Running the Gauntlet: A Gifted Māori Learner's Journey Through Secondary School

Introduction

Jill Bevan-Brown
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The title of my presentation is "Running the gauntlet: A gifted Māori learner's journey through secondary school". I chose the analogy of running the gauntlet as I feel it aptly describes what schooling is like for many gifted Māori learners. Today I am going to share a number of stories with you that illustrate this situation. Unfortunately these are not "isolated instances". For 12 years now I have been involved in a wide variety of research projects relating to Māori learners with special needs and abilities and in that time I have collected a substantial, empirical database of many such instances. I would also like to make the point from the outset that while this presentation deals specifically with gifted Māori students, the four barriers I will be discussing today apply to all Māori students whatever their level of ability.

Teacher attitudes that disadvantage gifted Māori students

Perhaps the most damaging assault the gifted Māori learner has to face is from negative teacher attitudes in general and low teacher expectation in particular.

The first story to illustrate this concerns a 15-year-old Māori girl who came home from her first 6th form chemistry class to declare to her mother:

It was awful. I'm the only Māori in the class and right through the lesson Mr. X kept staring at me and asking, "Now do you understand this and do you understand that?" I was the only one he asked and then to make things worse, he said we have to buy a chemistry workbook and that it was expensive $40. Then he looked straight at me and said, "but you can pay it off a dollar a week". I felt so shamed!

The chemistry teacher was new to the school. He did not know that the girl in question had received a very high mark for School Certificate science and that her parents earned considerably more than he did!

The second story appeared in Issue 17 of *Kokiri Paetae* under the heading of "Teacher's put-down proves an inspiration for scholarship winner". After achieving well at college, completing two degrees and establishing a successful career in a leading law firm, Russell Karu won a Fullbright Scholarship and a $55,000 grant to attend Harvard University for post graduate study.

All this from someone who was told by one of his teachers in fourth form to forget about being a lawyer. "I was told to forget about it as a career. I think they saw a boy from a lower working class Māori family, who at best would end up as a labourer", (1998, p. l3).

I don't know whether the remark from Russell's teacher was intended as reverse psychology (I suspect not!) and although it worked for Russell, I do not recommend it as a technique to motivate gifted Māori learners!

The last story was told to me by a mother who rang an 0800 number I had provided for parents of children with special needs to share their experiences with me. Her son was diagnosed as having ADHD. He is at college now but when he was in standard 1 the mother went to see his teacher as she was really concerned about his lack of progress in reading. The teacher told her, "Don't worry. X is actually above average for a Māori child." The mother said the teacher was not concerned about her son's lack of academic progress but his behaviour was always being complained about. Her son is, in fact, a bright boy. Since that incident in standard 1 he has been suspended four times.

I know this story relates to primary school and this is a conference for secondary school teachers but I included it to show you that some gifted Māori learners have been running the gauntlet of low teacher expectation for a very long time.

A further point that should be made is that low teacher expectation is not confined to Pākehā teachers. Unfortunately I have many examples, particularly at secondary school level, of Māori teachers giving Māori students negative messages.

At this stage you may be asking, do these low teacher-expectations really have any effect on a learner's self concept and level of achievement? There is substantial, world-wide research confirming that it does. The classic research is Rosenthal and Jacobson's study, Pygmalion in the Classroom (1968). Fifteen years later Cooper and Good in Pygmalion Grows Up looked at the results of hundreds of studies on "expectancy effects" and they clearly showed that where teachers had genuine high or low expectations of their students, these expectations affected their behaviour towards the students. It also affected the way students felt about themselves and their levels of achievement. Caroline Persell sums it up.

When teachers hold definite expectations and when those expectations are reflected in their behaviour toward children, these expectations are related to student cognitive changes, even when pupil and achievement are controlled. Moreover, negative expectations, which can be observed only in natural settings because it is unethical to induce negative expectations experimentally, appear to have even more powerful consequences than do positive expectation. Moreover, socially vulnerable children (ie younger, lower-class and minority children) seem to be more susceptible to lower teacher expectations (1997, pp. 98–99).

The discussion in this section has concentrated on low teacher expectation and its effects but there are many other negative teacher attitudes that adversely affect the progress of gifted Māori students. We do not have time to discuss all these today but I am going to share with you a few research quotes from principals, teachers, and teacher aides. I would like you to reflect on the effect these attitudes may have on Māori students.

