

A ROLE MODEL STUDY FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS¹

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces an activity to increase the employment opportunities of students with special needs in line with the sustainable development goals provided by the United Nations and the priorities of the World Economic Forum on social mobility and inclusive education. The participants (n=62) consisted of parents of students with special needs, senior undergraduate students as role models, beauticians, and educators. A qualitative research method was employed to collect and analyze data. Data were collected through researcher notes and semi-structured interview questions. The participants' responses were audio recorded. Data analysis revealed that half of the 16 students with special needs who participated in the activity developed an interest in the profession of the role model who took care of them and showed entrepreneurial skills to receive on-the-job training suitable for their needs.

Keywords: children with special needs, inclusive education, regional development, hair care and beauty, vocational training.

ÖZEL GEREKSİNİMİ OLAN ÖĞRENCİLER İÇİN BİR ROL MODEL ÇALIŞMASI

ÖZ

Bu çalışma özel gereksinimi olan öğrencilerin istihdamının artırılmasına yönelik Birleşmiş Milletler'in sürdürülebilir kalkınmaya yönelik hedefleri ve Dünya Ekonomik Forumu tarafından yapılan soysal hareketlilik ve kapsayıcı eğitim üzerine çalışmalar doğrultusunda, bir etkinlik önermektedir. Bu etkinliğin amaca uygun olup olmadığını belirlemek amacıyla yürütülen arařtırmaya, özel gereksinimi olan öğrenci aileleri ve eğitimcileri, etkinlikte rol model olan gençler ve öğrencilerin davranışlarını izleyen okul yöneticisi eğitimcileri (n=62) katılmıştır. Bu arařtırma nitel arařtırma yöntemi ile desenlenmiş ve verilerin toplanmasında yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme tekniğiyle sorular sorulmuş, arařtırmacı notlarıyla birlikte sesli kayıtlar alınmıştır. Sonuç olarak; etkinliğe katılan 16 özel gereksinimi olan öğrencinin yarısının onlarla ilgilenen rol modelin mesleğine ilgi geliştirdikleri, gereksinimlerine uygun işbaşı eğitimi almak için girişimcilik becerileri gösterdikleri tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: özel gereksinimi olan çocuk, kapsayıcı eğitim, bölgesel kalkınma, saç bakım ve güzellik, mesleki eğitim.

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INTRODUCTION

Since modern industrial societies, including democratic countries, tend to be mass societies (Aycan, 2002), the disadvantaged groups in the society include those who are most exposed to exclusion. Overcoming this exclusion imposes important roles on all segments of society. As Erol Özmen has briefly explained, regarding this exclusion, the most significant handicap of today's people is that they do not take enough time to understand others who are different from themselves. As the complexity of the formation of human behavior makes it difficult to understand human beings, it is necessary to look at the whole picture (Özmen, n.d.). Having careless attitudes and behaviors in showing empathy increases the barriers in society. These barriers pose insurmountable difficulties for those with special needs in education. Due to these difficulties, when students with special needs drop out of school, their opportunities to acquire a profession are significantly limited.

In recent years, research studies on disadvantaged children have increased in the European Union (EU) and the United States of America. For example, the American Public Health Association (APHA) ranks health-related reasons as the first among the reasons for school dropout (APHA, n.d.). This is followed by low academic achievement, low motivation, and socioeconomic disadvantages. Although research on this field in Turkey is insufficient, developing activities and conducting research in this area would decrease the problems that disadvantaged students experience. The studies conducted with these students in Turkey revealed that they suffer more loneliness at school than those who do not have special needs (Görmez & Tekinarıslan, 2017). Social participation includes problems that economic theory has just begun to deal with. The World Economic Forum (WEF) recommends first increasing social mobility to overcome these problems and sustain socioeconomic development (WEF, 2020). According to the social mobility index, which defines the development levels of today's societies and developed by WEF, Turkey ranks 64th. Although Turkey comes right after Panama and before Colombia in this index ranking, it is far behind all EU countries. This report (WEF, 2020) stated about Turkey that despite a low student-teacher ratio in high school education,

