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*Maddalena Colombo**

Author information

* Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan and Brescia, Italy. Email: maddalena.colombo@unicatt.it

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The Impact of Ethnicity on School Life: a Cross-National Post-Commentary

*Maddalena Colombo**

In light of the “great alert” surrounding immigration

The seven articles presented here take us on a long journey that justifies an end-of-the-road reflection. They also constitute an infrequent case of cross-national research that tries not to be “inward-looking” but rather favour a comparative perspective, which addresses an international audience.

What is the lesson that these multiple case studies, carried out in different places and timeframes, have taught to us, as sociologists of education, about what is happening in mixed classrooms as a result of increasing multiculturalism and changing attitudes? The countries we took into consideration, Italy and France, are just a pretext to explore the European space in its permanent change, both structural and cultural, while it copes with the hardest “immigration alert” in the past few years¹. Italy and France are close, yet distant: both share the EU’s Southern borders, but they have adopted radically different policies of border control, due also to their own histories of openness/closeness towards “other ethnic groups” (e.g., France’s history of colonisation is in contrast with Italy’s long-term transcontinental emigration). As far as the institutional level is concerned, one would be hard-pressed to expect great commonalities between the two, given the different public managements of schooling, but there could be a common ground in constructing ethnic and educational inclusiveness. I will try to share here some insights into the core topic of this special issue.

¹ See the *media* resonance of the migrants and refugees crisis, cfr. Triandafillydou, 2018.

* Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan and Brescia, Italy.
Email: maddalena.colombo@unicatt.it

Let us first and foremost consider the issue of language: here immigrant students (or descendants of immigrants) are identified via their “ethnic” identity, rather than their racial identity. This is because we believe ethnicity to be a more useful construct than race. Furthermore, race issues are extremely minimised in Italy, with a certain evasiveness surrounding discourses on race and colour (Migliarini, 2018), whereas they are instead highly sensitive in France, where there is a pre-ordinate and top-down forced-blindedness regarding race in schools, which has lead teachers to become rather apprehensive and unable to discuss race openly (Redjimi, 2003; Cooper Stoll, 2014). Thus, ethnicity and ethnicisation seem to be the appropriate terms to set out what we want to clarify here: ethnicisation is the process, and not only the result, which unfolds in social relations when there is a clear rupture of a given “culture homogeneity” within a culturally specific environment, such as the school². No matter which definition of “ethnic” social players share – whether they derive it from a geographical, anthropological, or religious origin, or they consider ethnicity a sort of “degree of civilisation” for reciprocal assessment and positioning – they use ethnic otherness to build boundaries and deem rights, or develop reception or closure behaviours. So what is worth noting here is the making of ethnicity. I assume the concept of ethnic groups, following Brubaker (2002, p. 167), “not as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals – as the imagery of discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded and enduring ‘groups’ encourages us to do – but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated terms”. This means that, in non-essentialist terms, ethnicity has a social reality that does “not depend on the existence of ethnic groups or nations”, but rather rises from the “overriding power of ethnic and national identifications in some settings” (Ibidem, p. 168).

Starting with the main axes of the sociological object, in the current change of school environment many actors are involved: students and teachers in the front lines, with school managers and parents also engaged in the process right behind them (horizontal axis). And, in the vertical axis, according to a systemic and “ecological” view, everyday interactions and institutional dispositions intertwine to build the so called “school effect” (Smith & Tomlinson, 1989), the object we specifically want to shed light on. If the premise is the universal right to education, schools ought to represent the highest expression of humanisation and equity within a developed society (and act as such, especially within the public sector) by giving reception to all children and young people and applying the same standards of treatment, evaluation and opportunity of access to everyone. But vertical and horizon-

² A clear example is the presence of students with different ethnical backgrounds in a typically Italian classroom.

tal impediments can create several mismatches between purpose and educational practices, short and long-term objectives, discourses and practices, which are much harder to remove when the school effect remains tacit and unrecognised.

The articles presented in this issue have developed a range of different approaches to investigate both axes, mainly collecting in-field data with a quantitative or qualitative approach. Although they do not cover the whole territorial variability within the selected countries (some enquiries are extremely localised), they enable us to understand the main constraints underpinning the multicultural transformation of schooling.