All Māori and Polynesian students should have extra English everyday basic grammar and oral work ... Māori and Pacific Island students should look at sitting external exams in their fourth year not third year – an extra year's tuition. It's a language thing ... they lack life experiences eg mountains, Orana Park – they haven't been there so this needs to be explained, pictures shown etc.

Māori children have scored with stanines less than their Pākehā peers in SATs because they come from families with no formal school education success therefore they're not concerned whether their children do reading at home or not.

There is a high use of drugs prevalent in Māori families. This affects children's behaviour ... It is difficult to get parents on board because they lack parenting skills ... the problems at school are a result of inadequate parenting and dysfunctional families in the first five years of life.

I regard them all as children. The only difference is that Māori children do not get a lot of support from their home so the staff have to give Māori children more to compensate for that.

I'm sensitive to their racial things they would do for example a job in the IEP is to help with eating. My way would be to use a knife and fork but maybe they are not expected to do that at home.

They don't want to be consulted (Māori). If things go well you never see them, but if things go wrong they're on your door.

I am not denying that there are Māori students who are disadvantaged by their home circumstances – just as there are Pākehā students in this situation. However these quotes demonstrate a level of generalisation and stereotyping that is unwarranted, unfair, and prejudicial.

Teacher behaviours and practices that disadvantage gifted Māori students

There are many teacher behaviours and practices that disadvantage gifted Māori students. Although these arise from a multitude of causes, low teacher expectation is at the foundation of many of them. For example, teachers spend more time interacting with students for whom they have high expectations (Persell, 1977), present them with more challenging material (Keddie, 1971; Alpert, 1975), show more warmth towards them, teach them more, call on them more often, give them more chances to reply and ask them more frequent and difficult questions (Rosenthal, 1974). These students are also praised more frequently when right and criticised less frequently when wrong or unresponsive (Brophy & Good, 1970; Rosenthal, 1974).

Consequently it can be hypothesised that because many teachers have low expectations for Māori students, these students are missing out on instructional advantages available to students for whom teachers have high expectations. This hypothesis can be challenged because it is extrapolated from overseas research findings. However New Zealand research suggests that it may be true. For example, Dame Marie Clay (1984) in a study of teacher-child interaction in six Auckland schools showed that teachers attended unequally to different ethnic groups. The lowest rates of interaction were directed at Māori children. Teachers did actually start as many contacts with Māori children but they asked less often for elaboration of what was said. This finding arose from detailed running records in a situation where teachers knew their responses were to be analysed for research purposes. Given this, it is reasonable to suppose that the teachers involved were unaware that they were interacting less with Māori children. For me this makes the finding doubly disturbing how can teachers rectify behaviour that is disadvantageous to Māori students when they are unaware of engaging in such behaviour?

"Culture is a crucial, if not the ultimate, mediating factor in academic achievement" (Gay, 1997, p. 223). Overseas research shows that minority group students are disadvantaged by having resources, facilities, teachers, financing, instructional materials, programmes, and environmental settings of a poorer quality than majority group students. (Gay, 1997). Surely this is not the case for Māori students in New Zealand, after all, don't they have access to the same schools, teachers, curriculum, programmes and resources as Pākehā students? In fact Māori students are underrepresented in the well-resourced schools situated in wealthy areas and overrepresented in the less well-resoureed schools in poorer areas but this is not the point at issue here. Having exactly the same lessons and resources as their Pākehā counterparts can be the very crux of the problem for gifted Māori students who identify strongly with their Māori culture. If these lessons and resources reflect only the life experiences, aspirations, values, and frames of reference of Pākehā society, then the gifted Māori student is at a decided disadvantage. Similarly, the progress of the gifted Māori student is also likely to suffer if the teaching methods and processes used are solely Pākehā-centric. Geneva Gay explains this in relation to the situation in the United States:

Most graduates of typical teacher education programs know little about the cultural traits, behaviors, values and attitudes that different children of color bring to the classroom, and how they affect the way these students act in and react to instructional situations. They do not know how to understand and use the school behaviors of these students, which differ from their normative expectations, as aides to teaching. Therefore they tend to misinterpret them as deviant and treat them punitively. Because teachers' cultural backgrounds and value orientations are highly compatible with middle-class and European American culture, they can use these cultural connections to facilitate the learning of white students. This is done routinely and without conscious or deliberate intentions. It is their shared cultural orientations that make instruction more relevant and personally meaningful. The absence of these for students of color places them at a learning disadvantage (1997, p. 211).

