

The management of continuous teacher education in Portugal and its relationship with a fair and democratic curriculum¹

A gestão da formação contínua de professores/as em Portugal e sua relação com um currículo justo e democrático

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Abstract

The article reports on a study that examines the continuous teacher training organized in Portugal by School Association Training Centers, created to meet the training needs of teachers in various school contexts. In this study, the goal was to understand the effects that the management of continuous training has had on the curricular production of teachers in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education. Following a theoretical-methodological approach that points to a non-linear and flexible path, the management of a continuous training center and teachers were consulted in conversational interviews that highlighted: The School Association Training Centers still hold on to their role of organizing training projects that can somehow meet teachers' training needs, while living in the ambivalence of having to, on one hand, comply with the Ministry of Education's demands and, on the other hand, address the real needs of teachers. We see continuous training as a *phármakon*, since it doesn't have just one meaning. It produces effects that, in some situations, are beneficial; and in others,

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harmful. In other words, continuous training works both as a remedy and a poison, and teachers experience these effects in different ways when shaping the curriculum in their professional contexts.

Keywords: School management; continuous training; democratic curriculum.

Resumo

O artigo dá conta de um estudo que problematiza a formação contínua de professores/as organizada em Portugal pelos Centros de Formação de Associação de Escolas, criados para responder às necessidades de formação dos/as professores/as dos diversos contextos escolares. Nesta problematização, o estudo objetivou conhecer efeitos que a gestão da formação contínua tem provocado na produção curricular dos/as professores/as do 1º Ciclo de Ensino Básico. Seguindo uma orientação teórico-metodológica que aponta para um caminho não linear e fixo, foi contatada a direção de um Centro de formação contínua e professores/as, ouvidos/as em conversas-entrevistas que evidenciaram: os Centros de Formação de Associação de Escolas ainda resiste na sua função de mobilizar projetos de formações que possam de alguma forma responder às necessidades de formação dos/as professores/as, vivendo, no entanto, na ambivalência de atender, por um lado, às exigências do Ministério da Educação e, por outro, às necessidades reais dos/as professores/as. Percebemos a formação contínua enquanto um *phármakon*, pois não se fecha numa única significação. Ela produz ao mesmo tempo efeitos que, em algumas situações, são benéficos; e, em outras, maléficos. Em outras palavras, a formação contínua ao mesmo tempo opera enquanto remédio e veneno, e os/as professores/as sentem esses efeitos de modos diferentes na produção do currículo em seus contextos profissionais.

Palavras-chave: gestão escolar; formação contínua; currículo democrático.

INTRODUCTION

Discourses that sustain the importance of continuing teacher education have justified it not only as a bureaucratic requirement for career progression but, above all, because of the effects it may generate in improving curricular and pedagogical practices that take into account the specificities of students and the various contexts in which they are situated (Imbernón, 2010; Nóvoa, 2009; Fritsch; Leite; Lima, 2022; Melo; Almeida; Leite, 2022, 2023). In Portugal, a large part of continuing teacher education is provided by the School Association Training Centres (*Centros de Formação de Associação de Escolas - CFAE*), created in 1992 with a strong local component and justified, among other aspects, by their role in fostering collaborative work among schools and the exchange of experiences among teachers, as well as in

democratically responding to the training needs of teachers working in specific school contexts.

Our perspective also considered that continuing education, far from being interpreted merely as a “complement” to initial teacher education, may be understood as a possibility for deconstructing policy discourses that seek to present definitive solutions to educational trajectories. Rather than searching for fixed meanings of teaching, continuing education may contribute to questioning structures that are intended to be “predefined”, broadening democratic political ways of signifying teacher education and the school curriculum. This perspective is aligned with a non-essentialist curricular conception of teacher education, grounded in projects of non-fixed and radically contextual curriculum (Lopes; Borges, 2015; Santos; Borges; Lopes, 2019; Melo; Almeida; Leite, 2022, 2023), consistent with the ever-emerging needs of teachers (Nóvoa, 2009; Trindade, 2018). Such a conception is based on the idea that curriculum is always a translation, a text traversed by displacements, tensions, and differential contextual dynamics (Lopes; Macedo, 2011; Azevedo; Almeida, 2025). In this regard, we considered perspectives that draw attention to teachers’ curricular productions within a globally structured political-economic agenda for education (Dale, 2008; Ball, 2001), with strong implications for school everyday life and for teachers’ work logics and cultures (Marinho; Leite; Fernandes, 2019; Souza; Novais, 2025). We also took into account leadership and school management styles that operate as mechanisms for regulating teachers’ actions (Bolívar, 2009; Torres; Palhares, 2009; Souza, 2009; Lima, 2014).

