

The Role of The Educational Tutor in The Italian Vocational Education and Training

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Abstract

This paper considers the figure of the educational tutor in the Italian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, as a bridging role between the learning processes in the school and in the company and as an educational figure for the student during and at the end of the training pathway. The pedagogical-theoretical method of investigation, in continuity with some data emerging in the literature, highlights how the tutor has not only an instrumental function in the training pathway, but has a strategic and substantial role in the global growth process of the student as a future worker and citizen.

Keywords: educational tutor, vocational schools, companies, learning by doing.

1. Introduction

In Italian educational politics the issue of the work, understood as teaching that prepares young students to the job market, has always encountered a sort of cultural resistance. (Macale 2021; Bertagna 2006, 110). In the entirety of its history, the Italian educational model has always destined ‘professional education’ to those who were considered lazy or not enough successful in school, tainting thus the educational orientation with a clear class-conscious signature. This thesis, which was supported by the various XX-century educational politics – regardless of their political orientation – has been put into question, at least on a political level, by the 2000 school reform, though with thousands reassessing’s contradictions in the following years.

This paper shall focus on one of the consequences of such re-assessment of job experiences’ value in Italian educational paths, in particular those of education and professional development, that is to say the dual system, which could be defined as a pedagogic process designing learning paths, thanks to the joint educational interventions of both school and enterprises (CEDEFOP,

2020). In line with some European Parliament Studies (2014), this dual system is being consolidated as a bridge over troubled waters, bringing to light several results regarding the educational success and integration into the job market. For this reason, Europe is now asking its Member States, including the first-level ones such as Italy, to pay more attention to educational and professional training paths (Vaitkute 2019), not just according to the objectives enlisted in the Education and Training 2020” document (Council of the European Union 2009), but also to a rather more shared good practice prospective.

The glue that holds these two formative contexts together is the educational tutor, that is to say a professional figure that closely monitoring the student and putting him at the centre of the formative process avoids self-referential corporate or educational excesses to happen and promotes an integrated path of growth. Beyond the pure reflective nature of the tutorials, this monitoring is also ‘physical’. Quite often the tutor walks the students to the company for their formative training, or at least he goes visiting them during the entire length of their extra-educational training period, therefore handling the processing function (continuity and unity with the formative process), the supporting function (supporting and overseeing the learning process to guarantee the achievement of formative goals), and the instrumental one (specific help to the organization and handling of the learning process) (Pignalberi 2018, 91).

2. The dual system in Italy

In the history of Italian School, with the expression ‘dual system’ one refers to that learning mode which bases the training process on educational continuity between school and work, in which school is the starting point – not the arrival – and the working experience is an extension of the learning process. The approval of such pedagogic method has had a controversial history (Potestio 2020) and, only after academic confrontations and political debates, only in 2000 (Scandurra 2019) began to be put in place with the school-work alternance program directed to all high schools, and distinct from the professional apprentice (Ballarino 2013).

Dwelling now just on the Italian vocational education, one could say that it is structured in two paths: the state one (vocational education) and the regional one VET (Vocational Education and Training).

The first path lasts five years and ends with a Diploma (4 eqf); the second one (Cedefop, 2017, 25) lasts three years and aims to obtain a Professional Qualification (3 eqf), with the option of a 4th year to obtain a professional Technician Diploma (4 eqf). Both paths provide, during the course of studies, a period to be carried out in a company, which is longer in the case of VET. As far as vocational education is concerned, it is referred to as school/work alternation and is regulated by Law 77/2005 and reinforced by 107/2015; as far as vocational training is concerned, it always starts from Law 77/2005 and it then defines the modalities and times of the internship in a company in the various State-Regions Conferences.

Particularly the dual system applies only to VET , a system that, compared to state-run courses, is particularly successful in Italy, and that falls within the international classification of relevant learning that takes place in educational and work contexts, reporting good results in both areas. Recent national surveys, in fact, present VET-related training providers as more inclusive schools in terms of number of students with different cultural backgrounds, special educational needs, and drop-out students from other study paths, while at the same time recording an increase in non-repeating first-year students (INAPP, 2022). The output of training courses also underlines the value of these paths in terms of employment (Unioncamere-Anpal 2022) and re-entry into the state education system (Zagardo, 2019, 17-18). These data confirm, in Italy, what has already emerged in previous international research, that has emphasized how the dual mode supports motivation for lifelong learning and generates inclusiveness, not only during the training period, but also in work environments (Bennet and Gallagher 2013; Hopkins 2008; Bennet 2007; Coll 2009).