A story that illustrates this point in the New Zealand context concerns a gifted Māori student who was found to be wagging her accelerate maths class. The pupil was in the bilingual unit but joined the mainstream accelerate class for maths because of her advanced ability in this subject. When questioned about why she was wagging she explained that she felt uncomfortable with the atmosphere and style of teaching, both of which were quite different to what she was used to in the bilingual class, "Nobody talks, they all hide their work and won't even lend you a rubber!" (Bevan-Brown, 1995).

Organisational procedures, practices, and structures that disadvantage gifted Māori students

Within secondary schools there is a number of organisational procedures, practices, and structures that disadvantage gifted Māori students. Class scheduling and composition, placement procedures and allocation of Sixth Form Certificate grades are just a few examples I have come across. The irony is that some of these practices have been established to benefit Māori students but in reality they are having the opposite effect. I will give you some examples.

With the advent of kura kaupapa Māori, bilingual and total immersion units, many Māori students are arriving in third form thoroughly fluent in te reo Māori. They sit School Certificate in third form and the bright pupils receive top marks – wonderful! However the

problems start the following year. After doing so well in third form, a number of these students "bomb out" doing Sixth Form Certificate in Māori in fourth form.

What goes wrong? There is a number of contributing factors. The system for allocating Sixth Form Certificate marks is one of them. Top School Certificate Māori students contribute their "ones" to the sixth form mark pool. However when these "ones" are allocated for Sixth Form Certificate, they often go to Pākehā chemistry and physics students while the Māori students themselves receive lower marks, in some cases I know of, considerably lower! Parents often perceive this situation as arising from racial prejudice. Hopefully they are wrong. I believe it is a combination of three principal causes. Firstly, the silly system that creates a shortage of available "ones" when fifth form science multiplies into physics, biology and chemistry at the sixth form level. Secondly, the unfortunate practice of teachers having to argue and lobby for the allocation of sixth form marks (described by one teacher as "the Sixth Form Certificate bunfight", a bunfight in which the typically young, inexperienced te reo teacher is pitted against the older, experienced head of science or maths who, very often, is also the sixth form Dean!)

The third cause lies in the nature of the work required in sixth form. Rightfully it is geared towards students becoming responsible, independent learners. They are required to use their independent research and study skills to produce work, the marks of which contribute to their Sixth Form Certificate grade. In this system, the 16-year-old physics student has an advantage over the 14-year-old te reo Māori student whose level of maturity and independent research and study skills are not nearly as well developed.

But whatever the reason for gifted Māori students missing out on the "ones" at sixth form level, the damage caused is far-reaching. The high expectations created by the student's success in third form may result in them feeling they have "lost face" in the Māori community and cause them to abandon the study of te reo altogether. Thus a subject where the student has the ability to succeed at an advanced level has become the source of lowered motivation and self-esteem, a fact that could possibly affect their attitude to school and future achievement in all subjects.

For those students who do persevere with Māori into the seventh form, history often repeats itself. One mother tells the story of her son's marks in Bursary Māori being scaled down from 94 to 67. This mother is a well-educated, assertive Māori woman who challenged the system on her son's behalf – all to no avail. She was told that the Government simply could not afford the cost of the large number of A Bursaries earned in the Māori Bursary exam. The drastic level of scaling her son's mark was subject to was required for financial reasons. The same degree of scaling was not applied to other languages such as Russian and French as the smaller number of A Bursaries earned in these subjects was economically manageable. Background information required for this mother's challenge was not freely given. She had to apply for it under the Official Information Act and to pay for the privilege. One of her biggest concerns was that "these Māori students who were A students were being told, no you are not, you are a B!"

The second issue I want to address is the disadvantages caused by some class option and placement practices. There is considerable overseas research to show that gifted minority group students are missing out on placement in accelerate classes and top ability groups (eg Espito, 1973; Hobson vs Hansen, 1967; Oakes, 1985; Racial and Social Isolation in the Schools, 1969; Brookover, Leu & Kariger; 1965; & Rist, 1970: all cited by Persell, 1997, p.