Economic and social status affecting ethnic diversity in schools

The first social hurdle is particularly evident when we deal with the persistence of economic disparities between native and non-native school populations in their daily experience of education. The disadvantaged status of immigrants or descendants of immigrants emerges both in school choices (and results) and in their relationship with teachers and with peers. It is worth considering the two social dimensions of schooling affected by ethnicity, the “institutional” and the “relational” (Colombo & Santagati, 2017; Santagati, Argentin & Colombo, forthcoming), separately. Whether we look at France, where children of second generation are legally considered citizens, or at Italy where they are not (they cannot apply for naturalisation until they turn 18), multi-ethnic schools end up being contexts where downward assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) risks taking place over the long-term period. This is due to the convergence of belonging both to an “underclass” and to an “alien culture”, as predominant drivers of a segmented embodiment in the receiving society³.

Actually, if the school effect – which should be a positive driver of equity for migrants – is too weak and can be neutralised by migrant student’ low economic and social status, this has great significance for current sociological interpretation. This might confirm the resurgence of class difference, not only due to a classification (or denomination) process, but produced directly from these lower level of wealth, power and property among immigrant workers and their offspring. Thus, their lack of social power is so determined by the experience of eradication, displacement and from the loss of social capital, that it is difficult to contrast it with more cultural capital/schooling.

³ See, for the discussion upon the segmented assimilation concept: Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Ambrosini & Molina, 2004; Waldinger & Feliciano, 2004.

Many results from the fieldwork seem to support this hypothesis: if we look, for example, at data on secondary education choices in Italy – but also in France⁴ – it is clear that second generation students, on average, are more likely to attend short and pre-professional courses, thus decreasing their likelihood of reaching higher education compared to natives (Giancola & Salmieri, 2018) or, when they do, with less academic pre-requisites which would enable them to achieve the best marks and more prestigious qualifications. If this happens, the cause is not merely an initial linguistic disadvantage (which can, undoubtedly, slow down an educational career). There is also a mechanism of social differentiation and segregation within and between schools, that affects educational pathways so strongly and so deeply that current counter-mechanisms have little power to contrast it. Let us consider, for instance, the reception protocols put in place by some school institutions geared to welcome immigrant newcomers, or personal guidance tutors for second generation, aimed at contrasting early tracking and school abandon, or to support their academic ambitions⁵.

But the notion of social class in itself is still under revision, and the mechanisms of class formation, attribution and self-identification are much more fluid and unclear than ever. If we endorse a “relational” idea of class, over and beyond the decline of the classic notion of class based primarily on occupation and consumerist behaviour (Bradley, 2014), we can argue that the marginal status of immigrants and their descendants is defined more by the social identities of those who are “against” immigration and poverty (I’m thinking here of the growing nationalist sentiment among natives) rather by the efforts of those who seek to foster their assimilation, integration and self-identification. This process of “othering”, or better, of “diminution of others”⁶, makes immigrants’ poverty and marginalisation more visible and problematic by imposing upon them a permanent condition of inferiority, over and beyond their (potentially) good results in school achievement or socialisation among peers.

The “timespace” factor

One other significant constraint which emerges from the fieldwork is the “timespace” factor. As Mavroudi, Page & Christou suggest (2017), not only space is fundamental in the study of migrations (in terms of flows, mobility, borders and boundaries; all of which are recurrent categories for analysis),

⁴ See, in this issue, the articles by Bozzetti for Italy, and by Laborde & Silhol for France.

⁵ See, for instance, two innovative projects carried out in Milan (dropout prevention reported by Bonini & Santagati, 2018; contrasting early tracking reported by Carlana et al., 2017).

⁶ See, in this issue, the article by Barthou.

but its intersection with time is compelling. The fluidity associated with migration, as a temporary condition and future-driven experience, requires us to consider migrants' relationship with the receiving country as dynamic *per se*. The studies presented here mirror the usefulness which still characterises the distinction between generations of migrants, because the process of establishing oneself in the receiving society – whatever form integration may take–takes time to accomplish and to generate fruitful outcomes for the children of immigrants.

