
The Return to In-Person School: Teacher Reports of Student Behavior and Social–Emotional Learning

Lindsay Brockmeier, Nicole R. Brass, Christi Bergin, and Madison Imler

The COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures greatly interfered in students' social, emotional, and academic development creating behavioral struggles after returning to school. This concurrent mixed-methods study examined teacher perceptions of student behavioral change and social–emotional learning (SEL) during the return to in-person schooling in fall 2021. Teachers ($N = 120$) from a Midwestern state completed online surveys consisting of both closed and open-ended questions about student's social, emotional, and academic behavior. Teachers also responded to questions about SEL program implementation in their schools before and during the pandemic. Teachers overwhelmingly reported worsened student behavior since returning to school. Content analysis revealed academic motivation struggles were most often reported, followed by social and emotional struggles, respectively. Additionally, teachers from schools with SEL programs were significantly less likely to report academic motivation struggles. Findings suggest that SEL programs may help mitigate COVID-related academic motivation struggles. Possibilities for future research on student behavior and SEL as the pandemic recedes are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *COVID-19; mixed-methods study; social–emotional learning; student behavior*

Disruption to in-person education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has affected K–12 students' social–emotional development and academic learning (UNESCO, 2020). The impact of school closures and associated precautions against the transmission of the virus on students' social and academic engagement was substantial (Benner & Mistry, 2020). A growing body of research demonstrates that youth experienced greater loneliness from extended isolation (Ellis et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021), lower quality friendships (Cohen et al., 2020), higher levels of depression (Rogers et al., 2021), diminished academic motivation and engagement, decreased overall sense of school community, and greater exhaustion and absenteeism during lockdown (Branje & Morris, 2021). Although there was regional variation, many K–12 schools in the United States reopened to full-time, in-person learning in fall 2021 after more than a year of continued shutdowns from virus outbreaks, remote learning, and hybrid learning. Our study investigates how students and teachers responded to this

transition. Specifically, we asked teachers whether their students' behavior changed after the return to in-person schooling, in what ways, and—looking toward preliminary solutions—whether schools' participation in a social–emotional learning (SEL) program reduced the negative changes that teachers observed.

We examined how teachers perceived students' behavior following the transition to in-person schooling through the lens of a bioecological model. According to this perspective, human development is shaped through reciprocal interactions between an individual's personal characteristics and interrelated features of their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Proximal processes—the interactions between individuals and the immediate environments they interact with daily and for extended time—are particularly influential for development. During childhood and adolescence, school is a significant proximal context that directly shapes development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Throughout COVID-19, students' lives at school dramatically

changed (e.g., switching to remote learning and spending less time with peers and teachers) and changed again when students returned to school after the disruptions. These changes to students' proximal contexts (and more distal contexts like federal policy and family dynamics that shape the proximal contexts) likely resulted in significant changes to students' development and their subsequent behavior.

Unfortunately, recently collected large national datasets suggest that student and teacher challenges have carried over from lockdown to the return to in-person school. A national survey indicates that 87 percent of educators reported that students' social-emotional and behavioral development has been negatively affected by the pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). Further, 79 percent of these teachers reported needing more mental health support for students, and 70 percent reported needing training in supporting student social-emotional development. Since the return to in-person school, adolescents' depression and anxiety symptoms have roughly doubled (Racine et al., 2021). Early estimates on academic achievement suggest that almost two decades of learning gain trends have been lost in mathematics and reading over the last two years of the pandemic, with greater decreases for students who had struggled with academics prior to the pandemic (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). These large national datasets have provided important overviews of outcomes of students' experiences from the transition to in-person schooling, but more work is needed to investigate the actual behaviors that students are exhibiting in school that may have contributed to negative outcomes. The present study directly addresses this need by asking teachers to report on how students' behavior changed since returning to in-person school. Teachers' perspective on students' behavior is critical. They are the frontline of managing potential changes in students' behavior in the classroom. Teachers are also reentering the classroom after many months of stress related to making a rapid shift to online instruction with little or no training in using new technology platforms (Pressley et al., 2021). During this stressful time, teachers' self-efficacy decreased and exhaustion increased (Herman et al., 2021). Insight into teachers' perceptions of students' behavior is an important first step to developing interventions to address students' behavior and support teachers' well-being.

