

Overage Enrollment And Repetition In Schools: Implication Of The Free And Compulsory Basic Education In Liberia.

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Abstract:

Despite more than two decades of implementing the compulsory basic education policy by the Ministry of Education and considerably increase in students' enrolment at all levels, the education system is still face with huge overage problems. There are concerns about high over-age children, dropout, and repetition rate in the country. The situation raises question about the efficiency of the education system and government quest to achieve the sustainable development goal number four by 2030. The purpose of this study was to examine efficiency in basic and compulsory education in Liberia through the analysis of national enrolment and repetition data available using the annual school census report of the Ministry of Education for academic year 2019-2020. The study sought to answer three questions: What is the enrollment pattern of pupils at age and over-age at Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Senior secondary education levels? What is the repetition rate of pupils at age and over-age at ECE to Senior secondary education levels? To what extent students' age influence their repetition at ECE to Senior secondary education levels? Data was extracted from the annual school census on key variables such as enrolment, over-age, and repetition rate by county and level of education and analyzed to produce descriptive statistics and correlational results using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The study found that almost one and a half million school-aged children were enrolled in Liberia, but a little over half of the enrolled students completed the academic year. However, majority of the enrolled students were overage. Given the net enrollment, close to fifteen percent of students failed to progress to the next grade. The study also found significant relationship between student age at enrollment and the repetition rate. The study concludes that the age of enrollment of children is a key predictor of the extent to which they can progress across level of the education system.

Keywords: *At age, Overage, Repetition rate.*

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I. Introduction

School entry at inappropriate age, school repetition and dropout are three critical concerns that every education system seek to tackle for the achievement of universal access to basic and compulsory education (Merino-Montero, 2021). Students' enrollment and progression from one level to another level in school is important for parents, students, and the school system. It is an indication that all school children are accessing education and completing acceptable educational levels before they transition into adulthood. It is for this reason that more than two decades ago many countries in Latin America and Asia adopted a compulsory and free education policy while many countries in Africa adopted universal primary education policy with the expectation to ensure that every child has access to basic education (Dufitumukiza, 2020).

The Liberian education system is a 3-9-3-4 system and divided into Six (6) levels: Early Childhood Education (ECE), basic education (making up of lower basic, upper basic, continuing, and adult education); senior secondary school (making up of academic and technical education); junior college and other post-secondary institutions; colleges and universities; and intermediate institutions of learning (making up of teachers' education and vocational training). However, to get on par with other sub-Saharan countries, the government of Liberia adopted the Nine-year Basic Education policy to provide guidance on compulsory and free education from lower basic to upper basic education for all Liberians. Initially free and compulsory primary education policy in Liberia was adopted in 2001 with the aim to promote school enrollment at the primary level and alleviate the responsibility on parents and families by 2003. However, after 10 years of implementation, the free and compulsory education policy was amended in the Education Reform Act of 2011, which made primary education (grades 1 to 6) and lower secondary education (grades 7 to 9) free and compulsory for all Liberians (MOE, 2011). The main reason for the amendment was to encourage robust enrollment of the already overage school aged children and reduce the illiteracy rate of the country. According to the Ministry of Education (2020), children ages 3 to 5 should be at

the ECE level (Nursery to kindergarten), ages 6 to 11 are expected to be at the lower basic education level (grades 1-6), and children 12-14 at the upper basic education level (grades 7-9). In line with the compulsory and free education policy, all children are compelled and expected to complete both lower basic and upper basic education (grades 1-9) between ages 6-14. According to the academic calendar and regulation for promotion, the cut off point for a student to pass a subject is 70% average. To be promoted to the next class, a student must achieve at least 70% average in almost all subjects including mathematics and English (MOE, 2022). Therefore, a student who failed to reach the 70% average in majority of the subjects including Mathematics and English (MOE, 2022).