Generation matters in education: I am not thinking here only at the robust statistical findings, which confirm the increasing improvement in school performances among non-natives (or the smaller educational gap with natives) of later generations in comparison with the first arrivals⁷. Actually, in the inter-generational transition a significant change occurs regarding how ethnicity is constructed and negotiated for 1st, 2nd, up to the 3rd generation. First generation immigrants, for instance, avoid making ethnic identification visible in public spaces in order to bypass any sort of misrecognition for themselves and their children. Within the family, on the other hand, ethnicity is emphasised by parents and grandparents with the aim of minimising the risk of losing one's cultural heritage. Second generations tend to behave in the opposite way: re-claiming self-identification and developing a certain "ethnic pride", especially when others (both natives and non-natives) relate to them in negative terms, although cultural identity is not as relevant. The third generation, as the case of Italians in Switzerland illustrates⁸, renews the meaning of ethnicity by showing an almost opportunistic revival of one's cultural identity, in which the mother language is useful both for intimate and collective contingencies.

The intersection between time and space requires us to have a greater "event sensitivity" when developing the school policies and processes. Considering the range of incidents and other events associated with migration and multiculturalism which have taken place in Europe in the last decade (termed "cataclysmic" by the press and, consequently, assumed as such by a vast part of the Italian and French population)⁹, it is not surprising that particular events may be subjected to a different narrative. For example, it is worth mentioning how (after 2015) the spread of populism among school professionals has led to interrogate the prior assumption of equity and universalism in education, and to question *laïcité* or religious neutrality both in

⁷ Regarding 1st-2nd generation students' school achievement, see the updated reports issued by the Italian Ministry of Education: MIUR, 2018; and by the Ministère de l'Éducation National, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche: DGESCO, 2016.

⁸ See, in this issue, the article by Chatelain & Arcidiacono.

⁹ Such as: Arab spring, terrorist attacks, increasing inflows from Syrian and East Asia across the Balkan way, migrants' boats tragedy, militarisation of Italy-France border etc.

France and in Italy. You may find some evidence of this rupture in some of the essays: but surprisingly, such invisible changes of opinion are more localised and specific than universal and expected. Specific conditions (school size, rate of immigrant children, a rural or urban context, composition of teaching staff) may foster a nationalist sentiment more than others, along with the longitudinal development of ethnicisation through the micro-policies of segregation, gentrification, or internationalisation, etc.¹⁰.

Moreover, if national regulations try to equalise trends and normalise the institutional profiles of public schools, through more or less stringent guidelines, the essays presented here show that normative dispositions are not able to bypass the time/space factor and its local arrangements¹¹. In this case, sociomateriality matters (Landri, 2014).

Where is educational discrimination and how to detect it?

The third constraint to the transformation of schools is that of ethnic-based discrimination. This has to be read in its twofold expression: as a formal impediment to participation in education for disadvantaged groups or individuals, and as the informal (invisible) result of the creation of ethnic minorities which leads to self-exclusion. According to Barberis (2016, p.83), immigrant pupils are subjected to four types of discrimination in education: a) in space (i.e., isolation and segregation); b) in tracking (i.e., grouping by ability and/or by background, discouragement and mortification of aspirations); c) in transitions (i.e., channelling, relegation to lower tier jobs or as NEETs), d) in peer relationships. In addition, one further type of discrimination ought to be mentioned (e), which results from institutions who do not respond to the normative mandate: whether deliberately or unconsciously, principals or inspectors may fail to promote or outright contrast the main values and practices associated aimed at fostering the inclusiveness of migrants and ethnic minorities (equity and respect for students' difference) and act "normally", failing to adopt a true intercultural disposition and without any sensitivity to diversity.

In terms of discrimination in education, France and Italy display similar profiles in international rankings (like the MIPEx, assessed in 2014) where they score 36 and 34 points, respectively, placing them in 21st and 23th place, considered as countries who are "slightly unfavourable to immigrant

¹⁰ A specific example of this is represented by certain private schools who select students of immigrant origin on the basis of their national or ethnic origin, according to who is deemed "useful" to foster the internationalization of the school (thus some nationalities are favoured and appreciated, while others are out of favour and rejected).