Within the argument developed, continuing education is therefore considered as something that cannot be assigned a fixed place within the play of differences. Furthermore, curricular differences are conceived as a text in continuous production, marked by the constant translations that teachers make of its effects within their specific contexts. These translations, in turn, ambivalently produce new effects in teachers’ curricular decision-making processes, extending beyond the limitations imposed by academic frameworks and state policies.

Taking these ideas as a point of reference, we conducted a study aimed at answering the following research question: what effects has the management of continuing teacher education in Portugal, organized by the School Association Training

Centres (CFAE), produced on curricular development, particularly regarding the actions of teachers in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education?

In developing the study, we strategically adopted Derrida's (2005) notion of deconstruction, which points to a non-linear and non-fixed path for conducting research. Our strategies unfolded through flows of conversational interviews woven into meetings with the management of a CFAE and with teachers in their everyday school contexts, traversed by different relational and discursive dynamics.

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE CONTINUOUS TEACHER TRAINING CURRICULUM

The debate on continuing teacher education has been translated into fields of struggles over meaning, whose historical-discursive traces account for its emergence in educational discourses as a remnant of a model aimed at "supplementing" initial teacher education (Romanowski; Martins, 2010). In dialogue with the deconstructionist discursive investments referred to by Derrida (2005), this search for something that is "missing/was missing" from "initial" teacher education, and which supposedly gave rise to continuing education initiatives, may perhaps be understood "[...] as the presence of undecidability and the eternal debt to the unfaithful fidelity of the process of meaning construction" (Silva, 2020, p. 29-30) within teacher education processes; that is, it may be viewed as a constitutive lack. However, as already suggested above, continuing education, far from being interpreted merely as a "complement" to initial teacher education, may also be understood as a possibility for deconstructing discourses that seek to present definitive solutions to educational trajectories, including those structured within initial teacher education processes.

By adopting this position, we seek to affirm that education is always in motion: not in order to produce fixed meanings, but rather effects of meaning which, as may be inferred, are always coming into being, taking place, and yet to come. This perspective brings us closer to a curricular conception of education disconnected from previously sedimented logics intended to (pre)define causes and effects (Lopes; Borges, 2015; Melo; Almeida; Leite, 2022, 2023), operating radically through the contextualization of curricular projects (Leite; Fernandes; Figueiredo, 2018, 2019;

Lopes, 2025) in teacher education and, in this particular case, in continuing teacher education aligned with teachers' contextual needs (Nóvoa, 2009; Trindade, 2018).

From this standpoint, the aim is to reflect upon: continuing teacher education situated within schools and attentive to teachers' needs; its relationship with the socio-educational realities of everyday school life; and processes of democratic governance. Indeed, these were the reasons that justified the creation of the School Association Training Centres (*Centros de Formação de Associação de Escolas - CFAE*) in Portugal. Within their organizational structure, representatives of the Pedagogical Councils of each school belonging to a CFAE, after consulting teachers, design curricular projects for continuing education that respond to these professional needs and to the plurality of school realities. In this sense, when CFAE follow this orientation, they become aligned with processes of democratic governance.

THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH STRATEGIES

In Portugal, the accreditation of training programmes, as well as of the trainers responsible for delivering them, falls under the responsibility of the Scientific-Pedagogical Council for Continuing Education (*Conselho Científico-Pedagógico da Formação Contínua - CCPFC*), appointed by the Ministry of Education and governed by the legal framework regulating continuing teacher education (Decree-Law No. 22/2014, of 11th February). It is also this CCPFC that accredits the School Association Training Centres (*Centros de Formação de Associação de Escolas - CFAE*).

Within this context, and guided by the research question underpinning the study, we initially sought to listen to the director (DCF) and an adviser (ACF) of one of the most important and representative CFAE in Portugal, located in the Porto region.

