

TEACHER UNIONS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN PUNJAB: ADDRESSING PROBLEMS, INFLUENCING POLICY, AND EMPOWERING MEMBERS

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Abstract

This study explores the role of teacher unions in Punjab, Pakistan, highlighting how they act as agents of change by identifying educational problems, influencing policies, empowering members, and promoting reforms. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the researcher gathered real-life stories from experienced members of the Punjab Teachers Union (PTU) to understand their challenges and achievements. The findings show that teacher unions play a key role in spotting issues in the education system, such as high student-teacher ratios, irrelevant curriculum changes, and unnecessary non-teaching duties for teachers. Unions raise these problems at different forums and suggest solutions to improve education quality. However, their involvement in official policy-making remains limited. While they sometimes influence recruitment and transfer policies through pressure and negotiations, unions are often left out of major national decisions, such as curriculum reforms. Another important function of unions is creating awareness among teachers about their rights and current educational policies. This is done through meetings, social media campaigns, and seminars. Still, many members lack proper understanding and training, as formal training sessions are rare due to poor planning and limited budgets. The study also found that although some informal training takes place during meetings, unions could become much stronger and more effective with better-organized training programs for their representatives. Overall, the study shows that while teacher unions in Punjab have the potential to improve the education system and protect teachers' rights, they face many challenges, including limited involvement in policymaking and a lack of structured training for their members. Strengthening unions through capacity building and greater inclusion in decision-making processes could help bring positive changes to education in Punjab.

Keywords: Teacher Unions, Educational Reforms, Policy Making, Teacher Empowerment, Educational Challenges

Introduction

Unions started to form during the early days of modern industries. Their main purpose was to balance the power between workers and employers. In the beginning, unions focused mostly on protecting workers from unfair treatment by employers (Giddens, 2009). Teacher unions, however, do more than just fight for better pay or working conditions like traditional labor unions. They also support the professionalism of teachers and help protect their rights, along with the rights of other school staff. These unions speak on behalf of teachers and work together with education authorities to improve conditions through collective bargaining (Bascia, 2005).

Teacher unions are strong in schools because they can organize and stand up for teachers when needed. However, Kallaway (2007) pointed out that teacher unions are often left out of important decisions, like setting education policies. He mentioned that teachers and their unions usually don't get a say in decision-making, yet they are often blamed when problems arise. Grindle (2004) and Murillo (1999) point out that teacher unions in Latin America are involved in making education policies. However, not many studies have looked into this area. Teacher unions are known for their active role in shaping different parts of education policies.

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In the United States, some teacher unions have a different view when it comes to policy-making and education reforms. Moe (2003, 2005, 2011) explains that some unions see these reforms as a threat to teachers' rights and benefits, so they try to stop them through lobbying and campaigns. Research by Anzia (2011), Ballou (2001), and Hartney & Flavin (2009) shows that teacher unions in the USA influence education policies by using their strong organizational power. These unions often resist reforms that focus too much on accountability. In South Africa, Patillo (2012) found that teacher union strikes negatively affect the education system by causing school closures and disturbing exam and teaching schedules. Bascia (2005) noted that media and policy experts often criticize teacher unions, saying they lack proper authority and don't focus on what really matters. This makes it hard for unions to be taken seriously in the policy-making world.

Geingob (2004) highlighted that teacher unions have also played a role in fighting for independence, standing against unfair education systems, and supporting social equality. The involvement of teacher unions in education reforms depends on how well the unions are organized and whether their leaders and members have the knowledge and skills to take part in such complex processes (Fataar, 2006; Bascia, 2005; Buhlungu, 1999). Draxler (2008) and Marope & Sack (2007) also highlight the importance of having experts within teacher unions to make their role in reforms effective. Unfortunately, our education planning often doesn't match the actual needs, and implementation is usually ignored. This leads to a system that becomes more corrupt rather than improving. Our universities are not producing skilled professionals like editors, developers, administrators, or decision-makers. People are more focused on income and material things rather than real growth, and those who are supposed to support progress aren't making any valuable contributions. Students today seem more interested in getting degrees than gaining real knowledge. Just having more colleges and universities doesn't mean we are improving — in fact, it only shows that the quality of education is lacking. For example, no Pakistani university ranks in the top 1000 in the world. This shows a clear link between the country's poor education system and its weak social and economic conditions.

