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## The Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group (WTIG) Lessening Structural, Cultural, Indirect and Direct Forms of through Cultural Competence and Transformative Teaching and Learning

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# The Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group (WTIG) Lessening Structural, Cultural, Indirect and Direct Forms of through Cultural Competence and Transformative Teaching and Learning

## Abstract

Bullying at school is an international phenomenon, and as a result there is a need for teachers to understand bullying behavior at its roots and beyond direct (hitting, kicking, choking) and indirect (gossiping, cyberbullying, silencing one's voice) forms. If we are really going to lessen bullying at school overtime, we must talk about the unmentionable: Bullying at school is larger than one child pushing, hitting or kicking another. Literature suggests it is quite disappointing that to date there has been no significant impact on bullying at school in the United States (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Berger, 2007). Literature also suggests there is little to no national conversation about how direct and indirect forms of bullying at school are connected to ideological beliefs, structural practices and cultural competence. This particular study explored the scholarly literature and educational practices of social justice guru, Paulo Freire and their implications for examining ideology, structural practices, cultural competence, and oppression, namely bullying at school. The teacher-participants in this study became known as the Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group. The six 5th grade teachers, diverse in race, gender and experience, were nominated by their principals to be a part of this year-long endeavor. Fifth grade was selected because bullying behavior is most extensive at the middle school level (Archer & Cote, 2005; Eslea & Rees, 2001; Espelage, Meban, & Swearer, 2004; Pellgrini & Long, 2002). One of the goals of this study was to help 5th grade students learn an appropriate use of power before they transition to middle school. The principals used social justice oriented teaching as the criteria for nominating a teacher. Social justice teachers' teaching practices are designed to pose thought-provoking problems for students to devise understandings for discussion. They address "key social justice issues locally and globally - regarding racism, class inequality, gender inequalities, planetary pollution and global warming, war and peace, etc., and seek to integrate such issues as themes into the disciplinary subject matters at hand rather than delivering free-standing lectures on them" (Shor, 2011, p. 1.). The nominated teachers who became the six teacher-participants responded to four surveys, participated in nine cultural circles (focused discussion), and were videotaped while teaching a lesson in their respective classrooms. The teacher-participants came to understand the connection between ideology, structure, culture and oppression in their school contexts as well as how all four can perpetuate direct and indirect bullying behavior. As a result of their experiences with this study, the teacher-participants were convinced that teaching from a social justice orientation, a Freirean perspective in particular, has the potential to lessen structural, cultural, indirect, and direct forms of bullying, because it poses thought-provoking questions and addresses power and inequities as it relates to race, social class, gender and the like. They were also convinced that teaching from a social justice perspective could help them to guard against becoming teacher bullies. This study was expected to allow those teachers who were very effective at teaching from a social justice orientation to share their teaching practices with those who had less experience. In the end, all social justice teachers, veteran and novice were expected to enhance their skills through this work. Future research should consider further investigation on how ideological beliefs, structural practices and cultural competence can perpetuate direct and indirect forms of bullying so that teacher education programs can address this before preservice teachers earn a license to teach.

## Keywords

Research, Bullying, Ideology, Structural practices at school, Cultural Competence, Critical Multicultural Social Justice Education, Cultural Bullying, Structural Bullying

**The Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group (WTIG)  
Lessening Structural, Cultural, Indirect and Direct forms of through  
Cultural Competence and Transformative Teaching and Learning**