The selection of this CFAE from among numerous possible alternatives was based, on the one hand, on the importance and prominence it has come to assume within the field of public training provision in the Portuguese context, as highlighted by Trindade (2018); and, on the other hand, on the following reasons: (a) it is a training institution formally recognised and reaffirmed through a primary legal instrument (Decree-Law No. 127/2015, of 7th July); and (b) it is located in mainland Portugal, with

an area of influence that approximately represents a variety of Portuguese regions and parishes.

Following our meeting with this CFAE, we requested, at the end of the conversation, contact details for teachers working in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education within the School Clusters (*Agrupamentos de Escolas* - AE) associated with the CFAE and who had participated in at least one continuing education programme offered by the centre during the previous year.

To this end, the CFAE management contacted different groups of teachers who had participated in training programmes offered by the centre during the previous year. From these groups, and on a voluntary basis, three teachers from the 1st Cycle of Basic Education indicated their availability to contribute to the research and provided their email addresses for contact.

Thus, the selection of the teacher sample was based on voluntary participation and availability and followed the criteria initially established: (1) teachers currently working in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education; (2) teachers from School Clusters (AE) associated with the CFAE under study; and (3) teachers who had participated in at least one continuing education programme offered by that CFAE during the previous year.

These teachers were invited by email to participate in conversational interviews. As all agreed to contribute to the research, interview dates were scheduled. The meetings took place face-to-face between October and November 2024 and followed both ethical principles, such as anonymity, the right to withdraw, and the possibility of revising previously expressed positions, and a commitment to resisting rigid procedural structures.

Although the conversational interviews retain certain links to a theoretical-methodological tradition aimed at structuring data, they unfolded through flows of dialogue and conversation that disrupted the rigidity of such processes, destabilising and transforming the previously established questions into new questions articulated by the teachers during the research event itself.

In order to advance the problematisation of the research data (analytical procedures), and in line with Derrida's notion of the double meaning of the pharmakon, we strategically sought, through these dialogical conversations, to trace the effects that the management of continuing teacher education in Portugal, organised through the

CFAE, has produced in curricular development, particularly at the level of the practices of teachers working in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education.

Accordingly, our analytical strategies sought to engage with the traces through which teachers (here identified as PPB1, PPB2, and PPB3, as they work in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education) read, interpret, and experience these effects within their curricular (con)textual productions. At the same time, we acknowledged the impossibility of closing the meanings produced by such effects, since the ambivalence of the pharmakon suggests that these meanings are always unstable and open to multiple interpretations.

THE MANAGEMENT OF CFAE AND THE EFFECTS OF CONTINUOUS TEACHER TRAINING ON TEACHER CURRICULUM PRODUCTION

As a result of the reflection we do with Derrida (2005), in this section, we do not intend to solidify an interpretation of the effects of continuous teacher training, since we understand that these effects are shaped by contingencies that are constantly changing and prevent any attempt to fully capture them.

This is what we can initially understand from the statements of the CFAE management members, as they themselves highlight their ambiguous autonomy, expressed sometimes in meeting the needs indicated by teachers and schools, and other times in complying with the requirements/interventions of the Ministry of Education, which are often prioritized due to their mandatory nature, as shown in the following statement:

Training activities are very important for innovation and for improving teaching practices. In Portugal, curriculum content has been the subject of various interventions over the past 20 years. The Center responds to two main situations: on one hand, the training needs identified by teachers and schools; on the other hand, especially in recent years, namely in the last six years, the requirements of the Ministry of Education's policies. So, there are clear guidelines. Up until the pandemic, maybe even until 2018, schools were identifying needs. There was a program before that. In fact, there were programs that identified the need, for example, for the National Plan for the Promotion of Educational Success. There were clear guidelines on what, especially in terms of classroom methodology. So, that need to slightly change the role of the teacher and the role of the student, that was

done at that time. After that, and especially in my opinion, we ran two programs where schools could hardly say no, or they could say it, but they had very little say in what their actual needs were. Why? Because the Ministry of Education identified that teacher digital training was essential. So, we had two years where we basically focused on actions on this topic. They were actions from the Ministry of Education (DCF, 2024, interview).