POTENTIAL ROLE OF SEL PROGRAMS

Long before the pandemic, schools implemented SEL programs to address student social, emotional, and behavioral health. SEL is an integral part of education and human development and is defined as the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2023). SEL programs in schools aim to help students integrate emotions, cognition, and behavior to deal constructively with everyday social and personal challenges (Weissberg et al., 2015). Although there are differences among SEL programs based on the targeted behaviors, approach, quality, and implementation, several meta-analyses and reviews have found that overall SEL programs have small to modest effects on students' increased prosocial behaviors and academic achievement, and decreases in antisocial behavior (Cipriano et al., 2023), mental health concerns (Sklad et al., 2012), and emotional distress and substance abuse (Ruby & Doolittle, 2010; Taylor et al., 2017). Positive outcomes arise from students' participation in SEL programs for myriad reasons, but the most prominent are that SEL programs seek to foster the development of important competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision making, that provide youth with a solid foundation for positive academic and social behaviors at school (CASEL, 2013). Further, SEL programs can positively shape schools as a developmental context through processes such as promoting warmer relationships with teachers and peers and reinforcing a climate of belonging and safety (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Though there are likely to be some differences based on the quality and implementation of an SEL program, there is precedent to evaluate whether SEL programs can make a positive difference during students' transition back to in-person schooling.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Existing research has documented the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on K-12 student behavior and academic learning. Our study extends that literature by exploring teachers' perceptions of the academic motivation, social, and emotional behavior changes affecting students, and the potential effect of

SEL programs after returning to in-person school in the fall of 2021. We use a concurrent mixed-methods design to address the following research questions: (RQ1) Do teachers perceive changes in students' behavior since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the return to in-person school? (RQ2) How do teachers describe students' behavior change? (RQ3) Are teachers' responses different based on whether their school is implementing an SEL program?

We expected that given the stress related to school shutdowns and reopenings and the subsequent teacher burnout (Herman et al., 2021), combined with the mental health concerns affecting students from the lockdown (Branje & Morris, 2021), teachers were more likely to perceive negative behavior changes among their students during the return to school. We also expected that having an SEL program at their school (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) would reduce teachers' negative perceptions of student behavior changes, even during such tumultuous times as the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were 120 K–12 teachers across a Midwestern state. The survey invitation was published in a monthly newsletter for the state's largest teachers' union, which serves over 47,000 educators statewide. Initially, 147 teachers provided responses to the survey; the analytic sample comprised the 120 who completed the open-ended responses. This survey sought to measure teachers' perceptions of resilience to COVID-19-related disruptions. Respondents' gender and race/ethnicity skewed toward individuals who self-reported as female and White (86 percent women, 12 percent men, 2 percent preferred not to answer; 96 percent White, 3 percent Native American, 1 percent Hispanic/Latinx) with racial demographics relatively comparable to the census data (83 percent White, 12 percent Black, 2 percent Asian; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022) and teacher demographics for the state (78 percent female, 96 percent White; Rhinesmith, 2020). Respondents ranged in age (21–30 years = 9 percent, 31–40 years = 32 percent, 41–50 years = 36 percent, 51–60 years = 20 percent, and 61–70 years = 3 percent) and years of teaching experience (range = 1–34 years, $M = 15.15$, $SD = 8.01$). Teachers were provided the option to report school information; therefore, demographic information about the student populations served by the schools

where teachers taught was limited to just over half of our sample. For the 69 teachers who provided this information, 40 percent were in rural school districts, 27 percent were in small towns, 18 percent were located in suburban areas, and 15 percent were located in urban/city areas according to NCES classifications. District enrollment ranged from very small ($n = 101$) to very large ($n = 22,644$) with an average of 4,239 students ($SD = 5,151$).