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*Abstract*

*Bullying at school is an international phenomenon, and as a result there is a need for teachers to understand bullying behavior at its roots and beyond direct (hitting, kicking, choking) and indirect (gossiping, cyberbullying, silencing one's voice) forms. If we are really going to lessen bullying at school overtime, we must talk about the unmentionable: Bullying at school is larger than one child pushing, hitting or kicking another. Literature suggests it is quite disappointing that to date there has been no significant impact on bullying at school in the United States (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Berger, 2007). Literature also suggests there is little to no national conversation about how direct and indirect forms of bullying at school are connected to ideological beliefs, structural practices and cultural competence. This particular study explored the scholarly literature and educational practices of social justice guru, Paulo Freire and their implications for examining ideology, structural practices, cultural competence, and oppression, namely bullying at school. The teacher-participants in this study became known as the Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group. The six 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, diverse in race, gender and experience, were nominated by their principals to be a part of this year-long endeavor. Fifth grade was selected because bullying behavior is most extensive at the middle school level (Archer & Cote, 2005; Eslea & Rees, 2001; Espelage, Meban, & Swearer, 2004; Pellgegrini & Long, 2002). One of the goals of this study was to help 5<sup>th</sup> grade students learn an appropriate use of power before they transition to middle school. The principals used social justice oriented teaching as the criteria for nominating a teacher. Social justice teachers' teaching practices are designed to pose thought-provoking problems for students to devise understandings for discussion. They address "key social justice issues locally and globally--regarding racism, class inequality, gender inequalities, planetary pollution and global warming, war and peace, etc., and seek to integrate such issues as themes into the disciplinary subject matters at hand rather than delivering free-standing lectures on them" (Shor, 2011, p. 1.). The nominated teachers who became the six teacher-participants responded to four surveys, participated in nine cultural circles (focused discussion), and were videotaped while teaching a lesson in their respective classrooms. The teacher-participants came to understand the connection between ideology, structure, culture and oppression in their school contexts as well as how all four can perpetuate direct and indirect bullying behavior. As a result of their experiences with this study, the teacher-participants were convinced that teaching from a social justice orientation, a Freirean perspective in particular, has the potential to lessen structural, cultural, indirect, and*

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### **Introduction**

Though there are many anti-bullying efforts in schools around the country, few of them have been scientifically evaluated (Berger, 2007). One of the key factors in whether evaluation takes place is funding. For example, Smith, Ryan, and Cousins (2007) had three hundred ninety-five schools in the United States respond to a survey regarding the evaluation activities of their anti-bullying programs. The results revealed that few of the schools evaluated their anti-bullying programs, and those who did evaluate their programs used low rigor. The schools that evaluated their programs received external funding to do so which also afforded them the opportunity to offer more anti-bullying programs (Smith, Ryan, & Cousins, 2007).

Bullying, according to Coloroso (2003; 2011), at its core is contempt and violence that is fueled by arrogance. Those who feel they are superior to others, often times, believe they can harm people who they feel are “less than they are,” and these perpetrators have no remorse. Coloroso (2003; 2011) explained that anyone can be a target of bullying behavior; however, there are those who are more likely to be bullied than others. Children who are vulnerable to becoming a target of bullying are generally “anxious, lack[ing in] self-confidence, unwilling to fight, shy, reserved, quiet, timid, sensitive, poor, rich...perceived as inferior [due to race or ethnicity], or [are] those whose gender/sexual orientation, or religion is perceived as inferior and deserving of contempt” (Coloroso, 2003, pp. 44-45). Many targets of bullying behavior are selected because their physical, intellectual and behavioral characteristics are devalued (McEvoy, 2005). McEvoy (2005) explained that “if the basis of target selection happens to be a category we recognize as discriminatory, then we also recognize bullying as a hate crime” (p. 3). Bullying can be perpetuated through ideology, structural practice and lack of cultural competence.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian theorist, educator and practitioner wrote a number of influential books notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paulo Freire's observations which included thirty years of teaching around the world informed him that most schools promoted the values of the dominant class, creating a "culture of silence" where underserved individuals were oppressed--deprived the means to think critically about their place in the world (Freire, 1993). Much like American education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cultural bias can be found throughout public school curricula and standardized testing, cultural bias is believed to be salient throughout the instructional practices promoted and executed by school teachers and administrators. For example: holding the belief that the dominant or mainstream (presumably European and North American) cultural ways of learning and knowing are superior to ways of learning and knowing that do not reflect such a culture.