Despite the policy on appropriate age of enrolment and provision of the Education Reform Act of 2011 that enrollment of children would be at appropriate age, all schools use testing or entrance placement to enroll students at every level. As found by Waydon, Ying and Ketter (2016), the free and compulsory education policy is appealing in the wake of high illiteracy rate in the country, but implementation of the policy remains its greatest enemy. As a result, universal primary enrollment is yet to be reached and over aged enrollment cut across all grade levels with few overage learners having access to alternative education programs. Student repetition is still an area of concern that may contribute to the huge number of dropouts and out of school children. Even though the compulsory and free basic education policy has led to an increase in enrollment, but the education system is faced with several challenges with maintaining children in school and ensuring age-appropriate enrollment and progression. The government efforts in enforcing the age-appropriate enrollment policy remains unchecked and there is little empirical evidence of how it affects students' enrollment, progression, completion as well as curb the overage problem in the education system.

II. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine efficiency in basic and compulsory education in Liberia by examining the trend of gross enrollment, overage, and repetition in schools.

Therefore, this study sought to:

1. determine the enrollment pattern of pupils at age and over-age in the system.
2. assess the repetition rate of pupils at age and over-age at ECE to Senior secondary education levels.
3. examine the extent to which students' gender and age influence their repetition rate.

III. Research questions

The purpose of this study was to examine efficiency in basic and compulsory education in Liberia by looking at the enrollment pattern, overage, and repetition rates. Therefore, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the enrollment pattern of pupils at age and over-age in the education system of Liberia between 2005 to 2020?
2. What is the magnitude of grade repetition among school-aged children accordingly to age and education levels?
3. To what extent students' gender and age influence their grade repetition?

IV. Literature Review

Generally, curriculum and teaching materials are designed, and schools are set up based on appropriate age for enrollment at different grade levels. School aged children who are younger or older for a certain grade may have difficulties integrating and succeeding in school. Previous studies concerning enrollment, over age and repetition provided some interesting information in other parts of the world. Across the world enrollment pattern has shown improvement, but the magnitude varies from countries. In sub-Saharan countries there is continuous increase in gross enrollment over the past decades. A study conducted by Ekaette, Ameh and Owan (2020) in Nigeria found an upward pattern in enrollment of all schools surveyed between 2008 – 2013 but decrease in subsequent academic. Reports from several countries across the world such as Latin America, Asia and Pacific regions, India, Japan, and sub-Saharan point to the fact that the implementation of the free and compulsory education policy for school-aged children has led to increment in students' enrolments and completion rates at all levels (Dufitumukiza, Wanjala, & Khatete, 2021). In Liberia, enrollment at the lower basic level has been decreased by more than 50,000 students between 2015 to 2020, but slightly increased at all other levels with huge number of over-age students across all levels (Ministry of Education, 2022).

However, overage remains a serious problem across countries like Ghana, Malawi, India, South Africa, and the United States among others regardless of their level of development (Taylor, Mabogoane, Shindler, & Akoobhai, 2010). Lewin (2007:27) indicated that "Overage entry and progression delays primary school completion to ages where boys and girls may be subject to growing pressures to contribute to household income and to enter into marriage". The issues of school aged children who are overage simply affects children from poor and rural communities in all school systems across the world. Overage is an acute problem in several least developed countries like Haiti where almost half of the enrolled children at the basic education level are overage.

According to Kabay (2016) and Sunny, Elze, Chihana, Gondwe, Crampin, Munkhondya, Kondowe, and Glynn (2017) age is a common predictor of students' repetition in school, no matter whether they are at age, under-age, and over-age, they are more likely to repeat a grade. Several studies (Brophy, 2006, Martin, 2011, Sunny et al., 2017, & Kyereko, Smith, Hlovor, & Keney, 2022) revealed that grade repetition is common in most sub-Saharan countries and that overage student's progression is higher in lower grade than younger students and vice versa as they go to higher grades. Other researchers such as Akyeampong et al. (2007) and Ampiah and Adu Yeboah (2009) found that school aged children who repeat a grade are more likely to drop out of school which increases with multiple repetitions. Sunny et al. (2017) indicated that children who are over-age for a particular grade may struggle to catch up with others in their age group and at the same time their learning pace may affect younger students in the same grade with them and may repeat a grade. Weatherholt, Jordan, Crouch, Barnett, and Pressley (2019) examined repetition rates of students in primary of Uganda through interview with caregivers and teachers. They found that caregiver and teacher reported repetition is much higher than officially reported repetition by schools and more over-age students than schools report. In other words, school aged children who are too old for their grade tend to have more learning problems and may end up having to repeat a grade or dropout, thus putting them further behind their age group.

