

Slipping Through the Cracks: The Case of the Unidentified English Language Learner

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The fastest growing population of students in our schools today speaks a language other than English at home. For over forty years, state and federal guidelines have been in place for the identification and education of limited English proficient (LEP) students. According to Francis, Rivera, Leseax, Kieffer, and Rivera (2006):

While ELLs vary in their academic outcomes and many thrive in U.S. schools, there is indeed a significant proportion—whether or not formally designated Limited English Proficient (LEP) or English Language Learner (ELL) and thus receiving support services for language development—who struggle considerably in developing English proficiency, academic skills, and meeting grade-level standards. (p. 7)

One issue that is not being addressed in schools or educational research is the unidentified English language learner (ELL). There is no hard data on how many English language learners (ELLs) are unidentified or how schools are addressing this issue. This article is an attempt to shed light on this issue through a case study of one campus's initiatives and one child's story.

Introduction

The school being investigated for this article is located in a Central Texas School District⁸ (CTSD) that is a mid-sized school district with approximately 3,000 students in a town of about 13,000. The town's identity is closely tied to its Czech heritage although the school aged population is almost 60% Hispanic. The district is the home to one 3A high school with grades 9-12, a middle school with grades 6-8, an upper elementary with grades 3-5, and a primary school with grades pre-kindergarten through two.

In the 2005-2006 school year, the Central Texas Primary School began a transformation that today has had a tremendous impact on the ELLs attending the school in addition to the faculty, staff and parents. That year, the school ushered in a new principal, an instructional facilitator, and a bilingual/ESL coordinator. Nichole, a first year principal, had been with the district for more than ten years, working as a teacher and assistant principal. Jeannie, as an instructional facilitator, was hired to work with the primary campus by coaching and mentoring teachers, working with students, and providing on-going professional development. Lynn, the district's first full time bilingual/ESL coordinator, was hired to work specifically with bilingual and ESL students, parents, and faculty. In addition to working with educators across the district, Lynn was charged with developing a cohesive, vertically aligned bilingual and ESL program beginning with the primary grades.

In the fall of 2005, less than 20% of the primary grade students were identified as being LEP. Of those identified,

⁸ The names of the school district, school and people are pseudonyms created to maintain confidentiality.

approximately 20% of the students' parents had denied bilingual services. There were no students identified for ESL. In addition, the LEP students were among the lowest performing students in the school based on the percentile ranking on the Spanish version of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS/Logramos).

Maria's story

Maria started at the Central Texas Primary School in pre-kindergarten in a general education, English only classroom. By kindergarten, the teacher had already identified Maria as a struggling learner. She rarely participated in class or talked with her peers. She almost never smiled or laughed out loud. By first grade, the teachers were growing more concerned as Maria continued to show little progress either socially or academically. She attended every intervention offered by the school including working with a reading specialist and attending summer school. By the end of second grade, the teachers and administrators were even more concerned with Maria's lack of progress. In order to place Maria in the third grade, the school was discussing the possibility of referring Maria for special education testing to ascertain whether a learning disability or even mild mental retardation might be a factor.

The role of administration

As a first year principal, Nichole had the task of trying to remedy the low performing standards of her ELLs. She explained that the philosophy she believed in for her teachers had to be set for your whole campus with the understanding that you'll apply

that same philosophy to your students that have special needs whether they are ELL or special education.

She began providing time and opportunities for professional development. She set high standards and monitored the progress of her teachers and students, taking care to address their needs. She also realized that as the campus leader, she needed to rely on the specialists on her campus and in her district.

Nichole relied heavily on Lynn, the district bilingual/ESL coordinator to focus on the bilingual program and to improve the performance of the bilingual classes. This included meeting with the bilingual teachers and having Nichole explain to them that she had the same expectations for all teachers in both bilingual and regular education classrooms.

Lynn also discussed the attitude of “pobrecitos” or “poor little ones,” with the bilingual teachers. She explained that the children in the bilingual classes were not “pobrecitos,” that the program needed to become focused and to have higher standards than had previously been in place. The setting of high standards and providing appropriate support and professional development would be key in turning around the bilingual program.