there are many young adults (24.4%) neither in employment nor in education and training. If a significant participation progress can occur in the access to education column (39.6%), the results will be much better. In addition, the report states that there is a low female labor force participation score (32.8%) and that more than a quarter of the workers cannot access employment opportunities. According to the related studies in the literature, physical accessibility is not considered sufficient for increasing social mobility in Turkey (Deniz et al., 2021; Mengi, 2020; Öztabak, 2018). Besides, it is not possible to eliminate barriers without receiving suitable training for employment appropriate to the type of disability, using special equipment and methods. For this reason, it is very important to increase the social mobility of people with special needs for them to contribute to the economy. This can be achieved if they receive inclusive education at an early age to develop appropriate professional skills. This education is not only about the inclusion of the student in school life, but it is also about becoming an individual in social, family, and business life. When this effort serves lifelong learning, a multiplier effect emerges.

Lifelong learning aims to develop skills to raise high socioeconomic individuals who are open to technological developments and improve themselves in all areas of life (Ünal & Adıyaman, 2017). As discussed in the study of Ünal and Adıyaman, informal learning is shaped by formal learning opportunities according to environmental factors. Informal learning, which means learning in all areas of life, comes to the fore in determining the predisposition toward vocational education.

Job shadowing activities based on the master-apprentice relationship, which are recently decreasing, evokes taking a role model. Having a good role model in early childhood has positive effects on identity development. Role models affect the development of identity as the person learns from and imitates the model's behavior as they interact with each other (Çimen, 2019).

When a person with special needs encounters exclusion in education life and drops out of school, he/she is also excluded from qualified employment. The findings of the study by

Rasmussen and Yıkılmış support this view. In addition, the study found that the vocational training and employment of children with special needs were not viewed as sufficient and productive by their mothers (Rasmussen & Yıkılmış, 2020). The purpose of the current study is to provide a scientific contribution to the research efforts in the field of disadvantaged groups. The study sought to answer the research question, "Is using the role model approach effective to increase the motivation of students with special needs to get a job and participate in employment?" The answer to this question was obtained by asking semi-structured questions in face-to-face interviews with the participants. These answers were examined in terms of whether the students with special needs developed an interest in choosing a university education or a profession as a result of participating in the activities developed as part of the current study. Students with special needs (SSN) participating in this study were in special classes in four schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in Manisa. The young people selected as role models were senior beauty specialists studying at Manisa Celal Bayar University (MCBU), Health Services Vocational School, Hair Care and Beauty Program. This study, which was designed with a multi-disciplinary approach, examined whether the students developed professional orientation and skills when they communicated with a role model.

Permits, Preparations and Participants

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Board of MCBU Faculty of Medicine with the document dated 01.16.2019 and numbered 20.478.496. Informed Consent Forms were obtained from the parents of SSN for participation in the activity and research. With the approval of the Manisa Governor's Office and the permission of the Provincial Directorate of National Education, the activities were carried out in four schools in two districts. The activities were implemented using the group work method. Preliminary visits were made after communicating with the school administrators via e-mail. In these visits, the school administrators were informed about the planned activity and, they were asked to contact the families. When the school administrators informed the researchers about the days agreed

with the families, the work schedule was created. In addition, the types of special needs (sensory, physical, mental) of those who wanted to participate in the study were obtained from the school administrators.

The activities were implemented on 19, 21, 22, and 25 February 2019 and, they each lasted half a day (approximately 3-4 hours). In these activities, personal hair care and beauty treatments were given to 16 SSN and their families. The sample of the research consisted of the people who participated as observers in the activities organized for 16 SSN attending four primary schools in Manisa. Nine men and 53 women observers (n=62) participated in this research with the following roles: 16 SSN parents, nine role models, 17 educators, and 20 beauticians. A qualitative research method was employed to collect and analyze data. Data were collected through researcher notes and semi-structured interview questions. The participants' responses were audio recorded and analyzed using qualitative methods.

ACTIVITY IMPLEMENTATION

Step 1: Preparation of the Role Models

Role models (nine beauticians candidates) were selected before the implementation of the activity by using the purposive sampling method. For this, a group of undergraduate students studying in the hair care and beauty program were asked whether they would like to participate in a field study where they would voluntarily act as role models. Those who accepted to be role models were informed about the study and signed consent forms.