Procedure

Teachers completed the survey two to three months after the start of the 2021–2022 school year (around November 2021). Participants provided their consent before the survey began. This research was considered exempt under Category 2 federal regulations (45 CFR 46.104[d][2]) and the University of Missouri institutional review board. The survey was hosted online via Qualtrics, and respondents completed the survey using their own devices.

Measures

To assess perceptions of how students' behavior had changed since the COVID-19 pandemic and the return to in-person school, teachers responded to two questions. First, to assess teachers' beliefs about the students' behavior, teachers responded to the simple close-ended question, "To what extent has student behavior changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?" Responses were solicited using a three-point Likert scale (1 = better, 2 = no change, 3 = worse). This type of retroactive reflection has been common in prior COVID-related research (Li et al., 2022; Newby et al., 2020). Second, teachers responded to the open-ended question, "Please explain how student behavior has changed." To capture SEL implementation in schools, we presented the CASEL (2023) definition of SEL (referenced earlier in this article) in the survey, followed by the question, "Is your school currently implementing social-emotional program(s) to address student social-emotional well-being?" with a yes/no response.

Analytic Plan

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which teachers perceive that their students' behavior has changed since returning to school, we used a concurrent mixed-methods design. That is, to address our research questions, the qualitative and quantitative data were simultaneously collected

with close- and open-ended questions, analyzed independently, and then combined for interpretation. This integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the phenomena and a better explanation of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). To address RQ1 and RQ2, descriptive analyses were conducted on close-ended questions. The open-ended responses were analyzed by a team of three coders (the first, second, and fourth authors; all self-identify as White American women). The team read all the participants' responses to become familiar with the data, then generated initial codes representing students' behavioral change for each response using both theoretical (analyst-driven) and inductive (data-driven) approaches. Analyst-driven coding focused on general motivation, peer conflict, and mental health, while data-driven coding focused on all other themes present (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes that evolved were based on logic and face validity, which is a common practice in content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006). Frequency codes were calculated for each theme that emerged. Coding was not mutually exclusive; responses could be analyzed as representing multiple codes. Coders met on multiple occasions throughout the process to resolve any discrepancies and establish consensus, and participant quotes were selected to demonstrate each code (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). At least two coders analyzed each response. Last, to address RQ3 and combine our quantitative and qualitative data, we explored whether teachers who reported having an SEL program at their school were less likely than teachers without an SEL program at their school to report negative academic motivation, social, and emotional change in their students using binary logistic regression analyses.

RESULTS

RQ1: Teachers' Perceptions of Whether Their Students' Behavior Has Changed

In line with our hypothesis, when asked whether students' behavior had changed since the return to in-person schooling after COVID-19 shutdowns, almost all teachers (95 percent) reported that student behavior had gotten worse since the return to in-person schooling after COVID-19 shutdowns. Few teachers reported that students' behavior showed no change (4 percent) or that behavior had gotten better (1 percent).

RQ2: Teachers' Perceptions of How Their Students' Behavior Has Changed

After reviewing all participants' responses, piloting coding schemes, and refining the coding schemes through discussion, 11 distinct codes emerged from teachers' descriptions of their students' behavior changes. These codes were collated into three overarching themes representing academic motivation, social, and emotional changes. Academic motivation changes were represented by three codes (less engagement/on-task behavior, less motivation/more giving up, and increased apathy toward schoolwork). Social changes were represented by five codes (less mature behavior, lack of social skills, increased violence, increased peer conflict, and increased dependence on technology). Emotional changes were represented by three codes (challenges with emotion regulation, increased anxiety/stress, and increased depression or threats of self-harm). See Table 1 for sample participant quotes illustrating each code.

Overall, teachers reported academic motivation behavioral changes in their responses most frequently (59 percent), followed by social behavioral changes (48 percent), then emotional behavioral changes (38 percent). Table 2 presents the frequencies of how often teachers reported each change in students' behavior. The most common academic motivation, social, and emotional changes that teachers reported were increased apathy toward schoolwork, lack of social skills, and challenges with emotional regulation, respectively.