As the campus instructional facilitator, Jeannie planned professional development sessions for the faculty and staff. The trainings included topics such as literacy, special education, gifted education, and second language acquisition. As Jeannie and Lynn met and discussed the needs of the bilingual teachers, they became aware of the need to provide training on English as a second language (ESL) strategies for all faculty and staff. Because teachers’ perceptions of a student’s ability can be a significant influence on student achievement, Jeannie and Lynn recognized the need to address the perceptions of the teachers toward ELLs

(Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Smith et al., 1998). With Nichole building a school culture that encouraged and rewarded collaboration and open dialogue, the teachers felt comfortable expressing their perceptions and beliefs about students whose first language was not English. Jeannie and Lynn then continued to dialogue with the teachers and exposed them to different perspectives throughout the professional development sessions.

Jeannie's ESL training included the stages of language acquisition presented by Krashen and Terrell (1983) which she tied into a variety of classroom ESL strategies for math, literacy, and writing. These stages of language acquisition paralleled Lynn's training on the the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) (Texas Education Agency, 2009) and on the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) (Texas Education Agency, 2008). Jeannie and Lynn provided ongoing professional development to include training for the Texas ESL teacher certification exam.

Identification of ELLs

Maria's entry into US schools

When Maria entered the Central Texas School District in Pre-Kindergarten in the fall of 2004, her mother completed a home language survey indicating that she spoke English only at home. Her school registration was almost two years before the Central Texas Primary School began informally training the office staff about the purpose and necessity of the home language survey. At that time, the office staff apparently believed that the sole purpose of the home language survey was to place a student into bilingual education and that if the parents did not want the child in the

bilingual program, they should mark English only on their enrollment paperwork.

Maria's mother is bilingual, English-Spanish, having grown up in the United States with bilingual parents. Maria's father is from Mexico and Spanish dominant. Maria grew up in a bilingual household, often serving as a translator between her Spanish-speaking grandmother and English dominant brothers. Maria's home language survey should have indicated that her first language was Spanish. Since it indicated English as the only language spoken at home, Maria's language was not assessed to verify her English proficiency at that time, and she was placed in a general education setting.

Home language survey

When children first enter a US public school, both the federal government and the state of Texas require the parents to complete a home language survey that asks about the primary language spoken in the home and by the student. In Texas, the home language survey includes 2 questions (Texas Education Agency, 2004):

What language is spoken in your home most of the time?

What language does your child (do you) speak most of the time?

In best practice, the questions should be asked in the parent's home language. The Spanish/English version of the questions is provided in the Texas Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) manual. The Texas Education Agency website provides translations of the home language survey into 24 different languages (Texas Education Agency, 2005). The information

provided by this simple questionnaire is imperative in that it impacts the educational decisions made for the student. Therefore, it is imperative that schools make every effort to ensure that the information is accurate and truthful.

When parents arrive at the school to complete the enrollment paperwork, the first people they often encounter are the office staff. As the ambassadors of the school during registration, it is important that the office staff understand why parents should fill out the home language survey. The purpose of the home language survey is two-fold. The home language survey is used to accurately record the first language of the student and home language of the family. The best practice would be for this information to be used to ensure that communication between home and school takes place in the home language of the family. Based on federal (Texas Education Agency, 2009) and state guidelines (Texas Education Agency, 2007), the second use for this information is to inform the school that a student who speaks a language other than English is enrolling in the school. If parents indicate that a child speaks a language other than English, the school must assess the child's language so that the LPAC can determine if the child is LEP. A designation of being limited English proficient will trigger a process that includes parental notification of programmatic options and appropriate instructional placement by the LPAC.

If the home language survey is completed indicating that a child only speaks English, the student is placed in the general education setting. These students do not receive ESL or bilingual support (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

During the 2006-2007 registration, Lynn was present at the primary campus to provide support to the office staff and to help ensure accurate completion of the home language survey. By

having short conversations with the parents as they enrolled their students, Lynn modeled for the office staff how to elicit the home language information. When two families arrived at the school speaking German, Lynn asked them simple questions about their children, like what grade the children would be in, was this their first time in US schools, and inquired about their home language. As the parents began working on the registration paperwork, Lynn printed out the home language surveys in German. This helped to ensure that the parents understood the paperwork. When the parents asked what the form was used for, Lynn explained that it was a standard form used to help the school to communicate more effectively with the parents. Also, if any language other than English is spoken by the child, the school would do an assessment of the child's English to be able to plan instruction that would best meet the needs of the child. Lynn went on to explain that the school would inform them of the results of the English proficiency evaluation and the school's recommendations for their child's educational program.