¹¹ See, in this issue, the articles by Barthou and by Labord & Sihol.

students”¹². But sociologists and other scholars show different attitudes on this issue: French studies focus on visible and invisible discrimination, operating with reference to students’ ethnic identity (although principals and teachers, in France, are strongly advised to remain neutral in respect to this) or through a subtle underestimation of ethnic diversity¹³. On the contrary, ethnic discrimination in schools has been hardly investigated by Italian sociologists, often minimized and relegated to a local phenomena with isolated incidents (Azzolini, Mantovani & Santagati, 2018).

If we look at the articles in this issue, we ought to understand where educational discrimination lies. In the institutional frame investigated by Cascino et al., France’s and Italy’s school regulations are compared at two analytical levels: the normative level (i.e., what values a law is based on) and the cognitive level (i.e., how the law suggests such values be implemented in practice). It quickly becomes clear that the two countries have adopted opposite approaches, for example when dealing with newly arrived migrant students. Whereas in Italy the normative principle states that it is their right to be immediately admitted in ordinary classrooms to prevent peer segregation, France has set up preparatory classes for allophones (UPE2A) aimed at accelerating their French language skills. Thus, discrimination can emerge from the definition of the target itself: for Italy, migrant students are regular students (although they are formally “non-Italians” until 18 years of age, and thus “temporary citizens”), whose ethnic background is disregarded; for France they are allophones, whose ethnic background deserves specific attention, but only to be put aside and substituted by the new one (language becomes “the tool of a cultural assimilation”¹⁴).

A second type of discrimination lies at the cognitive level, where policies translate into practice. The Italian Ministry of Education issued a great number of recommendations via several Circular Letters which, unlike laws, are geared at fostering best practices among educational institutions, but their non-implementation does not mean schools will be sanctioned for not having followed the ministerial guidelines. The equivalent French Ministry of Education issued only two laws (replacing previous legislation), the tone of which was particularly alarmistic (post 2015), and sought to control their application in every local school system. In the Italian case, discrimination can occur when the autonomy of the school system and its poor accountability at the national level create actual disparities between schools, so that each school is, in reality, responding more to the local “demand” (i.e., becomes

¹² See: <http://www.mipex.eu/education>.

¹³ The ethnic diversity in class/school composition is often due to the distribution of housing and to neighbours segregation, which ends up to be a justification for not counter-acting the ethnic discrimination at stake (Ichou & Van Zantèn, 2014).

¹⁴ See, in this issue, the article by Cascino, Porrovecchio, Muscarà, Masson & Severino.

particularistic) than to legal and state principles (which would make it universalistic). In the French system, discrimination lies beyond the “correctness” of the law: the *laïcité* of the State and the need to construct school professionals’ “secular self”—as depicted by Laborde and Silhol in this issue—end up obliging principals and teachers to a supposedly neutral position with regards the ethnic background of their students, so that any ethnic connotation of their relationships with minority students is hidden or interpreted in terms of social inequality¹⁵. The emphasis on mastering the French language construes “ethnicity as a deficit”, although formally this is depicted as a mere linguistic issue.

The articles which investigate classroom climate and social interactions are able to identify real life cases of discrimination through an ethnographic lens or via students’ self-reporting. Some unexpected results have emerged in middle schools in both countries: for example, in France immigrant students in “priority” (hyper-mixed) classrooms perceive themselves to be protected from discrimination the more they can stay apart from natives¹⁶. In the Italian study on intergroup friendships, on the other hand, non-natives have more intergroup friendships and more cooperative behaviours compared to natives, but they report getting on better with those classmates who score less than natives¹⁷. This puts under scrutiny the analytical categories and the empirical tools that sociologists use in their fieldwork .

The articles which focused on student’s educational trajectories also found it quite easy to detect discrimination, as Bozzetti did in his article for example. The accounts gathered among post-secondary education students with a migrant background in Italy confirm that a visible, explicit discrimination is made by the school guidance services and counsellors, when they advise minority students to enrol in less qualifying educational careers, mainly because they ignore whether their families have the cultural and social capital to support their children’s in longer and/or more demanding educational paths. The study highlights a specific reinforcement mechanism operating between schools and families: because immigrants parents are more influenced by teachers’ opinion than natives (and more confident in schools’ suggestions), teachers significantly condition the educational paths and progress of these students, but often teachers don’t realize they have this power and use it in a counter-productive way. This may be an example of “enacted” discrimination, which may also be present involuntarily in school’s policies (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012).