In Italy, one of the winning characteristics of the VET system is its connection to the territory and to the production base. A professional training network also supported by the local public administration which, understanding the winning combination of vocational school and companies in terms of social impact, supports these paths to non-public, though always accredited, entities. Overcoming some of the state-oriented education's limits, a well-managed training reality is being understood as a form of both horizontal and vertical partnership. The first draws strength from the competitive pluralism of the agencies connected to civic commitment's networks; the second is facilitated by a more pronounced separation of roles between the Providers (the social "public" embodied by the accredited institutions) and the Commissioner (the administrative-governmental "public"). In this sense, we speak of an evolution from "private social" to "public social", which becomes the best guarantee of a guided development of the educational offer only if the training actions' objectives are established and firmly controlled by the Commissioners" (Zagardo 2014, 23).

There are two ways in which VET students can meet the world of business: alternation between school and work and apprenticeship, which are quite similar to the definition of Initial Vocational Training in the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (commissioned by the EU) of 2011.

The VET provider is a local authority, that is to say, the Regions, which, since 1948, have been responsible by constitutional delegation (art. 117-118) for legislating on the subject of "artisan and professional education", administering all the functions connected to it. It is precisely its regional system that allows this educational system to consolidate itself as a training network involving not only schools, but also and above all companies, which become learning and experiencing opportunities, in which young people can experiment with a "know-how" close to what they learned at school, yet different as it is part of a reality linked work process. In Italy, this kind of consideration is beginning to be directed more and more towards forms of

real work-based learning Academy, that is, a training service capable of performing a variety of services along the chain of needs, referred to one or more associated companies, of which it constitutes the fiduciary training body (Nicoli, 2019, 109).

The ways in which VET students can meet the business world are two: the alternation schoolwork and apprenticeship, modes quite approachable to the definition of Initial Vocational Training found in the document National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (commissioned by the EU) of 2011.

School-work alternation is the didactic method in which the school provides internal training, while external training is provided by the company. In the VET the school-work alternation, unlike that foreseen in Professional Education only, consists of many hours spent in the company both in its traditional courses (we are talking about 390 hours in the first three-year course as opposed to 210 hours in the IP in the last three years), and in those courses defined as 'learning' ones according to the dual system, in which the percentage of hours spent in the company must at least be 50% more than those spent in the school training. During the training period, the student does not receive any reimbursement of expenses.

As for apprenticeship, after years of political debate, it has been recognized, in addition to its legal dimension as an active labor policy, as having a pedagogical value inherent to its status (Zago 2016). In fact, apprenticeship is not only a didactic modality, but it is an authentic structural form of the educational process that combines characteristic elements of work pedagogy such as precisely knowledge, sociality, the ability to conduct (self-direct) and obviously the work itself (Moscato 2016). Furthermore, recent data highlight how this path, in addition to facilitate the entry onto the job market, also facilitates a quality insertion, that is, in line with the training path and with an appropriate work contract (D'Agostino and Vaccaro, 2019). During the second apprenticeship training, the student enjoys the dual status of both worker and student, thus also receiving financial compensation. It is the company that decides whether a student does alternate school-work or apprenticeship. In both cases, the tutor is the conduit that must preserve continuity in the actions and interactions between educational institutions and workplaces, known as boundary crossing precisely from the problems and potentials that arise in the two training contexts that if addressed in a positive and capacitating atmosphere, lead to the improvement of the interaction between the two interacting organizations (Akkerman and Bakker 2012). For this reason, in the following sections we shall address the role of the tutor in the two training contexts, and its work with the student they guide on their professional training journey. This will highlight how the participation of all stakeholders promotes not only real work-based learning, but also the construction of shared artifacts, up to projects of didactic improvement of the internship in the alternation schoolwork or apprenticeship.

