

Verbal Word Choice of Effective Reading Teachers

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Abstract

Humans are fragile beings easily influenced by the verbal behaviors of others. Spoken words can have a multitude of effects on an individual, and the phrases and statements teachers use in their classrooms on a daily basis have the potential to be either detrimental or inspirational. As increasing numbers of students arrive at schools from broken families, possessing poor nutritional habits and debilitating health concerns, and experiencing greater exposure to violence in the media and within their communities, educators need to be keenly aware of the impact their verbal behaviors have on children. Teachers need to be mindful of the words they choose to speak when attempting to elevate each child's self-worth. In addition to the external factors affecting children that erect hurdles for teachers to overcome, continuously changing educational policy creates additional obstacles for teachers attempting to increase student achievement. New state and federal mandates force teachers to make changes to instructional practice and assessment with the start of each new school year. Recent legislation in Ohio requiring students to be retained who fall below a specific score on the Grade Three Reading Ohio Achievement Assessment has caused students to become increasingly more sensitive to verbal teacher feedback and in some cases resulted in a loss of overall self-esteem due to fears of failure. Words are impactful; therefore, educators hoping to increase academic achievement in literacy skills development as a means to prevent possible student retention need to study the verbal behaviors of effective reading teachers. This paper will argue that teachers' intentional preplanning of verbal word choice can increase students' reading achievement. Additionally the paper will synthesize the relevance, content, and impact of current literature on the topic of verbal practices of effective reading teachers and provide recommendations for practical implications for successful reading instruction in the regular elementary classroom setting.

Introduction and Argument

The recent passage of Senate Bill 316 in Ohio has created an upheaval of instructional reading practice, data collection and parent communication, resulting in a major impact on student learning in public elementary schools throughout the state. This new bill includes several mandates focused on elementary reading instruction and assessment and is referred to as the Third Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG). The Ohio Department of Education's (ODE) TGRG Guidance Document has outlined requirements starting in the 2012-2013 school year for school districts to administer "an English Language Arts (ELA) diagnostic assessment by September 30 of each year for students in kindergarten through Grade 3, (ORD 3313.608(B)(1)) [...then] if the diagnostic assessment shows that the student is not on-track to be reading at grade level by the end of each year, schools must provide the parents, in writing (ORG 3313.60(B)(2)(a) [...and] develop a reading improvement and monitoring plan for each student including students with IEPs identified with a reading deficiency within 60 days after receiving that student's diagnostic results" (Ohio Department of Education, 2012, pp. 2-5). These requirements, released in the summer of 2012, left school leaders and teachers scrambling at the start of the 2012-2013 school year to make sure that all requirements and deadlines would be met only to experience frustration with unclear, continuously updated guidance documents from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) as the year progressed.

For some local Ohio school districts, adhering to the fluctuating requirements of the TGRG has been quite challenging. Due to financial constraints and budget cuts in recent years, many districts are operating without curriculum directors and assistant superintendents. Principals are doing their best to oversee the daily management of the buildings, while also serving as curriculum specialists trying to stay on top of weekly curriculum updates and mandates emailed from the offices of ODE. For many, attempting to start the school year in compliance with TGRG requirements meant locating or purchasing an approved ELA diagnostic and educating staff on how to administer the chosen diagnostic, leaving teachers feeling overwhelmed with yet a new initiative to become skilled at in a limited amount of time. In order to communicate mass changes regarding school assessment schedules and new student identification terms of "on track" and "not on track" per the ODE guidance document requirements, administrators hurried to develop letters informing parents of the new legislation, gave presentations at parent meetings, and developed personalized parent notification letters for those students deemed to be "not on track" (Ohio Department of Education, 2012, p. 2). Reading teachers then scrambled to develop Reading Improvement and Monitoring Plans (RIMP) for students not

on track, given that “presently, ODE does not have templates or sample reading improvement and monitoring plans available,” (Ohio Department of Education, 2012, p. 5). These extensive efforts have left countless educators feeling anxious and apprehensive, often second guessing their teaching abilities fearful that their instructional practices could result in a child’s retention. Third grade teachers, specifically, worry that their students will not reach a cut score of 390 (for the 2012-2013 school year) on the Ohio Reading Achievement Assessment and will be retained (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). This pressure has sparked a desire to learn more rigorous and effective reading instructional techniques to improve their reading instruction. When taking into account the potential risk of student grade retention, a decision that will impact a child for the rest of his or her educational career, the relevance and importance of this current issue of educational policy and its effects on reading instruction is magnified.

