



# researching with children: ethical tensions

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## ABSTRACT

There is a need to reflect on both the processes and outcomes of the range of approaches aimed at promoting children's engagement in research, with the specific intent of listening to children's voices. This article considers some of the ethical tensions we have experienced when engaging children in research about their prior-to-school and school environments and their perspectives of the transitions between these environments. Examples from projects conducted in Iceland and Australia are drawn upon to illustrate these tensions and, to reflect on the strategies and questions we have developed to guide our engagement with children. This article raises issues rather than offering simple solutions. We suggest that there are a number of contextual and relational variables that guide our research interactions, and no 'one best solution' applicable to all contexts. Our aim in sharing these tensions is to stimulate further debate and discussions around children's participation in research.

**KEYWORDS** *early childhood education, ethics, consent, research with children*

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## introduction

Research in early childhood education has, over recent years, devoted increasing attention to the importance of listening to the voices of children and having regard for children as active agents within social and cultural settings (Clark and Moss, 2001;

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Lansdown, 2005). Early childhood research has been influenced by several social, political and research agendas, notably: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) and more recently, the statement issued as General Comment 7 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2005), which reiterates the significance of the CRC for all children, including the very young; citizenship discourse (Jans, 2004; Roberts, 2003), which asserts children's rights and participation as active citizens; and changing paradigms of the study of childhood, as embodied in the 'new sociology of childhood' which focuses on children as 'beings rather than becomings' (Qvortrup, 1994) and advocates the rights of children to have their voices heard and to be taken seriously as well as the obligations of adults to listen (James and Prout, 1997).

There has been an active commitment from many early childhood researchers aimed at facilitating children's engagement in research, including very young children. Particular examples include the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), investigations of the everyday lives of children (Cobb et al., 2005); children's engagement in art experiences (Darbyshire et al., 2005); children's experiences of school and child care (Eide and Winger, 2005; Kinney, 2005) and engaging young children in documentation of their learning (Carr et al., 2005). Each of these projects has emphasized young children's competence within research contexts and their ability to engage with researchers who respect their views and value their perspectives. In addition, much has been learnt about children's perspectives, and changes to practices in early childhood settings have been instituted in response to these perspectives.

However, engaging children in research is not without challenges or tensions. The increasing emphasis on engaging children in research establishes the need for critical review of the methodological and ethical challenges experienced by researchers. Vandembroeck and Bie (2006: 127) note:

It is necessary to look critically at the new paradigm, since it risks being implemented as a new 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 2001) for pedagogy. This could imply that the initial ethical standpoint, wishing to give a voice to children, is at risk, since the new pedagogy of participation may well be silencing specific groups of children and their parents.

This article draws on two ongoing projects – one in Iceland (Einarsdottir, 2005a, 2007) and the other in Australia (Dockett and Perry, 2007a) – which reflect the philosophic bases that children are indeed experts on their own lives (Clark and Moss, 2001) and are competent social actors who have the right to be heard (James and Prout, 1997). Both projects recognize that children's participation or engagement in research occurs on a number of different levels. In Lansdown's (2005) description, these levels range through consultation (where adult directed initiatives elicit children's perspectives), participation (where opportunities are available for children to be actively involved the development, supervision and evaluations of projects) to self-initiation (where children are empowered to take action, and are not merely responding to an adult-defined agenda).

Further, both projects are underpinned by the belief that adults can learn much about ways to enhance children's lives by listening to them. A brief description of these projects is used to 'set the scene' for the following discussion, which focuses on some of the ethical tensions faced by researchers involved in these projects as they promote children's active participation in research.

## **Iceland**

In recent years Johanna has conducted research with preschool and primary school children in Iceland. Children from two to seven years old have participated in studies where the aims have been to discover children's views on:

- (1) the role of preschool and preschool teachers;
- (2) learning and teaching in primary school;
- (3) children's well-being in preschool and primary school; and
- (4) children's influence and power in preschool and primary school.

For example, one study was conducted over a period of three years in one preschool in Reykjavik. Participants were 49 children and 12 preschool teachers who were seen as co-researchers and gathered some of the data. The first year was a preparation period that involved reading, discussion and piloting methods to use with the children. The second year was a data-gathering period, and the last year was the analysis period, when interpretation and reflections on the findings took place (Einarsdottir, 2005a).