3. The tutor in school to stress the importance of working

One of the reasons why school teaching, especially the one related to cultural axes (linguistic, mathematic, social-historian heritage, and techno-scientific), often fails to meet and match the working world is the reluctance of some teachers to accept the competence-based learning model in basic skills also. An attitude sometimes unconsciously anchored to their scholastic past, sometimes prejudiced and ignorant of the European educational context in which VET operates. Being still bound to a transmissive model of knowledge, it is hard for them to understand that "the construction of a competence is based on a constructive dialogue between resources of different nature and belonging to different domains" (Fioretti 2018). Regrettably, it is not always clear that a didactic organization that promotes the integration of learning processes (interdisciplinarity and inter-contextuality) facilitates a meaning dimension in the educational path.

If, on the other hand, one believes that school training and in-company training are separate paths and can exist independently of each other, then the disconnection between the two parties makes an integrated training pathway effectively impossible. Moreover, if this separation is sometimes also internal to the vocational training center itself, with an array of teachers of competences relating to the four cultural axes (linguistic, mathematical, scientific-technological and historical-social) on one side and on the other side the vocational skills trainers who still regret the supremacy of the practical hours that used to exist before the education system reform, it is even more difficult to test an integrated training system that does not work only on the basis of subject programs.

While acknowledging the good intentions of many cultural axes' teachers in wanting to give a certain pedagogical dignity back to VET study paths, which for too long have been deemed inferior to parallel school paths such as those of high school and technical, one cannot believe that this revaluation can be put in place exclusively through a celebration of tout-court knowledge. It is necessary to understand that relying mainly on cognitive learning is the wrong thing to do, since according to an embodied learning perspective, psychomotor, physical and manual aspects are and remain fundamental in any educational process, even more so in initial vocational training (Hyland 2019).

The issue lies right here. One does not recognize that for teaching to be authentically orientated towards the students' personal life, it cannot be unidirectional and conclusive in itself but must respect the contingent already provided at school, at the company and also in the affective and social students' contexts. In this sense, the educational tutor, as the glue between contexts and students, is summoned to persuade teachers and trainers to work in line with a principle of integrated didactic planning that can support the student in their human, cultural and professional growth. It is precisely in the personalization of learning processes that the tutor, although not being a teacher or a trainer, must know how to design teaching spaces where theoretical knowledge can be integrated with the practical one so that study and work are no

longer read in an antagonistic and hierarchical way, but in a circular and integrated one (Bertagna 2011, 37).

In conclusion, just as students are called upon to learn at school and in the company during the training process, looking for motivation in both contexts, so teachers, trainers and tutors must support this process, which is designed as a "junction between the potential and needs of the individual and the potential and needs of the organization" (Auteri 1998, 150). In this way, as well as supporting learning in the present, foundations are laid for future professional paths in which one will have to be able to combine and organize personal and organizational knowledge through the creation of cognitive, practical and attitudinal bridges as to deal with the work world's continuous changes.

4. The tutor in the company to remind of the learning styles

When the company accepts a student into its organization it must consider that although the student is being trained for such job and therefore should not lack some of the required skills, they are not yet fully trained and need therefore on-the-job training as well. Contrary to the professional development of an experienced worker, in-company training is more about learning than about performance, i.e. it focuses more on the way of learning than on the content itself.

It is now that a second figure intervenes to assist the educational tutor, that is to say the company tutor, whose role is described in art. 1 of Ministerial Decree no. 22 of 28/02/2000, which states that this figure must transmit the skills needed for the job-related activities, acting as a teacher and guarantor of learning. This means that the company tutor, as the student's main interlocutor with the company, must also be a teacher and not just a master, that is to say they must accompany the student's specific learning processes in continuity with what is being at school dealt with. In order to avoid the erroneous idea of educational self-sufficiency of the company (Dal Lago 2012, 82-83), the educational tutor must suggest the company tutor to trace back what has been learnt in the company, according to a narrative principle that has metacognition as its fulcrum, understood as awareness of one's own knowledge and action in the company.

It is clear that such an approach does not only aim at training memory to repeat a behavioral pattern related to a given competence, but it mainly serves to educate the mind to reasoning, and therefore learning. This is, from a professional point of view, the continuity between company and school: competences are not something static, but rather a process linking the person to different contexts realities. This concept is valid for both school and company; the job carried out at the company becomes really formative only when the company understands that the job carried out in alternance or apprenticeship, is not just aimed at the mere performing action, but rather at the acquisition of those skills useful to carry out the task.

