Four Effects of the High-Stakes Testing Movement on African American K-12 Students

Thompson, Gail L; Allen, Tawannah G. The Journal of Negro Education 81.3 (Summer 2012): 218-227,301-302.

Headnote
In order to ensure that American students are competitive with students in other countries, since the 1980s, U.S. policymakers have been trying to improve the K-12 public school system. Recent reform efforts have led to the current high-stakes testing movement, which measures student achievement and school effectiveness mainly by standardized test scores. In this article, the authors explain how the current high-stakes testing movement has harmed African American students through (1) instructional practices that have not resulted in widespread higher test scores; (2) increasing student apathy; (3) more punitive discipline policies and pushing more youth into the prison pipeline, and also by (4) creating a narcissistic education system that strives to make schools "look good," even if students are not really learning information that will help them improve the quality of their lives. The authors conclude with recommendations that can improve the schooling experiences of African American youth.

Key words: apathy, achievement gaps, prison pipeline, narcissism, NCLB, school reform

Introduction
From its creation until the present time, there has been an on-going quest to improve the U.S.? 2 public school system, and promises of reform have been a foundation of many political campaigns. Nevertheless, the school system has continuously failed to live up to its potential (Spellings, 2012). Consequently, some students receive a quality education that prepares them for college or to enter the workforce, and others receive an education that prepares them for lowpaying jobs or perpetual unemployment (Hale, 2001). One of the most far-reaching reforms began in the 1980s after "A Nation at Risk. . ." (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published. This report revealed that U.S. students were not performing as well academically as their counterparts in other nations. A flurry of educational reforms followed, to include: the 1987 High Schools That Work Reform (Smith, 2005), 1993s Success For All (Smith, 2005), and the Comprehensive School Reform of 1997 (Smith, 2005).

The latest reform endeavor was codified in 2002, when the U.S. Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which amended the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). According to its statement of purpose, NCLB was created "to ensure that all children . . . obtain a high-quality education and reach a minimum proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (U. S. Congress 2002, p. 15). These goals would be accomplished through a twelve-step process that included meeting the educational needs of underperforming students from historically underserved backgrounds; closing the achievement gap . . . especially. . . between high- and low-performing children and their more advantaged peers; and significantly elevating the quality of
instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development. (U.S. Congress, 2002, p. 15)

Although the authors of NCLB explicitly outlined a multifaceted approach to school reform, in the end, NCLB became equated with one ultimate objective: producing high test scores. A major consequence has been the current high-stakes testing movement that has made standardized test scores the main criteria by which student knowledge, teacher efficacy, and school quality are assessed. An even greater problem has been that although the authors of NCLB had good intentions, a decade after the reform was enacted most of its goals have not been met (Hightower, 2012; Klein & Rice, 2012).

Former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings stated, "Half of our minority students don't graduate from high school on time. And millions of students move through the system without having basic reading and math skills" (Spellings 2012, p. 42). Among the "millions of students" whom Spellings referred to are African Americans, a group who has historically been underserved and even harmed through low expectations, culturally irrelevant instructional practices, unfair discipline practices, underrepresentation in gifted classes, and overrepresentation in special education classes by the U.S. public school system (Ford, 2011). Because African American students account for a significant portion of the nation's K-12 public school population - approximately 17%, and in the 20 largest school districts, African Americans account for 11%-74% of the students - their schooling experiences remain important and need to be addressed (Aud, Fox & KewalRamani 2010). Therefore, in this article, the authors explain how the current high-stakes testing movement has harmed African American students through (1) limited improvement in test scores and dropout rates; (2) increasing student apathy; (3) more punitive discipline policies and pushing more youth into the prison pipeline, and (4) creating a narcissistic education system that strives to make schools "look good," even if students are not really learning information that will help them improve the quality of their lives. The authors conclude with recommendations that can improve the schooling experiences of African American youth.