In this paper, gross enrolment is defined as the total number of students who enrolled for a particular academic year while net enrolment is the total number of students who complete an academic year. Over-age students are defined as enrolled children who are older than the official school-age for a particular school grade level. Repeaters refer to students who do not progress to the next grade at the end of a particular academic year often because of failing to achieve the benchmark for progressing to the next grade (Ministry of Education, 2020, & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). Examining the enrollment pattern, overage enrollment issue and the number of repeaters in the education system will provide insight into the extent to which the free and compulsory basic education policy is implemented in the country.

V. Theoretical perspective

This study was guided by the social cognitive theory. The social cognitive theory explains individual development, learning capacity and self-regulated competency in which parents, peers and teachers play important role in the life of the learners in a social context. This theory demonstrates the interaction between individual, development, and social context in which they exist and function (Lipnevich, Preckel, & Roberts, 2016). In the context of this study, social cognitive theory was used to study enrollment pattern with the view that grade levels are structured based on developmental and age appropriateness of children which considers the physical, cognitive and abilities of the age group (Ormrod, 2013). This kind of instructional structure creates the awareness among parents, teachers, and students that at a particular age, children are qualified to enroll in school. However, most often the decision to enroll children in school is largely dependent on the parents, who presumably know the developmental stage of the child and determine whether the child is ready for school or not. If the parents are not convinced of the child development and readiness for school, they may delay enrolling their children. Parents may also delay enrolling their children in school even when they should be in school because of economic and cultural reasons. Teachers as role model for students may also contribute to enrollment pattern in school. The way in which teachers can motivate, inspire, and guide students in learning may either encourage enrollment or push out students who may think otherwise of schooling. More importantly, teachers' and school's decision to promote, retain or demote students because of their development level and performance in school may also influence the enrollment pattern. Therefore, from the social cognitive theory perspective, child development, learning and self-regulated learning ability in a social context are key to understanding enrolment pattern in a school system because the structure of the school level over time create the awareness for students to pursue schooling and transition to the appropriate level through social interaction with parents, peers, and teachers.

VI. Methodology

This study was guided by the post positivism that espouses that research involving experiences of the majority is acceptable as it is an attempt to explore a phenomenon as much as possible (Pandwar, Ansari & Shah, 2017). The study was based on the quantitative research approach that is more flexible with clear predefined variables and data collection instrument. The study adopted an ex post facto research design that described the enrollment pattern and examined the relationship between student age and repetition based on past academic year. The

Ex-post Factor design was adopted because the study utilized records of activities that have previously occurred in the school system of previous academic year (Owan, Basse, & Ekpe, 2020).

Data obtained from the Annual School Census (ASC) of the Ministry of Education was used to in this study. The annual school census is a national yearly data collection process to cover all schools and gathered data on several educational indicators throughout the breadth and depth of the country. The ASC process was led by the Education Management Information System (EMIS) division of the Ministry of Education. The questionnaire

utilized was a very long tool that had sections on school profile, leadership, students, teachers, infrastructure among others. The survey tool was administered by the District Education officers and the data was reported directly at schools by the school principals or registrars. The annual school census report contains tables and graphs on the vital education indicators needed for a comprehensive overview of the status of the Liberian Education System (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In this paper, data was extracted from the ASC specifically on key variables such as enrolment, over-age, and repetition. The extracted data was entered into the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The analysis was in two parts, the first part was a descriptive analysis that provided results from the data and produced a graph and frequency tables for the first two research questions. The second part was analyzed using a correlational analysis that produced results on the relationship between students age and repetition at all levels nationwide using a one-tailed confident level of significance.

VII. Results

In this section, the findings are presented with appropriate interpretation in three parts. The first part was about the enrollment pattern of pupils by level in the system while the second part concerned with repetition rate of pupils at age and over-age. The third portion was about the correlation between students' age and repetition rate across the country.