## **Australia**

Over several years, the *Starting School Research Project* (Dockett and Perry, 2007a) has investigated the perceptions, expectations and experiences of all involved as children start school. Throughout this project, there has been a commitment to recognizing children as stakeholders in the transition, and promoting their participation in the research as well as the planning and evaluation of transition strategies. Participants have been more than 1000 children, parents, educators and community members who have been involved in some way in promoting children's transition to school. Children aged from approximately four to six years have been invited to participate in the research, usually in their school or early childhood setting, though sometimes in their home environment.

## **methodologies**

Both projects have adopted a range of methodologies aimed to promote the active participation of children. Strategies have included: informal conversations with children, discussions based on books about starting school, keeping journals,

opportunities to draw about the transition to school, reflections on transition, photo and video tours (Dockett and Perry, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Dockett et al., 2006; Einarsdottir, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). The importance of utilizing a wide range of strategies is not to seek one specific or consistent (triangulated) message from children. Rather the aim continues to be to use strategies that actively engage children and in which children have a choice about how they participate. Using a range of strategies also facilitates the involvement of children with a wide range of competencies. For example, strategies that rely on non-verbal communication can encourage the involvement of children who have limited language skills.

## **ethical tensions in researching with young children**

Research itself generates a range of tensions and challenges. When seeking to engage children in research, some of the ethical tensions are highlighted. Of particular note are those related to consent (Farrell, 2005; Flewitt, 2005b; Ford et al., 2007), the representativeness of children who participate in research (Hill, 2006), the impact of children's participation (Clark, 2005; Hill, 2006), the consideration of children's spaces as sites for research (Moss and Petrie, 2002), and the interpretative framework used in data analysis (Grover, 2004). Methodologically, we also acknowledge the challenges inherent in adults interacting and engaging with young children identified by other research colleagues (for example, Fasoli, 2003; Sumsion, 2003). This article focuses on ethical tensions that have been relevant to our own research. We do not claim to have resolved these tensions – but do find that raising and discussing these with colleagues provides opportunities for ongoing reflexivity and review of our practices and assumptions.

## **issues of consent**

One major question we have confronted is: what constitutes informed consent in research with young children? There is a legal answer, in that in both Iceland and Australia, there is a legal requirement to have the informed, written consent of the parent or guardian when seeking to engage children in research (Dockett and Perry, 2007b; Einarsdottir, 2007). However, this requirement does not negate the importance of gaining children's agreement to participate in the research. Both projects have adopted approaches that emphasize the importance of children's assent, where assent is interpreted as 'agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract' (Ford et al., 2007: 20). Cocks (2007: 258) refers to assent as 'the sensitizing concept in gaining children's agreement', adding:

seeking assent requires the researcher to remain constantly vigilant to the responses of the child at all times; it is not something gained at the beginning of the research then put aside. It requires time and constant effort on the part of the researchers, who need to attune themselves to the child's unique communication . . . (Cocks, 2007: 258–9)

In each of the projects, there have been occasions when parental consent was given, but children's assent was not. Different strategies for providing opportunities for children to assent to involvement have been used – including a smiley chart asking children to indicate their preferred involvement by circling the appropriate figure.

Maddy's interaction, reported below, reflects several ongoing conversations we have had with children as they determine whether or not they want to be involved in projects. We are very much of the view that children need time to make decisions about assent, and that this time can only be available when researchers spend time in specific settings, become known to the children and start to establish relationships based on trust and respect. The importance of time to develop trusting relationships is highlighted by several researchers (Clark and Moss, 2001; Lancaster, 2006; Lansdown, 2005), with Greene and Hill (2005: 17) noting that 'time and trust go hand in hand'. With the support of early childhood staff and parents, we sought children's views about what they thought school would be like. Maddy (aged four years, nine months) was about to start school. Her mother had completed a form indicating her consent for Maddy to be involved in the project. This form had provided details of the project for both parents and children, and parents had been asked to discuss the project with their children before indicating consent (or otherwise). Maddy was sitting in the sandpit at preschool soon after she had arrived one morning.