96). Anecdotal evidence suggests the same thing is happening for gifted Māori students in New Zealand. I will give two examples that illustrate this.

The first concerns Donald Mann who was granted the Dennis Ferrier Memorial Scholarship in 1999 for academic excellence at Massey University, Albany. He recalls "being transferred from Hato Tipene to Keiston Boys High School in Form 4, and 'being automatically stuck in a class graded for average learners. The strength of my parents taught me to rise above such negative stereotypes"' (*Kokiri Paetae*, 1999, p. 15). I have heard many similar stories of inappropriate placement of gifted Māori students both in relation to streamed classes and to ability grouping within non-streamed classes.

The second example relates to a college where on entering third form three different class options are available – accelerate class, bilingual unit, or mixed ability class. A parent who was questioned about this choice told an interviewer:

For a Māori student to be in the bilingual unit and to be in the top-stream class was an either-or choice. When her son went to Waikaraka (fictious name) he had to decide to be in either the bilingual unit or the top-stream class. The underlying message was that one is either Māori or intelligent, and cannot be both she said. She had to decide from the conflicting positions both as a mother wanting the best for her child and as an advocate of bilingual education ... She also mentioned that if a bilingual student is intelligent and moves from the bilingual unit to the top-stream class, what kind of message is it sending to the students left in the bilingual unit? (Doerr, 2000, p. 375).

If the bilingual unit in this school was perceived as a class where gifted Māori students were placed and extended then "being Māori or being bright" would not be an issue. However Doerr supplies considerable evidence from teachers, students, and parents to show that this was not the case. She concludes:

It is ironic that the bilingual unit, one of whose purposes was to raise the self-esteem of Māori students, turned out to work for the opposite result because of the way it was related to the streaming system and because that aspect was not recognized widely (ibid, p. 405).

To what extent gifted Māori students are disadvantaged by not being placed in accelerate classes is a debatable point that depends on your support or otherwise of these classes. However returning to research, there is a large body of findings that show streaming advantages students placed in the top stream and disadvantages those who are not. Studies have shown that top-streamed classes in secondary schools

consistently receive better teachers, class materials, laboratory facilities, field trips and visitors than their lower-track counterparts (Findley & Bryan, 1975; Goodiad, 1984; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaurn, 1976; Schafer, Olexa & Polk, 1973). Oakes observed that teachers of high-track students set aside more time for student learning and devoted more class time to learning activities. (Persell, 1997, p. 95).

Research has also shown students in the top stream were exposed to more highly valued knowledge and skills and "received more empathy, praise and use of their ideas, as well as less direction and criticism, than did lower-track students." (ibid, p. 96). Students in lower streamed classes were more often off-task and teachers spent more class time disciplining

them. The extent to which these findings are applicable in the New Zealand situation is unknown but it certainly provides some food for thought.

A scheduling issue that is disadvantaging Māori students relates to the time-tabling of kapa haka, te reo and taha Māori classes in some schools. A number of examples can be given. At the previously-mentioned Waikaraka College

the bilingual students missed two hours every week for the kapa haka or cultural performance practices, one of which fell on the social studies class time for year 9 students. While most of the extra-curricular activities were done outside the class periods, kapa haka practice was done during the class periods. Even though kapa haka was performed mostly for the College – formal ceremonies at school, representing the College outside etc – the bilingual students' commitment to it was not credited or rewarded in any way. That is, two class periods per week were taken away by the kapa haka practice, but the students' commitment to kapa haka activities were not acknowledged in the educational structure (Doerr, 2000, p. 397).

Not only were the student's efforts not acknowledged, but they were being disadvantaged by receiving one less social studies lesson than the rest of the school's year 9 students. While this particular example is not specific to gifted Māori students, it alerts us to circumstances where students who are gifted in cultural areas are especially vulnerable. The talented kaea may be frequently called upon to karanga visitors and the gifted waiata composer may miss his/her own lessons in order to tutor kapa haka groups throughout the school. I have heard stories of these students failing tests of material covered in classes they did not attend, receiving detention for not doing homework they never received and putting their Higher School Certificate at risk because of "absences" at cultural classes and events. Rua Tipoka's experience demonstrates a similar point. For those of you who have never heard of him, Rua plays for the North Harbour rugby team, he has played for the New Zealand 7s, is a black belt and New Zealand title holder in martial arts and is part way through a law degree. He tells how he was "kicked out of the 1st XV because I went to a Māori speech competition instead of coming up to play Sacred Heart College." (*Kokiri Paetae*, 1999, p. 22). Fortunately this did not hold him back in his rugby career!