Limited Improvement in Tests Scores and Dropout Rates

Some African American students are reading at or above grade level, have good math skills, and receive a quality education (Canada, 2010; Jackson, 2010). However, one of the most blatant indicators that NCLB has failed is the fact that countless African American students are not receiving a quality education. High school graduation rates attest to this. Researchers at the Advancement Project found that fewer than 7 out of every 10 students graduate from high school (Advancement Project, 2010) and according to Jackson (2010) "... New Jersey is the only state with a significant Black male population with a greater than 65% high school graduation rate" (p. 1). Furthermore, "graduation rates for Black males range from 48%-75%, and in five of these 'best' districts, the gaps between graduation rates for White males and Black males range from 10% to 31% in favor of White males" (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010, p. 9). In the future, although graduation rates may improve, the gaps may actually increase (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2010).

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores are another indicator that NCLB has failed to close the Black-White achievement gap. In order to monitor achievement trends over time, NAEP administers standardized tests to a nationally representative sample of 9, 13, and 17 year olds (Grissmer, Kirby, Berends & Williamson, 1994). According to NAEP, one year after NCLB was implemented there was a 3 1-point gap between the reading scores of Black and White fourth graders. In 2011, the gap had decreased to 26 points, resulting in a five-
point reduction (National Center for Education Statistics, 201 la). In 2003, mere was a 28-point gap between the reading scores of Black and White eighth graders. In 2011, the gap had decreased to 25 points, creating a three-point reduction (National Center for Education Statistics, 201 lb).

NAEP mathematics trends revealed a similar pattern. In 2003, there was a 27 point-gap between the mathematics scores of White and Black fourth graders; in 2011, the gap had decreased by two points (National Center for Education Statistics, 201 lc). In 2003, there was a 36 point-gap between the mathematics scores of White and Black eighth graders; in 2011, the gap had decreased by five points (National Center for Education Statistics, 201 ld).

NAEP data and dropout rates indicate that while the Black-White achievement gap has narrowed over time and achievement scores have increased, NCLB has not resulted in a widespread improvement in the quality of education that African American students receive. Far too many African American students continue to receive a substandard education (Canada, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Thompson, 2007).

An Increase in Student Apathy

Another consequence of NCLB is that teachers have lost much of their autonomy and their ability to design creative lesson plans of their choice. Many teachers are now required to use curricula and teaching guides that tell them what to do, how to do it, and how much time to spend on each activity (Kozol, 2005). In spite of the overemphasis on testing, in a recent study in which more than 40,000 public school teachers participated, the majority indicated that standardized tests are not an important measurement of academic achievement, and 89% said that a "curriculum that goes beyond what is tested on standardized tests has a 'strong' or a 'very strong' impact on student achievement" (Scholastic Inc. & the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012, p. 82). Moreover, the overwhelming majority indicated that "access to high-quality curriculum and teaching resources are 'absolutely essential' or 'very important' " (Scholastic, Inc. & the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012, p. 84).

Unfortunately, the lack of professional development for teachers that might help them to improve their instructional practices and the overemphasis on test scores has harmed both students and teachers. As a result of NCLB, the quality of education that students receive has worsened, teachers have been forced to "teach to the test," and it has become more difficult for "teachers to engage students and create authentic and sustained learning" (Advancement Project 2010, p. 4). In its most recent report, Quality Counts gave the nation's teaching profession a "C" (Hightower, 2012).

Since so many aspects of school that interest students have now been eliminated, and the school culture has become "even hostile" (Advancement Project 2010, p. 26) many students have become apathetic. Furthermore, the Independent Task Force of the Council on Foreign Relations concluded that students of color are more likely than other students to be harmed by the curriculum and instructional practices that are prevalent in the school system (Klein & Rice, 2012). Kozol (2005) painted a dismal picture of the low-income, inner-city, and predominantly Black and Latino schools that he visited. He concluded that the "scripted" (p. 71), "prepackaged," (p. 86), curriculum and "regimented," (p. 77) instructional practices only produced rote memorization rather than authentic learning experiences. Increased anxiety among teachers and students was also noted.
As Kozol (2005) emphasized, although there are many causes of student apathy, two common causes are the way that teachers teach and what they teach (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2007). This is especially true for African American students, because for decades, experts have emphasized that in order to improve African American student achievement, teachers must make the curriculum culturally relevant (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2004). Characteristics that African American students equate with good teaching include making the curriculum comprehensible, interesting, and relevant (Thompson, 2002). However, in a national study by Met Life that included more than 2,000 sixth to twelfth grade public school students, less than 30% of the students rated "the overall quality of the education that they receive[d] as excellent" (MetLife, 2011, p. 56). Low-income students were more likely to rate the overall quality of education at their school as fair or poor, were less likely to say they very often receive enough attention from their teachers in class, and were less likely to give their teacher an A on preparing them in English . . . and math. (MetLife. 2011, p. 49)