During the training period, it would be good to dwell on the learning process, in a context that, although different from the educational one, can resume the affective and motivational

cornerstones the encounter between teaching and learning involves. Precisely for this, companies are also summoned to increase active in training participation in the classroom; to collaborate with teachers in planning learning paths to identify innovative elements; to share and support the educational and training mission of the school and to ease up placement processes (Macale and Scrocca 2020, 255-256). The valorization of knowledge through an effective transfer and re-use of the knowledge conceived and realized in the training pathways, both the school and business one, is an important step in reinforcing students' awareness and critical capacities in the face of the challenges of today's society.

If the educational tutor succeeds in transferring this skill to the company tutor, then the company job becomes a means to counteract the devitalisation of knowledge (Tacconi and Messetti, 2020, 679) carried out in classrooms and school laboratories, which would otherwise risk being extinguished by such a blind vision of the future. Only this way the focus shifts from teaching processes (often self-referential) to real learning processes where active positioning of the learner is supported (Vitale et al. 2017) so as to make them protagonists of their own experiencing process, and to also promote active, conscious and democratic participation in the productive and social life of a local community, as well as European (Lucio Villegas 2014).

However, in the work context pedagogical challenges are not limited to the professional side, the so-called hard skills, but also to soft skills as well. As Palma observes "it is not a coincidence that while indicating the 10 skills most in demand in the 2020 labour market, the World Economic Forum mentioned among the first 6 the "complex problem solving", "critical thinking", "creativity", "people management", "ability to coordinate with others" and "emotional intelligence". All complex skills with a high level of articulation" (Palma 2018, 40). In this sense, the educational tutor must be a pedagogical mediator between learning and experience, skills and character, context and person. The work becomes an educational device in which the student can develop skills up to the ethical-reflective dimension (Pellerey, 2017).

5. Tutor and Student for a global growth

The relationship established between the educational tutor and the student is confidential, in line with the Latin etymology of the word tutor, which indicates protection. The student, finding himself in front of someone who does not judge him and does not have direct evaluative duties, feels freer to speak and does not feel the need to come up with excuses; this allows him to reason and reflect not only on his own excellence, but also on his own mistakes and inappropriate behavior in the school or company context.

The educational tutor, having pedagogical competences, as well as technical knowledge on the subject of alternance and/or apprenticeship, reminds us that the student is not only a *homo faber*, but also and above all a *homo agens*, that is to say, as Arendt reminds us (1964), acting is not a simple act without words, but is always connected to speech and to the human capacity to narrate one's own experience throughout acting. For this reason, the tutor must support paths of

professional reflexivity (Schön 2006) that connect industry (acting) and reflexive thinking (Tacconi 2014). Hence the need to carry out constant interviews, to have a training diary while working at the company on which to write about professional aspects linked to one's job skills, but also personal aspects, or those relating to the company context in which one is placed. It is necessary to organize spaces that allow students to break the didactic routine (at school and in the company), encourage criticism, examination of their own doing and their own actions in order to reinforce good behavior and modify inadequate ones. This is possible because in the pedagogical principle of alternation training, practice and theory, body and mind, experience and reason, work and study are placed outside any hierarchy.

The perspective is therefore that of the capability approach in which the student is not just a knowledge-absorbing sponge, but becomes aware of his own potential and limits, both related to his person and to the contexts in which he operates (Nussbaum 2011). This awareness process is what makes the work in the training processes more authentically educational, as every external input becomes a stimulus for inner growth. In this sense, acting is worth more than producing and work is not an end in itself, but is work for the person (D'Aniello 2019). It therefore reflects on a person's ability to perform an action as a will and feasibility for action, what Sen would call functioning. In this sense, the tutor's task is to create functional relationships distributed between the person and the context, and through which the person-in-situ appears to be skilfully endowed. (Margiotta 2018, 49) and is ready to express their talents.

