**Re­newing Our Islamic Schools Back to the Mission of “Earning Allah's Pleasure” and Developing a Mission-based Science Curriculum**

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**Introduction**

As Islamic Schools in North America continue to flourish through the establishment of new schools and through the rapid development of existing ones, many institutions may find themselves drifting away from their mission for which they were first established. As Islam teaches us to continuously renew and re-orient our purpose, Islamic Schools too must stop and refocus. The mission of many Islamic schools is stated using various phrases at different institutions, yet ultimately may be summarized in simple words “to seek the pleasure of Allah SWT”. This quest to earn the pleasure of the Divine should form the foundation of every aspect of Islamic schools. How staff are carefully selected, curriculum, initiatives and protocols developed, the whole school environment is setup, must be deeply rooted in this noble mission. In summary, Islamic schools must create a holistic environment that reflects an Islamic ideology (Gilani-Williams, F. (n.d.)). Many times, Islamic schools find themselves simply becoming a public school with a different dress code, and a few different electives, namely Quranic and Islamic studies. This situation is questionable as public schools and Islamic schools, although may have many factors in common, have a completely different ultimate mission. As Islamic schools, we must ensure that our focus for education is a holistic one based on the desire to remain steadfast in the worship of the Creator. “The process of becoming educated is not a forward motion toward things unknown, rather it is a search for knowledge that will bring an individual back toward their fitra (natural state of purity)... It is a process of recognizing the magnanimity of the Creator– of His Oneness (Tawheed). All forms of knowledge that bring an individual closer to that state of understanding are considered educative.” (Memon, 2006)

**Why should an Islamic School's mission be to “seek the pleasure of Allah”?**

Before discussing how to re-orient our schools back to this fundamental mission, it is worthwhile to mention why Islamic Schools have chosen or should choose an ultimate mission to “seek the pleasure of Allah”. Through very simple deductive reasoning one can summarize the purpose of any school as being the training ground to prepare children, and now with more years of schooling, young adults, for life with its related challenges. This first point is important to clarify as a school must not be simply an institute to train individuals to follow instructions and take examinations where they can correctly solve a math problem, correct grammar on a sentence, or recall dates of historical events. School, must also be an institute to prepare individuals for being productive in society, helpful to their neighbors, and most importantly and broadly summarized as individuals who succeed in their life test for which they have been created. For Muslims, this life test or reason for life is very clearly stated in the Holy Quran as individuals who fulfill Uboodiyah to Allah (Quran, 51:56). This term, Uboodiyah, can be defined to be inclusive of the following ideas: lovingly surrendering to Allah, Connecting to Allah, and Pleasing Allah. Therefore, deductively, since school is intended to prepare one for life, and the purpose of life is to seek the pleasure of Allah, Islamic schools must be institutions that prepare Muslims to do just that. This goal must supersede any other goal when a conflict of goals arises. Additionally, all other goals must be developed and carried out ultimately to achieve this over-arching goal. Although this mission may be agreeable to Muslims across Islamic schools of North America, keeping this front and center of all school functions and most importantly in the hearts of all the stakeholders is what will bring this mission to life. Committing to a school, which prioritizes obedience to Allah without compromise is critical if this goal is to be actualized.

The secondary question, after establishing what the over-arching mission of Islamic schools should be, is how can this mission be accomplished? In order for a mission to be brought to life, a commitment must be made by all stakeholders involved. "The schools that have been most successful ... have benefited from a clarity of purpose that is grounded in a shared set of core values" (Bamburg, 1994) Values are defined as the behaviors, beliefs, and actions that a school finds important. Parents, students and staff must all understand and share in those values and share responsibility in implementing them.

The shared values by Islamic schools will be reflected in their mission and vision, however that does not imply that all Islamic schools will be identical or that they need to be in order to fulfill their mission. Therefore, when exploring how to achieve this mission, the authors cannot possibly discuss all possibilities and means available for this mission to become a reality. However, this paper intends to outline some essential factors that schools should adopt to achieve the mission.