As a result of new educational policy, schools are shifting their focus to finding and implementing instructional techniques that will maximize student growth and promote higher achievement in the area of reading. More specifically, the effort is being narrowed to learning and implementing the verbal phrases, questions, praise, and prompts demonstrated by effective reading teachers as an added measure to further thwart students from falling victim to the TGRG. Elementary teachers know that the time they spend with students is critical and each interaction with a child has the power to enhance learning potential; therefore, it is hypothesized that selective verbal word choice of teachers can positively impact student reading achievement.

Relevance of Studying Verbal Practices of Teachers

Every verbal interaction with a student is important in not only helping a child to learn and comprehend new content but also in shaping lives. Teachers need to be aware of the words they use when modeling strategies during reading lessons, during conferences with students, and when offering feedback. It is suggested that teachers’ careful selection and preplanning of the words they choose to use when speaking to students through class discussions, questioning, error correction, and conferring can result in positive reading gains in student performance. Given that the area of reading instruction and performance is a critical issue in today’s educational arena and most recently an emphasis of new state legislation in Ohio with high-stakes consequences, including retention based on the Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA) for reading scores, this paper will focus on examining the verbal phrases and feedback of effective reading teachers as a means to generate

implications for classroom instruction. To support the claim that selective word choice can increase student reading performance, multiple published literature sources will be analyzed in terms of their relevance, content, and impact on this area to help derive valuable conclusions and recommendations for current teachers and school administrators. The referenced works focus on the verbal practices of effective reading and writing teachers, yet are applicable to all teachers regardless of content area. The relevance and timeliness of this issue is also significant in accordance with the recent adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). These new academic standards adopted by 45 of the 50 states require that the level of questioning and thinking students are engaged in is more rigorous and also largely emphasizes text complexity and higher Lexile levels for student texts (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).

Literature Review Highlighting Characteristics of Effective Reading Teachers

In order for teachers to develop their craft, they need to hone in on the language use and verbal behaviors of effective teachers and replicate those behaviors with their own students. The qualitative research study outlined in Jennifer Archer's (2004) dissertation, *Characteristics of an effective teacher of reading in an elementary school setting*, highlights the verbal phrases and questioning techniques that effective reading teachers use on a daily basis to promote literacy development. Archer (2004) conducted research in a southern United States capital city in two elementary schools (one public and one private), spent 5 weeks in each school, and interviewed six participants (2 principals, 2 second grade teachers, and 2 fourth grade teachers). Archer's dissertation is both timely and relevant and posits great implications for educators as her data was derived from observations and interviews with current teachers in both public and private schools. Her findings demonstrate that effective teachers "verbally model instructional procedures, [...] often talk aloud during problem solving and analytical thinking, [...] and] place literacy as an important priority to model the characteristics of a lifelong learner" (Archer, 2004, p. 19). Effective reading teachers demonstrate and "possess strong characteristics of positive verbalization and open communication due to the diverse needs of each individual child" (Archer, 2004, p. 82). The words teachers use matter and can have a great impact on reading achievement. Yet in order for teachers to begin to use their word choice more powerfully and push the cognitive levels of their students, they need to analyze more critically the specific ways words are used in reading lessons. Reflecting on the extent to which their words matter during interactive read-alouds, in varying questioning techniques,

and during error correction will be useful in raising self-efficacy and developing a sense of collective belonging.