In contrast, developed countries have shaped their education systems to meet market needs. Shen and Wong (2006) point out that although there have been some improvements, there is still a long way to go. We need to work hard to strengthen our democracy and raise our social and economic standards, just like some of our neighboring South Asian countries. In Pakistan, many teacher unions are actively working to improve the education system. One of the most well-known unions is the Punjab Teachers Union (PTU), which focuses on solving educational issues and protecting the rights of teachers in Punjab. PTU is a well-organized body with thousands of members across the province. In other parts of the world, like Ivory Coast and other African countries, teacher unions have played a bigger role beyond just supporting teachers. They were involved in important movements like the struggle for independence and democracy. Researchers have also studied how teacher unions influence education policies and how they negotiate with governments. Teacher unions have proven to be powerful in many countries. In Pakistan, several unions have been working even before the country gained independence. Despite their long history, very little research has been done to understand their actual role in improving education, shaping policies, and solving problems in schools. In his 2011 study on how teacher unions take part in and affect education reforms, Marius Kudumo used a framework developed by Murray and Wood (1997). This framework includes four different theories that explain the roles and purposes of trade unions.

Kudumo listed these theories and also described the main ideas behind each one, based on Murray and Wood's explanations.

The four theories are:

1. Unitarism
2. Pluralism
3. Radical or Class Conflict Theory
4. Trade Unions as Social Movements

Research Objectives

Followings were the objectives of the study

1. To explore the role of teacher unions in identifying and addressing key problems faced by teachers in Punjab.
2. To examine how teacher unions influence educational policies at the provincial level.
3. To investigate how teacher unions work to empower their members professionally, socially, and economically.

Research Questions

Followings were the Research Questions of the study

1. What are the main problems addressed by teacher unions in Punjab?
2. In what ways do teacher unions influence education policy?
3. How do teacher unions support the professional and personal empowerment of their members?

Methodology

This study was based on qualitative research, using a narrative design. Both of these methods focus on exploring and understanding people's experiences by listening to their stories (Creswell, 2015). The main goal of this research was to understand the opportunities and challenges faced by teacher unions in solving educational problems. That's why the researcher chose a qualitative and narrative approach—to deeply explore the experiences of those directly involved. To truly understand these experiences, it was important to talk to people who had been a part of the union and had faced these challenges themselves. This kind of research needs close interaction with participants, so their real-life stories and insights can be collected and understood. As Creswell (2005) mentions, narrative research involves working closely with participants throughout the study. This includes explaining the purpose of the research and choosing the right kind of information to collect.

There are currently about 25 to 30 teacher unions in Pakistan. Among them, the Punjab Teacher Union (PTU) is the biggest and oldest, with around 150,000 to 200,000 members (Ammar Rashid & Mosharraf Zaidi, 2015). That's why this study focused only on the PTU and its role in addressing educational issues in Punjab. The study included teachers who have been actively involved in the PTU for a long time and have firsthand experience of working to solve education-related problems. Their stories helped the researcher understand the real opportunities and challenges faced by teacher unions in Punjab.

For privacy, the names of participants were changed to initials like "U, V, W, X, Y, and Z." The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather their thoughts and experiences about the union's role in education. Narrative inquiry is a way to collect, study, and share people's personal

stories. These stories are shared by the people themselves and help us understand their reality, beliefs, and identity. This approach questions the old ways of thinking about truth and knowledge. The structure of a story helps researchers understand how people make sense of events in their lives, what they believe, what values guide them, and what their hopes and plans for the future are. In this kind of research, analysis (or finding meaning) happens all the way through—not just after the data is collected (Gehart, 2007). The first step the researcher took was to write down (transcribe) the interviews. After that, the researcher coded the text, which means organizing the content into different parts. From this process, various themes appeared. These themes show the real-life experiences of teacher union members, especially about the opportunities and challenges they face.

Analysis

Following themes were emerged from the study.

Identification of Educational Problems

Education is the process of imparting knowledge and skills to learners and this process is usually carried out in school. This education system may face some problems which can influence the quality of education being provided to students. These problems are spotted by teacher unions time by time. Talking about the educational problems a respondent “F” who is working as secretary-general of the Punjab Teacher Union stated that,

“In our education system, we are facing a lot of problems. We raise our voices and highlight these problems at every forum.”

