Reconceptualizing High Schools as Small Learning Communities

Introduction

The achievement gap between Latino and African American students and White and Asian students will not close unless schools become smaller, more personalized learning communities. Research on the higher academic achievement of students coming from small, focused schools is gaining wide publicity.

(Cotton, 1996; Wasley & Lear, 2001) The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Federal Government through the Small Learning Communities grant program are funding small school efforts in numerous communities throughout the United States. The efforts in New York are well known, especially the stories of Central Park East Secondary School and the Julia Richmond Complex. This movement is also central to reform efforts in Chicago, Oakland, Boston, and many other communities. Many of these schools are new schools, characterized by personalization, authentic pedagogy and assessment, shared decision-making by teachers, students and parents, and choice. Choice means that students and teachers choose to attend and work at the school.

Few people remember that there were public schools of choice in thousands of communities in the early 1970s, and even fewer people remember the names Mario Fantini and Dwight Allen who were national spokespersons for schools of choice. Few of these schools are still in existence. There are important lessons to be learned from these earlier efforts.

The theme of the May, 1975 *Kappan* was "New Paths to Adulthood", and the articles included optimistic writing by Stanley Elam entitled "Secondary reform: An idea whose time has come", Harry Passow entitled "Reforming America's high schools" and R.B. Dierenfield entitled "Personalizing education: The house system in England." In hindsight, this optimism did not come to fruition. The comprehensive, American high school looks today much like it did when I graduated in l963 and when my father graduated in 1935.

Converting Large High Schools

The focus of this article is on the reconceptualization of large schools, especially high schools, as small learning communities. Many educators are calling this "conversion", meaning the conversion of large schools into smaller units. Given that the majority of students, especially students of color and in poverty, will continue to attend comprehensive schools, we should not and cannot give up on the ability of large schools to transform themselves into small learning communities and thus to increase the potential to maximize learning for all students.

The lessons to be learned from large schools that reconceptualize themselves as small learning communities is very different from the lessons to be learned from starting small schools of choice. Starting small schools is incredibly hard work, requiring very courageous leaders[1]. Converting a large school to smaller learning communities is proving to be even harder. The biggest difference may be that conversion usually does

not involve the same degree of choice; many administrators, teachers, staff, parents and students have a stake in current practice and must significantly alter their view of schooling if conversion is to occur. Even when skillfully led, conversion efforts may lead to vocal divisions within the educational community.

School leaders engaged in conversion need a knowledge-base of how to proceed in order to improve the odds that they will successfully improve student learning and sustain themselves. Once again, there were schools in the l970's and 1980's that did exist as multiple learning communities. Their histories and lessons learned have not been well recorded. But this knowledge-base does exist. In l973 Quincy High School in Quincy, Illinois divided its senior high school into seven learning communities. In 1976, influenced by Quincy High School, Gunderson High School in San Jose, California opened with three learning communities.

On May 3 and 4, 2002, a symposium was held at San Jose State University. Leaders from these two schools were keynote speakers and shared their stories and their learnings with approximately 100 school leaders in our region. This symposium was sponsored by LEAD Center at

San Jose State University, California Schools Redesign Network at Stanford University, and the national Coalition of Essential Schools.

What follows is the story of these two schools and an attempt to summarize some of the important lessons. With hundreds of high schools currently trying conversion and many others contemplating such work, it is imperative that educational leaders understand the historical experience of these two schools and link this to current efforts.

Quincy High School

From l973 until l978 Quincy Senior High School consisted of seven educational programs known as Education By Choice (EBC). Students in Grades 11 and 12, with guidance from school personal and parents, chose one of these programs in which to study. In the mid-seventies, Quincy High School was listed as one of the top ten high schools in the country. Articles about the school appeared in *Kappan* (1975), *Newsweek* (1974), *Time* (1975) and numerous newspapers. Yet the program lasted only five years. In l988 Patrick M. McGinley did a case study of the school for his dissertation. Much of the information in this article comes from

interviews with Terry Mickle, the Director of Special Projects and Grants at Quincy High School during EBC, and from McGinley's dissertation.