RQ3: Differences between Teachers with and without School SEL Programs

Nearly half of teachers (45 percent, $n = 54$) reported that their school was currently implementing an SEL program. Three binary logistic regression analyses were conducted with whether teachers reported negative academic motivation, social, or emotional changes as the dependent variables (0 = did not report this type of behavioral change, 1 = reported this type of behavioral change) and whether teachers had an SEL program at their school (0 = no SEL program, 1 = SEL program) as the independent variable. Teachers' gender (1 = man, 2 = woman) and their years of teaching experience (as a continuous variable) were also accounted for as covariates in the models. Results are presented in Table 2.

Whether teachers had a SEL program at their school did not significantly predict their reporting

Table 1: Content Analysis of Teachers' Response to How Behavior Has Changed since Returning to School

Type of Student Behavior Change	Code	Participant Quotes
Academic motivation	Less engagement and on-task behavior during class	"Students seem to have <i>shorter attention spans and more difficulty focusing on a task or sitting in a seat.</i>" "Students are <i>less engaged</i>, openly share not wanting to do anything, and there is an unwillingness to invest in the process with challenging content. We have very <i>high numbers of missing assignments, late work, incomplete work, being absent on test days, etc.</i>"
	Less motivation, more giving up in the face of challenges	"Students are <i>less likely to persevere through a difficult task, and more likely to give up when facing a challenge.</i>" "It appears that a lot of our students <i>have less drive to learn</i> and more drive to 'do what they want.'"
	Increased apathy toward schoolwork	"Students are <i>less willing to take responsibility for their actions and see little value in learning.</i> While we set goals all the time, there is <i>little interest in putting forth the effort to achieve them.</i>" "Students feel that they will just be passed along like last year and <i>so they do not apply themselves or put forth any effort in their schoolwork.</i>"
Social	Less mature behavior	"Students' <i>maturity level has decreased. Behavior once seen only in middle school is now clear and present in high school.</i>" "I would say in my area, <i>student maturity has significantly decreased, and although I teach eighth graders, I have to approach them as if they are fourth graders.</i>"
	Lack of social skills	"Students have not been exposed to other students as early as they were pre-COVID. Students now <i>are lacking social skills so when put in social situations they react inappropriately to stimulus or nonpreferred activities.</i>" "Students seem to have <i>forgotten how to people. They are not using kind words toward peers or adults.</i>"
	Increased violence	"We have so many <i>physical fights</i> now. We've seen an increase in truancy and drug use in school." "As an educator of eight years, I have never been <i>hit, kicked, bit, slapped, head butted, pinched, or talked back to as much as I have this year.</i>"
	Increased peer conflict	"<i>Disrespect, defiant, unable to get along with peers, physical assault.</i>" "They are <i>struggling to get along with others, work with others, use kind words, keep their hands to themselves, etc.</i> even more than before."
	Increased dependence on technology, inappropriate use	"Students are <i>disengaged with other students</i> even at lunch, <i>choosing their devices over human interaction.</i>" "They are way <i>more addicted to their devices</i>, and they cannot communicate effectively."
Emotional	Challenges with emotion regulation	"I am seeing a huge increase in students who are <i>unable to manage their emotions and make safe, respectful choices</i> in the school setting." "Students are also <i>not able to know what their triggers are, and any time they struggle with anything they break down.</i>"
	Increased anxiety/stress	"Upon returning to in-class learning right after the pandemic a lot of <i>students were worried and didn't have the coping skills. This fear of being ill or out of school on quarantine has many students anxious and worried about their health and grades, as well as the health of loved ones.</i>" "Students are <i>stressed out, burned out, and unmotivated.</i>"
	Increased depression or threats of self-harm	"We have a greater number of <i>students being referred for mental health counseling, emergency room visits, or inpatient stays.</i>" "Many students seem <i>depressed, negative, and unable to cope with emotions.</i>"

Note: As each response could be described with more than one code, *italicized text* represents the portion of the participants' response that led to a particular coding classification.