These problems are always needed to be resolved for smooth schooling. Explaining it further he said,

“When we get opportunities to meet educational authorities, we always highlight educational problems and provide our suggestion to resolve them.”

One of the problems which the teacher union highlighted was the student-teacher ratio (STR) in Punjab. The STR is the baseline for the rationalization of teachers in schools. In other countries of the world, STR is 20 to 25 students per teacher but in Punjab, they have increased it up to 60 students per teacher which are very high. Quality of education will suffer from this student-teacher ratio. Teacher union is a good platform to identify educational problems. Teachers working in teacher unions mostly struggle for the rights of the teaching community. It has been observed that many teachers which are members of teacher unions do not give proper time to their classes and remain absent from the school because they have relationships with union leaders. A senior member of the teacher union “E” at the District level shared his personal experiences with the teacher union, he said,

“I joined the teacher union to raise my voice to highlight the problems in the education system and to fight for the rights of the teaching community. He further said that both are important to be highlighted as problems always influence the education system and quality of education and teachers deserve more than what they are getting.”

We are the stakeholders of the education system when we get the opportunity to have a meeting with CEOs, DCs and Secretary Education, we highlight all the issues which exist in the system. For example, teachers have been asked to conduct dengue activity in schools and submit it online on daily basis. This is very time consuming and is not the responsibility of a teacher. It is the responsibility of health workers. We talked about this and showed our concerns that the prime

duty of a teacher should be teaching in class. Similarly, some other non-teaching activities which disturb the teaching process were also spotted in the recent past. A respondent “Z” shared his experiences and said,

“Union is considered a strength when it works in the right direction. Educational authorities listen to their voice and resolve the issues.”

We have to identify educational problems because we have a platform to use for this purpose. Unfortunately, in the education system, we have so many problems that we need to keep struggling for them. Talking about educational problems a respondent “X” described that,

“We are facing many problems for example syllabus is a major issue for which we have to struggle every year. In the recent past, we raised our voice for the syllabus to be improved. On our demand, they updated the syllabus of computer science, before this it was not updated since last ten years.”

Similarly, Arabic was a compulsory subject but government make it an optional subject and consequently students lost their interest in Arabic subjects. We forced the government to reverse the decision and its status was changed to the compulsory subject again. In the same way, sometimes educational authorities make unnecessary changes in curriculum which may cost our young generation in future. Teacher unions raise their voice to make curriculum suitable to meet individual and societal needs. A respondent “Y” explained it further and said that,

“Sometimes issues emerge from the inappropriate policies which they make without consultation of all stakeholders.”

For example, the government initiated the project of Danish Schools, they started it in Lahore as well and it was not needed at all because they occupied some good schools in the name of the centre of excellence. They were supposed to work on the schools in remote areas of Punjab. Similarly, PEF schools created some problems only because of flaws in policy about PEF schools. Another respondent “W” has the same views about the problems in the education system. Sharing his experience, he said,

“Government has introduced some quality indicators about schools. These indicators include enrollment ratio, attendance of teachers and students, cleanliness of the school, surprise test of students and some others. These indicators are fulfilling through fake reporting. We raised our voices to resolve the issue. Because based on this fake reporting many districts go on top and get rewards whereas some district gets punished on this fake reporting.”

Teacher unions are an appropriate forum to raise voice for the problems in the education system. They have many options in their pocket. They can strike, protest, negotiate and can go to court against the concerned authorities. Therefore, we can say that it is the responsibility of teacher unions to highlight the issues at every possible forum.

Policy Making & Reforms in Education

Policy making refers to the actions taken by the government or the decisions by the government intended to solve problems and to improve the quality of education. A policy established and carried out by the government goes through several stages from inception to conclusion. These are agenda building, formulation, adoption, implementation, evaluation, and

termination. Teacher unions represent the teaching community and are considered as one of the important stakeholders in the policy making process. In Pakistan, teacher unions have their reservations regarding the policy making process. Most of the members of teacher unions think those teacher unions or teachers were not asked to contribute to policy making. A respondent “K” described that,

“Mostly we were not involved in the policy making process. Even sometimes we did not know that government has drafted new educational policy.”