Background

As described in the McGinley case study (1988), Quincy was a small river community and had a distinct social stratification. Robert Havighurst's book *Growing Up in River City* (1962) was written about Quincy. Quincy has a history of large numbers of students attending parochial schools, and, during the time of McGinley's case study, thirty-two percent of the children attended the Catholic parochial schools. Quincy at one time was considered a blue-collar town, but in l973 the Motorola factory completed closed down, and, within two years, the Gardner-Denver Company reduced its number of employees and moved its headquarters out of Quincy. Electric Wheel, a division of Firestone also closed. The school district enrollment dropped from 9,700 in l973 to 8,298 in l978.

The thinking of educational leaders in Quincy was greatly influenced by the writing and visitations of Mario Fantini. In his l973 book, Fantini suggested ways to implement alternative schools based on teaching

styles and understanding how they affect the learner. This and earlier writings by Fantini were known and used by leaders in Quincy.

In l971, Quincy Public School District received a Title III ESEA grant to implement a program at both the junior and senior high schools. At that time the district was in a K-6, 7-9, 10-12 format. The grant was to set up a school-within-a-school at both the junior and senior high schools. The project was entitled Project to Individualize Education (PIE) and was based on a constructivist philosophy of student-centered schooling.

In April l972 a planning grant of $139,800 was secured under Title III ESEA for Education By Choice. The purpose was for teams of teachers with shared teaching philosophies to develop multiple small schools at both the middle school and high school.

Philosophy of Education By Choice

"Traditionally, educational leaders within a school system have sought out what they considered to be the best educational program available, and subjected all students, teachers, administrators, and parents to that program. In general, this method has not worked. For, as schools have

existed as a single system for everyone, they have increasingly satisfied no one." (Education By Choice Title III, E.S.E.A., 1976, p. 4)

"This project will provide seven alternative schools representing different philosophical orientations and will afford the 1,450 students of Quincy Senior High (grades 11 and 12) the opportunity to choose an educational environment which they feel best fits their individual learning styles. Students who are presented with the opportunity to select a school which they feel will enhance their growth as individuals will become more involved in the educational process, increase their academic performance and will become more positive in their attitudes toward school and teachers." (p.9) ... "Once parents begin to participate directly in the decision-making process concerned with their child's education, they will become more enthusiastic about the school system, have more contacts with and want to know more about their child's teachers, and will become more involved in the school program." (p.19) (Education By Choice, Application for Operational Grant, 1973)

These goals for engaging students and parents more fully are certainly an honorable, as appropriate today as they were then.

Planning Process

From l970 to l972 a committee of teachers and administrators studied ways to better meet the learning needs of students. The 1971 and 1972 grants were secured. In February, 1

972, a representative group of faculty members were elected to form a committee, responsible for the forming of an acceptable model for EBC. Junior high faculty were invited. Students were added to the coordinating committee, and 23 parents agreed to serve on a citizens' advisory group. Many faculty workshops were held to support program development.

During the Summer of l972, 90% of the 7-12 teachers attended a three week workshop intended to design small schools-within-a-school. Teachers voted in November as to whether or not they wanted to implement EBC. The District was going to shift to a new K-6, 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 configuration for l973-74. A new school would open at that time, housing only Grades 11 and 12. Teachers in Grades 11 and 12 approved EBC; teachers Grades 7 through 10 did not.

The Seven Schools

- Traditional School

This was the most structured and teacher-centered school. It was based on the premise that not all students can accept responsibility and therefore need a structured atmosphere.

- Project to Individualize Education School (PIE)

This school started two years earlier and was based on the philosophy that, since students would soon be forced to accept the responsibility and make decisions for life, they should be encouraged to make decisions in high school as well as be responsible for those decisions. The weekly schedule was flexible, as were the opportunities for students to participate in a variety of learning situations.

- Flexible School

This school used "modular scheduling" with approximately 60% of student time in the classroom and 40% reserved for optional activities. The Flexible School was thought to be in between the Traditional School and PIE philosophically. This School consistently had the largest enrollment.

- Fine Arts School

This school also used modular scheduling. Students enrolled in classes within this school, including a wide array of arts classes; math and science which were taken in other schools. This school closed in l976 following the resignation of the director and due to low enrollment.

- Career School

The Career School was designed to prepare graduates for specific careers and was planned with the support of 130 community members. It offered twenty occupational programs in five specializations. All students worked at least 15 hours per week in a related field.