Ideology can be defined as an unquestioned set of beliefs about a group of people. Though ideological beliefs continue to inform structural practices, cultural knowledge, and ultimately teaching practices, scholars and practitioners argue that they do not. Freire and Macedo (2005) explained that many K-12 schools and universities express publicly that they keep all ideological beliefs out of schools and universities. Freire and Macedo (2005) challenged the notion that ideology does not play a key role in the construct of the derisive social categories of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in schools and universities. They argued that the denial that ideology exists in schools and universities is deceptive and hinders individuals from developing the critical skills needed to become full participants of society (Freire and Macedo, 2005). Freire and Macedo (2005) believe that ideological beliefs guide structural practices at school.

Structural bullying is maintained by "Terror." According to Coloroso (2003), terror is structural (systemic) bullying used to intimidate and maintain dominance within systems. Terror flows along ideological gradients. Those with power are likely to bully those who have less whether it is student-to-student or teacher-to-student. Much of the structure of schools is based upon a sense of authority, and has many elements rooted in the ideas of a factory, namely a strict sense of hierarchy (Freire, 1993; Rhone, 2008). Transforming the way that parents and teachers, students and teachers, and students and students interact with each other can change the school culture into a place where parents, students and teachers can learn to think critically, not what to think. This means that teachers would reinvent themselves to become change agents who are open to ideas from those who are, often times, least likely to be listened to, parents and students. Students can be vulnerable to teacher bullying. McEvoy provided an example of what teacher-to-student bullying looks like:

An abusive teacher may argue that a student who complains is simply trying to excuse his or her "questionable" academic performance. This shifts attention from the teacher's inappropriate conduct to a discussion of "standards" and to the student's motivation for complaining. This also has the minimizing effect of suggesting to others that what is at stake is merely a "personal difference," rather than a systematic abuse of power (McEvoy, 2005, p. 2).

Twenlaw and Fonagy (2005) defined a bullying teacher as “one who uses his or her power to punish, manipulate, or disparage a student beyond what would be reasonable disciplinary procedure” (p. 2387). Page (2007) reports that teachers who are unable to correct students who break the rules, disengage from the learning process, show apathy, and who don’t show concern for receiving bad marks can resort to classroom control strategies that can change them into the biggest bullies in school. First, these teachers were good students in their own schooling experience and are unable to empathize with students who show little interest in following the rules (Page, 2007). Second, most of these teachers have no experiences or teacher training to help them deal effectively with children who refuse to cooperate (Page, 2007). Third, these teachers have a set and limited knowledge base on how to interpret the underlying causes for why students are unmotivated and why they are hostile or feel marginalized in the school environment (Page, 2007). Further, few but some teachers resort to intentional bullying, intimidation and/or humiliation to force uncooperative students to cooperate. In essence, teachers resort to bullying to gain student control. Though bullying by teachers is generally not direct (hitting, kicking, choking, etc.), it is powerful and very clear to see. It can create a climate that provokes student-to-student indirect and direct forms of bullying.

Cultural bullying is maintained through a lack of cultural competence, sometimes associated with terror (Rhone, 2008; Coloroso, 2011; Campbell, 2010). It is cultural bullying when a teacher or a student of the dominant culture singles out a student because of his or her differences such as skin color, ethnicity, social class, language, and sexual orientation. Cultural bullying is taking place when students of color are expected to abandon their core identities including native language in order to “fit” into dominant ideologies operating in the larger school context. Students from diverse racial, ethnic, and impoverished backgrounds are most often not able to “fit” into what has long been defined as “appropriate behavior” and “high academic performers” at school. Recent data indicates that 90% of teachers in United States classrooms are white, middle class and increasingly female (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2009; King, 2000) while the students they teach continue to get racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse. Many teachers and students bring discriminatory attitudes to school that have been formed from teachings at home (Campbell, 2010). In most cases, white teachers and students have not been exposed to a critically reflective curriculum to examine and deconstruct long-held, deep-seated values and opinions (Campbell, 2012). Teachers and students from the dominant culture might feel contempt for students who are different from themselves due to cultural ignorance. What makes teacher expectations and the resultant discrimination so difficult to eradicate is that personal beliefs are deep-seated, part of our individual and cultural experiences, and therefore difficult to change from the outside---they are also often hidden. Even if they believe it to be true, few people are willing to admit that they consider white students to be smarter than African American, Hispanic, Native American or wealthy students to be more capable than poor students. And one would suspect that even fewer educators are willing to admit that they treat underserved students any differently in the classroom than they do the rest of their students.

