

Indigenising infant and toddler pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Samoan pedagogical framework for pepe meamea

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This article presents findings and analysis of a two-year Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) study that involved cross-sector partnerships between Aoga Amata (Samoan early childhood centres) and English-medium early childhood education (ECE) centres. In the first year, the study engaged Samoan cultural experts, faiaoga (Samoan teachers), and Samoan researchers in the co-design and conceptualisation of a Samoan pedagogical framework for teaching Samoan pepe meamea (infants and toddlers) in ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Six Aoga Amata (full immersion Samoan centres) co-designed the pepe meamea pedagogical framework in the first year. In the second year, English-medium ECE centres joined and partnered with Aoga Amata in cross-cultural mentoring relationships to employ the pepe meamea pedagogical framework to transform the way teachers work with Samoan infants and toddlers. The article presents the framework through five key ma'a tatāo (securing rocks/touchstones). This framework promotes the continuity of Samoan pepe meamea cultural wellbeing and belonging.

Introduction

Our approach to the research intentionally sought to give precedence to Samoan indigenous knowledge systems, values, and practices through a co-design process with our research partners. This process that we had collectively chosen prioritised relationality to support both collective and individual contributions to and engagement within the study. We open by positioning the research within Samoan onto-epistemology alongside methods of postqualitative research. Following this, we present the demographic landscape of the Samoan population within Aotearoa New Zealand and the significance of strengthening Samoan pedagogies in ECE for Samoan New Zealand-born tamariki (children). Finally, we share the process by which the touchstones of the pepe meamea framework emerged and were refined through talanoa (culturally located dialogue) and lalaga (Samoan weaving) and explains how the framework can be used to shape culturally sustaining Samoan pedagogy.

Prioritising Samoan Onto-Epistemologies

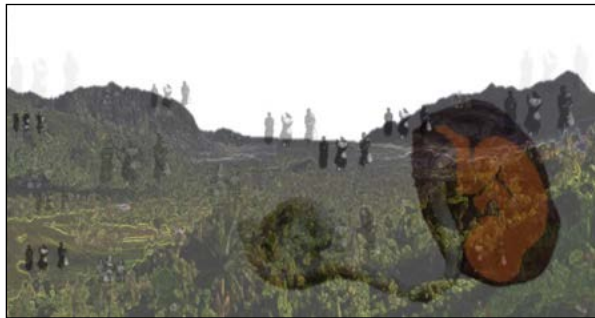
Tui Atua (2005), a respected figure in Samoan culture and a former head of state, sheds light on the complex nature of Samoan indigenous knowledge. He highlights the challenges in comprehending these knowledge systems due to their unique relational and ontological nature. By emphasising Samoan onto-epistemology, Tui Atua questions the dominance of Eurocentric ontology. Through his scholarship, Tui Atua calls into question the process of thought itself and its relationship to Samoan spiritual, ecological, cultural, and social spheres of knowing (Tui Atua, 2005, 2009a) in which the movement of knowledge is never static. It is the movement of thought that generates new assemblages: knowledge is embodied in and with the world, tied through relational ecological systems (Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022; Tui Atua, 2005). The tensions for sustaining traditional Samoan cultural knowledge through inter-generational oratory tradition have become increasingly problematic due to the change and flux inherent in migration, cultural shifts in local society, and the penetrating forces of capitalism and neoliberalism upon Samoan epistemologies (Anae, 2016; Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022; Muaiava, 2022). The Samoan onto-epistemologies we prioritised in our conceptualisation of the pepe meamea pedagogical framework are illuminated and investigated through our postqualitative approach to inquiry. We hope to generate connections for you, the reader, to experience the research with us in sense-knowing—through our storytelling, imagery, and poetry—as we seek to open generative spaces for understanding beyond representationalism or interpretivism (Matapo, 2021a).

Why Postqualitative Inquiry?