At this stage I think I need to clarify a point. Some of you may be thinking, "one minute she is telling us to incorporate cultural content and the next minute she is criticising its inclusion!" This is not what is intended. What I am criticising is any scheduling, administrative procedure, teacher action or the like that results in a Māori student being disadvantaged because of their participation in cultural activities. I also have a real concern about schools who believe the provision of te reo classes and a kapa haka group is all that is required to meet the cultural needs of Māori students. For these needs to be met, Māori students should see their culture reflected and valued in all subjects and activities.

Negative feedback from society and peers

Gifted Māori students are bombarded by negative statistics. Rarely a day goes by when they are not told, in one way or another, that Māori have lower incomes, poorer health, die earlier and have higher rates of unemployment, crime and teenage pregnancy than Pākehā. They also learn that at school Māori students are more likely to get suspended and expelled, be in "cabbage" classes and leave school earlier with fewer qualifications. Despite the concerted efforts of many parents, whānau, caring teachers, organisations, and supportive media attempts, the message that gets through to far too many Māori teenagers is that Māori are

"dumb", second-class citizens. This is well illustrated in the story told by a 14-year-old Māori girl. She was one of two Māori in a fifth form accelerate class. On one occasion Navy recruitment personnel addressed the class. They were asked what qualifications were necessary to join the Navy. The answer was three A Bursary passes to which one of the Māori students replied in a loud voice, "Well that cancels Māori out!" With the exception of the young girl who told the story, all the other students laughed raucously. Neither the teacher present nor the Navy personnel made any comment. One week later the 14-year-old withdrew from the accelerate class.

The message that Māori are dumb is a message that is picked up not only by Māori students but also by their Pākehā peers. This is illustrated in the story of a Māori boy who moved from a school with a high proportion of Māori pupils to one that had very few Māori. The boy reported feeling uncomfortable being the only Māori in his maths class. The situation wasn't helped when his high maths test marks were read out in class and a peer declared, "Well, he must have cheated!" The boy had only been in the class for a week and his peers were unaware of his maths ability. Not only had it been assumed that he was "dumb" but also that he was dishonest!

The teenage years are arguably the most difficult time in our lives. The need to be accepted by peers is paramount. Research shows us that gifted students are often socially isolated because of their ability. It can be a time of great loneliness and emotional anguish. Add to this the burden of belonging to a cultural group whose members are perceived as dumb, second-class citizens. Can you imagine the self-esteem and cultural identity issues many gifted Māori students have to face and is it surprising that so many of them leave college early never having achieved their potential?

In this presentation I have purposely not touched on home-related barriers that gifted Māori students face. This is not because they do not exist. Rather it is because my time is limited and I prefer to spend it on school-related issues that teachers have greater opportunity to address. There is also a secondary reason. As illustrated in the quotes relating to negative teacher attitudes, many teachers have a leaning towards the "blame the victim" mentality. Introducing home issues often fuels this and sidetracks discussion. I firmly believe that in all teaching we must look at our own backyard first. We must examine our own attitudes, behaviours, and practices to see if they are helping students or contributing to the problems they face. Change must start from this point. Having said this we will now consider what we can do in our own schools to make sure gifted Māori students are not running the gauntlet.

The first thing we must do is to raise our expectations of Māori learners in general and gifted Māori students in particular. Research clearly shows that teachers' behaviour is influenced by the expectations they hold and that students perform up or down to these expectations. If teachers expect the best from their Māori students they are likely to receive it. I am not suggesting that these expectations be unrealistic nor that any background factors that disadvantage gifted Māori students be ignored, au contraire. However, I am suggesting that teachers seriously examine the attitudes they hold in respect to their Māori students and if any of these are stereotypical, prejudicial, unwarranted, unfair or inappropriate, they should be replaced by optimistic, valuing, supportive, and informed attitudes.