The researchers sought role models who had one of the following criteria: having a special need from birth or later, choosing this profession based on a role model in their childhood, and doing this job professionally. Of the role models selected for this study, four had a disability, three had a relative with a disability, and two had a role model in their lives that caused them to choose this profession.

The participating role models received a 15-minute training on disability types and special needs. In this training, the basic communication rules with SSN, how they should behave when someone is interested in them as a role model,

the purpose of this study, the importance of being a role model, the planned activity calendar, and the principles to be followed in the implementation of the activities were explained and summarized for the role models. For example, a lecturer explained to the role models some priorities such as the legal and ethical limitations of the activity, personal hair care and beauty treatments without using cutting tools, and the types of special needs.

Step 2: Organization of the Activity Room

A suitable classroom or hall was requested from the school administrations for the activity area. The preparations for the activity were started by taking the role models selected for the activity to the area indicated by each school and placing the tools and materials on a suitable table or school desk in the hall (Photograph 1). The students at each school participated in activity in their school. Parents also participated in the activity with the students. The role models and observer groups that attended each session were different from each other.



Photograph 1. Activity Workspace

During the activity, procedures aiming at interactions between the SSN and the role models (e.g., personal care, hair styling, massage, reflexology, eyebrow-mustache removal, Indian henna) were preferred. The necessary hygiene conditions were well looked upon, and procedures were carried out in a safe environment, paying attention to special requirements, without the use of any cutting-drilling-inflammable tools. Families were also able to bring the consumables used within the scope of the activity. For example, for hair care; blow dryer, comb, brush, hair care lotion, hair band, hairpin, for make-up; eyeshadow, blush, foundation, mascara, lipstick, and for skin and hand care; skincare cream, nail polish, and Indian henna could be brought by the parents.

All materials were limited to those with anti-allergic properties. The procedures were first carried out for the parents by the role models. The role models offered suggestions to the parents, and after their approval, they carried out the beauty treatment procedure. Research notes were kept during the activity from this step on. The audio recording was made during the interviews at the end of the activity.

Step 3: Parent-Child Interaction

The trainers suggested that the role models should perform in an open area close to the SSN so that the students have the opportunity to see the procedures applied to their parents. This is important to maintain a closeness where the parent can make eye contact at any time they need to deal with the SSN. Thus, it was ensured that they could develop trust in role models by observing the applications practiced on their parents with a comprehensive understanding. While determining the position of each student during this activity, the most appropriate distance was chosen for them to communicate with the role models. A place has been found for the role model in an aspect that allows the child to monitor the personal care processes of the parent at the same time (Photograph 2).



Photograph 2. Beauty Treatment for Parents

After the beauty treatment was applied to parents, any enthusiastic children were offered a similar procedure carefully under the supervision of their parents. For example, even though some of the students were not comfortable during the procedure, they tried to overcome this with the support of their parents and trainers. Meanwhile, the SSN's reactions to the role model were written in the research notes (Photograph 3). After the beauty treatment, each

SSN wanted to be photographed with his/her role model.



Photograph 3. Supervised Care for Children

Step 4: Communication with the Role Model

The activity was planned in a way to allow comfortable communication between the parents and the SSN. However, when the SSN began to communicate with the role model, the parent could move to a point outside the child's visual field. The procedures were applied at an angle that the parents could easily see their children. A mother emphasized that her child allowed a stranger to touch his hair for the first time in this activity. The teachers and parents of the SSN particularly specified such behaviors as a positive development. In this activity, all students gave very positive reactions to their mothers being happy after their personal care.

Throughout the whole process, attention was paid to ensure that the educator or parent did not interrupt the relationship that the child developed with the role model. An SSN, who avoided participating in the group before communicating with the role model and was shy in entering the classroom, exhibited positive attitudes when the role model cared for his parent. As the role models used the beauty care materials, the SSN showed interest in them and started touching beauty materials such as nail polish, lipstick, and jelly used in hair and skin care. After a while, they wanted to buy and use these materials, described as a positive attitude by their families.

During the activity, the SSN asked the role models how they could be more good-looking, what profession they could do in the future, and their university expectations (Photograph 4).