In the light of recent reflections on global competence (OECD, 2018), which have added to the classic tripartition of competence (Knowledge, skills, attitudes) the 'values element', not as a criterion of understanding (this is in the knowledge), but as an element directing one's personal growth, the tutor must follow and reflect upon not only the knowledge related aspects, skills and attitudes to vocational training, seeking an educational integration between the school context and the company context, but must also reflect upon what is the value the student gives to the work. Materialistic values, solidarity values, environmental values or subjective values? An in-depth comparative study has highlighted how work values change with age and how these are linked to cultural contexts (Caggiano et al. 2017). Reflection on this aspect, therefore, would allow the student to gain a greater knowledge of his inner world, which interacts, if not in a manifest way, with his educational and professional choices. It is worth remembering that professional orientation, understood as the domain of professional practice, can influence the appreciation and interpretation of moral and non-moral values more than cultural affiliation. This means that two people doing the same job, although belonging to different cultures, give more importance to one value than to another (Christen 2018).

On a pedagogical level, therefore, the tutor accompanies the student and, starting from the potential and difficulties in the training pathway, tries to deal with any resistance that may also be the result of criticism from other existential areas or behavioral problems (Colasanti et al. 2019), such as not to allow the student to live his training experience serenely. In this sense, the

adjective 'training' in reference to the tutor, recalls the German concept of *Bildung*, as the tutor supports the student in that active process of formation that leads him to face the challenges posed by reality on a personal, cultural and professional level. The student is called upon to make a synthesis of the different existential contexts in order to develop an adult life which is able to recognize potentialities and limits for human and professional growth in the different contexts. The student is called upon to make a synthesis of the different existential contexts, in order to become an adult, and knowing how to recognize potential and limits for human and professional growth in different contexts. The need to inhabit time and space remains an important pedagogical prerogative, since knowing how to dwell one's own contexts means knowing how to cope with various difficulties inherent in the person's growth (Konidari 2021).

6. The tutor at the end of the VET course

After having been the mediator between the school and the company and having accompanied the student in the training process, the tutor must also support the student at the end of the course in order to help them understand the necessary steps to be taken in the near and immediate future, adopting, however, a longer-term perspective. It is not only the moment of the "measuring competences"; if a good job has been done *in itinere*, the only things left to do are preparing a curriculum vitae and answering the question "What do I do now?"

This is the time to help the student think about their life project, which, through a realistic vision of oneself and one's social environment, allows one to better face choices regarding one's profession, one's personal fulfilment, the management of interpersonal relationships in the contexts one wishes to face. This is the moment to turn the reflections made during the course into something concrete, into an important life choice, perhaps the first one (given the age and experience acquired) really independently made.

In this moment the tutor assumes the task of an orienteer who "ferries" the person into a new reality. Orientation is therefore a pedagogical category expressed in a form of educational care supporting study and/or opening up new perspectives in life (Boffo 2018, 56). A recent study (Restiglian et al 2020) has highlighted how it is thus essential for the orienteer to have a high level of preparation and professionalism, which is not limited to the mere specific knowledge to transmit, but to the possession of transversal skills that allow him to effectively deal with students and to bring the guidance to success.

There are, actually, three options: a) continue the studies within the regional vocational education sector; b) return to state education to obtain a state diploma giving also access to university; c) enter the job market.

With regard to the first point, not all regions in Italy have activated this type of vocational courses and, above all, there are no educational continuations for each vocational figure in the various regional vocational training legislations (Franceschetti, Giovannini, Sntanicchia, 2022). This is a major problem in Italy, so much so that vocational education and training

students who want to continue their education, at the end of the vocational qualification (3 EQF) or professional technical diploma (4 EQF) choose to re-enter the national education system.

As far as the second point is concerned, despite the possibility of what is defined as a "passerelle" from one education system to the other, on the basis of agreements with the MIUR and/or on the stipulation of conventions between the State Institute and a Regional Training Body, there is often a didactic gap, a lack of recognition of the quality of the training carried out by the student in the VET. The mismatch between the two educational systems is self-evident and it may lead for the student to become the scapegoat and pay the consequences. As well as it is possible that high schools accepting students coming from cfp tend to organize sort of ghetto classes only composed of VET students.