Both the DCF and the ACF, who are part of the management team of the CFAE under study, emphasised that, through the centre, they seek to identify teachers' professional development needs in order to organise continuing education programmes. At the same time, however, they must comply with the Ministry of Education's "clear" directives, that is, mandatory guidelines, which have increasingly shaped decision-making in recent years, particularly regarding training initiatives aimed at teachers' digital capacity-building and at the "recovery" of learning outcomes that gained prominence in the wake of the pandemic context. As a result, the CFAE's autonomy becomes, to some extent, ambiguous.

On the other hand, as illustrated by this discourse excerpt, although there are meanings of professional development oriented towards innovation, such innovation is sometimes conflated with the very notion of technological innovation and renewal associated with reform processes. This first perspective on professional development is influenced by Portugal's Digital Transition Plan, whose school digitalisation policy has contributed to the platformisation of continuing teacher education and is grounded in the assumption that an innovative teacher teaches through the use of digital technological tools.

The second professional development perspective is articulated with this discourse and also with the example of the National Programme for the Promotion of School Success, which seeks, among other objectives, to address high rates of school failure. In this case, professional development involves the implementation of methodological protocols promoted as being more effective in improving learning outcomes, while overlooking other variables involved in the educational process.

While recognising contextual specificities and the ways in which policy is translated within particular situations and contexts, we identified, in the discourses surrounding these reform processes, associations with logics of standardisation through the articulation of prescribed curriculum and standardised testing. This

suggests a certain degree of influence from the GERM - Global Education Reform Movement, which promotes curricular standardisation as the principal “remedy” for enhancing educational quality and developing “effective” educational systems.

[...] GERM has taken on, among other things, [...] main characteristics: i) Standardization of education - [...] which focuses on educational outcomes and is based on the belief that the quality of results will improve if clear and high enough performance standards are set for schools, teachers, and students (using external assessment systems, prescribed curricula, among others) [...] (Marinho; Leite; Fernandes, 2019, p. 926).

This perspective, aligned with discourses of “effectiveness” and “efficiency” and in line with international recommendations (Dale, 2008; Ball, 2001; Marinho; Leite; Fernandes, 2019) that have strategically influenced educational policy reforms in different countries, brings us closer to a conception of teacher training curriculum connected to logics that try to design how teacher education “should be” “[...] with a view to (pre)defining causes and effects, inventing a rationality” (Lopes; Borges, 2015, p. 488) and mainly seek to exercise control over the teaching and learning processes.

These interventionist processes that tend to formalize the training processes go against the role of the CFAEs, which were created as organizational units with the autonomy to create and carry out their own training projects, as highlighted by Formosinho and Araújo (2011, p. 7):

The model is thus open to a concept of teacher training focused on the teacher as the subject of training (they get involved in the training process from the needs assessment stage and take part in planning, executing, and evaluating their training), integrated into their professional groups (department, team, projects) and embedded in the school as an organizational unit, but also centered on professional practices, and therefore leading to their improvement.

This idea of training points, therefore, to the fact that teachers should not just be “spectators” of “ready-made” curricula, but also creators of formative curricular projects (Veloso; Almeida, 2022; Leite; Fernandes; Figueiredo, 2018, 2019). However, the “doses” of external interventions, which are increasingly prominent in the projects,

also leave traces of influence/effect on teachers' discourses, as expressed in the following teacher accounts:

There are two sides to it. Because we are partly required, when we move up a level, to have that minimum number of hours. But we can even have more. We could have 1,000 hours, but we need 50 hours for each level. And these hours really relate to our own area. It doesn't make sense. And then there are those people who sign up because, like now, there's going to be a repositioning and people don't really know how it's going to happen. It's better to have extra training than not enough. I'm even in another one (PPB1).

Training activities are very important for innovation and for improving teaching practices. In Portugal, the curriculum content has gone through many changes over the last 20 years, depending on the government and which Ministry of Education is in power. Continuous training is a great asset for teachers to adapt and take on new knowledge and new practices (PPB2).