Enrollment pattern of pupils at age and over-age in primary to Junior High school

Figure 1 clearly shows an incremental trend in school enrolment from 2005 to 2020. The gross enrollment rose from nearly one million in 2005 to more than 1.4 million in 2020. The highest surge in enrolment was recorded in 20015 with almost 1.5 million but decreased in subsequent year of the survey. Primary education level account for close to half of the total enrolment across all academic year followed by Early Children Education (ECE).

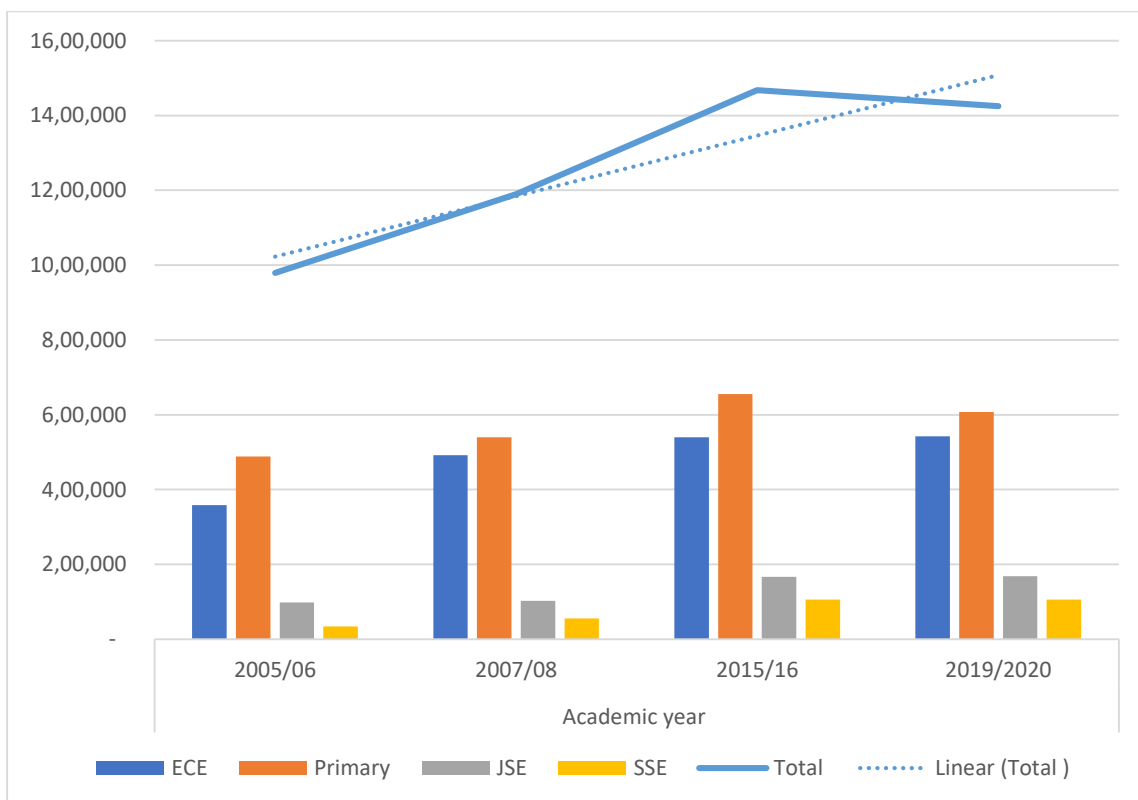


Figure 1. Enrolment pattern between 2005/06-2019/20

As prescribe in the National policy, school-aged children with ages 3 to 5 are to enroll in ECE and those above these ages are to be at the next level of education and so on. Table 1 contains enrolment pattern of pupils by age and level for academic 2019/2020, 1,424,827 enrolled in Liberia with the highest enrollment at the lower basic education level and the lowest enrollment at the senior secondary education level. Overall, 56.8% of the enrolled students completed the academic year with completion rate declining from ECE to the senior secondary education levels. Completion rate was the highest was at the ECE level with 97.9% and the lowest at the upper

basic level with 25.3%. Comparing enrollment at age and overage, 69.7% of the enrolled students were overage in Liberia. The result show more than 51% of enrolled students across all the levels of education in Liberia were overage, ranging from 51.5% at the senior secondary education to 78.9% at the lower level. It is clear from the results that most school-aged children enrolled in lower basic were overage accounting for 78.9%.