¹⁵ The disregard of the ethnic specificity of student’s background and its interpretation in mere socio-economic terms among French sociologists is well illustrated by Ichou (2013).

¹⁶ See, in this issue, the article by Barthou.

¹⁷ See, in this issue, the article by Pica-Smith, Contini & Ives.

The agency of second generations and “new families”

Reading through all the contributions (and beyond those in this issue) it becomes clear that, despite the social and economic limitations, and despite the risk to encountering discriminated in their educational careers, some students with a migrant background are not at all victims of the system. Rather, they often react to the system in order to reach their own goals.

Statistical trends confirm this: for Italy, the improvement in educational access among second generation students in comparison with the first is remarkable. As reported by Biasin and Patacchini (2012, p.13), this intergenerational mobility is related not only to generations but also to individual characteristics: with nationality (i.e. immigrants from Asia and Africa, with relatively low levels of education among the first generation, are more likely to reach educational improvement than others immigrants) and gender (in particular for the younger cohort of African women scores 24% higher probability to be educated than Italians) being particularly important. Furthermore, the rising trend of access to higher education reveals an increase of new enrollments among students of immigrant background, especially those who hold an Italian secondary education certificate (MIUR, 2016; Bertozzi, 2018). Many of them, in the Italian higher education system, seem to overcome the gap that characterizes students with lower social and economic background, by passing school selectivity and discriminating barriers. Their family's ethnic background, instead to acting as a hindrance, seems to be rather a motivating factor for these students¹⁸.

As far as France is concerned, Algand, Landais and Senik (2012, p. 24) report that from the first to the second generation, the gap in educational attainment compared with natives decreases for most immigrant groups. Second generations tend to complete secondary education more frequently and with 0.3-0.4 years of negative gap compared with their parents. This negative gap becomes even higher for Southern Europeans. There is also a particular improvement from the first to the second generation for those groups who were the most disadvantaged in the first generation: second-generation Asian women are performing outstandingly well, with an edge of 1.4 years of education relative to native French women. Generation, origin and gender again matter¹⁹. Also Ichou (2013) reports an ethnic-specific result on educational achievements of students with an ethnic background (by comparing results of the long-term studies Panel 1997 and TeO – INED, 2011): in France, almost all foreign students score lower on levels of school performativity compared with natives (although they show a significant reduction of the

¹⁸ See, in this issue, the article by Bozzetti.

¹⁹ For the girl's major school success, both natives and immigrants, see also the original study TeO-INED by Brinbaum & Kieffer (2010).

learning gap during primary education, which partially decreases during lower secondary) with the exception of children from mixed families and South-Asian or Chinese students, who perform around the average or (in the case of Asians) better than natives. The number of Asian students is also increasing within the international population in French universities, particularly the number of Chinese students (ENM, 2012), and data indicate an international openness of the higher education system in France with a high access of students from North Africa (excluding Morocco and Tunisia) (Ibid.).

It is just to say that sociological analysis must consider the best results obtained in educational inclusivity over time, not only exclusion processes, becoming even more sensitive to ethnic-specific issues. To understand what represents barriers for some and facilitating factors for others, the French sociologist Ichou (2013, p.27) suggests we consider some cultural interpretations of difference among immigrant groups. Gender roles in the family, use of their mother tongue, the process of generating job aspirations in first and second generations, can be deeply explicative factors of the gap, once the groups are controlled by social status and migration trajectories (the time of settlement of an immigrant family still being the most important factor). Parreñas (2005, p.78) insists on fathers' presence or absence in the family life, and the related mediating work of mothers in intergenerational transmission, as factors that can widen or close the "emotional" gap between the first and second generation, with detrimental or beneficial effects on school achievement. I would suggest, in addition, that ethnicity, as defined here, for those who feel supported by their ethnic roots or specific cultural environment during the migration process, becomes a further factor in fostering the migrant students' agency (Mainwaring, 2016).