In the recruitment policy of 2016, there were many flaws, a lot of things were not clear in that policy. We showed our reservations from the platform of teacher unions. When we put some pressure, they called a meeting and invited all the representatives. We asked them to recruit those people who have degrees relevant to education. Candidates who have degrees in engineering, commerce or DVM are not suitable to teach in schools. We hold two or three meetings and they agreed to amend the recruitment policy. In the recruitment policy of 2018, they made it compulsory for teachers to have a degree in a school subject. A respondent “Q” who is working as senior president at the Divisional level shared his experience about policy making and stated that,

“If the government take teacher unions on board while they work on policies related to education, we can contribute very much. The issue is that they never want to consult with us but we always keep force to draft balance educational policies which may be fruitful for quality education.”

This time they drafted a transfer policy with our consultation and this transfer policy is much better than the previous which was made without consultation. This can be judged from the review cases after the transfer process. Review cases are very small as compared to last time. Talking about the national education policies, it was revealed that teacher unions have no representation in the policy making process.

A respondent “M” explained it and said,

“In the process of national education policy, there is no involvement of teacher unions. This is a bureaucratic attitude. They involve irrelevant people in policy making.”

Teacher unions have been raising their voice that they should be involved in the curriculum development process because teachers are the main stakeholders. But they have been continuously ignored by the educational authorities. While formulating the educational policies, teacher unions do not have proper representation. A respondent “G” explained it as.

“When your country is sovereign and has its resources then they can formulate their policies. When you are taking money from others for books, teachers training and other purposes then your policies will be drafted on the guidelines of your sponsors”.

Educational authorities consult a little bit with teacher unions and other stakeholders on recruitment policy and transfer policy but they are reluctant to involve them in curriculum reforms and national education policies. Besides educational policies, reforms are required in the education sector. These reforms are necessary for the recruitment process, infrastructure, teachers training, curriculum and establishment of new schools. These are directly concerned with teachers but teacher unions have their reservations that they are totally out of the process of reforms. A respondent “I” stated that,

“We have been asked to make sure implementation but we never have been involved in policy making or reforms process. For example, MEAs visit schools, they have army backgrounds and did not know anything about education but a principal is bound to meet their requirements and they evaluate school staff and principal. Similarly, enrollment policy and other non-teaching activities disturb the teachers and cannot focus on their classes.”

These are the policies that have been drafted without consultation. Such policies cost the education system and needed to be revised. In formulating educational policies, all the stakeholders should be on board. The key stakeholders are teachers, students, administrators, parents and the community. Teacher unions represent the teachers and union leaders should be on board with policy makers so that such policies may be formulated which can produce quality education. A respondent “X” explained it and said,

“Whenever we meet with the minister of education or secretary education, we asked them to give us proper representation in decision making because we are main stakeholders”.

Some people (officers) think that if teachers do not participate in the decision-making process it does not make any difference. The fact is that teachers are the main stakeholders in the education system and they have very limited participation in the policy making process. Explaining further a respondent “A” described that,

“We do not have any wing which can analyze the situation and provide feedback about education policies. Yes, we discuss all matters including policies in our meetings, but there is no formal group which can provide situational analysis on reforms related to curriculum change and policy making”.

There should be experts in teacher unions who can understand the educational requirements can work to meet those. Policy makers should accept proper representation of the teaching community in policy making so that educational policies may be brought quality education.

Creating Awareness Among Members

Awareness is the state of being conscious about something. Awareness is important because when we have a better understanding of the phenomenon, we can resolve the issues or problems convincingly. We are then empowered to make changes and to build on our areas of strength as well as identify areas where we would like to make improvements. Teacher unions provide a better understanding of the rights of the teaching community and even about the education system. A respondent “A” described it as,

“It is a difficult task to create awareness among the teachers from the teacher union forum. People prioritize their benefits and use teacher union platform for their gains.”