Interactive Read-Alouds and Questioning Techniques

Educators cannot ignore the impact educational policy reform and mandates such as the TGRG have on reading instruction and development across the content areas, for all teachers to be considered teachers of reading, and for increasing the use of read-alouds in classrooms to model proper oral reading fluency. The importance of teacher read-alouds has grown with the arrival of the new demands present in the CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA) that call for students to read and comprehend more rigorous and complex texts at higher Lexile levels. Given that some students cannot decipher text independently at these more complex levels, read-alouds are a great instructional strategy not only to model the concept of reading for meaning but also to demonstrate oral reading fluency, expression, and think-aloud strategies. In order to develop the cognition and reading potential through the use of the read-aloud instructional strategy, teachers need to look to the research to find the most effective ways to leverage their speech and words in expanding students' intellectual capabilities for higher gains in reading achievement. The words teachers use in interactive read-alouds need to be chosen and selected carefully, given that in addition to positive language, "effective teachers also verbally model instructional procedures [...and] talk aloud during problem solving and analytical thinking to demonstrate to students the sequential steps of the thinking process" (Archer, 2004, p. 19). Angela Wiseman (2011) describes similar characteristics noting that teachers should be selective about their word choice to construct meaning through dialogue: "extend students' literary understanding [..., develop] important interpretations about literature [..., and encourage] students to use their own experiences to make meaning" (p. 435). Teachers can make a difference in a child's reading ability if they choose their words carefully, similar to the teacher Wiseman (2011) studied who "encouraged her students to take the important role of making meaning by contributing to discussion and learning about the picture book" (p. 432). Wiseman's (2011) findings are significant given that, when teachers are selective in their speech and know what prompts to use with their students instead of relying on the use of lower level questioning strategies, interactive read-alouds "can provide opportunities for open-ended responses combined with specific reading instruction" (p. 432).

In another study focused on observations of reading teachers' dialogue in classrooms, Peter Johnston (2004) found that while facilitating an interactive read-aloud, teachers need to be aware that "the ability or tendency to ask effective questions contributes a great deal to children's agency and to their development of critical literacy" (p. 55). The way in which questions are asked makes an impact on a child's reading development. Instead of asking a child "What was your favorite part of the story?" effective reading teachers ask "What have you learned most recently as a reader?" (Johnston, 2004, p. 26). The latter question establishes a non-negotiable concept that the child is a reader and has learned something, not giving the child a choice but to accept agency for the topic (Johnston, 2004). Of similar importance is the consciousness to ask children what went well when they were reading, writing, and creating. This type of questioning helps children to see themselves as successful readers and writers and to express their thinking in a way that builds their confidence. Teachers can also boost interest in reading by "asking students what they're wondering about or what they're hoping will surprise them as they read on" (Allyn, 2012, p. 19).

Archer (2004) also examined the types of questions effective reading teachers asked in their verbal interactions with students. Successful reading teachers "constantly and consistently ask the students their opinion of the author's writing" which falls in accordance with the new CCSS for ELA that require students to be able to discuss and argue their opinions of text (Archer, 2004, p. 79). Similar to the positively worded questioning techniques Johnston (2004) and Archer (2004) cited as evidence of an effective reading teacher, Wiseman (2011) found that asking open-ended questions such as "What do you think? It could be whatever you think...it can't be wrong, it's whatever you think..." allows a student to develop trust in their teacher taking more risks and ultimately embracing higher order learning skills (p. 434). By being strategic about word choice, the teacher can convey "the sense that the book was an experience they would share together and that [the students are] an important part of the story" (Wiseman, 2011, p. 434). School leaders should also note that included on the National Council for Teachers of English's (NCTE) list of effective reading instructional strategies are teachers' abilities to create "a risk-free environment that supports social interaction, open discussion of ideas, and multiple perspectives" (National Council for Teachers of English, 1998-2012). This list also encourages the use of "multiple instructional methods such as shared reading, guided reading, and literature discussion circles, demonstrations and think-alouds, specific feedback to students to support their reading development, [...and] ongoing support to

students who need additional instruction” (National Council for Teachers of English, 1998-2012).