**How to achieve this mission?**

**A. Choosing Staff**

The hearts of the drivers of the school (teachers and administration) demonstrates the heart of a school:. “The single most important thing you can do to ensure the success of your organization is to hire the best people you can find to do its work.” (Community Tool Box, 2015) Therefore, “who the staff is,” at a deeper level than credentials on a resume, is going to dictate the level of success of the school in “seeking Allah’s pleasure.” It is well established that the one who does not possess something will not be able to transfer it to others. Staff that does not “possess” the mission of the school, i.e. accept and actively struggle to accomplish the mission within their lives, will fail in transferring this mission in any real sense to students.

Thus, it is of utmost importance, when choosing school staff, to choose individuals who have demonstrated belief in the mission, which can be practically witnessed not only in their prior teaching or administrative positions but within their day to day lives. A teacher in an Islamic school serves as a role model responsible not only for the mind but for the soul of the student (Baloch & Afendi, 1980). Therefore, for example, it is insufficient for a math teacher to simply be talented at teaching math. He or she needs to also serve as a role model who is struggling to achieve the mission of the school in their life even after school hours. Parents should want their children not only to solve math problems as their math teacher does, but to live, also in a similar manner. School leaders must properly weigh the level of commitment to this mission in prospective staff and administration even if it means sacrificing on other preferable credentials since the best candidate, if lacks the orientation for which the school is established, will ultimately deter the school from the mission. Any Islamic school leader can probably testify how difficult it is to find these individuals who will bring the mission to life. However, with a sincere intention to finding these individuals, lack of compromise on the essentialness of the mission, and most importantly with a lot of supplication, Allah does send these shining stars.

**B. Constant Re-iteration of the Mission**

One of the reasons the mission becomes a school slogan as opposed to an actualized reality is due to the lack of re-iteration of that mission at all school levels and through the school year and even the school day. All staff and administration meetings as well as meetings with individual or with a group of parents should ultimately begin with a reminder of the purpose. Just taking the time to verbally state the mission is in itself a means to re-orient back to the mission. Additionally, a few moments may be taken occasionally to discuss what the mission means on the ground and how the school can work harder to achieve this mission. In communication with students through the day, the purpose should be re-stated and sometimes discussed. For example, several times a week, during homeroom or assembly the students should be reminded: “Why they are here in school?”. Even a student in KG can respond with the answer *“I am here to make Allah happy”.* Even at this stage the student will have a preliminary grasp of what this means since they have a grasp of what it means to “make someone happy”. Using simple terminology such as this or for example saying “talk to Allah” instead of “make dua or make supplication” is likely more effective with students especially at a younger age. At the Islamic school of Miami, the idea of “Making Allah Happy” is a consistently re-iterated mission throughout the school. Students will then be reminded of what this means through examples. Making Allah happy is accomplished through respecting and obeying teachers and parents, focusing in salah, being neat and organized, giving your best effort at understanding your science lesson so you can use this information to benefit others and because performing well will make your parents happy, and so on. Connecting these objectives, which most schools strive to achieve regardless of their mission, to the noble mission of making Allah happy, will make accomplishing them much more achievable InshAllah.

Another example where the purpose should be re-iterated in school is throughout the day in various subjects through learning moments. The teacher may remind the students or ask them to figure out why they are learning about a given topic and the students should be able to ultimately link the lesson to making Allah happy. If this is not possible, more training is required for the students or the curriculum itself may need re-visiting. With this constant, sometimes seemingly tedious re-iteration of the purpose, the hearts of the administration, teachers, parents, and students is less likely to loose focus within the day to day details of school affairs. For indeed, Allah has reminded us that the believer is in need of frequent reminders when He said “ Yet go on reminding, for verily, such a reminder will profit the believers” (Q. 51:55).

**C. Dua as the most powerful means to achieve the Mission**

Perhaps the single most important and effective means to achieving the mission is the means of “Dua” or supplication. The Prophet (pbuh) stressing the critical nature of this means stated, “Dua is itself the Ibadah (Worship)” (Sunan Abi Dawud, 1479). School leaders, administration, teachers, parents and students must admit to the fact that they cannot reach the mission of making Allah happy themselves. The recognition of the inability to take any action, let alone achieving such a lofty mission, is an essential article of faith of Muslims and the beginning of hard work and success. With this recognition of ones inability one recognizes that all ability is by Allah alone. Although this may be something recognized and believed by Muslims, truly internalizing and experientially living this belief is a life long pursuit. Unfortunately, even in Islamic schools, Dua has become a formality, as opposed to a sincere recognition of inability on the part of the Creation and the full un-shared ability of the Creator. A regular, sincere, diet of dua for the success of the school is critical to achieve the school mission. As with the re-iteration of the purpose stated earlier, this dua should be regular in meetings and through out the school day. Ideally staff should also make dua for the achievement of the mission of the school, not only within the school, but in times of solitude where sincerity is likely to be more present.