Discussing this further this it was revealed that creating awareness is one of the major tasks which the teacher union performs. Awareness is always required to stand up for the rights. Giving an example about this respondent “D” who is a senior member of Punjab teacher union stated that,

“Sometimes teachers are not aware of the things going on. We have to create awareness about everything. For example, the government was trying to hand over education institutions to the local government. When we talked with

teachers on this issue, some of the teachers did not know how it will affect the education system. We conducted seminars and corner meetings to educate them about the pros and corn of this issue. Similarly, an issue existing about the educators who were recruited through NTS and were not regularized so far. The government has decided to regularize them PPSC."

The awareness campaign is very necessary at all levels. Without awareness, it is not possible to raise a voice against the issues. First, they need to understand them and create a favorable environment for the teacher union to play its role. Explain this another respondent "Y" described that,

"We have to move in the field as we travel to Tehsils, Districts and Divisions of Punjab to organize seminars and corner meetings to motivate people. We use social media channels, newspapers and television channels for creating awareness."

Another important thing is that awareness is not only required for teachers but sometimes educational authorities are also required to understand the issues which teachers face in schools as well as the educational problems. For example, anti-dengue activities are not the responsibilities of teachers but they have to perform on daily basis. Similarly, teachers have to run enrollment campaigns which are not their duty. Teachers' prime job is to teach in the classroom but they have to perform many activities which did not belong to their job. A respondent "H" described the situation and said,

"Due to pandemic COVID-19, people are financially suffering and they sent their children to work in fields or workshops so that they can become earning hands for a family in a difficult time."

Now they are not coming to school on regular basis even after the reopening of schools. School teachers have been directed to keep enrol them whether they are coming or not. It is a problem for the classroom teacher to ensure 100% attendance with so many children absent from the school. These are some issues which we want to be in the notice of the educational authorities. Teacher unions are working for the betterment of the education system and they needed to engage their members to create awareness and simultaneously they work to create awareness among educational authorities to resolve the issues. A respondent "N" discussing the issues regarding the awareness campaign stated that,

"Teacher unions do not organize regular training workshops which may be very useful in creating awareness. The fact is that whatever we have learned is our self and practical learning."

Members of teacher unions are required to be motivated and charged to raise their voices against the issues they are facing in the education system. They needed to understand the education policies and should highlight the flaws in them. Another respondent "T" who is the senior member of the teacher union at the provincial level stated that,

"First of all, we need to motivate and educate them that what is not good. Then we discuss the available options to resolve the issues. We have the option of table talk with educational authorities, if the problem is not resolved in the meeting, then we move for protest or strike. We also have the option of the court to resolve the problems."

Creating awareness among the teaching community, union leaders circulate the messages on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. Most of the teachers who represent the teacher unions have joined these groups. Besides this corner meetings are conducted in schools and they are asked to be ready for protest for the protection of their rights and to resolve the issues.

Training of Union Representatives

Training is referred to for developing individuals of an organization to make them capable and confident in such a way that they can perform their role in achieving the goals of that organization. Training is an organized process that increases the knowledge and skill of the individuals being trained. Consequently, it is a process desired to change the behaviour in such a way that the consequence would be useful for the upliftment of the organization. Training is supposed to be an essential part of the teacher unions as their representatives needed to be familiar with the knowledge, rules and regulations of teacher unions. Talking about the training a respondent "K" who was working as secretary-general at District level described that,

"Training is an important factor in teacher unions. We can train new members of the union so that they have a sound understanding of the affairs of the union. Unfortunately, we do not have any formal system to train our members".

Teacher unions do not train their members as they should. Many factors have been involved in this. Sharing his experiences about the training he further explained that he has been working for the teacher union for the last ten years but he is not witnessed a single training session. He further said,

"Nobody in the union took it seriously as it should have been. There is no planning to train newcomers or work on the B team which may lead the union in future. It is my personal experience that no training session was conducted in past ten years."

There are many ways to train members of the unions. There may be seminars, workshops, corner meetings and booklets which may provide useful content about the teacher unions. Due to a lack of proper training, many teachers who represent unions at various levels do not have even basic information about the union. A respondent "G" who was a member of the teacher union when asked about the objectives of the teacher unions, said,

"I am not clear about this as nobody has told me that for what purpose they are working. A colleague asked me to join the union and he gave my nomination. No one contacted me after that. Once we were asked to get ready for the strike. But I was not aware that why they are striking and what will happen after that."