As registration progressed, the office staff became more comfortable with the information about the home language survey and how to address the questions and concerns of the parents. At the Central Texas Primary School, one member of the office staff spoke Spanish, the dominant language of the non-English speaking school population, which allowed the office staff to interact with the parents more appropriately and explain the information. When home language surveys are correctly administered and collected, the result is fewer mis-identified students like Maria.

Professional development and teacher collaboration

As principal, Nichole was instrumental in the process of promoting increased teacher collaboration and cooperation and providing on-going professional development which built a school culture of where it is not only appropriate, but expected, for teachers to recognize their struggling learners, to search for reasons why the child is struggling, and to ask for assistance with the child or interventions. Nichole explained that at the Central Texas Primary School:

... the teachers have to be accountable ... you have to set an expectation that the teacher is accountable for their students, but you also have to set the stage [for them].

Nichole set the stage for her faculty by allowing Jeannie to conduct continuing professional development that focused on a variety of issues including working with second language acquisition. She provided time for teachers to plan together and encouraged collaboration. She also supported Lynn being on the campus and providing support to the bilingual and general education teachers as they encounter issues related to bilingual and ESL. Nichole created an atmosphere of openness by allowing specialists to take a lead role with the teachers. She was actively trying to build a strong collaborative community of learners and modeled this through working with the specialists. Nichole explained:

...the principal has to back up what the specialist is telling them ... I think you have to trust that the specialist is the specialist. [They are there] ...to go forth and help... you have to have the expectation that they [the teachers] will follow through with it or they are not going to do it.

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Nichole, Jeannie, and Lynn worked together creating an environment that stressed that the teachers are responsible for teaching each child to the best of their ability and that if the teacher needs assistance, the principal, specialists and other teachers are there to support them. This helped the teachers understand that they were not alone. By building a collaborative support system, the teachers are generally comfortable asking for and providing assistance.

A continued area of focus was how to work with ELLs. In the beginning teachers questioned why they needed to learn ESL strategies when they were not the ESL teachers. Lynn explained to them that many of the students at Central Texas Primary School were parent denials and that ESL strategies would benefit these students, even though their parents had denied any special language program. Nichole also explained:

... a lot of kids are still acquiring language especially at this level; we have a lot of kids who are economically disadvantaged who don't get exposed to... language.... I mean ESL strategies are good teaching strategies. ...I think they would be different if they were some kind of out-there strategies, but it can help kids with limited vocabulary acquire more language.

The teachers began to pay more attention to the language backgrounds of their students. One first grade teacher commented to Lynn as they ate lunch in the teachers' lounge:

I asked my students who spoke Spanish at home. Only three students did not raise their hands.

The teacher knew he had 2 parent denials but was surprised at the number of students who said they spoke Spanish at home. This information was verified during parent teacher conferences. As the

ESL and literacy professional development continued, teachers became more reflective on their classroom practices and began observing the responses of the students to the ESL strategies.

Another change that began to occur was the focus on the bilingual classes by the administration and specialists. Nichole insisted that the bilingual teachers have the same curriculum with the same rigor as the general education classes:

The expectation of the bilingual classes is that they are doing exactly the same as the regular classes, if you go and look at the stories that they are reading, ... to the work that they are producing, it is the same work, it is the same level of expectation, it's the same classroom except that one is in Spanish and one is in English.

Jeannie provided professional development for Spanish literacy development, made additional resources available, and insisted that they attend all school professional development. Lynn followed through with classroom observations and mentoring of the teachers. Within one year, the bilingual first grade classes on the Spanish version of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS/Logramos) outscored the general education classes on the ITBS based on percentile rankings in math and reading, while the second grade bilingual classes performed as well as the general education classes.