Thompson (2007) illustrated how NCLB-driven instructional practices and the over-emphasis on testing have contributed to African American student apathy. In 2003, Thompson collected questionnaire (N = 268) and focus group (N = 146) data from African American, Latino, and White students at an under-performing high school. Several of the questionnaire items pertained to students' beliefs about the curriculum, their teachers, and required tests. African American and Latino students were more likely than Whites to say they wanted better teachers. Additionally, 66% of the African American students who completed the questionnaire said that most of their classes were boring, compared to 57% of Latinos and 48% of White students. Only 57% of African American, 66% of Latino and 76% of White students who completed the questionnaire agreed that "most of my teachers explain assignments well." Fifty-seven percent, 46% and 60 % respectively, responded the question "my schoolwork is very important to me" (Thompson, 2007, p. 322).

Seventy-five percent of the African American questionnaire respondents said that in most of their classes, they had not learned as much as they wanted to learn about their culture, and were more likely than Latinos (57%) and Whites (36%) to say this. Sixty percent of African American students, with 61% of Latinos and 50% of White students were more likely to say most of their classes were not preparing them for the "real world," while 52% of African Americans, compared to 50% of Latinos and 42% of Whites were more likely to say that most of their classes were not teaching them what they needed to know in order to survive in their communities. Furthermore, African Americans and Latinos were nearly twice as likely as Whites to admit they did not "take their classes as seriously as they should" (Thompson, 2007, p. 322).

Regarding state-mandated tests, African American questionnaire respondents were more likely than Whites and Latinos to say that during the previous year, they could read and understand the information on the state-mandated test, but were less likely to say that they understood most of the math problems on the test. African Americans were also less likely than the other students to agree that, during the previous year, and the current school year, passing the state test was very important to them. They were less likely to say that most of their teachers had done a good job of preparing them for the state test. However, African Americans were more likely than Whites and Latinos to say that if before- or after-school tutoring programs were offered to help them prepare for the state test, they would attend (Thompson, 2007).
Another contributor to student apathy has been that as a result of the high-stakes testing movement and the economic recession, several aspects of school that would increase the interest of many African American students have been eliminated or drastically reduced. In addition to recess, the arts have been curtailed or eliminated from numerous schools, even though many African American students have historically loved music, art, and drama classes, and have often done well in these subjects. Kozol (2005) explained,

the virtual exclusion of aesthetics from the daily lives of children in these schools is seldom mentioned when officials boast that they have pumped the scores on standardized exams by three or four percentage points by drilling children for as many as five hours in a day. (p. 119)

In its "Teachers, Parents, and the Economy" study, MetLife (2012) revealed that teacher job satisfaction has decreased since 2009, and the percentage of disgruntled teachers has reached its highest level in two decades. Ironically, teachers who were less satisfied with their jobs also tended to be in schools where art and music programs have been eliminated (MetLife, 2012). Teacher dissatisfaction undoubtedly impacts the quality of teaching that students receive, and may also contribute to student apathy, especially for students of color, because "teachers with low job satisfaction and those who are more likely to quit their jobs are more likely to teach in schools with more than two-thirds minority students . . ." (MetLife 2012, p. 15).