As far as the the third point is concerned, according to the European interpretation the placement is the first aim of Vocational education and training (<https://epale.ec.europa.eu/it/glossary/vocational-education-and-training-vet>). Although considering the criticality of Italian job market (Rovati 2020), it is nonetheless necessary to understand that the placement proposed by a tutor is indeed a pedagogical placement (Girotti 2006). In line with the current theory of "career education", which is defined as the specific orientation in educational-professional contexts (Pellerey 2018, 45), it is important to contemplate that, before an immediate job placement responding to a vision of on demand vocational training, one should allow for an attitudinal placement. This is well expressed by the so-called "transformative placement", which in continuity with Mezirow's thought (2000), is shown as «i.e. "A placement that takes on a pedagogical dimension because oriented to change and to emancipation; that rejects the instrumental use of guidance activities and takes on all the formative significance that the guidance dimension has with respect to the more general purpose of forming a person capable of critically and creatively governing the processes of constant change that involve him/her at an individual and community level" (Dato 2016).

7. Conclusion

After much reluctance, Italy has perhaps been recognized that a constant and effective dialogue between schools and social realities is becoming sharply essential; a particular relevance is given to companies and organizations that can offer "work/educational service" opportunities to students, thus expanding the educational offer. Although with many difficulties this dialogue between school and work (Scandurra 2017; Palma 2019) keeps searching for a balance, so that a "third transformative space" (Fedeli and Tino 2017) can be formulated, capable of reactivating the "traditional" pedagogical knowledge of teaching, which together with the paradigms of Work-Based Learning, Work-Related Learning, Work-Integrated Learning (Mulder 2017) supports and enhances experiencing knowledge. Though perhaps started a little late compared to other countries, this path still has some originality (Massagli 2016), especially in educational reflections, both those of a theoretical matrix and those

concerning organizations (Xodo 2016, 115) that show how challenging it is, even in Italy, to look for a definition of VET that would at the same time satisfy the pedagogical tradition of the past and the challenges of the future (Moodie 2006). Nowadays, however, it is understood that, as it was already the case in other countries, "workplace partnerships are an innovative way to link companies and develop regional innovation centres, including vocational schools and higher education" (Tessaring and Wannan 2004, 50).

It is clear enough that the 'work concept' cannot be fully understood if not in the light of "that system of ideas and expectations that historically and culturally have been condensed around this concept" (Scandurra 2019, 23), "being careful to unduly separate at the outset the 'work concept' from the world and the human" (Gianola 2011, 27). This is why the essence of VET encompasses programs providing participants with skills, knowledge, and aptitudes that enable them to engage in productive work, to adapt to rapidly changing labour markets and economies, and to participate as responsible citizens in their society. But what work, what adaptive skills, and what society are we talking about?

Today, echoing and updating reflections on what from the Greek tradition onwards was defined as 'good job', conceived as the result of a joint action of technical and ethical virtues (Nicoli 2016), we returned to the same concept of good work which, drawing on an international literature, Gardner (2011) presents with the following adjectives: excellent, engaging and ethical. This means a work that meets the technical standards of the sector and is therefore in line with companies' demands (excellent). A job that involves the student and is also in line with the potential, criticality and educational needs of adolescents, in order to make their training course meaningful. Last but not least, an ethical job that requires responsibility for one's own life project and commitment to others. A job, therefore, that knows how to connect the personal moral dimension to the social ethical one, rethinking the educational and professional action as praxis, that is, as a path of formative growth that considers the centrality of the student and the integral promotion of his well-being (Macale, 2019).

Within this dual system, the tutor becomes a pivotal figure, not so much intellectually as in everyday life, in ordinary things within the training year, in the school context and the company one.

Just in his figure nearly concentrates a dialogical space committed to personalize the learning processes and the global growth of the student, as well as activating reflections in the adults involved in such process. An apparently hidden role, but in fact fundamental because "pedagogical" in its etymological and theoretical-praxic meaning, since "in pedagogy, the object of study, in fact, is not to be found in work or study, but coincides with the subject who studies and works and who, through a relationship, tends to form in a harmonious and integral way his own and others' potentialities" (Navoni, 2020, 87).

For this reason, this role would require greater attention from educational policies, as well as from labour policies, because the strategic role of the educational tutor is to promote both hard

skills and soft skills in the student, both of which are essential to keep up with the constant changes in the labour market. It would therefore be interesting, for example, to create specific training courses for those who intend to carry out the role of training tutor, in order to provide candidates with a range of competences encompassing pedagogical aspects and those linked to the world of organizations, companies and the general aspects of the labour market.

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