Maria's progress in general education

Maria struggled academically and socially from the time she first entered the Central Texas Primary School. The school utilizes a three tier interventions system: Tier 1 students are working at or above grade level; Tier 2 students are struggling slightly and

receive interventions from the regular classroom teacher; Tier 3 students are struggling significantly. Besides the regular classroom instruction and the Tier 2 interventions, Tier 3 students receive additional interventions from a specialist. Maria was identified as a Tier 3 reading student in kindergarten and remained at Tier 3 through 2nd grade. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) was used to assess oral comprehension and fluency. By the end of 2nd grade, Maria was testing at a DRA level 4, which is the expected level of performance for beginning of 1st grade. By the end of 2nd grade, the expected level of performance is a DRA level 28.

Maria's teachers noticed that, in addition to her academics, she continued to struggle socially. She appeared sad and withdrawn to her teachers. She rarely participated in class. She rarely spoke, even to her classmates. Her overall demeanor was of a very unhappy child.

Re-identification process

In the spring of 2007, the assistant principal of the school, after having screened Maria for dyslexia, approached Lynn with questions about Maria. The teachers and administrators were concerned with her lack of academic and social growth. Lynn and the assistant principal reviewed Maria's cumulative folder and found the home language survey and family information. The assistant principal, who had been with the district for many years, thought that she knew the family and that they spoke Spanish at home. Lynn agreed with her, but informed her that as long as the home language survey indicated English only, there was nothing she could do about it.

Then, in the summer of 2008, the campus instructional facilitator, Jeannie, discussed Maria with the bilingual coordinator. She had tracked the young student's academic progress since kindergarten and knew that she should have progressed more than she had in her reading. For Maria to continue to third grade, Jeannie knew Maria would be referred for Special Education testing. Believing that Special Education was the wrong direction to take in this situation, Jeannie finally asked Lynn if she could talk to Maria in Spanish, just to see if she would respond.

Lynn finally agreed to meet informally with Maria. Jeannie introduced them in the hall. When they first met, Maria stood quietly with her shoulders rounded as she stared at the floor. When Lynn greeted her with a simple "Hola, María. ¿Cómo estás?," Maria looked up and smiled for the first time. Lynn could tell with just a brief conversation that Maria was definitely more at ease in Spanish than in English. When Lynn and Jeannie discussed Maria again, Lynn explained that if the parents agreed to change the information on the home language survey, she could conduct a language assessment as if Maria was first entering US schools.

Jeannie quickly met informally with the mother and asked her about speaking Spanish at home. When the mother said that yes, Spanish was spoken in the home, Jeannie asked her to correct the home language survey which allowed the district to conduct a language assessment to see what else could be done to meet Maria's needs.

Lynn conducted an assessment of Maria's oral language proficiency in both English and Spanish. In English, Maria tested as LEP. For Spanish, she tested as Non-Spanish Speaking. Although this testing indicated that Maria was stronger in English than Spanish, during the English testing, Maria was unsure of her

answers and kept her head down. During the Spanish testing, Maria, maintained good eye contact with Lynn. She tried to answer each item. Her receptive language was much stronger in Spanish and was demonstrated by more responses to Spanish items than those in English. However, her expressive language in Spanish was weaker, causing many of her responses to the Spanish items to be in English. Although she tested stronger in English, she appeared to have a higher self-concept in Spanish.

Programs for ELLs at the Central Texas Primary School

At the elementary level, parents of ELLs have three program options for their children. Students may be placed in a traditional, late exit/maintenance bilingual program. This program follows an 80/20 model with core content instruction at the primary grades focusing on Spanish language development. At the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten grades, 80% of the day is conducted in Spanish, with 20% in English. English instruction is in the areas of physical education, library, computers, and other socially based activities. In 1st and 2nd grades, approximately 70% of the instruction is in Spanish, again with the focus on Spanish language development in the core content areas.

The second program option is English as a Second Language (ESL). The ESL program at the school is integrated into the general education program through an inclusion model. The student is placed in a general education class with an ESL certified teacher. While there are several teachers at the primary level with an ESL certification, the principal takes great care to individually place each English language learner with the most appropriate teacher for that student. In this program, the ELL is not separated

from the rest of the students. Rather, the teacher employs ESL methodologies throughout the lessons and provides interventions and scaffolding as needed to differentiate instruction for the student's success.