- Work-Study School

The Work-Study School was designed for students with learning difficulties who could become school dropouts. Job placement was a major goal. The school faculty worked closely with the Illinois Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

- Special Education School

This vocationally-oriented school was for educable mentally handicapped students who qualified under state mandates.

Over the five year period, the approximate number of students enrolling in each school each year was (McGinley, 1988, p. 62):

Traditional: 330

PIE: 290

Flexible: 500

Fine Arts: 90

Career: 160

Work-Study: 130

Special Education: 90

What went wrong?

1. Financial considerations

The decrease in enrollment, and therefore to funding, led to teacher lay-offs in l978. The district employed 71 fewer teachers in l978 than in l973. A 1978 public referendum for additional educational funding failed 2 to 1.

2. Changes in EBC

Due to reduced staffing, the integrity of programs had to be compromised. No longer could students remain totally within a school for all coursework. No longer could many teachers teach only within one

school. The sharing of personnel across schools compromised the original philosophy.

3. Internal dissent

Teachers in the 9th and 10th grade high school did not support EBC.

4. Lack of community support

Factions of the community never understood or supported EBC. One of the primary concerns was the amount of free time students had in school and the amount of time students spent in learning situations outside of the school during the school day. During the first two years, guidance for student placement was done quite well. In subsequent years the investment in time to meet with parents diminished. Some students chose schools based on the choices of friends or to have free time. A perception was that too many students were not achieving their potential. Some parents viewed the PIE program with skepticism; PIE began two years prior to EBC implementation. According to Terry Mickle, many parents never understood that EBC was much more than an extension of PIE.

5. Quincy Board of Education

In l972 the Board was cautious in its acceptance of EBC. In subsequent elections, Board members were added who did not agree with the

philosophy of the school. These new Board members were reluctant to accept federal funds.

6. Test scores

ACT test scores began to fall. EBC was blamed.

7. Response of school administration

Administration became defensive as criticism grew. Administration did not do a good job of explaining EBC to the community during the last three years.

8. School accountability

Whereas the goals of EBC were clear, little effort was made to document and evaluate progress towards these goals. When the school felt attacked by the community, data were not readily available to document and/or communicate the effectiveness of EBC.

9. Departure of key staff

Brandt Crocker, Assistant Superintendent and major supporter, left following a lack of community and board support. Don Price, Director of Special Projects and principal writer of the PIE program, left to work for the Comptroller of the State of Illinois. Rick Haugh, Director of EBC, left education after the Board turned down a request to submit a proposal to become one of six Illinois Centers of Educational Improvement. Larry

Milton, Director of Fine Arts School, left education. Larry Ehmen, Director of Flexible School, left education. Ron Rush, Director of PIE School, left education.ss

As Terry Mickle wrote, "A question is, did the staff leaving cause the demise or did the prospects of demise cause the staff to leave? I think both occurred."

Update- Going Back to the Future

In 2002 Quincy was a recipient of a $50,000 federal Small Learning Communities planning grant. Twenty-five years after the demise of EBC, small schools are being explored once again.

Gunderson High School

From l976 until l982, Gunderson High School, in San Jose, California, consisted of three educational programs known as Schools-Within-A-School. The clearly defined purpose of the small schools was to deliver a

guidance-based educational program to all students in a small school setting. Students were assigned randomly to a teacher advisor, with consideration to balance for gender, grade and ethnicity. Students were assigned to the same school as their advisor. Unlike Quincy High School, the differences amongst the three schools were not clearly articulated. One of the schools utilized short, one unit classes and rescheduled students every ninety days. A second school used flexible scheduling. The third school was more traditional. The intention was to allow the faculty, students and parents to evolve the philosophy of each school over time. The philosophy for the school was influenced by the "Individually Guided Education (IGE)" program of I.D.E.A.

Background

In the Spring of l974 Ralph Sleight, principal of the soon to open Gunderson High School, sat in the parking lot of Quincy High School. Quincy was the last of four exemplary high schools he had visited. On a piece of paper he wrote, *"Everybody is somebody special."* This became his mantra as he spent the next year collaboratively planning the opening of the new high school and for the six years he served as the principal. In l978 Proposition 13 passed in California, leading to a severe reduction in

funding for schools. In l980 San Jose Unified School District had a very painful teacher strike. The program survived when teachers came back to work, but commitment by some teachers was less clear. In l981 the school added 9th graders and therefore many new teachers. In l982 Ralph Sleight retired. Much of the information in this article comes from interviews and correspondence with Ralph Sleight and with school-within-a-school principals Norris Hill, Pat Cabral and Chuck Benjamin. This author became a high school principal in a nearby school district in l977 and visited Gunderson High School numerous times to talk with Ralph about educational issues.