In many United States teacher education programs, preservice teachers take one course titled “Diversity or Multicultural Education” that does not examine unequal distribution of power and/or white privilege (Gorski, 2008). In order for teachers to develop a critical lens, it is important to move beyond food, clothing, and music celebrations of diversity to examine “whiteness” and the privilege associated with it in every aspect of society, especially in schools (Gorski, 2008; King, 2000). Today, white teachers still avoid a serious conversation about how school systems apparently privilege whiteness over other cultures. Therefore, systems that marginalize, bully, some students and promote the well being and success of others remain untouched (King, 2000). Critically examining ideological beliefs, structural practices, school cultural climate, and teaching behaviors can help to ensure that all children will be treated with dignity and respect. Even in the face of standard assessments and accountability through testing, it remains vital for teachers to acknowledge diversity and the role of power in diversity.

### *Methods*

Six principals were asked to nominate one 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in their buildings whose teaching behaviors were consistent with a social justice orientation. Fifth grade was selected because bullying behavior is most extensive at the middle school level (Archer & Cote, 2005; Eslea & Rees, 2001; Espelage, Meban, & Swearer, 2004; Pellgrini & Long, 2002). This study drew on data from six 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers through four surveys, nine cultural circles, and one videotaped classroom observation. The teachers were diverse by race, gender and experience. Every teacher had approximately 23 students in his or her classroom; therefore, the number of people directly and indirectly impacted by this work was 144.

The teacher-participants used a Freirean lens to examine how oppression, silencing, contempt and exclusion, all characteristics of bullying behavior, could be embedded in ideological beliefs that guide the ranking and sorting regimes of what schools do. For example, most ranking and sorting regimes result in middle class, English speaking and mainly white students being ranked into advanced level classes, while students who are impoverished, minority and who possess limited English skills are overrepresented in special education classrooms.

### *Findings*

Survey instrument #1 revealed that in general the nominees had a teaching philosophy that represented a social justice orientation, they were different from each other; yet, there were many commonalities. Every nominee identified a social justice teacher as one who uses a very engaged approach to teaching designed to empower students and lessen aggressive behavior, namely bullying. Further, the teacher-participants reported that cooperative learning, debates, and journal writing, were among the strategies that social justice teachers should use most often. On average, the nominees rated themselves at 7.5, on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 representing a teacher who uses a social justice orientation in every content area. Generally, the nominees had a strong desire to become more effective social justice educators. The nominees explained

that they were most familiar with direct bullying (hitting, kicking, choking, and spitting) and less familiar with indirect (silencing of voice, threats, and verbal taunts), structural, and cultural forms of bullying. After some discussion, they all believed various forms of bullying were present in their schools and classrooms. Most of the nominees believed that teaching with a social justice orientation was consistent with anti-bullying teaching practices. All nominees believed that this study had a connection to the Cultural Proficiency Initiative in the Wichita Public Schools, USD 259. Pre/survey #2 revealed that the teacher-participants did not understand the interconnectedness of structural, cultural, direct, and indirect forms of bullying. This data also revealed the first three cultural circles were effective in helping teacher-participants to understand the connectedness of structural, cultural, direct, and indirect forms of bullying and what teacher-to-student bullying could look like. In survey instrument #3, using data from a survey and observations, it was clear that all teachers had to varying degrees deepened their social justice orientation approach in the classroom. They realized that teacher-to-student bullying happens more often than they once believed, prior to this endeavor. Survey instrument #4 showed the teacher-participants became more reflective practitioners. The teacher-participants reported that this study caused them to examine their own ideological beliefs about diverse cultures (race, ethnicity, language differences, and social economic class) to ensure they were not using racist practices and they were making clear connections between teaching, power, culture, privilege, and the present day realities of those who continue to experience prejudice and discrimination. All came to understand that dialogue is significant for students and themselves. Every teacher-participant believes that it is possible to “Lessen structural, cultural, direct, and indirect forms of bullying through cultural competence and transformative teaching and learning” through the use of critical pedagogical practices as advocated by Paulo Freire. Critical pedagogy advocates the use of education as a tool to help learners to better themselves by developing voice for the purpose of creating a more just society. In other words, education is designed to start the process for progressive social change.