The reality of migrant families thus appears here at centre stage, and not – as is usually the case – as a mere backdrop to the educational process. For children and young people, the ethnic environment in which they grow up is, at the same time, an opportunity (a resource), a lived experience, and an ethos (heritage) (Santagati, 2009; Colombo & Santagati, 2010) which both supports and hinders their educational career. And it is within the family that they build and negotiate the specific ethnic identity they will "put on" at school and in peer relationships. It is across this culturally oriented aspect (even though still confused, mixed and in progress) that they build educational and professional aspirations and pursue their goals.

Thus, one of the main areas future school policies must focus on is how to empower immigrant parents. The article by Mantovani & Gasperoni sheds light on the school-family relationship, via self-reports completed by respondents of the latest PISA questionnaire. As expected, in both countries immigrant families participate less intensively than natives in school initiatives

due to specific barriers (that affect their conditions in relation to natives), which include: the language gap, lack of childminding arrangements and the belief that their involvement is irrelevant for their children's achievement. In Italy, on average, parent involvement, irrespective of migratory status, is less intense compared with France. But the data also suggests that immigrant parents' involvement is not correlated with their socio-economic status (especially in Italy), unlike natives (whose participation is inversely correlated to SES). Interestingly, immigrant families tend to participate more to teachers' initiatives compared with natives. Here we can see the prodromal signs of a "new" school-family alliance (which, at least in Italy, would be warmly welcomed).

The same data, moreover, confirms that "self-activation" in school-family initiatives among immigrant parents is rare and still weaker than among natives: proposing informal and teacher-initiated activities remains a priority of a multicultural school's micro-politics. It is not surprising, therefore, that school legislation in both countries insists upon giving "support" to allophone family in order to facilitate school integration for their children²⁰.

Recommendations for applying an intercultural approach in multi-ethnic schools

And here I come to my last and crucial point. If this is the route to follow (fostering the alliance between schools and migrant families and empowering migrant parents to reduce exclusion and inequality for their children), how to implement an authentically intercultural approach which deals with ethnicity directly²¹? If an intercultural policy is "a diversity policy that follows equality and the recognition principles, without necessarily being group specific, but rather incorporating all people as a target public" (Zapata-Barreros, 2018, p.5), I presume an intercultural approach is still far from what is being implemented in the majority of schools, in Italy or France. The reasons have been mentioned before and are related to the risk of an underpinning discriminating side-effect of both countries' educational policies. In fact, reading the national guidelines, it is not clear, for example, if the support given to immigrant parents should address primarily top-down control or bottom-up participation. As Lewis argued (Lewis, 2005), there is a recurrent symbolism and rhetoric around the "other family", because it mobilises heteronormativity and the fear of the State or the national community of losing control over its core values. Notably, family is the locus of

²⁰ See, in this issue, the article by Cascino, Porrovecchio, Muscarà, Masson & Severino.

²¹ Recently I discussed the principles, benefits and pitfalls of an intercultural social action in this blog: http://progetti.unicatt.it/progetti-ateneo-Introductory_Notes_-_Why_do_we_need_COLOMBO_16_may18.pdf

socialisation and cultural transmission and an “intollerant” kind of otherness may be emerge from immigrant families, especially in those less inclined to assimilation. Dealing with ethnic families in educational settings will probably highlight the tension between enforcing security issues and promoting a degree of pluralism (Colombo, 2013), through more inter-ethnic contacts, reciprocal understanding but also normalising practices. School professionals have to be aware that beginning a “new deal” with migrant parents, and ethnic communities and their representatives, will require them to develop strong skills in negotiation and self-reflexivity.

The time has come to provide large-scale training in intercultural skills and competences not only to school professionals but to all the network’s representatives within a local community, where schools often play the role of an avant-garde and display best practices, thanks to their twofold nature: as community services, on the one hand, and cultural organisations, on the other. We hope that this issue will help to further understanding regarding the relationship between ethnicity and school policies by offering a spectrum of cases – from the Italian and French school systems – whose fundamental characteristics are dissimilar, notwithstanding the fact that some processes seem to have has a similar development due to the migratory phenomenon becoming a global challenge. The present issue thus reaffirms that the choice of adopting a comparative approach in migration studies (Bloemraad, 2013) offers yet further insights.

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