What made the work with small schools powerful

- Support from the Superintendent

  The superintendent was an important part of the communication loop. This resulted in central office administrative support and the assignment of one administrator specifically assigned to provide support from external groups.

- Initial planning time

  Ralph Sleight was given two years to prepare to open the new school. The schools-within-a-school principals and school secretary were given

one year. Time and resources were provided for professional development for the initial teachers. School visitations occurred during this time and continued after the school opened. Numerous community meetings were held to prepare the community and to acquaint them with the staff. Most of the faculty was hired in the Spring and meetings were held to prepare the faculty; this took coordination with other principals and the teachers' association.

- Weekly planning time

  One day a week students came to school on a late start allowing teacher time for professional development and communication. Professional development included training in the advisory process and preparation for that month's advisory focus. On alternate weeks the time was used for small schools meetings.

- Governmental support

  Gunderson was one of eight model high schools in California funded under the Reform in Secondary Education (RISE) Program. Staff from Gunderson had been involved in drafting the legislation for RISE. The knowledge that they were working at this level reinforced the value of the work and increased confidence in the processes being employed.

Included in the funding proposal was the primary feeder middle school, which also then received funding.

- Staff communication

  Shared decision-making, based on a "we agree" consensus process and "everybody is somebody special" philosophy, led to broad buy-in of staff. This process was developed from the IGE guidelines. The Governance Council was constituted as follows: two faculty representatives from each small school, one representative from each of five academic divisions, students, parents and classified staff and the four administrators. In addition, broad student input into issues was gathered in advisory. The governance council had authority over budget, academic program, scheduling and other activities. All faculty coming to Gunderson agreed to the importance of reducing student anonymity and getting students properly placed and successful.

- Community confidence

  Ralph Sleight came to Gunderson as the principal from a nearby high school, where he enjoyed considerable trust and confidence with the parent community.

- Advisory

The student advisory program was at the heart of Gunderson. Advisory provided the foundation for student advocacy and professional interaction regarding student performance and student needs. Former Gunderson administrators consistently point to the student advisory system as the most important component of the school.

- Support for faculty

  Teachers in each of the three units had the direct support of one administrator, one full-time counselor, and one secretary. In addition, each unit had its own office space and work space for teachers.

What went wrong?

1. Accountability

Initially, Gunderson collected data to look at student achievement and grade point improvements and surveyed parents and students to check on attitudes toward the school. However, the data was not well communicated and interpreted with the community.

2. Consistent communication with Superintendent and Board

During implementation, not enough time was devoted to communication and education, especially when the superintendent and school board changed personnel over time. Between l976 and 1982, San Jose Unified had three superintendents. The first supported and helped develop the program. The other two needed much more communication and education about the school.

3. Funding

In l978 Proposition 13 passed in California. Budget cuts starting that Fall greatly reduced the staffing and support necessary to personalize schooling to the extent desired. The school district reduced high schools to a five period day and eliminated all school counselors and also department chair time.

4. The teacher strike of l980

One of the issues that the union argued for was that the advisory program at Gunderson was beyond the scope of a teacher's responsibility. The district office and some teachers became less and less supportive of the advisory system. Trust amongst many elements of the staff was shattered by the bitterness of the strike.

5. Staff orientation

As staff changed, more time and effort should have been expended to the orientation and support of new staff, based on strong mentoring by existing staff. As the school-within-a- school principals became principals at other schools in the district, the new principals needed more support and orientation.

6. Change in school composition

When 9th graders, and therefore many new teachers, were added to the school in 1981, as the principal was preparing to retire, there was a great strain on the vision of the school. A renewed commitment to parent and student orientation and extensive professional development and culture building for teachers new to the school with veteran Gunderson teachers should have occurred.