In addition to the specific dua for the achievement of the mission, dua is also a means to the achievement of the mission in another sense. Given that dua is one of the, if not the, fundamental acts of worship in Islam, simply being in dua is a means to make Allah happy. Therefore, dua should become a culture within Islamic schools until the students themselves are making dua not only for the lofty goal of Making Allah happy but even the most mundane matters. Students should become regular in dua for success on exams, for the safe return of missing students, for the affairs of individuals in stress in their community, etc. When a student complains of pain or anxiety, they should firstly be reminded to ask Allah for relief before taking additional measures. This again, as alluded to earlier, will only become a reality if staff are chosen which also live dua throughout and beyond the school day.

**D. A focus on Akhlaq and Tarbiyah**

Another essential component in an Islamic school's quest to reach its mission, which is often not prioritized, is a focus on Akhlaq (the inner reality of the student) and Tarbiyah (Islamic Upbringing). “Both educators and non-educators would agree that the absence of nurturing students toward good character, or what Freire would call a universal human ethic, has had a tremendous affect on society” (Memon, 2006). Often times, the academic race in science, language arts, social studies, and math shifts the school's focus away from assessing and actively building positive akhlaq. Although part of the school's mission in earning the pleasure of Allah is to develop a level of mastery in students in certain aspects of these subjects, the reality is that on the Day of Judgement students will not ultimately be asked about their level of proficiency in these subjects. The student will be asked about and “graded” based on their inner reality, which manifests itself through various actions. How strong was their commitment to salah, what were their feelings and subsequent actions towards their parents and elders, were they people of humility or arrogance, and so on. Thus, if akhlaq are relegated to a second or a third position within the school dynamics, it is believed that a dis-service has been done to students as they would not be prepared for life and therefore the school would have not achieved its mission. Akhlaq brought about through a focus on tarbiyah and not simply the transfer of knowledge must be front and center in all school matters. The failure of a student in mastering a topic after a sincere effort to learn the topic and thus failing an academic exam cannot be equivalent or even remotely comparable to a student cheating on that exam. The first failure is one relating to knowledge mastery and the other relating to akhlaq.

A focus on akhlaq may be accomplished through several practical initiatives and approaches, some of which are mentioned here. Firstly, staff must be constantly reminded (as with the overall mission) to focus on and to keep a vigilant eye on the student's akhlaq and to engage in tarbiyah to rectify any negative akhlaq. Akhlaq is an internal reality ultimately only perceivable to the Divine, however actions manifested are indications of a person's akhlaq. Subsequently, various means may be employed to monitor, record, and communicate student Akhlaq. Schools may opt to develop an “Akhlaq card” as is used at the Islamic School of Miami, which can be viewed by the student, teachers, and parents. School wide “Akhlaq themes” may be used also to improve as a whole in chosen akhlaq such as organization, kindness, and respect. The progress of each student within the theme may be monitored and rewarded accordingly. As mentioned previously, this of course requires staff who themselves possess or struggling to possess these Akhlaq and hence again the importance of choosing appropriate teachers and administrators.

Secondly, the grading system of schools needs to demonstrate the school's focus on Akhlaq. If the grading system is skewed in the direction of academic mastery grades, naturally this is what students and parents will focus on. An Akhlaq grade may be assigned for each class and an overall Akhlaq grade assigned for non-subject related activities such as salah, lunch, assembly, etc. This should be the first and most important grade the student receives and the student should ultimately be rewarded or punished based on this category. This focus must be consistently stressed to the students and their parents. The second grading category, in order of importance, should be student effort, as students have varying abilities and begin at various starting points and therefore by focusing on effort one is also assessing progress of the student based on their abilities and their starting point as opposed to simply comparing them to other students, potentially creating an unfair situation. The third grading category should be the academic grade. The academic grade is used to demonstrate the level of mastery of learning objectives. This final grading category should be used to assess the student’s level in reference to the objectives of the curriculum; however the “success” of the student must stem from the mission of the school and therefore should be based strictly on akhlaq and effort.