### ***Cultural Competence/Cultural Circles***

Over a ten-month period, the teacher-participants attended nine cultural circles (focused discussions) and participated in a number of learning activities. The cultural circles were organized so that teacher-participants could read, reflect, dialogue, present chapters from Paulo Freire’s work, and role play. At the core of the first three cultural circles was an examination of ideological beliefs and structural practices that can oppress some students at the expense of others. The teacher-participants learned about the “banking system.” According to Freire, the “banking system” does not invite students’ voices in the classroom. It is teacher-centered and does not consider students to have valuable knowledge to share. Teacher A shared her feelings after the first three cultural circles:

The dialogue we had about *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* made me look at how I have been teaching and realize that while I have tried to be innovative and make the classroom relevant to my students, when it comes to crunch time I tend to count on a “banking system,” where I give students information and I expect them

to feed it back to me. I think one of the most beneficial parts of the first three circles was observing every teacher participant present the way their assigned “social justice” teacher taught a lesson. As I watched every presenter, I began to get ideas of how I could present different lessons, so students could dialogue and gain a greater appreciation for cultural differences, starting with their own.

Following the first three days of cultural circles, every teacher-participant was challenged to return to their classrooms and put into practice what they learned by transforming the content they were already teaching to include a critical lens, a deeper social justice orientation. The teacher-participants were given resources that were not limited to but inclusive of: *The Planning to Change the World: A Plan Book for Social Justice Teachers (2010-2011)*; *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love*; *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*; and *Rethinking Schools, Vols. 1 & 2*. During this year-long journey, teacher-participants were required to reflect and post to the *Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group* website after every cultural circle and when classroom interactions provoked them to do so. Teacher P captured the essence of her experience after the first three cultural circles:

After the three days of circle time, I am reflecting that there will always be room for growth, and that I have been extremely optimistic. I was prepared to “learn solutions” to social justice inequities with the mindset that it was all student-to-student based. The circle sessions have given me a wealth of opportunity to review my classroom and my own building, to look inward at areas open to professional growth on behalf of our own school staff, starting with myself. Fortunately, this does work within the philosophy and the “best practices,” that have been implied by the Cultural Proficiency education and Parent Engagement team.

### ***Transformative Teaching and Learning/Observations***

The remaining cultural circles centralized putting a social justice orientation into action in the classroom. The teacher-participants presented social justice lessons to the Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group. The lessons were designed to teach curriculum from a popular cultural, issues-oriented perspective using critical pedagogical techniques. The lessons included narratives that have been historically marginalized in our society. The teacher-participants used literature that explained how children who are bullied in many instances grow up to bully others and get involved in criminal behavior. The teacher-participants reported plans to include some of the approaches they learned from the work of Antonia Darder, *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love*, in their classrooms. The approaches included “Sharing Circles” and the “Daily News.” According to Darder (2002), “Sharing Circles” and the “Daily News” allow teachers to turn routine practices into critical dialogue. These activities allow teachers to get more deeply involved in their students’ lives in order to help them address some of the inequalities they live with daily, especially bullying. Several teacher-participants reiterated that in order to help students to transform their lives it is imperative that they have the chance to give voice to their struggles. In the end, the teacher-participants encouraged each other to use teaching

materials from *Teaching Tolerance* [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org); *Rethinking Our Classrooms* [www.rethinkingourschools.org](http://www.rethinkingourschools.org); *Social Justice Plan Book* [www.justiceplanbook.com](http://www.justiceplanbook.com); and weblinks from Critical Multicultural Pavilion <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural>.

