” (p. 25). Further, he claims that “Competitive structures reduce generosity, empathy, sensitivity to others’ needs, accuracy of communication, and trust (p. 25). It is clear based on this research that competition is guilty of creating an environment contrary to that which we hope to espouse in our Christian classrooms.

Competition Promotes Scarcity Instead of Abundance

A lesser used, but very important argument against competition within classrooms is the assertion that it promotes a philosophy of scarcity instead of abundance. NH (1997) argues that “A scarcity mentality dominates many people’s perceptions of competition and encourages win-at-all-costs attitudes (p. 7). This is most clear in capitalist economics which is said to thrive on competition and the real or perceived scarcity that such a structure promotes. Demand for resources creates the market and when a resource is demanded heavily it is said to be (either truthfully or fictionally) scarce. In our classrooms, we purvey a system of scarcity when we claim that only a select few can attain the highest grades or rewards, or that only some students exemplify the sort of ideals, gifts and talents that we’ve predetermined.

This attitude is antiscritural. The scriptural story is one of abundance; God distributes gifts to His image bearers in such a way that the entire Body of Christ will benefit. In this way, we experience a theology of abundance, not scarcity. We must be cognizant that our assessment and evaluation techniques and structures could actually serve to undermine such an understanding.

Possible Solutions

In light of the above framework outlining the detrimental nature of competition in Christian classroom pedagogies and methodologies, it is possible to outline a few solutions to the problem. In this section, three solutions will be discussed. First, it will be suggested that cooperative structures are preferable to competitive structures and align better with a scriptural understanding and worldview. Second, an attempt will be made to construct a system of fair competition in the event that competition is a strategy that will

be employed. Finally, the beginnings of a philosophy of interdependence as a reaction to the dependence and independence required by competition will be presented.

Cooperation and Collaboration

As noted above, Johnson, et al, have shown quite conclusively that cooperation is a superior method to competition in classrooms. In addition to this important conclusion, Meeker (1990) points out that “imposing a cooperative orientation rather than a competitive one, has been shown to lead to more successful and lasting resolutions of conflict situations” (Meeker, p. 206). And finally, McWhirther (1985) concludes in his study of competition in Christian classrooms that “the more appropriate pattern for the classroom should surely be co-operation” (p. 57). While it is true in the first two arguments that cooperative structures lead to better academic achievement and promote better interpersonal relationships, the primary importance is that a cooperative structure more closely resembles the scriptural framework that we’re meant to have towards our neighbours and in our communal structures.

Beed (2005) is quite right when he asserts that “Jesus’ required behaviour (turn the other cheek, golden rule, etc.) speaks more of mutual reciprocity, more of cooperation than competition, of reconciliation than conflict” (p. 55). The idea of mutual reciprocity is one that we must pay attention to. As Christians, we are not called to be individuals striving for our own best interest, but should be searching out ways that our God-given gifts and talents can be used for the edification of the whole Body. Likewise, our classrooms should be places where activities are designed to promote the growth of the gifts within them, where God-given gifts are collaborated in the hope that they will be used by God as a blessing for the whole. If there are aspects of our pedagogies and

methodologies that contradict this basic premise, we must be quick to rebuke them to explore different ways of achieving the ideal. McWhirther (1985) minces no words in his condemnation of competition when he says that “Competition consorts with greed, covetousness and self-seeking. Such attitudes are to be “put to death” for they belong with such evils as sexual immorality” (p. 58). If we regard such a condemnation as true, then our practices need serious study and reflection and a system of collaboration must be pursued.

Fair Competition

As stated at the outset, I don’t believe that competition is inherently evil or that it has no value whatsoever. I do believe, however, that it is wrong to impose competition on those who have not opted-in to it. In this regard, I believe, along with Rich (1988) that there should be rules that are followed to encourage what he calls ‘fair competition’. He claims that competition is fair when:

- a. The parties voluntarily agree to participate
- b. Rules are established and adhered to
- c. The rules avoid invidious discrimination
- d. The parties agree to abide by the outcome whenever the three criteria are not met

(p. 187)

While I agree that these imperatives are a good starting point for instilling justice and equity into competitive situations, the intention is not to promote competition. Instead, the default perspective should be collaboration with these tenets used only when competition is shown to be necessary or unavoidable. Wilson (1989), although speaking of competitive sports, has wisdom for Christian educators who he says will

“ensure that[...]competition is not conducted in too serious or earnest a manner, but in a way that games properly played are supposed to be conducted - with sportsmanship, enthusiasm but not fanaticism, and with the clear message (spoken or unspoken) that the winners are not thereby proved better men nor the losers worse” (p. 29).

Interdependence

I hope that it has become clear by this point in the paper is that Christians are called to live in community and to share resources for the betterment of the whole. NH (1997) in his creative paper entitled “Competition and Cooperation”, which draws heavily on the work of Stephen R. Covey, argues compellingly that Christians should think of this communal orientation as one of interdependence. Along with Covey, he argues that we can live in one of three orientations towards others: dependence, independence and interdependence. It will be helpful to explore Covey (1989) directly here who calls this the ‘Maturity Continuum’. Dependence means we are “directed, nurtured, and sustained by others” (p. 49). During Independence we become “inner-directed and self-reliant” (p. 49). It is only when our orientation becomes one of interdependence when we realize that “the higher reaches of our nature have to do with our relationships with others” (p. 49). In other words, dependence is the paradigm of ‘you’, independence is the paradigm of ‘I’, and interdependence is the paradigm of ‘we’ (p. 49).

NH claims that competition is part of the process of traversing the basic orientation from dependence to independence. He claims that “When we compete with others we measure ourselves against them: I know I can do it, I know I have achieved

because under competitive circumstances I have proved that I am better than you or just a little worse than you” (p. 6). My competition with the other is the determining factor in my becoming independent from them. It is easily seen that this orientation is not one of interdependence. In fact, “true interdependence is achieved when we seek win/win outcomes” says NH (p. 7). Win/win outcomes are not characteristic of competitive structures. However, win/win outcomes are indeed characteristic of the scriptural view of Christian community and consistent with the Body of Christ doctrine espoused in the New Testament. In the scriptural view of Christian community we don’t see individuals vying to promote their own best interests, we see something radically different – we see individuals using God-given gifts to promote the growth and well-being of others in the service of God’s Kingdom. Interdependence in Christian classrooms will be devoid of those competing for scarce rewards and devoid of those looking only to bettering themselves in relation to others. Indeed, interdependence in Christian classrooms will result in a climate of apportioning of gifts wherein the primary learning goal of each individual is to grow in his/her own God-given gifts in the hopes of serving the communal whole and developing the God-given gifts of others.

Concluding Remarks

In the argument above, we have seen that competition that is either intentionally or inadvertently built into classroom structures can work to prohibit the ability of Christians to construct a community as espoused in scripture. We are called to reject philosophies that encourage individuality and selfishness in favour of philosophies that encourage reciprocity of God-given gifts – encouragement and growth to others, and encouragement and growth in return. Competition and competitive structures within classrooms are not

conducive to this proviso and in fact have been argued to be dehumanizing to the participants exposed to them. Philippians 2:3 commands Christians to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves”. This could very well act as a determining verse for our purposes here. If there are structures within our school that cause selfishness or conceit, then these structures must be eliminated in favour of those that promote humility, which in this context I believe means something closer to interdependence – using one’s gifts to bless others, while in turn acknowledging that their gifts are blessing us equally and being used to further the Kingdom of God. This, I believe, will lead us closer to a scriptural understanding of how we learn with others in worshipful and God-honouring Christian classrooms.

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