I mean, a lot of times it's us, the teachers, who request it. Sometimes, a certain group of teachers will suggest that it would be good to have training on specific things, for example, right now, since we're really in the digital era and using platforms a lot. For instance, earlier this year, a group of teachers in a meeting decided to ask the director to organize training on the Camões Platform, which is the platform we're currently using to support our work. And at other times, it can also come from the training center itself, which is really up-to-date, and we're lucky to work with an amazing training center that's always attentive and concerned; they keep diversifying topics and offering training; and then, depending on how well the training is received, it may eventually be repeated later, adjusted, continued, etc. (PPB3).

Indeed, the effects are diverse: We identified effects of meaning that drift towards signifying continuing education as a remedy to be consumed and "applied" according to protocols recommended by curricular reforms; yet we also identified continuing education as a remedy understood as necessary for improving teaching practices in their contextual inventive potential.

In the first interpretation, the teacher emerges as the one who must "administer" the prescribed remedy and, at the same time, "ensure" its effectiveness, in a manner similar to a professional who follows established protocols. This perspective highlights investment in teacher education processes designed to "equip" teachers for such a task, as illustrated by the following statement: "Continuing education programmes are an asset for teachers to adapt and appropriate new knowledge and new practices" (PPB2).

In this sense, it is important not to overlook that, when used as an auxiliary mechanism for implementing curricular prescriptions aimed, above all, at standardising school practices and teachers' curricular decisions, education produces the effect of devaluing what is generated within schools, thereby threatening the differences that exist there. Hence its harmful character, being "[...] capable of affecting or infecting the deepest levels" (Derrida, 2005, p. 68).

Although the Ministry [of Education], in recent years, has had very strong guidelines on what continuous teacher training should be, there has always been some room for creativity from the CFAE. And how do we do that? We rely on the trainers we have and, therefore, we challenge these trainers to think with us about training that might be of interest to the teachers. And well: we end up implementing them too. I think that's how it is. Maybe this frames our work, right? (ACF, 2024, interview).

In the second point, we observe that the CFAE still resists in its management role by creating training projects that may, in some way, respond to the real needs of teachers; and thus lives in the ambivalence of meeting the demands of the Ministry of Education and the real needs of teachers constituted in the face of the emergence of everyday classroom life.

In addition to these demands, in this game, teachers are also confronted with the requirements arising from performance evaluation and progression in their teaching careers, which effectively influences the decision to participate in training activities. Although it is understood that continuous training is necessary and must be recognized, one must take care with the meanings through which it is represented so that it does not fall into training attendance merely as an obligation, without any effect on the improvement of curricular practices.

When handled as a necessary remedy for improving teaching practices in their contextual inventive potential, that is, by granting teachers the possibility to express what they wish to have focused on in training actions, training implies broad possibilities of effects as a discursive production of curriculum.

We perceive, from a Derridean reading, that continuous training can be interpreted as a *phármakon*, since it can produce, at the same time, beneficial or harmful effects depending on the situation, that is, it can simultaneously operate as

remedy or poison, and consequently teachers perceive and feel these effects in different ways in their professional contexts, as pointed out in the teaching discourses.

Because that's always after work, and sometimes we leave here tired. On Wednesday we finish, and it has been online. But it's tricky because sometimes [going] until 9:00 PM is a bit hard. Other times there are trainings where I wanted to learn more, and in the end I can't reach that level we aim for (PPB1).

I recently took part in a [training] on the system of technology systems. [...] And it was a really interesting training. But what happened? It was a training that public schools still don't have the resources to implement. It was very interesting, but then, when it came to putting it into practice, the school isn't set up for me. That's what I felt, especially in elementary schools (PPB2).

Has it been more of a digital era? Yes, because everything points to that, right? We're in the 21st century, and everything increasingly points that way in schools, even though sometimes a little bit of the essence of what school is gets lost. But more and more, the demand is always in the digital era, everything computerized. But that, afterwards, that's another story. Excuse my expression, it's a whole different matter because I personally think we shouldn't go to extremes. In the digital era, we're kind of undervaluing that part of teaching that's more bookish and about vocabulary; and speaking, commenting, writing, which is so important. And I think we're kind of entering, now, an extreme.

While acknowledging that some training activities produce improvement effects in their curricular production, teacher PPB1 also highlights that the mandatory nature for career progression, the excess and prolongation of training activities have produced effects of pressure, fatigue and unproductiveness, reducing possibilities, in their case, for interaction and utilization of training moments.