Postqualitative research offers several advantages for indigenising education because it acknowledges different forms of knowledge, decolonises research, emphasises ethical considerations, engages with interdisciplinary approaches (St Pierre, 2015), and encourages reflexivity. Undertaking postqualitative practices can address the limitations of traditional research paradigms and support a more inclusive and respectful approach to researching and teaching indigenous knowledge systems. As Samoan researchers, we embraced diverse paradigmatic perspectives and both indigenous and Western epistemologies throughout our work. By combining Samoan indigenous thinking with a postqualitative approach to inquiry, we discovered new possibilities to transform and envision research in unique ways. The modes of expression used supported a postqualitative position to contest the power of representation through textualised language alone (Pennycook, 2018). Throughout this article, imagery and poetry help express emergent and established understandings of pepe meamea. Jacoba's digital image and poem express our conceptualisations of pepe meamea.

Figure 1

The Intergenerational Reach of Pepe Meamea



Pepe meamea

We knew you before your birth

Your value in collective worth

In dreams of the living, you bind

The past, present and future divide

Like the fanua we walk

and whispers of ancestors talk

You are imagined in form

The weaving that adorns

Belonging; your birth-right

Inheritance and foresight

Intergenerational reaching

You come into being

Note. Image and poem by Jacoba Matapo.

Why Pepe Meamea Pedagogy in ECE?

The majority of Pacific peoples living in Aotearoa New Zealand today were born here. The highest proportion (48.7%) are Samoan, most of whom are New Zealand-born (Ministry of Social Development, 2016; Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Most of the Samoan-New Zealand population live in Auckland (65%), and although gagana Samoa (Samoan language) is the third most common language spoken in New Zealand, only 44% of New Zealand-born Samoans are proficient users of the language (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020). Given the steady growth (27% increase between 2013 and 2018) of the New Zealand-born Samoan population (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020), this research is critical to informing future directions for culturally sustaining Samoan pepe meamea pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE.

Samoan language maintenance for Samoan peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand has, for over 35 years, been supported within early childhood education through community and collective efforts of Aoga Amata (Utumapu, 2013). The first Aoga Amata was established in Wellington in 1987 with the specific purpose of grounding the Samoan language, culture, and spirituality to foster the wellbeing, identity, and culture of Samoan children (Ete, 2013). Aoga Amata were inspired and established by the hopes and dreams of the pioneers who journeyed from Samoa to

Aotearoa New Zealand (Ete, 2013). Today, Aoga Amata make up only 1.04% of the national total ECE licensed centres (Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2023), which means a relatively small number of Aoga Amata are available to Samoan families. The majority of Samoan children (and Pasifika children in general) are enrolled in English-medium ECE centres (MoE, 2015).

In addition to the limited number of Aoga Amata, other implications for culturally sustaining pedagogy are the influence of international ECE discourse, that typically perpetuates Eurocentric notions of infant and toddler development and pedagogy. Rameka and Glasgow (2015) have argued that within an Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context, normative infant and toddler pedagogies give very little attention to research regarding Pacific ethnic-specific philosophy and pedagogy. Examples include human development theories and developmental milestones that exclude different ontologies (ways of being) relevant to indigenous Samoan perspectives. A concern raised by transnational Samoan scholars is that infant and toddler pedagogies adopted within ECE are not always conducive to Samoan collective understandings of being and personhood fundamental to wellbeing, belonging, and identity (MoE, 2017; Toso & Matapo, 2018; Utumapu-McBride, 2013). In the spirit of identifying, enhancing, and sustaining cultural pedagogies that affirm Samoan indigenous knowledge systems, this research took a unique collaborative approach. It actively facilitated cross-sector partnerships in which experienced faiaoga (Samoan ECE teachers), as cultural experts, supported and mentored non-Samoan ECE teachers to transform their practice with pepe meamea.

Navigating Samoan Onto-Epistemology Within an Aotearoa New Zealand Context

Samoan peoples growing up and identifying as Samoan-New Zealanders brings complexity in subjectivity, particularly as they navigate Samoan culture and epistemology outside of their ancestral or heritage lands (Anae, 1998; Matapo, 2021b). To nurture Samoan identity, culture, language, and spirituality through the ECE years, this pedagogy must incorporate Samoan onto-epistemology (Kesi, 2014; Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2018; Utumapu-McBride, 2013). Onto-epistemology combines ontology and epistemology, showing that knowledge is intertwined with what we know. It argues that our understanding of reality is shaped by our interaction with the world, not just subjective thoughts. Samoan onto-epistemology highlights the significance of Samoan indigenous knowledge, cultural contexts, perception, experience, and interpretation in shaping understandings of reality (Matapo, 2021a).