Top Ten Lessons Learned

Given the realization that our schools are not meeting the needs of the majority of our students, and the commitment by many school districts to close the achievement gap for Latino and African American students, some school leaders are looking to convert large schools into smaller, more personalized learning communities, where students are known well,

where standards are high and appropriate support is provided, and where the voices of students, teachers and parents are valued. (Krovetz, 1999) This work requires courage and skill on the part of a broad diversity of school leaders[1]. The lessons from Quincy and Gunderson High Schools should inform this effort. Too often in American society we try good ideas and implement them poorly. The result is that we blame the idea not the poor implementation. Thus for the next 20+ years we say, *"We tried that and it did not work!"* Maximizing learning for all students through the institution of public schools is vitally important to the strength of our democracy, and therefore we need to *get it right*.

1. School accountability is a must

One of the most beneficial aspects of the high stakes accountability movement that has swept the country is the way school professionals are learning to use data about student learning to inform practice. Neither Quincy nor Gunderson did a good job in this area. When the community questioned the value of personalization, the schools did not have adequate data to demonstrate and/or communicate the effectiveness of the school's programs on student learning. Any school hoping to sustain a major reconceptualization should build in time, personnel support and professional development for data collection and cycle of inquiry-

collaborative action research. Quincy and Gunderson High Schools existed prior to computer hardware and software that made student data readily available. We no longer have that excuse.

2. Build coherence of vision and focus with the district office

Both Quincy and Gunderson opened with strong support from their superintendents and assistant superintendents. When these people left their positions and were replaced by administrators who were not part of the original planning and dreaming, critical support was reduced. Most school reform initiatives have been based on a theory of action that improving student achievement is a school by school effort; the role of the district has been neglected. This has been true for both top-down and more decentralized efforts. One of the most important lessons of the last 40 years is that the inability to sustain school improvement over time is at least partly due to this faulty theory. Coherence with the district office is critical; institutionalizing the deep changes in school practice needed to maximize learning for all students cannot happen without it.

3. Continuously engage and educate the educational community

Many school improvement efforts engage the community in conversations early in the process, but neglect this once the changes have begun. We must recognize that even with a great deal of initial communication, most parents and school board members will not understand the upcoming changes and will continue to operate with a model of schooling in their minds that is based on their own schooling experiences. In general, only a small percentage of parents engage in this initial conversation, and they do not speak for the broader community. In addition, as new parents send their children to a school in subsequent years, and new school board members are elected to office, continuous communication based on sound data is necessary to build a strong base of support for the school program. This takes time, a focused plan and resources. Ralph Sleight recommends that a school undertaking conversion should employ one person whose primary job is community engagement.

4. Small schools must serve all students equitably

Based on what is known at this time, it is this author's opinion that students and teachers should be assigned at random to the small schools created through conversion. This is a very controversial position to take, since one of the arguments for conversion is student, parent and teacher

choice. However, when large schools have given students, parents and teachers the choice of which small school program to enroll in, the schools too often becomes segregated based on student ability, gender, race and/or ethnicity and based on teacher seniority. The result is that some students and teachers are better served than others, much like in the traditional school. If choice is a component of the conversion, assignment should be carefully balanced across demographics for both students and teachers.

5. Guarantee autonomy – loose-tight coupling

All school districts should have a set of student standards and high expectations in place for all students. Given these standards as a commonality across all schools, small schools need to be autonomous. For the staff, students and parents to have ownership, they need to be empowered and carefully trained to make decisions regarding hiring, resource allocation, and professional development related to curriculum, instruction and assessment. They also need to be actively engaged in the design teams which develop the small schools.

In addition, at least for the academic part of the school day, if the conversion will be sustainable, small schools sharing any facility should be autonomous from each other. Once students are allowed to take academic classes across schools, autonomy and personalization are compromised. If even one student takes classes across schools, the ability for individual schools to develop a unique schedule or calendar, engage students in using the community for learning, and focus learning on interdisciplinary projects is compromised.

6. Design schools that are truly small in size and scope

Small schools are defined as schools of 500 or less. Thus, converting a high school of 3000 into three smaller schools does not meet the criteria. Furthermore, small schools need to focus on what they can do well for students, which needs to be knowing students well, supporting them to meet high standards and valuing their voices. (Krovetz, 1999) Marching bands, athletic teams and the like may be shared across converted schools outside of the academic day, but each school must decide what it can do well and focus on those areas. These decisions have to be consistent with serving all students equitably and therefore on maximizing learning for all students.