Table 1.
National enrollment pattern of pupils by age and level

	General Enrollment			Age		
	Gross	Net	% of Net	At age	Overage	overage %
ECE	542,696	257865	97.88	176595	366101	67.46
Lower basic	607558	321596	52.93	128350	476208	78.87
Upper basic	168379	42634	25.32	74697	93682	55.64
SSE	106194	28710	27.04	51549	54645	51.46
Total	1,424,827	650,805	56.81	431,191	990636	69.74

Repetition rate of pupils by level and gender

Table 2 presents the number of repeaters by level and gender. The net enrollment for the academic year 2019/2020 was 650,805 and 96,096 students failed to progress, which accounted for 14.8% of students who completed the academic year. In other words, 14.8% of students who completed the academic year 2019/2020 repeated at least one year in a particular grade the previous academic year. The highest repetition rate was reported at the junior secondary education level with 23.3% proportional to the net enrollment at this level. The primary level accounted for the least repetition rate with 11.8% children failing in a grade. However, given the number of repeaters per level, the ECE and Primary levels produced the highest number of repeaters, 44,275 and 37,990 respectively and fewer repeaters of 3,903 at the senior secondary school level. Comparison between gender of repeaters show that male students outnumber female students with additional 2,874 students who failed nationwide. This is also evidence across all levels of education with more male students’ repeaters than female students. This situation worsens the already undesirable over-age and drop-out problem that is confronting the education system of Liberia.

Table 2.
Number of Repeaters by level and gender in 2019

Level	Net Enroll	Repeaters			% of repeaters
		Male	Female	Total	
ECE	257865	22495	21780	44275	17.17
Primary	321596	19834	18156	37990	11.81
JSE	42634	5082	4846	9928	23.29
SSE	28710	2074	1829	3903	13.59
Total	650805	49485	46611	96096	14.77

Correlation between students’ age and repetition

Analysis of the relationship between students age at enrollment and the repetition rate was conducted at all levels and across the sixteen educational counties of Liberia. The school-aged children were divided into two groups: at age and overage. The results in table 3 show a significant relationship between children at age and repeaters of those who completed the academic year; with Pearson correlation coefficient of .583 and p-value of .018 across the 16 educational counties. On the other hand, there is a very strong relationship between overage children and repetition rate of those who completed the academic year, with Pearson correlation coefficient of .840 and p-value of .000 across the 16 educational counties from ECE to Senior secondary education levels. The magnitude of how student age influences the probability for repetition is significantly high, whether the student is at age, underage or overage.

Table 3
Relationship between age and repetition at all levels nationwide

		Repeaters	Decision
At age	Pearson Correlation	.583	
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.018	Significate
	N	16	
Overage	Pearson Correlation	.840	Highly significant
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	
	N	16	

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

VIII. Discussion

The government of Liberia adoption of the Nine-year Basic Education policy interventions led to increment in the gross enrolment of school aged children over the past decade and a half. This is in line with Dufitumukiza, Wanjala and Khatete (2021) study on the relationship between the Nine-year Basic Education policy interventions and students' enrolments that found statistically significant association with students' enrolment rates. There is an incremental trend in school enrolment between academic year 2005/2006 to 2019/2020. This finding is in line with several sub-Saharan countries that have witnessed continuous increase in gross enrollment over the past decade, but the magnitude varies from countries. A study conducted by Ekaette, Ameh and Owan (2020) in Nigeria found an upward pattern in enrollment of all schools surveyed between 2008 – 2013 but decrease in subsequent academic. However, out of the gross enrollment rate of children in Liberia more than half completed the academic year 2019/2020. This situation might be attributed to the covid-19 pandemic that disrupted regular schooling activities after the first half of the academic year. In Liberia, schools were ordered closed few weeks after the resumption of the second semester of the academic year. Students were required to sit home and utilize the radio and other means to continue learning. However, when the covid-19 situation was stabilizing, students were allowed to return to school for catch up and completion. At this point, many students failed to return which may be reasons for the huge difference between the gross enrollment at the beginning of the academic year and the net enrolled at the end of the same academic year.