Sue: Maddy, my name is Sue. Do you know why I'm here in your preschool?

Maddy: Mm. [stops running her feet through the sand, looks up, turns body slightly away from Sue]

Sue: Your Mum said it would be OK for me to talk with you about going to school. Do you want to talk with me about going to school?

Maddy: No. I'm playin' in the sand now.

Sue: OK. I'm going over to talk with Sandy. If you would like to ask me some questions or talk to me later, just come over.

Maddy: [nods]

*90 minutes later Maddy approaches Sue.*

Sue: Hi Maddy. How was the sandpit?

Maddy: Me and Jess made a cake.

...

Sue: Do you want to talk to me about starting school?

Maddy: Mmm. Not yet.

Maddy did decide to talk about starting school. Her initial reluctance – as evidence by both her verbal and non-verbal interactions – gradually diminished and she indicated her willingness to be involved only after three days of watching what happened,

noting who else had been involved and occasionally checking (by approaching Sue) that there were still opportunities for her to be involved if she chose.

Regardless of the strategy used, there remain occasions when parents are happy for children to participate, but children are not willing to do so; and where children are eager to participate, but parental consent has not been forthcoming. In some instances, the latter has resulted in children participating in a number of tasks or activities, but with no data being recorded or analysed. However, we are left wondering how appropriate that is, given that much of the research we undertake relies on building trusting and respectful relationships.

Seeking children's informed assent is an ongoing process (Flewitt, 2005a; Hill, 2005). To be informed, children need to understand the nature of the study; what is going to happen, what will be expected of them, what will happen to the data and how the results will be used. This may present some challenges if children do not have the knowledge or experience of what a research study involves (Greene and Hill, 2005). In each of the projects, we have endeavoured to find ways to explain clearly to children what is involved and their right to withdraw from the project at any time (Einarsdottir, 2007; Harcourt and Conroy, 2005). Part of this process has involved renegotiating consent throughout projects – checking with children that they are still willing to be involved (Alderson, 2005). In considering children's assent, we are also conscious of both verbal and non-verbal interactions, noting that children's body language can itself provide some important cues about their preferred involvement (Dockett and Perry, 2007c; Flewitt, 2005a).

In reflecting on this, Johanna notes:

Throughout my studies, I have been conscious about the danger involved when children agree to participate because an authority figure asks them to or because they don't quite understand what is going on. In the research study that was a regular part of the school day the children didn't give their consent through formal means at the beginning of the study; rather, they were asked each time they began activities connected to the study if they wanted to participate. I was not quite comfortable with that procedure and felt that to be ethical and make sure that the children didn't feel tricked into participating I needed to develop some method to explain the study to the children so their consent would be based on information they understood.

In a more recent study, where first grade children (aged six years) were asked to participate in a group discussion about their preschool experience and draw pictures from their preschool, an information leaflet where the study was explained was developed. The leaflet had pictures and a short text that explained what was involved in the study. The researcher went through the booklet with each child who then wrote his/her name in agreement to participate.

Our ongoing questions about issues of consent and assent in researching with children include:

- Who is legally entitled to give consent for children's participation? Are children legally able to give consent?
- What constitutes informed consent?
- How do we promote ongoing consent/assent that is renegotiated throughout the project?
- What strategies genuinely provide opportunities for children to indicate assent (or dissent)?

## **who is represented in research?**

Much of the rationalization for seeking children's perspectives is based on children's agency as they actively participate in the co-construction of their own lives, cultures and spaces (Corsaro, 1997; Qvortrup, 1994). However, in championing the inclusion of children's voices, there are dangers that children are treated as a homogeneous group and diversity among children is masked (Vandenbroeck and Bie, 2006; Waller, 2006).

Children have diverse perspectives, experiences and understandings. Choosing to involve some in research and not others can mean that this diversity is neither recognized nor respected. Children and young people involved in research have noted that the invitation to participate often comes from adults and that adults have a variety of reasons for choosing to invite some, rather than all children (Hill, 2006). In the following example, it became clear that some children were more likely than others to have opportunities to engage with research.