More Punitive Discipline Policies and Pushing More Youth into the Prison Pipeline

According to researchers at the Advancement Project (2010), "School districts around the country have adopted extraordinarily severe discipline policies and practices in recent years . . . [even for] relatively minor misbehavior or trivial student actions" (p. 4). As a result, more law enforcement personnel work at schools, and more students have been suspended from school, arrested, and pushed into the prison pipeline. These factors, according to the Advancement Project that stem from NCLB and "other test-driven policies" (p. 5). Furthermore, African American, Latino, and low-income students are punished more severely than Whites for the same behaviors, and are overrepresented among the students who attend prison-like schools and get funneled into the prison pipeline (Advancement Project, 2010; Gordon, Della Piana, & Kelcher, 2000).

Brown (2007) purported that from the time that they enter the school system, the educational paths of many African American males are marred by situational variables including harsher discipline practices, being taught by unprepared teachers, referrals for special education services, and feeling detached from school. These variables steer students toward the criminal justice system (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010). Consequently, more than half of African American male high-school dropouts are likely to become incarcerated at least once by age 30 (Zeiderberg & Schiraldi, 2002).

National Center for Education Statistics data reveal alarming patterns about suspension and expulsion rates since the implementation of NCLB. In 2003, African American males accounted for 33% of the public school students who had been suspended from school, but in 2007, they accounted for 57%. In 2003, African American females accounted for 27% of the suspended students, but in 2007, they accounted for 39%. During these years, even though White students made up a larger percentage of the public school population, the percentage of suspended White males - 25% in 2003 and 24% in 2007 - was not only drastically lower than that of African American males, but actually decreased over time. Whereas the percentage of
suspended White females increased slightly over time - 11% in 2003 versus 12% in 2007 - during both years, African American females were approximately three times more likely than White females to be suspended from school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These statistics indicate that for many students, race and gender significantly impact the chances of experiencing harsher disciplinary consequences.

In terms of expulsion from school, the data reveal that the percentage of African American males who were expelled went from nearly 10% in 2003 to approximately 15% in 2007. Conversely, the percentage of expelled African American females went down from 7% in 2003, to 5% in 2007. Unlike African American males, the percentage of expelled White males was dramatically lower in 2007 than in 2003, (5% versus 2%); it was also lower for White females, (1% versus less than 1%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). These statistics illustrate that African American students are more likely to be harmed by the current school reform's overemphasis on punitive discipline practices and policies, and that African American students are more likely to be funneled into the prison pipeline.

A Narcissistic Education System

One consequence of the high-stakes testing movement is that it has created a narcissistic K-12 public school system. The term "narcissism" is usually associated with the field of psychology, instead of education, and has its roots in the Greek myth of Narcissus, a man who fell "in love with his own image" (Behary 2008, p. 13). Today, a narcissist is described as an individual who rejects his or her real self and becomes obsessed with creating a "perfect image" (Behary 2008, p. 13). There is a continuum of narcissistic personality disorders, and the more extreme ones are classified as "pathological" (Lowen 1997, p. 26). Characteristics of narcissism include self-absorption (Behary, 2008), a sense of self-importance, arrogance, egotism, manipulation, lack of empathy, a need for approval, and lying (Lowen, 1997; Oakley, 2008). Lowen (1997), a psychiatrist who did ground-breaking work on narcissism, attributed the more negative aspects of narcissism to a difficult childhood. Lowen (1997) cited childhood experiences in the form of humiliating "blows to self-esteem that scar and shape" (p. 76) the individual's personality as contributors to the extremes of narcissism. Consequently, according to Lowen, "... the fear of humiliation becomes structured in the body and in the mind" (p. 76) of the narcissist.

Although narcissism usually applies to individuals, it can also apply to organizations. A narcissistic organization is one that can be characterized by many of the traits of narcissism (Oakley, 2008). As a result of the high-stakes testing movement, the U.S. public school system can now be labeled "narcissistic." However, the origins start with the nation's inception, when decisions were made about whom was viewed as worthy of constitutional rights and protection, and which individuals would be treated as "stepchildren": those who were deemed as less deserving than other Americans (Thompson, 2007). Because of slavery, oppression, and institutional racism, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and disparaged immigrant groups fit into the "stepchild" category (Thompson, 2007). The more direct and recent foundation of the current narcissistic public school system appears to stem from the publication of "A Nation at Risk" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). After the report was published, policymakers intensified their quest to reform schools, by revealing that American students were underperforming in comparison to students in other countries - including those that America viewed as inferior - the report caused the nation to be humiliated. This apparent "narcissistic wound" (Lowen, 1997) to the nation's "image" of superiority over other countries has resulted in NCLB, which has inadvertently become equated with the mass production of high test scores at all costs.
According to Lowen (1997), narcissists use power and control to overcome "a feeling of inferiority" (p. 84).