Even though enrollment is on the increase, but overage enrollments continue to be a problem that confronts several countries in the world. As indicated in the findings, more than half of the students enrolled in Liberia were overage. This is reflected in the enrollment pattern of students at age, underage, and overage enrollment at every level of education in Liberia. The results imply that children who enrolled at overage will continue to be overage for subsequent level of education. That is if a child enrolls above the required age at the ECE level, by the time the child leaves this level, he or she will already be overage for the primary level, then the secondary level and so on. This finding is in line with Akyeampong et al. (2007) and Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008), who found that overage enrollment is high and continue to trouble the education systems. Even though the causes of over-age enrolment have not been thoroughly researched in Liberia, but there are many reasons cited in literature that often led to the overage problem. In the case of Liberia, the fourteen years of civil war couple with Ebola crisis and the recent Covid-19 pandemic are major contributors to the overage problem in the country. Though basic education is free but early childhood education is not free and so schools justifiably keep children in the ECE and enroll overage children, those making overage a foundational problem in the country (Darvas & Namit, 2016). Another cause could be parents' failure to enroll their children at the appropriate age as required by law largely because of economic, cultural, and social reasons.

As reported in this study, there is strong relationship between age of school-aged children and their repetition rate in school. There are more male students' repeaters than female students across all levels of education. That is at age and over-age children are both at risk to repeat a grade for at least one academic year with more male students' likely to repeat than female students. This is like previous findings that age is a common predictor of repetition, whether they are at age, under-age, and over-age, they are more likely to repeat a grade (Kabay, 2016 & Suny, et al., 2017). This is also in line with Dufitumukiza (2020) who found that dropouts and stagnation are obstacles to school efficiency. Taniguchi (2015) and Kyereko, Smith, Hlovor and Keney (2022) also indicated that grade repetition is high in most sub-Saharan African countries and that it is affected by many school factors such as overage. This situation worsens the already undesirable over-age and drop-out problem that is confronting the education system of Liberia.

Despite adopting the free and compulsory basic education policy, the findings suggest that the Ministry of Education is not enforcing the appropriate enrollment policy. There are many children who are overage for reasons yet unresearched in Liberia. The government failure to enforce this policy has added to the many challenges facing the education system especially with increasing number of overage and out of school children who are at the school going age but neglecting to attend school because of other reasons. These have worsened the already undesirable over-age and drop-out problem that is confronting the education system of Liberia and put huge burden on government and parents. This is undermining efforts to achieve the sustainable development goal number four of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. How can government achieve this when almost half of the enrolled students do not complete an academic year, high number of repeaters at every level and increasing number of over age enrollment.

IX. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were reached:

- i. There is an incremental trend in the gross enrollment of school-aged children in Liberia with the highest enrollment recorded in 2015/2016 of over 1.46 million children.

- ii. 56.8% of the enrolled students completed the academic year and 69.7% of the enrolled students were overage. It is clear from the results that almost half of the enrolled students do not complete a school year and education system is challenged with high overage enrollment rate across levels.
- iii. 14.8% of students who completed the academic year 2019/2020 repeated a particular grade the previous year. Even though the study did not find that being over age as a risk factor for repetition, but it arises because of repetition in the system that may lead to recurrent overage at the next level of education and may lead drop out.
- iv. There was a significant relationship between children at age and overage and repetition of those who completed the academic year. Given the high dropout among students and the extent to which students are at risk of repeating a particular grade whether at age and overage remains a challenge for the education system of Liberia.
- v. Therefore, the free and compulsory basic education policy of Liberia was successful as it led to increase in students' enrolment over the years. However, the policy failed to tackle the overage issue and it is becoming doubtful whether the government will achieve the inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all as progress towards agenda 2030.

Recommendation

1. The ministry of education should design programs that will focus on overage children such as expanding the Alternative Learning Program (ALP)
2. The ministry of education should make early childhood education free and implement the age to grade enrollment policy to minimize overage and reduce huge dropout and repetition rate in the country.
3. In-depth research is needed to explore the main causes for overage and the effect on students' performance in the context of Liberia.

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