As Samoan researchers engaging in indigenous research within an Aotearoa New Zealand context, we navigate complex relationships. We acknowledge that our relationship with tangata whenua as the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand is an important part of our collective efforts. Through our ties across Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa (Pacific Ocean), we share whakapapa (genealogy) with Māori people. As tauiwi (non-indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand), we are also partners who seek to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi. We also acknowledge the complexities of relationships with research partners and within the early childhood context. Finally, we acknowledge our connections to each other, as researchers and activists supporting Pacific early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although distinctively different, our researcher

positionalities share a common purpose; in this article, you will hear us speaking individually and collectively. We employed the Samoan practice of *tuasi le vā* (upholding the inter-relational space) as a relational research tool within the study to nurture the longstanding relationships that have been at the crux of this project.

Our aspirations as researchers working alongside teacher-researchers were to activate Samoan onto-epistemologies in the research, to navigate the cultural spaces of relationship and to uphold the ethical collective responsibilities grounded in Samoan indigenous knowledge systems, all with the aim of developing culturally sustaining pedagogy for Samoan *pepe meamea*. Ethical cultural responsibilities included, honouring *tapu* (sacred) knowledges by excluding specific *tapu* knowledges in documentation and ensuring the co-design process was supported by our cultural advisors through their *fa'amanuiga* (blessings/approval) (Tuagalu, 2008). The following research questions underpinned our study.

Research Questions

Year One research questions (specific to the Aoga Amata ECE context):

1. What is *pepe meamea*, and how is it grounded in Samoan indigenous knowledge systems and ontology?
2. How is *pepe meamea* pedagogy understood and practised within Samoan Aoga Amata communities?

Year Two research questions (relevant to Aoga Amata and ECE centre partners):

3. How effective are cross-cultural mentoring partnerships between Samoan Aoga Amata and English-medium ECE centres in fostering culturally sustaining pedagogies through the indigenous Samoan framework of *pepe meamea*?
4. How has teacher engagement with Samoan indigenous knowledge systems and the framework of *pepe meamea* transformed pedagogy to enhance the cultural wellbeing of Samoan infants and toddlers?

Aoga Amata and English-Medium ECE Centre Partners

In the first year of the study, Samoan conceptualisations and philosophy of *pepe meamea* were explored within six Aoga Amata in Auckland. This exploration led to the development of a Samoan glossary with 189 Samoan concepts inspired by Samoan onto-epistemologies of *pepe meamea*. The *pepe meamea* pedagogical framework arose from the 189 concepts, as co-designed with *faiaoga* and cultural advisors. Through ongoing *talanoa*, the many years of experience and collective cultural intelligence of all participants influenced the emergence and framing of the key concepts of the pedagogical framework. In the second year, Samoan teachers, Samoan elders (knowledge custodians), and non-Samoan teachers were involved in learning, alongside researchers, specific holistic Samoan *pepe meamea* concepts and practices to refine, activate, and transform teaching practice. In the second year of the study, the original Aoga Amata and their partner ECE centres were selected so that they could be matched within the same communities. Our goal in doing this was to strengthen local cross-cultural mentoring partnerships and to

generate an extended community of inquiry (Tagoilelagi-Leota et al., 2022). The study facilitated a continuous co-design process that required ongoing collaboration, negotiation, and flexibility.

The following table introduces the twelve early childhood centres from which our partnerships were built. With their consent, we have included their ECE centre names and partner centres.