One strategy for seeking children's perspectives on starting school has been to invite small groups of children to participate in photo tours where they can highlight features of the environment that are important for them by taking photos (Dockett and Perry, 2005b). For example, we have invited children who have almost finished their first year of school to take us on a tour where they can highlight what they think new children need to know about their school. In many circumstances, adults working in schools select from the children for whom consent has been given, both in terms of which children can participate at specific times and the make up of the group in which they participate. For example, teachers have made comments such as 'Jason will have to wait for another time. He is too slow with his work' or 'I need to make sure you don't have a bad combination in that group'.

While these comments may well reflect the teacher's knowledge of individual children, they also demonstrate some, rather than all children are likely to become research participants.

However, it should also be noted that some children actively choose not to engage in research. Some children regard participation as intrusive and actively choose not to participate (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). This can be particularly the case when research occurs within private time or space. In one instance, for example, a visit to the home of a child about to start school was met with disdain

from the child involved. While his mother was very happy to engage in conversation and had indeed nominated visiting the home as the most appropriate location for a conversation, her son indicated in both verbal and non-verbal ways that home was his time to play and watch television and that he was not at all interested in research participation (Dockett and Perry, 2007a).

As we engage with children in research we find that we are continually asking the following questions:

- If research is representative, do children get to decide who represents them?
- Children are a diverse group – how does our research acknowledge this diversity?
- Do we expect some children to speak for all children?
- Does our research genuinely regard children as active social agents if not all have access to the same levels of agency?
- How does our research recognize ‘multiple realities’ (Frones et al., 2000) of childhood and childhood experiences?

## **interpreting data**

In addition to issues about who is represented in research about children’s participation (Hill, 2006), there are also issues about how adults interpret what children contribute. Efforts to understand the meaning of children’s comments or other contributions rest with an understanding of context, including the interpretive framework adopted by researchers. Grover (2004) notes that it is never possible to completely escape the interpretive frameworks we adopt as researchers. Further, it is important to understand the generation of data as an intercultural event, where the researcher and the children involved both shape the generation of outcomes (Baker, 2004) and where the data generated are therefore the result of intercultural collaboration (Danby and Farrell, 2004). The same principle can be applied to the interpretation of data, meaning that neither data generation nor data interpretation can be viewed as neutral processes.

Efforts to engage children not only in the generation of data, but also in the interpretation of data can ensure that the voice of the researcher is not the only one considered. Mannion (2007: 407) asserts that we ‘need to put the processes that give rise to potential delusion and mis-communication under the spotlight’.

In one of our studies where the preschool teachers participated in the data gathering, they were also involved in analysing, reflecting, and interpreting the research data (Einarsdottir, 2005b). The children, on the other hand, participated actively in the data gathering through group interviews, drawing, playing and taking photographs, but when it came to analysing and interpretation their voices were not heard. Rather, teachers drew on their professional expertise in



analysis and interpretation, and their voices predominated. When children are actively involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data they generate, interpretations are more likely to authentically represent children's perspectives, rather than adult interpretations of children's perspectives.

One way to promote the inclusion of children's perspectives throughout the research process is to integrate interpretation in the data gathering methods. The importance of involving children in the interpretation of data that they have generated and that reflects their perspectives is highlighted in the following reflection from Johanna.

When the children took photographs I printed out the pictures and met with individual children. We discussed the pictures, what was in them, and why they took the photographs. These interviews were of vital importance, because the pictures themselves only told part of the story. Without the children's explanations my understanding and interpretations would have been very different. Two examples illustrate this.

Many of the children took photographs of the playground and their friends. One five-year-old boy showed me his pictures that to me were of the playground with children and playthings. He, however, explained that he had been photographing his home and the neighbourhood where the preschool was located. He pointed to his home in the picture, it could barely be seen in the background. Another child took a picture of shelves in the playroom that reached very high. When she was asked why she took this picture she explained that it was because she wanted to know what was kept on the top shelves.