**E. Mission based learning of Academic sciences: Science as an example**

In Islamic schools, sometimes subjects are termed "secular sciences" as if Islam and the overall mission of the school are distinct from these other subjects. “There is no distinction, as Imam al-Ghazzali notes, between knowledge that is considered secular or that which is considered religious” (Memon, 2006; Nofal, 1993). Schools find themselves teaching Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Math in a way that is completely disconnected from Allah and the noble mission of the school. What exacerbates the situation more is that staff find themselves focusing on these "secular" subjects over the “Islamic” subjects to achieve accreditation goals, satisfy parents demands, and achieve high standardized test scores; thus basically developing a secular school. Although some institutions may be satisfied with striving to reach the goal of making Allah happy through dress code, Islamic studies, and Quran class alone, many would aim to achieve the mission in a more real sense. A more appropriate approach would be to realize that at an Islamic school there should be no room for “secular subjects”. Everything must connect back to the mission of seeking Allah’s pleasure. All useful knowledge in reality is that which increases ones awareness and knowledge of Allah. Learning in itself is a means to coming closer to Allah, by appreciating creation and the knowledge bestowed upon the creation. As noted by (Rauf, 1988), "An essential prerequisite is that religious and secular subjects should be made an indivisible whole. The compartmentalization of religious and secular education, based on a factitious division of life into spiritual and temporal, is not sanctioned by Islam".

One of the easier subjects that can be used as a means to this mission is the study of science, which we will define as the study of the physical world Allah has created. It is quite surprising that many Islamic schools across North America and across the Muslim world rely on secularist theory for their study of the world in the field of science. Islamic schools find themselves with no alternative to science books and curricula, which are void of even the mention of a Creator. However, for Islamic schools seeking the goal of Knowing and Pleasing Allah, this is quite far from what they aim to achieve. Science is one of the most direct of the four core academic subjects in schools that should lead to a reflection on the Greatness, Perfection, and Mercy of the Divine. Thus it is quite disheartening that Islamic schools are, for the most part, missing this opportunity. Although it is beneficial for a student to understand the life cycle of a plant and the process of photosynthesis, unless all of this orients the students attention to the Maker of this incredible system, the main purpose of the creation of that plant and the student's understanding of it has been missed.

Islamic schools need to re-orient their science curricula to achieve the mission for which they were established. “The Qur’an promotes the pursuit of knowledge within a framework of values: it is these values which should be the focus of our attention and which should shape our scientific activity. Only by turning these values into a living reality can we truly be honest to the Qur’an and fulfill our obligations towards it.” Sardar, Z., n.d).

Presented here are proposed objectives, of such a curriculum, which a team of scholars including the authors, have developed. These objectives will InshAllah form the basis of science programs at Islamic schools and mission-based science textbooks as well as other resources in the near future.

**Over-arching goals:** The mission-based science program should firstly aim to achieve specific over-arching goals. However, prior to the discussion of these specific goals, one goal that should be stated is the need for students to *understand the laws* that Allah created in this world, as this will be critical in the actualization of the remainder of the over-arching goals. Beyond this goal, the first specific goal should be to develop a sense of *respect* in students for the physical world (Iqbal, 2011). Without a sense of awe and wonder for the awesomeness of Allah's physical world, the remainder of the goals of the program will be difficult to achieve. Secondly, all aspects of the physical world studied in this mission-based science program, should ultimately point the student back to Allah and hence the reality of *Tawheed*, or the active affirmation of the Oneness of Allah in terms of His Names, Attributes and Lordship. Studying wind currents, for example, should be done in the context of this creature being a Mercy from Allah, a manifestation of His infinite power, with recognition that this Mercy and Power is incomparable to the mercy or power endowed to any other one of His creation, i.e. He is One in these attributes. Thirdly, the human response to Allah's Oneness in His Names, Attributes, and Lordship is one of *Uboodiyah*, ultimate freedom through complete surrender to Allah. Three main relevant components may be listed within Uboodiyah and that is *Purification of t*he *self*, *Service to fellow man*, and becoming a *Trustee of the environment*. In other words, in order to be one that fulfills Uboodiyah within the context of science and beyond, one must work on excellence in each of these categories. For the sake of brevity, examples will be given to illustrate what is intended from each of these categories.