During December 2010, every teacher-participant was videotaped in their individual classroom while teaching from a social justice orientation. The videotaping revealed that their lessons were engaging and exposed their students to various possibilities for addressing social injustices in their personal lives, communities, and at school. The lessons included classroom dialogue, giving every student a chance to share about his or her lived reality, in whole-class and small group settings. In addition, it included role-play that took the students back in time to take on the roles of freedom fighters who struggled for the right to vote. Instead of “pure” history lessons, students enacted social movements designed to move groups of people from the margins to the center in the American society. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade students role-played the positions of perpetrator, victim and bystander in the bullying relationship in order to better understand how they are connected. In one class, the students were inspired to start an Anti-bullying Club. They voted to have their club meet once per week to discuss the injustices of bullying and why it is important to report it, if one is a victim and/or bystander. The Anti-bullying Club would include a website for students to dialogue anonymously. One teacher-participant began having town-hall meetings and formed class committees to address issues regarding those who enjoy privilege at the expense of others—injustice.

The six teacher-participants who participated in this study were nominated by their principals as being teachers who have over time demonstrated a commitment to teaching for social justice. Therefore, the teacher-participants came to the Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group with a commitment to teach for social justice, teach through a critical lens. Through their participation in this year-long endeavor, the teacher participants simply used the cultural circles and critical multicultural lessons (in and out of the classroom) to strengthen the skills they brought to this work. As they engaged in critical dialogue and taught critical multicultural lessons, it became evident that they felt strongly about using an anti-bias curriculum to address not avoid the issues that keep students, teachers, parents, administrators and other school community members divided. Though the teacher-participants believed that most schools worked to ensure that all children receive a quality education, this process is not “sanitized” from the construct of the derisive social categories of class, race, ethnicity, language, etc. (Freire and Macedo, 2005).

This study was expected to allow those teachers who were very effective at teaching from a social justice orientation to share their teaching practices with those who had less experience. In the end, all social justice teachers, veteran and novice were expected to enhance their skills through this work. Future research should consider further investigation on how ideological beliefs, structural practices and cultural competence can perpetuate direct and indirect forms of bullying so that teacher education programs can address the issue of teacher bullying before teachers graduate with a license.

### ***Limitations***

We acknowledge that our original plan to organize at least two cultural circles for the parents of the students in the teacher-participants' classrooms to join us in this endeavor would not happen. Among the concerns was whether parents would feel that they were being told how to parent their children. In making the decision to proceed without the "parent-circles," we realized that we would be excluding a significant part of this endeavor. Paulo Freire believed that any effort made to transform classroom spaces to become more democratic should happen simultaneously with parents to ensure that children would have a like experience at home. If a like study is continued at another time, it will be imperative to include parents.

### ***Discussion***

Teaching for social justice means focusing on teachers' and students' activism regarding the social, economic, and institutional structures that maintain unearned privilege and disadvantage for particular racial, cultural, language, socioeconomic, and gender groups. In addition, teaching for social justice means facilitating learning in a way that acknowledges cultural and ethnic identity, using a culturally relevant approach to teaching and learning, and building social supports to help all students thrive in the classroom.

Bullying and being bullied is associated with health problems for children and adults. Children and adults who are bullied have adjustment problems including poor mental health and extreme violent behavior. Bullying behavior has long lasting effects for the victim, bystander and perpetrator.

### ***National Conference***

The Wichita Teacher Inquiry Group engaged a national audience in a dialogue about their year-long journey at the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in Chicago, Illinois. The Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference is based upon the work of the late Paulo Freire and the late Augusto Boal.

### **Resource**

This project is an extension of a dissertation study written by Linda Fae Rhone titled *School Bullying: A Freirean Perspective*. Rhone facilitates cultural circles (critical discussions) and workshops designed to help a school community guard against structural and cultural bullying and student-to-student and teacher-to-student bullying. Rhone can be reached at: [lindarhone@cox.net](mailto:lindarhone@cox.net) or (316) 847-2921.

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