This is indicating that lack of training can damage the cause of teacher unions as there is no understanding at the grassroots level. Members who join teacher unions should get orientation sessions so that they can know why they have joined the union and what will be their roles in future. Further, there should be a proper budget for this purpose. Sharing his experiences, a respondent "P" who was the president of the union in a District described that,

"I have been trying in my District that there should be proper training for newcomers but it requires a handsome amount to conduct. A person who is not collecting funds from the members cannot conduct any training. Two

years back I conducted a seminar for this purpose and was successful but after that, I could not manage it due to lack of budget.”

A very useful campaign may be launched through social media. Besides this, there may be corner meetings at the micro level to train individuals in groups. He further explained that,

“I am training them in corner meetings whenever I spend time in the field. I visit them in their schools and give them the latest information. Further, we conduct monthly meetings in our District. In the monthly meeting, selected representatives from all areas of the district participate. The representatives who participated in the meetings play their active role in the field and train others in their schools.

So, there is some training in the form of corner meetings and monthly meetings. These meetings are helpful to share useful knowledge about the rules and regulations of the unions, the latest information and update about the upcoming events. Besides this, members also know about their role in the teacher union and they can prepare themselves for that. Training is mandatory for all the members of the teacher unions. But unfortunately, the majority of them is not trained due to a lack of budget, planning and management of the teacher unions working in Punjab. Teacher unions can be more organized and stronger if they train their members and give them a clear direction. Members of the unions should be more responsible to represent the union so that their positive role help to make union struggles more fruitful.

Discussion

This study explored the role of teacher unions as agents of change in Punjab and revealed four key themes: identification of educational problems, policy making and reforms in education, creating awareness among members, and training of union representatives. Each of these themes sheds light on how teacher unions contribute to shaping the educational landscape in Punjab.

Teacher unions in Punjab play a crucial role in identifying the challenges faced by teachers and schools, such as lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, outdated curricula, and low wages. Since union representatives are often in direct contact with teachers at the grassroots level, they are well-positioned to gather firsthand insights into these problems. This aligns with Bascia (2005), who notes that unions serve as a collective voice for educators, highlighting systemic issues that might otherwise go unnoticed by policymakers. Kudumo (2011) also emphasizes that teacher unions are often the first to point out structural weaknesses in the education system.

The study found that teacher unions in Punjab are increasingly involved in policy discussions, although their influence varies depending on political and administrative contexts. They advocate for fair teacher recruitment, professional development policies, and curriculum reforms. According to Moe (2011), teacher unions can play a vital role in shaping education policy when they engage constructively with government bodies. In the case of Punjab, while union involvement in policymaking has grown, it is still limited by bureaucratic barriers and political dynamics, a challenge echoed in studies from other developing regions (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2017). Another important role of unions is raising awareness among their members about their rights, duties, and current developments in education. This includes informing teachers about changes in government policies, legal protections, and opportunities for growth. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that professional learning communities—including unions—help foster a shared understanding of educational goals. In Punjab, unions use meetings, printed materials, and social media platforms to keep members informed and engaged.

The study also found that the training of union representatives is a significant activity, although not always systematic. Trained representatives are better equipped to negotiate with authorities, resolve disputes, and lead professional development activities. According to Murray and Wood (1997), strong union leadership is essential for effective representation and change management. In Punjab, unions that invest in leadership training are more successful in mobilizing support and achieving their goals.

Recommendations

Followings were key recommendations of this study.

1. Teacher unions must continue identifying and raising educational issues such as high student-teacher ratios, curriculum flaws, and unnecessary non-teaching duties. These issues should be reported to authorities using evidence-based recommendations to encourage meaningful reforms.
2. Educational authorities must involve teacher unions in the policy-making process, especially in drafting recruitment policies, transfer policies, and curriculum reforms.
3. Teachers, as key stakeholders, should have a formal seat in decision-making committees at both provincial and national levels.
4. Unions should identify and groom future leaders by creating a “B team” and offering mentorship programs. Strong leadership will ensure the sustainability and growth of unions as effective voices for teachers.
5. Teacher unions should organize regular training workshops and seminars to equip their representatives and members with proper knowledge about union objectives, educational policies, and negotiation skills.

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