The third placement option is to deny services. In this case, the student is placed into the general education setting. The teacher may or may not be ESL certified. As with any student, the teacher will differentiate instruction, but the teacher may not have had adequate training in meeting the individual educational needs of an ELL.

Prior to the 2005-2006 school year at the Central Texas School District, if parents denied the bilingual program, they were not offered any additional special language services. Best practice would dictate that the benefits and goal of the bilingual program would be clearly explained to the parents. If the parents still wish to deny the bilingual program, the school should then explain the benefits of the ESL program and offer the parents the opportunity for their children to be in the ESL program. By doing this, the Central Texas School District reduced its number of parent denials from 20% of the LEP students to less than one student per grade level. This change led to the students receiving the appropriate ESL strategies and interventions from a highly qualified ESL teacher.

Bilingual programs are not limited to LEP students. Other students who are fluent English speakers can benefit from being in the bilingual program. Neither the federal nor Texas guidelines prohibit English proficient students from being in a bilingual program; this is a local school decision. Bilingual programs can be the appropriate placement decision for fluent English speakers, especially if the program is offered in their heritage language.

Placement decisions

The placement decision for Maria was discussed in depth by the LPAC. The meeting with Maria's mother was very emotional. Her mother, of course, wanted to do what was best for her daughter. Both Jeannie and the mother cried. Jeannie's tears were due to frustration of watching Maria struggle for 3 years in English; the mother's tears perhaps were as relief that something positive could come out of all this. Lynn outlined all the placement options for the mother: Maria could be retained in 2nd grade or placed into 3rd grade in either

- a general education class as a parent denial, but she would continue to Tier 3 reading intervention;
- an ESL class where she would continue to receive Tier 3 reading intervention and ESL strategies; or
- a bilingual class where the instruction would be primarily in Spanish and receiving Tier 3 Spanish reading intervention.

Lynn and Jeannie explained the positive and negative aspects of each option. Although the school tries not to retain students at the early grades, decisions about retention are made in the best interest of the student. Jeannie, Nichole, and Lynn all believed that the best option for Maria was to retain her in 2nd grade and place her in the bilingual program. This option would allow the school to rule out language as a reason for her lack of academic progress.

After discussing all the options with the mother, Maria was brought into the discussion. The mother asked her if she would like to be in a Spanish speaking class. Maria said yes. When the mother brought up the idea of her repeating 2nd grade, Maria started to cry. The mother encouraged her to talk about it. Maria indicated that

she was not worried about changing classes, but being in the same grade as her younger brother. She felt her brothers would pick on her. Once the mother assured her that her brothers would not be allowed to pick on her, Maria agreed with the decision.

Transferring into bilingual 2nd grade

In the fall of 2008, Maria started her second year in 2nd grade, but this time in a bilingual class. Her teacher, Elena, was a second year teacher. When she was about the same age as Maria, she had educational experiences that paralleled Maria's struggles with language and academics in both English and Spanish.

[Elena's] initial thoughts were, Wow! How can I address her issues knowing that she's struggling in both languages?

Maria started off the year much like she had the previous year:

She was withdrawn, wasn't participating, shut down, so I [Elena] had my work cut out for me. I think the first thing I had to figure out was how am I going to get this girl to trust me because I think she had trust issues as far as people not helping her and letting her down. She had no confidence.

Elena understood the importance of building a positive relationship (Liew, 2010) between them, and once that happened, you could tell that her confidence started to go up and she was more willing to learn.

At the beginning of the school year, Maria's demeanor was much like it was the previous year, but according to Elena, ... within about 6 weeks she emerged out of that shell. One day I asked her why she was smiling and she said because she was happy because 'I know what I am doing.'

Maria began talking with her peers in English and when she began to show more self-confidence, she started to speak in Spanish with the other students.

[Elena]... knew we have her now because she was more willing to participate in Spanish in class when we were learning academically. Now any other time that I would hear her it was both languages, which was great.

Maria excelled in math and made progress in reading. At the beginning of the year, she had good oral comprehension, but was not reading independently. By Christmas time, Maria was reading on a DRA level 10 in Spanish. By the end of the year, Maria was able to read on a DRA level 18 in Spanish. While the goal for 2nd grade is a DRA of 28, it was a considerable improvement over the level 4 of the previous year.