On the other hand, teacher PPB3 points out in their discourse that the excessive treatment of digital properties (digital training) in training activities to meet the Digital Transition Plan in Portugal, with its digitalization policy for schools, has caused effects of platformization of training and disregard for teaching in its more "bookish" conception.

The excessive doses, regarding the use of technologies in training processes, have caused, in the teacher's view, harmful effects on the treatment of the teaching-learning process, as they ignore other emerging training demands and distance themselves from a potential interaction with the curricular needs of the teachers in the classroom.

Teacher PPB2, in turn, also highlights the issue of digitalization in training activities, pointing out that often the proposals of these actions reflect effects of decontextualization of the material realities of schools. That is, the excessive focus of training processes on the use of technologies has caused, at times, a tendency toward the emptying of critical aspects in educational know-how, becoming harmful in the view of this teacher.

In this direction, the reading of teaching discourses points, among other possibilities, to the differential and deconstructive character of the pharmakon in their curricular productions when faced with discourses that seek to present definitive solutions operating in a network of contaminated/contaminating meaning-effects constantly translated by teachers (con)textually. This does not mean, in the context of our discussion, that the administration of “remedies” prescribing curricular standardization, as is the case of GERM to promote improvement in the quality of education and training processes, does not cause side effects of infection/affecting in teachers' curricular production; as highlighted by Derrida (2005), there is no harmless remedy.

However, the ambivalence of the pharmakon operates on the perception that there are meaning-effects seeking to control teachers' curricular production through the control of the training process, but that, even so, do not prevent other formative curricular possibilities from emerging and coexisting in the same training space-time, which enables the construction of more democratic curriculum that fulfill principles of social justice.

This perspective, then, enables approximations to the management of training processes aligned with the contextual needs of teachers (Trindade, 2018), that is, the continuing education of teachers in its inventive power occurs in a strong relationship with the real contexts of the teaching profession and provides a reflected experience of these situations (Nóvoa, 2009), and not merely a stage of career progression.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned, the study aimed to understand the effects that continuous training management in Portugal has had on the curricular production of first cycle

basic education teachers. The study showed that continuous training doesn't have a single meaning and produces effects that, in some situations, are beneficial, and in others, harmful, in other words, it acts as both a remedy and a poison, just like a *Phármakon* in a Derridean reading.

We thus perceive effects of meanings that float toward a continuous formation being understood as a medicine to be consumed and "applied" according to protocols recommended by curricular reforms, but also a formation understood as a necessary medicine for improving teaching practices in their inventive and contextualized power.

At the school management level, the study also showed that, on one hand, there is a relative "autonomy" both on the part of the Training Center of the School Association (CFAE) and the teachers when it comes to making decisions about which training activities to attend. This situation is particularly relevant when recognizing the importance of the school and teachers as decision-making spaces for achieving democratic education (Leite; Monteiro; Sampaio, 2023). As the data showed, this autonomy was sometimes compromised or, at least, appeared ambiguous due to interference from the Ministry of Education, especially regarding the digitalization plan.

As has been stated, regarding digital-related training, the teachers interviewed showed a dual stance: On one hand, they recognize that, given current policies, they see this training as necessary; but on the other hand, they acknowledge that their day-to-day professional lives sometimes present other training needs and that they don't always have the resources to put what they've learned into practice. This is something that requires a lot of reflection and calls for thinking about how digital tools are used: on one hand, not overlooking the conditions that exist for using them; and on the other, linking this training need with problems arising from everyday professional life that teachers themselves see as essential for ongoing training.

The study also points to the need to strengthen strategies that allow for broad democratic participation of teachers in discussions and in defining training programs, that is, situations where teachers can make their own training decisions with great autonomy, enabling the construction of more democratic curriculum that adhere to principles of social justice.

Thus, this study can promote elements for strengthening teacher training and professional development processes, addressing the demands around management, continuous teacher education, and its connection to a fair and democratic curriculum.

Moreover, there is a need to address the ongoing training process that happens relationally through the emergence of daily curriculum production actions/movements, shaped by learning experiences that are both collective and individual.

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