Table 1.
Early Childhood Education Centre Partnerships

| Aoga Amata ECE centres | ECE Centres |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Seugagogo Aoga Amata | Otahuhu Happy Feet Childcare |
| Fotumalama Aoga Amata | Toddlers Turf |
| Taeafou i Puaseisei Preschool (Raglan Street) | Immanuel Preschool Mangere East |
| Fetu Taiala Aoga Amata | Pukeko Preschool |
| Tumanu Ae Le Tu Logologo Aoga Amata | Inspire Early Learning Papakura |
| Taeafou i Puaseisei Preschool (Winthrop Way) | Barnardos Early Learning Mangere |

Talanoa and Lalaga: Conceptualising Pepe Meamea Through Samoan Weaving

The Samoan, Tongan, and Fijian practice of *talanoa* encourages diverse thinking through dialogue, storytelling, and openness (Farely & Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Matapo & Enari, 2021; Vaoleti, 2006). It fosters the co-creation of knowledge and resists rigid control. We utilise *talanoa* as a relational practice to engage in dialogue and address pressing issues. In research, *talanoa* challenges binary oppositions and allows for varied relationships and perspectives. Throughout the life of the study, *talanoa* was frequent and ongoing, creating space and time to revisit experiences and illuminate new insights pertinent to Samoan conceptualisations of *pepe meamea*.

Teachers-researchers-elders-weavers, all part of the *talanoa* assemblage, engaged in *lalaga* (Samoan weaving) while activating *talanoa*. Doing both, intergenerational voices, hands, and *laufala* (the pandanus leaves) conceived and reconceived the intricate multiplicities of collective meaning-making with human and non-human worlds (Matapo & Enari, 2021). The *laufala* (leaves used for material) were prepared in Samoa by village members and then shipped to Aotearoa New Zealand, through Falelaga Village, a Samoan community-based organisation that supports the revival of Samoan weaving in Aotearoa New Zealand for the benefit of Samoan communities. Using these materials, the embodied and relational engagement within this project extended beyond the immediate research partners: Samoan *laufala*, hands, soil, history, and genealogies were entangled within the *talanoa* weaving events.

The Fala Pepe: The Samoan Baby Mat

The research events brought together faiaoga, master weavers, ECE teachers, and elders to learn about the cultural importance and technique of weaving a fala pepe (baby mat). Traditionally, the fala pepe was woven by the mother or grandmother either before or during the mother's pregnancy. Weaving the fala pepe before conception or during pregnancy creates a connection between the weaver and the pepe meamea (baby) through love (alofa) and acts as material manifestation of gafā (living genealogy). During the first year of the study, during and after the weaving sessions, faiaoga described how the weaving experience extended their conceptualisations of Samoan intergenerational weaving practices. Faiaoga learned concepts to implement lalaga as a relational and pedagogical practice. The following image (Figure 2) presents the lalaga of the fala pepe.

Figure 2

Fala Pepe (Samoan Baby Mat)



Note. Image by Jacoba Matapo.

Alongside faiaoga, we, as Samoan researchers, reflected on our experiences of lalaga. Through talanoa and lalaga, the significance of the fala pepe having its own relational-entities emerged, illuminating the human and non-human interactions concomitant in the wellbeing of pepe meamea. From a collective perspective, we wrote:

Through lalaga and the fala pepe (baby mat) or fala ola (mat of life), which was coined during our weaving event, our cultural knowledge experts, alongside weavers, shared pedagogical insights of the mat—the mat as a teacher of the child, the mat that holds the stories of the collective, the mat that binds the child to their ancestors and land, the mat that shifts and moves with the child's day to day experiences encouraging their cultural wellbeing as Samoan.

Jacoba Matapo shares her personal story and the significance of engaging lalaga of fala pepe in her own cultural journey:

The falelalaga weaving event was deeply spiritual and personally meaningful. My mother, who is 72 years old, attended with us, sharing her experiences of childhood in Samoa and the tough transition to life in New Zealand. My mother is the eldest in her aiga, and she shared stories of responsibility and her critical role within the collective. She talked about her experiences of lalaga with her mother and the particular skills her grandmother passed down. My mother shared connections to other practices of Samoan pepe meamea wellbeing, such as the fofō pepe (baby healing massage) and how the fala or woven mat is central to the healing process of fofō. From the falelalaga weaving event, I have started a lalaga with my mother to be handed down to my first grandchild one day. I am bringing the lalaga into my home so that our intergenerational stories can continue and be woven with care and love into the fala for the wellbeing of the child (that is yet to come).