Two out of every four students participating in the activity in all four schools showed a special interest in the profession of the role model. The families of two students with a hearing impairment explained that they would be looking for opportunities on whether this profession would be suitable for their children and said that they weren't aware of the existence of such a department at the university.



Photograph 4. Student-Role Model Interaction

Step 5: Supervising the Applications

A professional haircare specialist who attended the activity as a supervisor answered all the questions about the procedures applied to the participants during the activity (Photograph 5). For example, questions were asked about the haircut styles, the type of shampoo according to the hair type, and how the role models applied braiding or blow-drying procedures.



Photograph 5. The Classroom Environment

An expert supervisor determined each material used in the applications by the role models in all schools. Especially heat-requiring processes such as blow-drying and styling were carried out under the direct supervision of the expert supervisor. When someone needed a haircut, the expert specialist intervened and took care of this

procedure one-on-one (Photograph 6). In some types of special needs, children might overreact when they are touched. For example, while children with Down syndrome were extra sensitive in this regard, in a case with multiple disabilities, it was necessary to wait for a while for the child to calm down.



Photograph 6. Expert Intervention on Haircut

Step 6: Face-to-face Meetings

Before starting the interviews, the researchers gave a general briefing to the participants about the interview questions and the purpose of the interview (Photograph 7). It was shared with the parents that the choice of profession is one of the most important decisions in life, and their feelings and thoughts about the future of their children were asked. This briefing aimed to explain which endeavors are considered a profession, what can be done for gaining professional skills at an early age, and the possible effects of a professional role model on children.

Some of the questions asked in the research are given in the section titled "Evaluation of the Activity." Semi-structured questions were asked to the participants one by one without taking their names, the answers were coded with numbers assigned to the participants, and the voice recordings were saved by using the same numbers (Photograph 8).

It was observed that the happiness of the parents due to receiving beauty and personal care increased the willingness and interest of the students to participate in the activity. Regarding this observation, the parents of SSN highlighted that they were very satisfied with this activity since they could not get beauty and personal care for a long time. This positive feedback revealed the high motivation of the SSN

mothers, who did not have time for themselves because of spending all their time on their children.



Photograph 7. Briefing with the Parents



Photograph 8. Volunteer Consent and Audio Recording

EVALUATION OF THE ACTIVITY

In this research study, the participants answered semi-structured interview questions after being informed about the interview process. Additional questions were also asked to get more detailed information. Before the actual interview, the semi-structured interview form was piloted with three people, and the questions were evaluated in terms of clarity. The data obtained from the pilot interview were excluded from the analysis as the people who answered the questions were not participants. During the actual interviews, the researchers took notes about the participants' flexibility, response rate, non-verbal behavior patterns, instant reactions, and any additional impressions. In the face-to-face interviews with the participants, specific attention was paid to their privacy. Approximately 60% of the participating individuals are relatives of SSN. The gender distribution of the SSN was equal in the activities.

Most SSN parents did not have a regular income or they earned below the minimum wage and received family support. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. Studies on disadvantaged groups are limited in the literature (Banks et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to conduct more research studies in this area to understand the dropout reasons of the economically disadvantaged groups.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

	n	%
Gender		
Women	53	85,5
Man	9	14,5
Education		
Primary	8	13,1
Secondary	16	26,2
University	37	60,7
Residency		
Rural area	6	9,6
City town	44	71,0
Metropol	3	4,8
Other	9	14,5
Work Condition		
Family support	20	34,5
Scholarship	9	15,5
Job/Profession	17	29,3
Other	12	20,7
Economic Income Level (₺)		
0-1000	17	30,4
1000-2000	19	33,9
2000-3000	8	14,3
3000	12	21,4
Disadvantaged Status		
Mother education (Primary/Secondary)	53	86
Father education (Primary/Secondary)	45	72
Having a separated family	36	58
Having a migrant background	26	41

Content analysis was carried out by archiving the records of the questions (audio, photograph, image) asked to the participants about the activity and combining and interpreting similar data. This process was in the form of pre-reading, qualitative data coding, identifying the emerging themes, and reporting the findings. Of the 62 participants, 85.5% were female (n=53) and 14.5% were male (n=9).