Pajak (2011) compared eight characteristics of a narcissistic parenting style to the current education system, and found several similarities. According to Pajak, the U.S. education system's overemphasis on testing, preoccupation with students' academic performance, push for merit pay, and insistence on more assessment equate to a "narcissistic policy style that tends to focus on the needs and interests of adults rather than the needs of children" (p. 2019).

Ford (2011) explained how dogmatism and narrow-minded thinking have harmed African American students and contributed to their under-representation in gifted classes. According to Ford (2011), in spite of NCLB, test scores and teachers' deficit beliefs about African American students continue to be problematic, little progress has been made, discrimination still exists, many teachers are not culturally competent, and biased testing instruments are used. She concluded that educators' deficit beliefs and their "desire to cater to the status quo" thwart "attempts to make necessary changes in measures, policies, procedures, and practices" (Ford, 201 1 p. 92) that would increase the number of African American students in gifted classes.

Lowen (1997) stated, "The tendency to lie, without compunction, is typical of narcissists" (p. 54). Since the passage of the NCLB Act, lying and cheating have become commonplace in the U.S. public school system. Numerous scandals have surfaced involving school administrators and teachers who have cheated in order to create an "image" of a high-performing school based on standardized test scores. According to The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, "The harsh penalties and heavy pressure of the current testing requirements of No Child Left Behind . . . and state exams continue to tempt some to improve scores at all costs" (n.d., p. 1). As a result, widespread cheating or lying about test scores has been reported in numerous states, including Texas, New York, California, Maryland, Washington, DC, New Jersey, and Georgia, and according to The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (n.d.), even more " . . . cheating cases and test security policies are under review in New York, Texas, California, Ohio, Florida, South Dakota, Tennessee, Maryland, and elsewhere" (p. 1). Many of the schools and districts in which cheating has been substantiated or suspected have high concentrations of African American students. In the Atlanta Public School System, for example ". . . 178 principals and teachers at 56 schools were investigated, and cheating was found in 44, or nearly 80 percent of the schools" (Strassmann 201 1, p. 1). These cheating scandals, especially those in predominantly Black school districts, undoubtedly have a demoralizing effect on students, and may make them lose respect for educators. Therefore, perhaps, the current U.S. narcissistic school system is an example of narcissism at its worst. Similar to a narcissistic leader who has power over numerous individuals; a narcissistic organization affects many people. In the case of the school system, the damage is being done to the most vulnerable: children who cannot defend or protect themselves from destructive policies and practices.

DISCUSSION

A decade after it was implemented, NCLB has failed to meet its most important goals of closing the achievement gap, improving instruction, and offering educators quality professional development. Instead, it has resulted in an image-based narcissistic school system that has actually been harmful to teachers and countless African American students, as indicated by high-school dropout rates, NAEP reading and mathematics scores, student apathy, under-
representation in gifted classes, and school suspension and expulsion rates. However, in spite of its lofty goals, once policymakers began to overemphasize the role of testing in measuring school quality teacher effectiveness, and student achievement, NCLB was destined to fail. Nevertheless, in spite of the public school system's chronic failure to provide a high percentage of African American students with a quality education that will assure them a prosperous future, there is still hope for the school system if policymakers become willing to accept and implement the recommendations that numerous educational researchers have made throughout the years (Advancement Project, 2010).