Building Self-Efficacy and Agency

The explicit words and phrases teachers use in their conversations with children make a vast difference in a child’s self-esteem and ability to learn. By choosing and selecting specific words, phrases, and questions, teachers can leverage their teaching in ways that expand student learning potential. Dialogue in classrooms is paramount in learning given that, “teachers’ conversations with children help the children build the bridges between action and consequence that develop their sense of agency” (Johnston, 2004, p. 30). From her observations of successful reading teachers, Archer (2004) concluded “the classroom teachers’ verbal communicative patterns are essential in developing the student’s self-efficacy in the classroom” leading to more successful readers (p. 14). Positive verbalization was a key factor of success in the classrooms Archer (2004) spent time in “because it builds the overall self-confidence of the child” (p. 49). In both public and private elementary school settings, Archer (2004) found that the most effective teachers “used positive reinforcement to teach students to monitor their progress, helped them recognize personal strengths, and taught them to praise themselves for their success [...and that] promoting this type of classroom environment improved academic performance and reeducated behavior problems” (p. 96). It is critical for teachers to mentally preselect the positive words they wish to use with students and to maintain a preventative mindset for avoiding the use of negative words as they too have the potential to impact a child’s self-esteem. Accomplished reading teachers instinctively demonstrate “avoidance of negative innuendos such as do not, never, and cannot” reinforcing the notion that establishing positive self-efficacy leads to better overall reading ability (Archer, 2004, p. 73).

In an effort to foster quality instruction in the area of reading, The International Reading Association (IRA) has established standards for reading professionals based on the numerous research studies they have completed over time. These standards reinforce the need to build self-esteem of students as a means to a greater end of improved reading skills and abilities. Outlining expectations for effective professional practices for reading educators, these standards state, that “student learning is positively impacted by positive teacher dispositions, such as high expectations, a carefully crafted physical environment, and a safe, low-risk social environment” (International Reading Association, 1996-2012). Being selective in word choice and language use will allow teachers to produce

these high expectations and embody a positive disposition. The IRA also suggests that effective reading teachers “provide instruction and instructional formats that engage students as agents of their own learning” which can be done through the selective use of words and phrases on behalf of the educator (International Reading Association, 1996-2012). Similar to the themes presented in the works of Archer (2004), Johnston (2004), and Wiseman (2011), the IRA reminds reading instructors to “demonstrate a respectful attitude toward all learners and understand the roles of choice, motivation, and scaffolded support in creating low-risk and positive social environments” (International Reading Association, 1996-2012). If school leaders want to improve student reading achievement scores and meet the demands of the rigorous CCSS for ELA they must be mindful that “in order for students to have feelings of success and self-esteem in the content area of reading, teachers need to instill belief and confidence within each student” (Archer, 2004, p. 14).

Error Correction

In order to help students grow and develop in their reading ability, teachers are responsible for presenting children with new information, but of even greater importance may be their role in correcting a child’s reading errors. If teachers want students to be able to improve literacy skills and learn from the mistakes made when reading, they must remain cognizant of the idea that “when a child tries something and does not succeed, [they] need to turn that event toward a narrative and identity that will be useful for the future” (Johnston, 2004, p. 39). When correcting errors, “the most important piece is to confirm what has been successful (so it will be repeated)” so that students take notice of what they are doing well and continue those behaviors in the future (Johnston, 2004, p. 13). Archer’s (2004) work reinforces Johnston’s (2004) findings on the importance of building student self-esteem documenting that the successful reading teachers she observed began “critiquing a child’s work with a positive statement” (p. 88). Instead of simply alerting the child that a word was read incorrectly and supplying the child with the correct word, Archer (2004) noted that effective reading teachers probe deeper and ask students questions such as “Would this word make sense in the sentence that you chose?” or a prompt such as “reread to see if it makes sense” (p. 57).

Not only does the phrasing style and word choice teachers use during interactive read-alouds and whole group instruction matter a great deal in developing a child’s reading ability, but of even greater importance is the specific language teachers use when working one-on-one with students during reading conferences and through error correction. Prior to

Johnston (2004), Archer (2004) and Wiseman (2011) observed and reported on the verbal behaviors of successful reading teachers, confirming that making positive remarks in error correction is an effective practice of reading teachers. Joanne Heubush and John Wills Lloyd (1998) conducted a meta-analysis to provide evidence for the hypothesis that verbal error correction can lead to improved reading achievement. Their article is largely relevant to the topic of teacher word choice as educators have a primary role in helping call students' attention to their mistakes in a timely manner in order for learning to take place while the action is still happening. As good coaches intervene in the middle of practice to correct an athlete, so should teachers intervene while a child is reading. In his study of the verbal behaviors of twenty reading teachers, Allington (1980) found a clear "relationship between teacher interruptions and the development of effective and efficient reading abilities" (p. 165). Important conclusions from Heubusch and Lloyd's (1998) article also supported teacher interruption for error correction recommending that teachers correct errors immediately, require students to repeat the correct response, and match the correction procedure used to the specific goal of the instruction for the student. Their research proves relevant for current educators, given that if done well "teacher feedback about oral reading accuracy should promote greater reading competence" (Heubusch & Lloyd, 1998, p. 64). Included in their findings are important implications for educators such as "favoring correction over no-correct conditions indicate[s] that feedback improves reading accuracy" (Heubusch & Lloyd, 1998, p. 68). Teachers need to vary the type of error correction phrasing used with each individual student given that "at different developmental stages, readers may well benefit from different interruption strategies" (Allington, 1980, p. 375).