A second step would be for teachers to look critically at their own teaching. As learnt from Dame Marie Clay's study, teachers can be completely unaware of the unequal treatment of Māori students. Perhaps a colleague could be asked to observe and evaluate one of your

teaching sessions. Better still, perhaps you could arrange to have your teaching videoed so that it can be analysed afterwards. This analysis could include a comparison of the rate and type of interaction with Māori and Pākehā students. In bilingual and total immersion situations where the class composition is principally if not totally Māori, the observations and videos would not be for Pākehā-Māori comparison but to analyse the quality of teaching involved – what are the rates of positive and negative comments? Are questions being asked that extend students? Are they being given sufficient time to cognitively process their answers? etc, etc. To guard against bias in marking, having colleagues remark coded scripts is a good idea.

A third step is for teachers to critically examine their lessons, resources, teaching activities and techniques for cultural appropriateness and content. Will gifted Māori students find their life experiences, aspirations, values, and frames of reference reflected in any of the content or methods used? For example, what stories by and about Māori are included in the English curriculum? Do they represent the diverse realities of Māori life? Is a Māori perspective of events included in relevant social studies and history lessons? Do maths classes contain Māori-relevant problems? etc. I acknowledge that the inclusion of Māori content in some secondary school subjects – for example, chemistry and physics is a challenge. However teachers who are creative, flexible, and committed will meet this challenge. No doubt they will also use culturally appropriate teaching approaches such as co-operative learning, mentoring, and peer tutoring in their efforts to cater for Māori students.

Fourthly, teachers should examine their school's organisational practices, procedures, and structures to ensure that they are not disadvantaging Māori students in any way. In respect to the particular examples I discussed under this heading, teachers should examine their past performance in the allocation of "ones" for Sixth Form Certificate. In the past 5 years, how many te reo students who contributed a "one" to the pool from their School Certificate results, received a "one" in Sixth Form Certificate? If the tally is low, teachers need to examine the reasons why and put measures in place to address them. Hopefully this will cease to be an issue with the abolition of School Certificate but teachers will need to be vigilant to ensure that any new qualifications and systems do not similarly disadvantage students gifted in te reo Māori.

If your school has streamed classes and ability grouping, you will need to consider whether the procedures used to determine placement in the various groups and classess are fair to Māori students? Is placement based on tests that are culturally biased or teacher nominations that are suspect? Giftedness is present in all cultures. If the accelerate class in your school is disproportionately White and the bottom stream is disproportionately Brown, you will need to ask, Why? Are there any school-related factors contributing ti this and if so, what can be done about them?

You should also examine critically the quality of teaching and resources in streamed classes to ensure that the disparity identified in overseas research is not present in your school. Students in New Zealand schools should be receiving an equitable education regardless of their ethnicity, ability level, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation or any other diversity factor. If this is not being achieved in streamed classes, then is this system defensible? Another issue that all teachers need to consider in respect to their schools is whether Māori students are being disadvantaged because of their participation in cultural activities or enrolment in bilingual and total immersion units? What rescheduling or reorganising needs to be done to ensure that this does not happen? A school-wide system

could be established to ensure that if students miss out on important work because of participation in cultural events (or for any other valid reason) they are provided with an opportunity to catch up. This should be organised so that students are not over-burdened with extra work but rather accommodations made – compacting of other requirements or exemption from certain activities are possible solutions.

The last assault in my gauntlet analogy involved negative feedback from society and peers. Teachers have a responsibility to challenge this negative feedback whenever they encounter it. What would you have said if you were the teacher in the class where the gifted mathematician was accused of cheating or where the comment about Māori in the Navy was made? Hopefully you would not have remained silent as the teachers in these situations did. Students need to know that racist jokes and put-downs are not acceptable and that Māori are not dumb or second-class citizens. Reference to and use of Māori role models in all fields is one strategy that can help to get this latter message across. *Kokiri Paetae*, the bimonthly publication from Te Puni Kokiri, is a wonderful source of information about Māori role models and it is free so there is no reason for it not to be in every secondary school library in New Zealand! Teachers are also powerful role models to their students. If your words and actions show that you celebrate diversity and value Māori people, culture, and te reo, this may just be the most valuable lesson you teach your students!

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