Table 2: Results from Binary Logistic Regression Analyses for Academic Motivation, Social, and Emotional Behavioral Changes

Predictor	Estimate	SE	Wald	Exp(B)	95% CI
Change in academic motivation					
SEL program	−0.93	.46	4.08*	0.40	[0.16, 0.97]
Gender	−0.43	.68	0.41	0.65	[0.17, 2.44]
Teaching experience	−0.03	.03	1.39	0.97	[0.92, 1.02]
Change in social behavior					
SEL program	−0.04	.45	0.01	0.96	[0.40, 2.30]
Gender	−1.67	.82	4.11*	0.19	[0.04, 0.95]
Teaching experience	−0.001	.03	0.001	0.99	[0.95, 1.05]
Change in emotional behavior					
SEL program	0.24	.44	0.29	1.27	[0.53, 3.03]
Gender	−0.66	.72	0.83	0.52	[0.12, 2.14]
Teaching experience	−0.003	.03	0.01	0.99	[0.95, 1.05]

Notes: SEL = social-emotional learning. SEL program was coded as 0 = no SEL program, 1 = SEL program, with the latter category as the reference group. Gender was coded as 1 = man, 2 = woman, with the latter category as the reference group.

* $p < .05$.

of negative social (Wald = 0.01, $p = .93$, $Exp[B] = .96$, 95% CI [0.40, 2.30]), or emotional changes (Wald = 0.29, $p = .59$, $Exp[B] = 1.27$, 95% CI [0.53, 3.03]), but there was a significant association for negative academic motivation changes (Wald = 4.08, $p = .043$, $Exp[B] = .40$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.97]). That is, teachers with and without an SEL program at their school were equally likely to report negative emotional or social behavioral changes among their students, but teachers with an SEL program were less than half as likely to report negative academic motivation changes.

DISCUSSION

The present study sheds light on teachers' perceptions of student behavior during the return to school after COVID-19 lockdowns. As expected, quantitative data revealed teachers perceived that student behavior changed for the worse since returning to in-person school in fall 2021. Teachers qualitatively described specific changes in their students' academic motivation, social, and emotional behavior. Among the most common behaviors that teachers reported were students' engaging in more off-task, disruptive behaviors during class, giving up in the face of challenges, being disrespectful and using unkind words with peers and teachers, increased emotional outbreaks, and choosing to use technology instead of interacting with peers or paying attention in class. Teachers also reported an increase in more extreme behaviors, such as more

mental health crises and more physical fights at school. These behaviors are likely the result of complex individual and systemic challenges placed on youth by the pandemic. Identifying these behavior changes observed by teachers is an essential first step in developing appropriate plans for addressing worsening behavior.

Most teachers (59 percent) reported negative academic motivation changes in their students. This is, they perceived less engagement/on-task behavior, less motivation/more giving up, and increased apathy toward schoolwork. However, based on integration of our quantitative and qualitative data, teachers from schools with SEL programs were significantly less likely to report students' reduced engagement, motivation, and apathy. This aligns with previous research, which indicates that students' participation in SEL programs promotes positive academic trajectories (Caprara et al., 2014; Cipriano et al., 2023). Students' academic motivation and social-emotional competencies are closely intertwined and may build from similar foundational skills such as positive self-regulation, emotional awareness and management, and the ability to form and maintain positive relationships (Caprara et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2017). Nevertheless, our results should be interpreted with caution given our small sample size and limited ability to account for other factors potentially associated with student behavior, such as school resources or length of time spent in remote learning.

Many teachers also reported negative social (48 percent) and emotional (38 percent) changes in their students. That is, they perceived less mature behavior, lack of social skills, increased violence, increased peer conflict, increased dependence on technology, decreased emotion regulation, increased anxiety/stress, and increased depression or threats of self-harm. Unexpectedly, teachers with SEL programs at their school did not perceive fewer social and emotional challenges among students during the return to in-person school compared with those with no SEL program. A plausible explanation is that the effects of COVID on social-emotional well-being (but not academic motivation) overpowered the effects of SEL programs as observed by teachers. In addition, existing SEL programs may not have been implemented with sufficient fidelity, which is a key factor influencing outcomes (Durlak, 2016), to obtain observable effects. Within the context of a once-in-a-lifetime world event like the pandemic (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), more time or more powerful interventions delivered with fidelity may be necessary to achieve social-emotional benefits. More research is needed to determine whether fidelity of implementation of specific SEL programs, or greater duration of intervention as the pandemic recedes, results in greater social-emotional benefits for students, as perceived by teachers.