The opinions of the educators, parents, role models, and beauticians regarding the effects of the activity on the vocational qualifications of the SSN were asked, and the collected data were examined through content analysis. The participants' responses were summarized in tables. Table 2 shows some of the questions asked to the participants. Additional questions were also asked as needed to find out any special evaluations and personal opinions.

Table 2. Semi-Structured Questions

Question 1. Are you willingly sending your child to school? Which profession would you like him/her to choose?
Question 2. Have you participated in any scientific activity voluntarily in your life?
Question 3. Do you think that children with special needs can get a job? a. Pre-project expectations: b. Post-project reflections:
Question 4. In general, how would you describe your feelings (emotional status) in one word? (As a follow-up question, the emotional state during the activity was asked.)
Question 5. What is the education, occupation, and working status of the mother? Who is raising the child? Who is taking care of him/her?
Question 6. Is there a family immigrant background?
Question 7. How is the economic situation of your family? Do you receive any support?
Question 8. Are mom and dad living together? The number of members in your family and who lives in the house where the child is raised? Is there any role model for the child?
Question 9. What kind of effects did the activity have on your child?
Question 10. Can you summarize your views on the employment of the disabled after participating in the activity?

The responses showed that the participants' views changed a hundred percent compared to their initial opinions at the beginning of the activity. In the first question, all parents stated that they willingly send their children to school. Regarding the choice of profession, three

participants expressed that they could motivate their children towards this profession by saying "I would not even think that my child would be interested in this profession." While all parents stated that they wanted their children to choose a job that would make them happy, one-third of them implied by body language that they were hopeless due to their child's special needs.

One of the districts where the activity took place is in a rural area close to the villages. The transportation of students coming to these schools from rural areas was with a companion from the family. One reason for this is insufficient accessibility. However, three mothers explained that inadequacies in self-care also caused the SSN to need their mothers during the school days. Another reason expressed by these mothers is that other students and parents do not know how to communicate with SSN. The number of participants with this view was 15, and the number of parents was four.

The findings showed that the families of SSN living in rural areas did not have any means of financial and moral support for their children to attend school. In this context, two parents expressed their concerns about this issue and that they never thought that it would be possible for their child to have a profession. Half of the parents stated that they noticed apprenticeship tendencies in their children in this activity, and they would do their best to develop this tendency. Table 3 presents the participants' opinions on children's employment.

Table 3. Opinions on Vocational Skills

Answers	n	%
Yes, they can overcome the obstacles.	31	50
Yes, they can do some work.	51	82
Partly, if effectively learned.	25	40
No, no job qualification.	10	16
No, they cannot be employed.	20	32

The third and ninth questions asked the participants about their observations and evaluations of the SSN with a focus on business and entrepreneurship. In the eighth question about the nuclear family, it was asked whether there was any role model or professional person in the child's close environment. Two of the SSN parents at the school in the city center

stated that they had a relative that they could take as role models. One-third of the children who participated in the activity showed a tendency to acquire a profession. For example, they expressed their desire to get a university education and start their own business in the future, in the dialogues within the family, by saying, "I want to do hairstyle like this older sister/brother," "Can I braid too?"

When the role model activity is implemented with hair care and beauty program students, it includes the development of self-care skills in daily activities. This activity can be developed and enriched for different professional fields. The current implementation met two important needs that support the school attendance and social participation of SSN. These needs are:

1. learning self-care skills and
2. the development of basic communication skills.

If the role model activity is generalized, students with special needs will have more opportunities to participate in society as individuals with higher socioeconomic status. Table 4 shows the contributions of this activity to the social mobility of SSN in accordance with the WEF priorities discussed at the beginning of the study.

Table 4. Contributions According to Special Needs

Level	Area	Equipment and Facilities
1 Self-care skills	Individual, social skills	A role model with appropriate approach for disability
2 Participation in social life	Sensory, physical adequacy	Accessibility, arrangements, materials
3 Specialization, education, workplace	Psychological, social support	Inclusive workplace, school and work order

The areas of special need associated with role model activity can be explained at three levels. The first level is self-care skills. Without these skills, individuals may be inadequate in socializing and adapting to the environment and face peer exclusion. Activities like the one shared in this study might contribute to the development of these skills, which are at the first step of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Furthermore, they can help with preventing peer

exclusion and lack of security that are at the second step of the hierarchy.