In addition to making a verbal correction, teachers also need to be aware that prompting the student to repeat the correction makes the entire verbal interaction more effective in improving the child's reading ability. This recommendation is consistent throughout research as Heubush and Lloyd (1998) state that "methods that encourage repetition result in more accurate reading [...and] corrections are more effective when the student follows it with an active and correct response" (p. 73-4). "Teachers should not be hesitant to interrupt the reading process for an effective correction" as the immediate use of an educator's powerful words does not detract from the reader's overall comprehension (Heubusch & Lloyd, 1998, p. 76). Word correction is a strategy used in many classrooms. However, if teachers are not applying it correctly, or utilizing it in ways that research has proven to be ineffective, then instructional efforts might be wasted preventing a student's reading ability from reaching full potential. The only critique relevant to the article's validity in terms of

implications for today's teaching practice is its timeliness, as it was published in 1998. However, considering the fact that its findings have been replicated and supported in current research such as Johnston's (2004)Choice Words, Archer's (2004) dissertation, and Wiseman's (2011) article, its credibility is long lasting and reputable.

Collective Phrasing – using “we”

One of the major themes of effective reading teachers repeatedly stressed throughout Peter Johnston's (2004) book, Choice Words, is their frequent use of collective pronouns such as “we”. Collective pronouns are “an invitation to an expression of solidarity or affinity [...and initiating] joint activity around shared goals produces not only the ability and desire to collaborate, but also a tacit understanding that doing so is normal” (Johnston, 2004, p. 66). Similar to Johnston's (2004) findings on the success of using collective pronouns in verbal dialogue with students, Archer (2004) found that “effective teachers select terminology that includes all students of the classroom to participate equally as active members” building collective agency for literacy skills development (p. 13). Furthermore, according to the data compiled by the IRA, successful reading programs in schools were those found “promoting active engagement, especially in the discussions that teachers were leading in their classrooms” (1996-2012). These teacher led discussions during class read-alouds and reading strategies instruction become the perfect opportunity to use collective phrases such as “our learning,” “remember when we...,” and “now let's...” which all help attribute feelings of success and accomplishment to the entire class.

Impact of Effective Word Choice

In order to get kids thinking at higher levels, educators need to know how to scaffold and facilitate verbal questions. To accomplish this type of higher level questioning, teachers need to be selective in choosing the most influential words to use during their classroom conversation and one-on-one student interactions, or conferencing. Selectivity in word choice is crucial, given that “dialogue is a window into another person's reading experience and is an effective way to get [kids] excited about reading” (Allyn, 2012, p. 19). However, if teachers do not carefully choose the right words to use in student conferences, their efforts may be wasted. Therefore, teachers “have to decide what to be explicit about for which students, and when to be explicit about it” in order to take full advantage of every second spent conversing with a student (Johnston, 2004, p. 8). According to Wiseman (2011), teachers need to exemplify 4 major categories of verbal response, “confirmation, modeling, extending ideas, and building meaning” in order to develop more successful readers (p. 432). If teachers are unaware of their word choice, they will miss out on opportunities to confirm their students' ability, preventing the development of agency and self-efficacy which

can impede learning ability over time. According to Wiseman (2011), effective reading teachers “used confirming statements” and selective word choice to “extend students’ literary understanding [...and] show support of each other’s responses and ideas” (p. 435). Additionally, effective reading teachers restated student responses and used paraphrasing techniques to encourage “students to use their own experiences to make meaning” from the text (Wiseman, 2011, p. 435). Although Wiseman’s article offers strategic implications and great suggestions for teacher word choice during interactive read-alouds, an even greater impact could have been generated if the researcher had observed and tracked data on multiple teachers over time in order to show a stronger correlation between verbal behaviors and improved student reading.