The talanoa and lalaga from which the fala pepe and the pepe meamea pedagogical framework emerged could perhaps both be said to have been anchored by ma'a tatāo.

Ma'a Tatāo—Securing Rocks

Pictured in Figure 2, ma'a tatāo (rocks to secure) are often collected by tamaiti (Samoan children) from the river to hold the fala pepe in place as it is being woven. Ma'a tatāo secure the direction of the weaving and support the weaver to manoeuvre the threads. The ma'a tatāo, everyday resources used in multiple ways, are fundamental to the integrity of the workmanship of the mat. The flexibility with which they can be moved while retaining their purpose—"to secure"—corresponds to the adaptability of and cultural security associated with the use of a fala pepe within an ECE context.

The pepe meamea pedagogical framework sets out to ensure that pepe meamea, who are the future carriers of Samoan culture and traditions, withstand the winds of change. The framework is mobile, like the fala pepe, to follow the pepe meamea. Figuratively, the ma'a tatāo, as shown in Figure 3, hold the pepe meamea pedagogical framework in place.

The Pedagogical Framework of Pepe Meamea

Five recurring Samoan pedagogical concepts emerged from the experiences and collective indigenous wisdoms of faiaoga shared through ongoing talanoa and lalaga in the first year of the study. These are depicted as ma'a tatāo holding down an unfinished fala pepe (Figure 2). The spaces between the strands of laufala are also integral components of the framework, and the unfinished fala pepe symbolises the potentiality of the unknown—the multiplicative and emergent relationships that are unified by familiar culturally-grounded Samoan onto-epistemological strands. The following image depicts the five Samoan pepe meamea pedagogical concepts that emerged from the experiences and collective indigenous wisdoms of faiaoga, as illustrated below.

Figure 3

Pepe Meamea Pedagogical Framework



Note. Image by the authors.

The presentation of the touchstones of this pedagogical framework does not set out to be prescriptive but rather to inform a reflexive and culturally sustaining process.

Tofāmanino

The term tofāmanino refers to Samoan philosophies of existence (Motusaga, 2017). As a traditional practice, tofāmanino involves an ancient form of communication with ancestors, whereby the high chief attains ancestral wisdoms through sleep or dreaming. The pedagogy of tofāmanino acknowledges the inherent strengths of pepe meamea and recognises the significance of them accessing ancestral knowledge and wisdoms through intergenerational practices. For teachers, tofāmanino can be fostered through intergenerational storytelling within the family, through song, dance, cultural artifacts, and wellbeing practices, all aimed at sharing cultural knowledge and philosophies.

Faiva o Fa'atufugaga

Faiva, a term originally used in reference to the exceptional expertise possessed by Samoan navigators and fishers (Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017), is now commonly used to denote the mastery of skills and competencies. In the ECE setting, faiva o le fa'atufugaga encompasses pedagogical skills, including the ability of fa'atufuga (strengthening capacity) of children to be immersed in gagana Samoa (Samoan language), cultivating language and cultural competencies. Within the ECE context, faiva o le fa'atufugaga involves teaching cultural skills and fostering appreciation and understanding of Samoan relational ethics.

Fa'asinomaga

Fa'asinomaga, a cultural birth-right in Samoan identity, is connected to cultural rights, heirs, genealogy, village heritage, and protectorate relationships. According to Tui Atua (2009b) fa'asinomaga is “a person's designation” (p. 154). Implementing fa'asinomaga pepe meamea pedagogy in an Aotearoa New Zealand ECE context recognises the importance of sustaining pepe meamea fa'asinomaga. This approach acknowledges the spiritual

life of pepe meamea by respecting the collective aspirations of the family. It involves sharing ancestral stories, honouring sibling relationships, and integrating fa'asinomaga experiences into children's learning and assessment.

Agatausili

Agatausili emphasises the significant role played by the Samoan cultural values of alofa (love), tautua (service to others), and fa'aaloalo (respect) in promoting the wellbeing of pepe meamea. Aga refers to the conduct exhibited, and tausili denotes the hierarchical importance of behaviour. The enactment of Samoan values and traditions through agatausili profoundly affects the overall being of pepe meamea. Agatausili is expressed by fanau/aiga (family) and caregivers through gentle handling, cradling, comforting, and physical touch. Within the ECE environment, agatausili—put into practice by attentive and caring faiaoga who grant pepe meamea the freedom to explore and move on fala pepe, engage with their natural surroundings, and access cultural resources and materials—cultivates experiences that reflect the Samoan way of life.