When a student learns about the strength of a leafcutter ant, which is able to carry 50 times its own weight (Coles, 2012), in addition to wondering how Allah's creation is inexplicable by man and leaves us in amazement, it should lead the student to the essential Islamic characteristic of humility. This is an example of how the study of the physical world should lead one to purification of one's self from ill traits such as arrogance. Additionally, students should learn about severe weather, not only for their own preparation if they encounter these conditions but to learn how to appropriately help others in this situation, hence the concept of Service to fellow man. Through the study of aspects of water, soil and air, the student should be driven to the reality that he/she is a Trustee of this environment, which he must learn not to betray. Thus, lessons within this mission-based science curriculum must be designed to achieve these essential Uboodiyah components.

**Methodological goals:** There are also specific methodological goals that are essential in the achievement of the over-arching goals mentioned above. Firstly within the curriculum, students must *Love to learn.* Without this essential passion, the grand goals mentioned earlier become a very arduous if not nearly impossible task to achieve. Secondly, a sense of becoming a *Seeker of knowledge* who is curious, critical and able to learn independently is also vital for the program to succeed. Thirdly, within this Islamic study of science, the student must be taught that the human being has *Potential and limits*. The student has grand potential through the faculties of perception Allah has gifted him/her with to explore and understand the world, yet one is also limited in his/her abilities by design and thus this creates ambitious yet humble scientists. Finally, the science program should focus on developing a *Depth of knowledge.* Quite often students find themselves rapidly covering numerous topics, yet unable to recall most of what they supposedly learned within that school year. Focus on a careful selection of what matters most for the student at their specific age in achieving the mission and then consistent and regular review through various learning tools and approaches, will InshAllah develop this depth of knowledge.

**Additional goals:** Three additional goals are also key in achieving the mission-based science program ultimately designed to make Allah happy. The curriculum must prioritize *Applicable* knowledge and skills; knowledge that will be useful for them outside of the classroom. Teachers, often face the question from a student of why they are learning what they are learning? Unfortunately such an answer is not always available to the teacher. This effort spent in learning knowledge that is not as applicable or relevant to the student as other areas, not only is lost valuable time, but serves to undermine the student's and sometimes even teacher's motivation to learn. Secondly, within the science program, students should learn to appreciate and respect the *scientific legacy* of Muslims and non-Muslims of the past and present. Having the knowledge and subsequent respect of their works will be a means to advance the abilities of the student InshAllah. Finally, the student must learn to practice *Ethical science*. Not all scientific inquiry is Islamically ethical and often times obviously harmful. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) used to seek refuge from knowledge that was not beneficial (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 3482); therefore, the student should learn to recognize and hence practice beneficial and ethical science.

Once such a science curriculum is established, Islamic schools will no longer need to rely on secular materials to teach science and struggle to "Islamicize" what is being learned, for they will have a program that was developed from the ground up to help them achieve the noble mission for which they are teaching InshAllah. This mission-based science program is just one example of how Islamic schools should use academic sciences as a means to achieve the mission of seeking Allah’s pleasure.

Appendix:

Allah's World KG Curriculum

Unit 1: Allah Made Me:

* 1. Unit 1 Overall Learning Outcomes:
     1. Student immediately able to recall that everything about him/her is made/gifted to him/her by Allah (Tawheed:Allah Made the world).
     2. Student recalls to thank Allah for each gift by verbally thanking Allah and through identifying and practicing rules for how to take care of these gifts. (Tazkiyah: Praise/Thanks)
     3. Student demonstrates awe for the human body Allah has made. (Develop Awe for Allah's World)
  2. Unit 1 Learning Topics:
     1. Everything about me is a gift from Allah!
        1. Exercises to identify different things about me that Allah gave me.
           1. Game-How many gifts of Allah can you find in yourself?
           2. Coloring worksheets: gifts of Allah to me
        2. Learn through observation of one's own body fascinating facts (to develop awe) about each of these gifts. i.e. Allah makes our eye blink to keep it moist, Allah gave you 27 bones just in your hand so you can move in so many ways.
           1. http://www.sciencekids.co.nz/sciencefacts/humanbody.html
           2. http://www.makemegenius.com/cool-facts/human-body--systems-biology-interesting-facts
        3. Practice thanking Allah for each gift.
           1. i.e. Recording an audio thank you note for one of my body parts to deliver to Allah or Spending time listing the gifts and thanking Allah aloud for each: He is hearing us!
        4. Examples of gifts of Allah to me:
           1. Limbs: Legs to run and play, Hands to hug mom/hold my toys
           2. Eyes, Mouth, Ears: See my friends and family, Taste my favorite food, Hear my favorite sounds.
           3. Gifts should be placed in context of this age level as seen above.
        5. Student able to recall 10 gifts about their body from Allah, 1 fascinating fact about each gift, and student recalls to thank Allah for each gift.
     2. I have to thank Allah for all these gifts by treating and using them well.
        1. Allah wants me to eat all that is good!
           1. Watching what I eat: Good (healthy, halal) vs Bad (Unhealthy, haram) food to maintain this gift.

Define halal/haram for them as “What Allah says is ok for us vs not”

* + - * 1. Listing examples of healthier foods options.
        2. Showing effects of healthier vs less healthy foods: i.e. energy vs laziness, healthy vs sick, healthy teeth vs teeth consumed by sweets, etc.
        3. Students able to recall principles of how to determine which foods are healthy and halal and which are not as well as a list of examples for both categories and being able to explain that by choosing good food this is how I thank Allah.
      1. Allah wants me to keep these gifts clean and safe!
         1. How to use bathroom (Islamically/Hygienically), Frequent wudu/handwashing (spiritual and health benefits), Washing teeth/siwack, Sneezing and coughing (how and what to say), nail and hair trimming (how often/sunnah way to do so/never biting off nails)
         2. Show effects of properly vs improperly doing these actions spiritually and physically.

Students recall, demonstrate, and are observed practicing steps for each of these categories.

* + - 1. Keeping Safe in the House, Masjid, Stores, Playground, Car, Street

Students recall, demonstrate, and are observed practicing 5 safety rules for each of these categories.

Unit 2: Allah made Plants and Animals

* 1. Unit 2 Learning Outcomes:
     1. Student immediately able to recall when a certain plant or animal is mentioned that it is made by Allah.
     2. Student able to recall that all plants and animals pray to Allah as well but in a different way which we cannot see.
     3. Student learns and therefore practices care for plants and animals since they are made by Allah and pray to Allah.
  2. Unit 2 Learning Topics:
     + 1. Allah made very amazing plants and animals: Choose most fascinating plants and animals to create awe/respect for Allah's world.
       2. Allah made very different animals/plants: big/small, different shape/form, different colors, fast/slow, how they move, what they eat, different offspring, etc.
          1. Possibly show video/slide show, have them bring pictures they find
          2. Follow up with a visit to the zoo, Nature Park.
          3. Going outdoors part of the class time and choosing leaves or insects to bring back to class to demonstrate diversity of Allah’s creation
       3. Let's look at how some of the plants and animals are the same and how they are different: Compare and contrast and organize differences
          1. Possibly cut out different pictures of plants and animals and then exercise grouping them by similarities.

Unit 3: Allah made the Sun

* 1. Unit 3 Learning Outcomes:
  2. Unit 3 Learning Topics
     1. Allah made the sun as a:
     2. Mercy from Allah to warm us, help plants grow (have class plant and show difference when kept with or without sun), give us light: all from one creature (The sun)
     3. Awe and respect and thus gratitude to Allah
     4. What is Allah telling me about how generous and great He is.
     5. K-PS3-1. Make observations to determine the effect of sunlight on Earth’s surface.
     6. K-PS3-2. Use tools and materials to design and build a structure that will reduce the warming effect of sunlight on an area

 Unit 4: Allah does not like us to waste anything in His World

* 1. Unit 4 Learning Outcomes:
  2. Unit 4 Learning Topics
     1. Do not waste: especially water, paper (writing/toilet paper), food, electricity, and even time (need to connect time to science concepts-plants need time to grow and if not watered on time may not survive)
     2. K-ESS3-3. Communicate solutions that will reduce the impact of humans on the land, water, air, and/or other living things in the local environment.

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