Physical and sensory limitations determine the second level of the hierarchy of the needs pyramid. This can be improved with on-the-job training when accessibility is increased with special equipment for professional skills that require a master-apprentice relationship, as was done in the current role model activity. These skills can also contribute to meeting the needs of belonging, love, and being valued, which are the basis of being an individual.

Role model activities support SSN's development as a socio-economic individual within the work/school environment in a third dimension. With this contribution, it seems possible for SSN to more easily overcome the inadequacies that require psychosocial support for choosing a field of specialization and effective participation in employment. The positive developments of SSN towards a profession can provide an increased value to the extent that they reduce their dependence on others.

CONCLUSION and SUGGESTIONS

It is desirable that the professional inclination is not directed towards a type of work that is done occasionally with pleasure but to provide a basic livelihood. For this, vocational training should be based on systematic knowledge content. In addition to the content training, discipline, morality, principles, and rules should be included in vocational education to teach the behavioral standards of the people who practice this profession.

Employment opportunities may increase for the children when this education takes place in accordance with their special needs. It has been known from master-apprentice relationships many years ago that having a role model has an important place in the background of choosing a profession. If a child has a role model in his environment at an early age, professional skills can be transferred through cognitive and social learning.

According to Karaboğa, today's young generation imitates role models who appear on media, and the orientation to a profession is limited for these young people (Karaboğa,

2019). Instead of professional skills, the concepts of reward and punishment are reinforced within this context. There are studies by Gander and Gardiner reporting that the environment in which children grow up shapes their social relations as well as their personality development and behavior (Gander & Gardiner, 2015).

Communication is a skill gained within the family as the most important tool in establishing social relations. For this reason, it was determined whether the professional interests and skills of the SSN developed positively by examining the participant observers' reflections on the SSN who communicated with a professional role model during the activity. This development was evident as half of the 16 SSN asked questions about the practice of the profession and expressed that they wanted to study this field at the university. The most significant awareness gained with this activity is that although all mothers never thought about the possibility of hair care and beauty profession being a good option for their children, they were very interested in it when they learned that there was such a department at the university. In addition, particularly the children of SSN mothers (eight SSN) who participated in the activity by receiving personal and beauty care showed a clear interest in the profession while working with the role models.

The main limitation of the study is that it was limited to four schools in Manisa. The researchers recommend expanding the scope of this study in future activities (within the budgetary resources) by involving role models from different professions and studying the professional interest and orientation of SSN in schools in rural areas. In this activity, the participants were predominantly from five disadvantaged groups. Research questions can be adapted for different groups. The disadvantaged groups that participated in the current study are as follows:

1. low-educated parents,
2. single parent (parents separated),
3. those with a migrant background,
4. those from low-income households, and
5. persons with disabilities or disabled relatives.

The participants responded to semi-structured questions asking about their sociodemographic

characteristics. Unlike the ones in the city center, the parents in the rural areas stated that their biggest problem was school transportation. SSN mothers whose children come to school from rural areas expressed that they take their children to school by public transportation every day. Both the school administrators and the educators confirmed that these children usually come to school on certain days, accompanied by their parents, especially their mothers, despite financial and transportation difficulties. The sustainability of education is at a significant risk for SSN who do not have sufficient socio-economic power. They receive education with the efforts of their mothers. Mothers and school administrators expressed that the rural areas lack resources in this regard, although students are provided with transportation services in the central districts. This situation not only prevents students' fair access to education, but also causes the family to be impoverished, and as a result, the education, development, and social participation of SSN is restricted.

As it is widely accepted, spending time with meaningful activities and gaining skills useful in daily life is an important process that brings individual success to students (Brazendale et al., 2020; Okcu & Sözbilir, 2017). This study aimed to plan appropriate activities for children with special needs to help them play educational games, socialize by learning, and gain basic self-care skills. In Turkey's EU accession process, sustainable and effective projects can be developed by adapting the role model activity in cooperation with universities and schools. The researchers recommend that educators cooperate on new vocational education laws, regulations, and policies in order for such projects to be implemented successfully.

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