First, in order to shatter the narcissistic culture of the school system, policymakers must stop being obsessed with an image that is based solely on test scores and with what students in other countries are doing, and focus on reality and what is best for U.S., K-12 students, especially those from historically underserved backgrounds. The needs of African American students have never been a priority for most education reformers. Consequently, reform after reform has had a damaging effect on these students (Canada, 2010; Kozol, 2005). Conversely, when policymakers make the needs of all students a top priority, they will cease to create reforms that result in the type of destructive policies and practices that are currently in place (Ford, 2011; Jackson, 2010; Thompson, 2007). Creating reforms that result in a quality education for African American students requires a fundamental mindset change (Ford, 2011) for policymakers. Instead of continuing to view African American students as inferior "stepchildren," where they are drilled as if they are incapable of employing higher-order thinking skills, policymakers must view them in the same way that they view upper- and middle-class White students: as students who deserve a quality education and who are capable of academic excellence (Kozol, 2005; Thompson, 2010).

Second, policymakers must be willing to provide adequate funding so that African American students can receive a good education. The infrastructures of the schools that low-income African American students attend must be improved (Klein & Rice, 2012), African Americans need dedicated and effective teachers (Canada, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Ford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2010), and policymakers must be willing to invest money into comprehensive programs that include funding for preschool and early literacy programs, social and health services, ways to increase parental involvement, and efforts to hold states truly accountable for educating African American students (Schott Foundation, 2010).

Third, although the original document clearly stated that one of NCLB's goals was to significantly elevate the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development (U.S. Congress, 2002), this goal has not been met (Hightower, 2012). Providing teachers with ongoing and adequate professional development is not only crucial, but it could also actually solve many of the problems that African American students experience in school. For example, professional development designed to strengthen classroom management skills and help teachers address their stereotypes about African American students, especially males, could dramatically decrease the number of African Americans who are viewed as discipline problems, suspended, expelled, and pushed into the prison pipeline (Thompson, 2010). Also providing teachers with in-depth information about the primary tenets of the Positive Behavior Support (PBS; Cohn, 2001) program, whose three main components are prevention, multi-tiered support and data-based decision-making, can empower teachers (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Additionally, professional development that is designed to help teachers create interesting, culturally relevant lesson plans could increase African American student interest and reduce apathy (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Delpit, 1995; Ford, 2011; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2010). Related workshops might allow teachers to cultivate an appreciation of
racial diversity, while also, providing a safe environment for them to examine their own preconceptions and ingrained attitudes about African American students (Barbarin, 2010).

Finally, policymakers must accept the fact that multiple measures must be used to assess school quality, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement (Ford, 2011; Thompson, 2007, 2010). For example, using authentic assessments, especially those that are based on student activities that replicate real-world performances as closely as possible (Svinicki, 2004), may produce very different, yet more reliable results than standardized tests (Wiggins, 1998). Authentic tests go directly to the desired outcome, provide diagnostic feedback to students so that they can see where and how to make corrections, and promote student individuality (Svinicki, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The old adage, "where there's a will, there's a way," applies to the current state of the public school system. In order to improve teacher morale and provide African Americans and other historically underserved students with a quality education, policymakers must become willing to face the fact that NCLB has not only failed, but has actually been harmful to the very students whom it was allegedly created to help. When policymakers become willing to face the truth, listen to the recommendations that are needed, and take action, perhaps the school system will move out of its current narcissistic rut and finally become the great equalizer that it is meant to be.

References


AuthorAffiliation
Gail L. Thompson Fayetteville State University

Tawannah G. Allen Fayetteville State University

AuthorAffiliation
Authors

GAIL L. THOMPSON is Wells Fargo Endowed Professor of Education at Fayetteville State University in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

TAWANNAH G. ALLEN is Director of the Doctoral Degree Program in Educational Leadership and an Associate Professor at Fayetteville State University.
TA WANNA G. ALLEN is the Director of the Doctoral Degree Program in Educational Leadership at Fayetteville State University.

GAIL L. THOMPSON a Wachovia- Wells Fargo Endowed Professor in Educational Leadership at Fayetteville State University has written six books including Through Ebony Eyes: What Teachers Need to Know but are Afraid to Ask About African American Students.

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