It is also possible that effects were positive for elementary, but not secondary school students. Prior research has repeatedly reported greater effects in the younger grades (Taylor et al., 2017) and that elementary teachers have reported greater concern about learning loss compared with teachers of older students (Nadeem et al., 2022). Our sample size was too small to address whether there were differences between students at different grade levels. More research is needed with larger, diverse samples of teachers to confirm these findings and assess whether SEL programs are successful at mitigating negative behavioral changes in different types of schools (e.g., elementary vs. middle, urban vs. rural).

A strength of our study is the use of a mixed-methods design to explore teachers' perceptions of students' behavior after returning to in-person school following over a year of pandemic-related disruptions (some of which are still ongoing). Our qualitative data provide concrete examples of student behaviors that teachers observed. This can

support focused conversations on how to address specific behaviors. Our findings also support SEL program implementation at school as potentially helping to reduce challenges with academic motivation postpandemic.

Our study has some limitations. First, we surveyed teacher perceptions, rather than objectively measuring student behavior. Teacher perceptions may have been influenced by the many stressful months of rapidly shifting to online instruction with little support, feeling low self-efficacy and exhaustion (Herman et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021), and then making yet another transition to in-person school. Second, we do not know how representative our sample was. It is possible that teachers who chose to take our survey had strong feelings about SEL, leading to potential response bias. Third, to ensure anonymity for respondents, we did not identify schools where teachers taught. In our quantitative analyses, we were only able to account for teacher-reported characteristics (i.e., gender and years of teaching experience). Thus, we were unable to account for other important factors that could have contributed to teachers' perceptions of student behavior, such as grade level, locale, or student characteristics (e.g., race, free and reduced-price lunch, academic achievement). In particular, the availability of resources at teachers' schools (e.g., Title 1 status, quality SEL programs) could have also influenced their perceptions of school climate and students' social and emotional functioning. Fourth, our small sample predominantly identified as women and White, which limits generalizability of these findings to teachers with other backgrounds. It is especially important to investigate the perceptions of teachers in communities of color and urban settings where the pandemic had a greater impact. Last, SEL includes a broad array of programs, with each program focusing on different objectives and using different approaches (Bergin et al., 2023). Results could be different for different SEL programs and may vary based on the quality of program implementation. Our sample was too small to analyze program differences.

Our study suggests four interesting directions for future research. First, future research could investigate students', rather than teachers', perspectives about changes in students' behavior that could also inform development of interventions. This approach could be particularly useful in understanding students' emotional well-being, as it is more

challenging for teachers to infer the internal nature of students' emotions (Venetz et al., 2019). Second, future research could investigate whether teachers' perceptions varied by grade level and by quality or type of SEL program. Third, future research should document the evolution of student behavior and what factors facilitate improvement over time as the pandemic recedes. Our study explored teachers' perceptions of student behavior following the pandemic early in the return to in-person schooling. We expect that student behavior will improve, although not rapidly. Fourth, future research could focus on teachers' perceptions of their own well-being following return to in-person schooling, and whether SEL programs support teachers' ongoing adjustment. The present study can inform interventions in schools to support students' behavior and teachers' well-being during these challenging and unprecedented circumstances. **CS**

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Lindsay Brockmeier, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher, Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology, University of Missouri, 211 Hill Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA; email: lbrockmeier@missouri.edu. **Nicole R. Brass, PhD**, is a postdoctoral researcher; **Christi Bergin, PhD**, is a research professor emerita; and **Madison Imler, MS**, is a doctoral student, College of Education & Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA.

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