The NCTE recognizes that teachers’ verbal word choice, when used selectively and positively, can have a great impact on student reading development. The organization’s position statement on the elements of effective reading instruction compiled by their Commission on Reading, posits several characteristics that are tied to verbal practices. The majority of the traits listed such as, “engage[ing] students in discussion [...and] building vocabulary and language knowledge” are executed primarily through teachers’ verbal conversations, statements, and phrasing within the classroom (National Council of Teachers of English, 1998-2012). Therefore in order to implement NCTE’s recommendations for effective reading instruction, teachers need to be mindful of their language and word choice in the classroom so that they may develop a culture which is most conducive to advancing reading skills. According to the NCTE, conversation and word choice evokes a heightened level of importance in reading instruction because “the more children interact with spoken and written language, the better readers they become” (National Council of Teachers of English, 1998-2012). Included in the NCTE’s position statement on reading is the notion that “as readers, we talk to others about what we are reading. These interactions expand and strengthen our comprehension and interpretation. Through these interactions, we learn to read critically, to question what we read, and to respond in a certain way,” highlighting the fact that the verbal communication techniques of teachers are in today’s world, more relevant and essential than ever before (National Council of Teachers of English, 1998-2012).

Similar to the NCTE, the vision statement of the IRA also values the impact teacher word choice has on student reading development as the organization promotes engaging verbal interactions between reading teachers and students by “recognizing that cognitive

challenge, in the context of engagement, is a source of motivation, and [by] making engagement, relevance, and initiative central pillars of teaching and learning” (International Reading Association, 1996-2012). It is relevant for school leaders to note that “creating the contexts necessary for realizing IRA’s vision requires preparing highly skilled teachers who know how to generate active student engagement, redesigning curricula and content standards to focus on big, relevant ideas” (International Reading Association, 1996-2012). Therefore, school leaders need to screen for effective verbal traits in prospective teacher candidates and continue to support the growth of this instructional practice through professional development. Furthermore, based on the IRA’s literacy implementation guide, with the advancement in student learning objectives from the CCSS, school administrators also need to ensure that the “interactions with [more rigorous] texts lead to maximum student learning, teachers must provide significantly greater and more skillful instructional scaffolding—employing rereading, explanation, encouragement, and other supports within lessons,” implying that word choice used in such explanations and encouragements is profoundly related to a child’s level of reading improvement (International Reading Association, 1996-2012).

Implications and Conclusions

Upon analyzing the research on the successful verbal practices of effective reading teachers, it is difficult to ignore the supportive data highlighting the importance of this topic as it relates to instruction in today’s classrooms. In order to maximize student reading ability, teachers need to be mindful of the words they use in interactive read-alouds, during error correction, while building self-efficacy, and in one-on-one conferences with students. By selecting specific verbal phrases and questions, the teacher can create a learning environment based on trust where students can take risks and ultimately increase their reading ability. The research in this area is relevant and important in its application to today’s increased standards for reading instruction and higher demands for student reading expectations on high-stakes performance assessments. The focus needs to be on “developing reading professionals who can deliver appropriately differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students” (International Reading Association, 1996-2012). The research has demonstrated that for reading teachers, “talk is the central tool of their trade” (Johnston, 2004, p. 4)

In order for school leaders and policy makers to help develop masterful reading teachers and limit the number of students retained under merciless legislative requirements,

educational leaders need to ensure that teacher preparatory programs and professional development are designed to share the research findings from studying effective reading teachers. Administrators and professional development leaders need to concentrate on helping educators develop consistent use of phrases and questioning strategies that are most conducive to rigorous and demanding levels of cognition in order to advance student learning in the area of reading. If school leaders wish to promote educators' use of generating active student engagement in reading conversations, they first need to observe current verbal practices during walk-throughs and observations. Providing teachers with professional development in this area will further develop the skill of being critically selective of word choice. Strategic education and implication of word choice can begin with clearly planned and continuous professional development that is tied to clear expectations built upon the foundation of evidence gathered during classroom walk-throughs and observations used for evaluation of teacher effectiveness.

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