In addition to her progress in reading, Maria's language skills improved. When she was tested in the summer before starting in the bilingual program, she tested as Limited English Proficient and as a Non-Spanish Speaker. At the end of one year in the bilingual program in which she received almost all of her core content instruction in Spanish, she tested as a Fluent English Speaker and a Limited Spanish Speaker, missing being classified as a Fluent Spanish Speaker by one question.

The story continues

Maria's story is continuing to evolve. She is now in a third grade bilingual class. She continues to struggle with reading fluency, but has good comprehension. She asks questions in class and continues to show academic improvement. She is no longer being viewed as a child who might need special education services.

Her teacher this year, while unfamiliar with her story, recognized that, although Maria still has gaps in her language, she is a bright, happy child who wants to learn. She participates in class. She plays and converses with her classmates. She no longer stares at the floor when an adult talks with her in either English or Spanish. She is rarely seen without a smile on her face. With continued interventions and a positive attitude, Maria now is on the path to academic success.

As for the school, the teachers continue to collaborate. They now understand the need to consider language as a possible issue with their struggling learners. Nichole explained her belief on why her teachers are now more successful at identifying and serving their ELLs:

I think there are 2 things – the teachers take real ownership of their students. They take ownership of making sure their students are successful. And in saying that, I think they look for reasons, say a child is struggling, they still want to explore or try to get to the bottom of what is going on. They won't just let it go. But second of all, because we have exposed teachers to the types of training and that this could be a problem, they are open to [the idea]. The teachers are a little better versed on when kids are not making progress, [because] they ... look at kids as individuals.

The general education teachers noticed Maria's academic and social progress when she started in the bilingual program. This helped them to understand the need to correctly identify students like Maria as ELLs. They have learned to utilize the bilingual teachers as positive resources in the identification process, with parental

communication, and in the discovery of appropriate ESL strategies.

During the 2008-2009 school year, the Central Texas Primary School identified six students as possible ELLs whose initial home language survey indicated that they only spoke English at home. The school reviewed each case individually. The general education teachers along with the bilingual teachers, after consulting with Nichole, met with the parents and discussed the benefits of the bilingual program. With parent consent, four of the students were transferred midyear from the general education classes into the bilingual program.

One of the struggling students was Maria's younger brother. Like Maria, Juan struggled academically, but unlike Maria, he talked in class, laughed, and was extroverted. Once the parents corrected the home language survey, the school assessed Juan's language and found that he was NOT LEP. By ruling out language, the teachers were able to find the most appropriate interventions for him. He is still in the general education classes and is making progress.

Bilingual education has been given increased validation and respect and has become an integral part of the school culture and community. While the overall number of students in the school has not dramatically increased since 2005, the identified LEP population has grown to 30% of the students. LEP students are no longer the lowest performing population in the school. There has been an increase in referrals of LEP students to the gifted and talented program and a decrease in referrals for consideration to special education as having a learning disability or mental retardation. These shifts in teachers' perspectives and students' performance affirmed the administrator's decision to actively

promote professional development and growth in the areas of second language acquisition.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is still no hard data on the numbers of unidentified ELLs in the schools, but that should not discourage teachers and schools from addressing the issue. The Central Texas Primary School in this discussion found that by building a collaborative school culture, educating the faculty and staff, and insisting on high standards with teacher accountability, schools can keep students from slipping through the cracks.

To help prevent the unidentified ELL from slipping through the cracks, it is recommended that:

- The office staff is taught about the purpose of the home language survey and how to explain it to parents.
- The administration provides faculty and staff with opportunities for on-going professional development paired with support from specialists.
- The teachers are held accountable for the success of each student while having the necessary support to meet their students.
- The school culture encourages teachers to collaborate and to talk to each other and to their administrators about the needs of their students.
- ELLs become a valued part of the school.
- The teachers and campus and district administrators work together to educate parents and other stakeholders about the values and benefits of the programs offered to ELLs.

The implementation of these recommendations requires a positive, professional, and collaborative effort. When teachers,

staff, and administrators work together, the unidentified Marias can become success stories.

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