Just as adults involved in research are invited to check the data they have generated, to ensure that data are accurate, authentic and in forms individuals are comfortable sharing with researchers, it is important to provide children with the same opportunities. Sometimes, this will result in children censoring the data, as in the following example:

In my study where children used disposable cameras to photograph what they found important in the preschool (Einarsdottir, 2005b) some of the pictures were taken in private spaces, in closed rooms where they were allowed to play without adult supervision, and in the bathrooms. When I sat with the preschool teachers and looked at the pictures the children had taken and realized how private many of them were, I felt that we were invading their privacy. I also felt that I had not explained well enough to them that the pictures were for other people to see, as well. After the photographs had been developed the children were allowed to choose what to do with the pictures; they could choose pictures to put in their personal photo albums, they could throw them away, or they could place a photo behind another photo so it wouldn't be visible.

Preschool teacher: What can I invite you to do with this picture? [They look together at a picture of a friend's behind with his pants down.]

Boy: I think you can invite me to get rid of it, thank you.

Research relationships which offer children control over what data are generated, analysed and interpreted can help move children's engagement in research

beyond the levels of consultation and participation described by Lansdown (2005).

Some of our questions about the interpretation of data are:

- How can we ensure that our own interpretive framework is not the only one considered in the interpretation of data?
- In what ways do we recognize that data generation and interpretation involve collaborative processes?
- What control do the children have over what count as data and how these are interpreted?
- What mechanisms are in place for children to check the data they generate and to edit /change them as they think is appropriate?

### **the impact of children's participation**

In our projects, we acknowledge the potential benefits for children as they engage in research, often in the form of adult recognition of their competence and capabilities. However, we are also conscious that children's participation can have other consequences. For example, Tisdall and Davis (2004) note that there is a danger in consultation becoming tokenistic, where children's views are often sought, but little feedback is provided and there is no clear indication of whether their participation leads to any changes in policy or practice. Sinclair (2004: 113) describes 'consultation fatigue', where children quickly experience disillusionment if their participation seems not to lead to change.

Several researchers have cautioned against the institutionalization of children's participation (Francis and Lorenzo, 2002) and the potential for participation to become an additional mechanism of control (Fielding, 2001, 2007). While these researchers have raised such concerns in relation to children in school, Clark and her colleagues (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark and Statham, 2005) have noted similar concerns when reflecting on the engagement and participation of young children. One particular concern has been that children's participation can lead to increased levels of surveillance and control by adults (Arnot and Reay, 2007; Bragg, 2007). This concern was highlighted for us in the following example.

The photo tours described previously provide a great deal of information and insight about children's perspectives of school. Across several studies (Dockett and Perry, 2005c; Dockett and Simpson, 2003), many children have participated in school tours and collaborated in the development of a journal of the tour, adding text to the photos to make a book that could be shared with new children starting school. On each occasion we have used this approach, children have led the group to their special places at the school. These are invariably places that are 'out-of-bounds' or secret. For example, one group of children stood on the border of an out-of-bounds area, noting that *You are not allowed to go there otherwise you might get hurt and the teacher is going*

*to kill you*. Further conversation indicated that several of this group did indeed enjoy playing in the out-of-bounds area. When the journal of this tour was compiled with the class group, there was a lot of conversation about the various out-of-bounds areas at the school. Teachers noted this and resolved to be more vigilant in their policing of these areas. In this instance, children's perspectives were listened to, yet one of the consequences was greater surveillance of children at school.

Part of the tension for us as researchers is ensuring that when children give their assent to be involved in the research they know what data will be collected and how that data will be shared. In this example, the children chose what photos would be included in the journals and knew who would be reading those journals (children, teachers and parents). However, there remains an unsettling feeling that these children showed a trust in us as researchers when they shared their secret places, and a further sense that the increasing surveillance of the out-of-bounds areas reflects a betrayal of that trust. Broström (2005) challenges adult researchers who work closely with children when he questions whether it is necessarily in children's best interest for adults to uncover details of their life and secret spaces. He suggests that we should consider creating a greater distance between ourselves and the children instead of trying to enter their world, since, he maintains, children's rights to privacy and protection are more important than some of our adult research agendas.

As we strive to engage children as active participants in research, we regularly reflect on the possible impact of this engagement:

- Are we contributing to increased surveillance of children's lives and experiences?
- Can we justify this intrusion into the private lives of children?
- How do we share the data and in what ways? Who owns the data? Do we negotiate data with the children? Do they have the opportunity to review these decisions? Do they have the chance to check and/or edit the data generated?
- How do we respect the trust children place in us when they share their experiences and perspectives?