7. Never assume that everyone is on the same page

Too often, following the enthusiastic initiation of a new school improvement effort that involved many people in the planning and dreaming, school leaders get busy with the doing and do not pay as much attention to the engagement and education of key players. Leaders at Quincy and Gunderson expended considerable initial effort to educate and engage the parent and student communities. They also expended considerable attention to the staffs. However, over time, new parents, new students, new teachers, new classified employees, new site administrators, new school board members, and new district leaders were not engaged in the same way. One leader at each school should have primary responsibility and time to build and monitor structures to continually and sincerely engage the various publics in understanding and contributing to the school. Building a base of relationships that allows for and encourages dissent and consensus building is labor intensive, but experience tells us is a necessary ingredient to sustain this work.

Related to this is the importance of involving union leadership in this work. The certificated and classified contracts must support small schools

and the autonomy required to maximize learning for all students. Working closely with union leadership on the development of small schools from the beginning is important. In addition, teacher and staff leaders at the school should engage themselves in union leadership roles in order to have their voices heard. Certainly the Gunderson story tells us what can happen when this is not in place.

8. Grow your own leadership sss

In both cases, as school and district leaders left the school, the new leaders had less understanding and commitment to the vision of the school. A school builds leadership capacity and substantially increases the ability of the school community to sustain this work when one defines school leader in the broadest sense to include many teachers, students, parents, staff, community members and administrators, and when meaningful leadership roles are shared with many members of the community. (Lambert, 1998) A major function of quality school leadership is to identify and mentor others to follow in one's footsteps.

9. Provide support for high quality teaching

Small schools are a necessary but **not** sufficient condition to maximize learning for all students. The single most important factor is to have high quality teachers in every classroom, working collaboratively toward the same end. We need to find ways to employ, support and retain the best and brightest to be teachers. Gunderson High School built in office space, clerical and administrative support, and time for this to happen.

All serious school reconceptualization efforts require that teachers change classroom practice. To succeed leaders must provide time and quality professional development that involves differentiated instruction related to the individual learning and teaching needs of each teacher and expert and peer coaching for the teachers. (Speck and Knipe, 2000). Neither Quincy nor Gunderson found the resources to continue professional development at the level they used to open the schools. Probably the one area of school reconceptualization that is more costly than the traditional is the need for quality professional development and the time to support this every year. This time is necessary for both the technical and intellectual growth of teachers and administrators.

10. Take care of ourselves

School receptualization is all about building relationships. When trust and engagement are high, when one's voice is valued, people want to be engaged in important work. However, this is very stressful and time consuming work. Burnout is high, and therefore turnover is high. Skillful leaders know how and when to praise and celebrate. Skillful leaders know how to obtain resources. Skillful leaders know when to take a break. Bridges writes, "Learn to do all that you are able, then let go." (1991, p. 100)

Conclusion

Many of the children of our wealthiest citizens attend prestigious, small schools. Few criticize the quality of schooling they receive in these schools. What we should want for every child is what we would want for our own child. Obviously, I am not arguing for vouchers. Democracy is fragile and will not survive without quality public schooling. Yet, every child deserves to be in a school in which she/he is known well by many adults, where expectations are high for all children and support is not only available but part of the daily life of each child, and the voices of the

students and adults are valued. Large schools cannot do this! Small schools done well are based on these practices.

Small schools are necessary but not sufficient to maximize learning for all children. Quality teachers are the most important prerequisite. Quality curriculum, instruction and assessment practices are important prerequisites. Adequate resources, including time for best practice in professional development are prerequisites. Strong distributed leadership and a collaborative culture within a district and within a school are vital. State and federal policies that truly encourage and support the learning of all children are vital.

However, any of us who have spent our lives in large schools and some time in quality small schools know that largeness predetermines that many students will fall through the cracks and that in small quality schools far more students learn to use their minds and hearts well. Let's use the lessons of history to reconceptualize high schooling and therefore to purposefully and skillfully convert many large high schools into the kinds of small learning communities we would all like our children and

grandchildren to attend. Let's use the lessons of history to do it right this time!!

1 The term leader is used throughout this article in the broadest sense to include potentially all members of the school community.

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