Paepaega (Lotoifale)

The paepae is the fundamental base of a traditional Samoan fale (open house). Traditionally, it consists of a sturdy platform of smooth black rocks sourced from a nearby river. Within the framework of pepe meamea pedagogy, paepaega highlights the responsibility of faiaoga to profoundly understand the contextual aspects of the lived experiences of pepe meamea and fanau (Tagoilelagi-Leota et al., 2022). This comprehension encompasses the interconnected human and non-human realms of pepe meamea and lays the groundwork for faiaoga's pedagogical interactions which strengthen relationships and facilitate decision-making that is in the best interest of pepe meamea and their fanau. Additionally, paepaega, as applied in ECE, reflects critical awareness of the political and social factors that impact the community and the centre environment. The following section introduces another concept evident in the teacher mentoring relationship.

The Emergence of Fenū: Samoan Cross-Cultural Mentoring Relationships in ECE

Through active cooperation and dialogues between faiaoga (Samoan teachers) and early childhood education (ECE) teachers, a new idea of cross-cultural mentoring emerged, fostering strong partnerships in the project. These connections were established among cultural advisors, teachers of varying age and ethnicity, and individuals in different roles within ECE, such as supervisors, managers, cooks, teacher aides, and non-qualified assistants, working in different regions.

During the lalaga research fono (weaving research meeting), a new term—fenū—arose. Fenū is the name for the spare strip of laufala (pandanus leaf) used in weaving. The fenū is essential for maintaining the structure and finishing the woven mat, added strategically to ensure resilience. Likewise, the cross-cultural mentor-mentee relationship necessitates thoughtful consideration through attuned and unhurried opportunities for the preservation and acquisition of cultural practices. The fenū must match the replaced strand's qualities and size, much like a mentor should meet the mentee at their level of cultural competence. The fenū reinforces the strand near its end, and the mat cannot be completed without it.

The fenū concept in mentoring implies mutual obligations, thereby challenging traditional perceptions of the “mentor and mentee” roles. Instead of seeing English medium ECE teachers as subordinates or novices, the Samoan teachers encouraged their ECE counterparts to reciprocate the fenū role. In this model, both mentor and mentee are seen as strong contributors with valuable knowledge about infants and toddlers. A faiaoga from Tumanu Ae Le Tu Logologo Aoga Amata reported that, to her, “fenū is about the process.” Fenū symbolises the mat’s aspirations and the responsibility to maintain strength and balance for the upcoming strand.

Along with fenū cross-cultural mentoring relationships, we encourage ECE teachers from all backgrounds to approach discussions about pepe meamea pedagogy (Samoan teaching methods) with aiga and fanau (families and extended families) with an open mind. This requires understanding Samoan early childhood ontologies rooted in ancestral traditions and wisdom, which might be distinct from conventional ideologies or Western child-rearing practices. It is crucial for non-Samoan ECE teachers to grasp the intricacies of their Samoan communities regarding cultural access and ambitions. For instance, not all families speak the Samoan language or have access to aganu’u (knowledge of village customs and protocols). Conversely, some families may be hesitant to freely share indigenous knowledge and customs due to their tapu (sacred) nature.

Conclusion

This pepe meamea framework presents faiaoga/teachers with a culturally sustaining approach to teaching infants and toddlers that diverges from the pedagogies that prevail in normative early childhood education discourse. The research from which this framework emerged explored culture and meaning through frequent and ongoing talanoa and lalaga, and the weaving practices shared and experienced by all involved in this study yielded rich metaphors through which to conceive and practice pedagogical methods for pepe meamea. The five ma’a tatāo (symbolic touchstones) presented here offer early childhood teachers secure foundations from which to transform their teaching practices and foster collaborative engagement with pepe meamea and their families.

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Author Notes

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