## **children's spaces in research**

Lansdown's (2005) description of different levels of participation indicates that much research involving children occurs in response to adult agendas, in contexts determined and organized by adults. Recent research suggests that there is much to be gained by focusing on 'both the spaces in which we conduct our research, and the spaces at the centre of our research' (Barker and Weller, 2003: 207). This is particularly the case when we regard data generation and interpretation as cultural interactions between researchers and participants (Baker, 2004). The physical locations in which we conduct research have an impact on that research,

just as the social situations surrounding research reflect specific relationships. For example, children's explorations of school spaces are influenced both by the physical layout of the school as well as the relationships between teachers and children. The children involved in these explorations have demonstrated a strong awareness of the rules of physical access (where they are permitted to go) and social interaction (how to address and interact with adults) (Dockett and Perry, 2005b).

In one of our photo tours, children took researchers to the principal's office. They indicated that they could take a photo from outside the door, but could not go inside. When the group decided that they should take photos of the toilets, there was great laughter when one of the boys pretended to walk into the girls toilets. The girls called him back and told him he was not allowed in there. When walking past another classroom, the children started to whisper, explaining that Mrs C. got cranky if they were noisy and interrupted her class.

Research with children is also guided by some cautions about the physical spaces. For example, in interactions with children, we seek open, easily accessible spaces, where children can engage for a little or long time, and where we, as researchers, are not alone with individual children. While transparency of research approaches is one reason for seeking these spaces, the major rationale reflects awareness of child protection issues and the desire to position ourselves as ethically responsible researchers.

Moss and Petrie (2002) use the term 'children's spaces' to describe both the physical location and the social and cultural practices that underpin interactions, including research interactions. Waller (2006) has called for a rethinking of children's participation to take greater account of children's spaces – 'spaces for childhood within which children can exercise their agency to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning-making, which may or may not involve engagement with adults' (p. 93). In a similar vein, Mannion (2007) suggests that the current discourses around listening to children and children's participation need reframing to focus on the relationships between children and adults and the spaces they inhabit.

'Listening to children's voices' and 'young people's participation in decision making' are useful starting points. But we need *at the same time* to understand how our research spaces, and spaces for children's lives are co-constructed by the actions of key adults because child-adult relations and spatial practices are so central in deciding which children's voices get heard, what they can legitimately speak about and what difference it makes to who we are as adults and children. (Mannion, 2007: 417)

Refocusing participation and research agendas in this way problematizes some of the notions of children's competence and agency that underpin many of the moves to incorporate and respond to children's voice in research. While retaining the imperative of listening to children, such a re-focus promotes relational perspectives, where we acknowledge that all individuals – children and

adults – move between different and shifting positions of dependence and independence, competence and incompetence (Kjörholt, 2005).

Recognition of research spaces guides our reflection on:

- How does the physical nature of research spaces impact on children's engagement, as well as the engagement of the researchers?
- How are the elements of social spaces reflected in the research design, development and interpretation? How do children, as well as adults, contribute to these elements?
- What constitutes competence in these spaces? Who decides?
- How does our research recognize the importance of relationships in the research process?

## conclusion

Engaging with children in research and seeking their perspectives is a complex process. To do this effectively we must be wary of approaches that position listening to children's voices and promoting children's participation as tokenistic processes that do little to enhance children's experiences. In presenting some of the ethical tensions we have experienced in different research contexts, we aim to highlight the questions and issues that we find problematic. We do not profess to have answers to these questions and are not necessarily convinced that there are single best answers. Rather, we have accepted that researchers, research contexts and research participants impact on the nature of the research conducted and the identified research outcomes. This does not negate our obligation to conduct methodologically rigorous and ethically sound research. Rather, it reiterates the need for ongoing reflexivity as we recognize the ethical tensions inherent in seeking consent and assent for children's engagement in research, acknowledge the diversity among and within groups of children, question the representativeness of the children engaged in our research, explore the potential impacts of children's participation in research, challenge our interpretations of research and negotiate research spaces.

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