

Merits and Demerits of Pre-Scripted Literacy Lessons in Zambia

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Abstract

Lesson plans are said to be valuable forms of teacher support because they can expand a repertoire of teaching practices. The government of the republic of Zambia through the Ministry of Education designed lessons and lesson procedures including materials for teachers to use in the teaching of literacy in grade three. Scripted lesson plans are a contentious issue in pedagogical discourse. The study sought to establish the merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons based on the experiences of teachers who implemented the scripted lessons. In depth interviews with grade three teachers of literacy as well as one standards officer and curriculum development officer were also included respectively. Regarding the merits of pre-scripted lessons, the study found that, scripts were a guide in the teaching of literacy and that they are helpful to ill prepared teachers who needed further pedagogic scaffolding after being newly employed by the government. Notwithstanding the merits, findings also showed that pre-scripted lessons were restrictive and took away the teacher's creativity. Moreover, such lessons were not responsive to the diverse needs of learners in multilingual and multicultural classrooms where multiple identities were a norm. The study concludes by arguing for the sensitisation of teachers on the merits of pre-scripted lessons and what power teachers have towards the negotiation and recontextualization of such curriculum in providing learner centred inclusive pedagogy.

Key words: *pre-scripted lessons, Zambia, literacy, merits, demerits*

1. Background

According to Lipson et al (2004), scripted teaching or scripted instruction refers to commercial reading programs that have highly structured lessons, often with specific time allotments for teaching specific skills, and often word-for-word scripts of what the teacher is to say. Other scholars such as Moustafa and Land (2002) defined scripted curriculum materials as, “instructional materials that have been commercially prepared and require the teacher to read from a script while delivering a lesson”. It came out of an effort to create a normative framework for managing and synchronizing teachers' work (Doyle, 1992). Teaching scripts are given to teachers in the form of curricula—the language, strategies and ideologies are written down for teachers to say and follow. Scripted instruction has often been advocated for schools where teachers have had inadequate teacher training and is also seen as way to standardize the quality of instruction. The components of scripted curriculum are learning objectives, units/ lessons to teach, activities

to be given to students, books, materials, assessment and other ways to evaluate student learning.

Critics say that such programs stifle teachers' creativity, undermine teachers' expertise, and fail to provide for the diverse needs of many classrooms (Mkandawire, 2022). However, advocates see it as the easiest way to provide teachers with the essential elements of effective reading instruction. Scripted instruction has also been applied to preparation of lessons in many other subject matter areas.

Scripted teaching can be traced back as far as 1888 where Samuel and Adeline Monroe published text for teachers that provided them with scripts for teaching reading readiness, phonics, and oral reading (Commeyras, 2007). In this method of teaching, the teacher is expected to read the lesson scripts verbatim. It is a form of direct instruction meant to guide teachers in order to sustain consistency in teaching strategies by teachers. It also hopes to eliminate the risk of poor instruction by inexperienced teachers. Its purpose of strict adherence to the script is targeted more towards schools with low standardized test scores so that the concepts being taught can be delivered in a consistent manner, with the expectation that the students will understand the lessons more clearly. This strategy is becoming more prevalent in US school districts, as well as schools throughout the world (Reeves, 2010). The views by Commeyras and Reeves becomes very important in establishing whether teachers were autonomous in the implementation of scripted lessons.

With more pressure being put on teachers to have their students achieve higher standardized test scores, teachers are looking to use scripted teaching programs as an aid to teach these concepts to their students, hoping that it will be a more effective way of teaching (Guccione ,2011). Scripts designed for teaching curriculum are not meant to eliminate the amount of teacher preparation, but are to be used as a scaffold for teachers to adhere to the topics and skills required of students. When used properly, scripted teaching programs are used as a tool that teachers can add and subtract parts of the structure to create a learning environment that facilitates appropriate instruction individualized to the needs of their learners (Guccione, 2011). Hundreds of schools could be using the same scripted curriculum; however, if used appropriately, their lessons will be carried out differently as a reflection of the diverse learners in their respective classrooms. The goal is that all of the students will learn the same concepts and be able to use the knowledge that comes from the scripted lessons.

A common critique about scripted teaching presumes that any person can come into a classroom and teach a lesson if they follow the script (Commeyras, 2007). However, proponents of scripted teaching maintain that just like an actor brings life to his script, a teacher can and must use his own personality to breathe life into the teaching script (Commeyras, 2007). Thus, it was interesting to see that some teachers were not autonomous while using pre-scripted literacy lessons. Arising from above, scripted lessons pose both merits and demerits. There are

critics and advocates of the same practice. The question that begs attention is: what are the merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons in Zambia. This question is particularly crucial considering that in 2014, the government introduced the primary Literacy Programme which came with pre-scripted literacy lessons. The Zambia Primary Literacy Program (PLP) contains all the lessons required to be taught from term one to term three in each grade year from grade 1 to 4. The lessons in the teacher's guide are pre-designed corresponding to the activities in the learners book (MESVTEE, 2013). The literally scripted lessons are ordered for teachers to follow. These scripted lessons are highly structured lessons with specific time allocated for teaching specific skills. They are intended to provide a tool that is clear and detailed, specifying what the teacher is going to teach when, and how that is going to be taught. Scripted lessons provide all the required resources for the teacher to use. Curriculum materials such as physical materials, procedures, tasks and concepts are included. These are designed into specific resources with specific pedagogical features in mind. The already designed lessons offer a step by step instruction, resources and assessment. The lessons take teachers through a process of using and applying the scripted lessons. It is from this background that this study was conducted to establish the merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons in the Zambian context in which Mwanza (2020) reported that literacy levels had been consistently low.

2. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to establish the contextual merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons in Zambia.

3. Research Questions

The study was informed by two research questions as follows:

- a. Why were literacy lessons pre-scripted in Zambia?
- b. What are the merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons in Zambia?

4. Methods and Materials

The study was purely qualitative. Wakumelo, Mwanza and Mkandawire (2016) believe that qualitative research is suitable for studies which seek to unravel experiences and detailed data. The study sample consisted 20 grade three teachers from 5 different schools, 5 head teachers, 1 DRCC, 1 curriculum specialist. Thus, the total sample was 27. All these participants were purposively sampled because of their centrality of the subject of inquiry. The teachers were those who had taken part in the implementation of the pre-scripted lessons. As implementers, they were deemed the right people to say what they found to be the merits and demerits of the pre-scripted lessons. Head Teachers were the supervisors. Thus, they were interviewed in order for them to give their impression of the pre-scripted lessons. Further, pre-scripted lessons are a curriculum issue. Thus, the curriculum specialist was purposively sampled to give his views from the perspective of curriculum and curriculum benefits. All the data was collected through interviews. Analytically, the data was analyzed thematically.

5. Presentation of Findings

The study sought to find out the reasons why literacy lessons were pre-designed and further establish participant's views on the merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons. The research question was important in establishing whether or not it was necessary for teachers to teach literacy lessons using a script. The following were the findings:

5.1 Why were literacy lessons pre-designed by policy makers?

The first research question sought to establish reasons for pre-designing literacy lessons for grade three. This was important in determining whether or not respondents had knowledge of why literacy lessons were pre-designed by policy makers. It was therefore, important to find out from the implementers especially the teachers their reasoning on why they were doing what they were doing. To answer this question, teachers and school head teachers, DRCC and curriculum specialist were interviewed. The following were the findings:

(a) To work as a guide to the teacher

The respondents said scripted lessons were working as a guide to teachers especially that they did not know cinyanja very. They said scripted lessons also helped teachers to look for teaching and learning materials as they were already done for them so it became easier to look for those materials stated in the scripted lessons. Some respondents stated the following:

I think after ZPC people were not teaching local language they were teaching English. Now that they are teaching local language it's a guide to the teachers who are not conversant with the language when they are not sure they will just follow through (T1)

Pre-scripted literacy lessons were pre-designed to work as a guide to the teacher. It's our mandate as CDC to provide materials for the teachers. Otherwise the best guide is the syllabus which the teacher should not divert from. What we are interested in is that at the end of the day outcomes are met (Curriculum Specialist)

Literacy lessons were pre-designed in order to give guidance to each and every teacher at each level that's what I thought, they were not designed to literally be used in class but as a guide and the teacher can source. To guide mwaiche I mean the teacher is free to source from other means, that is why we say teachers are resourceful and also that all schools should be moving in the same direction. Teachers bring in but in the guide of pre-scripted lessons (H1).

(b) To simplify teaching

Respondents said literacy lessons were pre-designed to simplify teaching. Most of the respondents said literacy in cinyanja was very difficult to teach. This is why

they thought that policy makers pre-designed literacy lessons so that they could make teaching easier. This is what some of the respondents had to say:

Literacy lessons were pre-designed for them to be easy to teach the learners as you know teaching literacy is very difficult no wonder they put stages on how to go about it (T3).

Lessons were pre-designed by policy makers for teachers to follow through what is required. I used to have challenges but scripted lessons helped me (H2).

Another respondent said:

For those teachers who have challenges in preparing lessons these pre-scripted lessons have been very helpful to them. Because all of us are teachers but we have different abilities some people because of language they have a challenge so because the lesson is already prepared they use them to decide on how they are going to present the lessons to the learners (H6).

(c) For uniformity

Respondents said literacy lessons were pre-designed by policy makers so that all schools should be moving in the same direction. This is what respondents had to say:

It was good for the teachers to follow so that every teacher at every school is following the same system. It is easy when preparing tests and exam (T3).

Literacy lessons were pre-designed to avoid teachers mixing up things, you find that the work which is supposed to be given to the lower grades was given to upper grades (T10).

Another respondent said:

The grade 3 literacy lessons comes with sounds to be covered in each week so I think the lessons were pre-designed so that we can all cover the same sounds and so that children can be moving at the same pace (T5).

(d) To ensure total coverage of the syllabus content

Findings revealed that pre-scripted lessons were pre-designed to ensure total coverage of the syllabus. One of the education administrator had this to say:

To help the teacher follow the sequence and then focusing on

assessment that will follow at the end of week 5 and 10. When learners are assessed the pre-scripted lessons can be used to check whether learners are lagging behind (DRCC).

However, one participant did not know why lessons were pre-designed. He wondered why lessons were pre-scripted while there were no materials to support the new practice.

I don't know why they were pre-designed. At this school we have not seen the literacy teacher' handbooks. I have only seen and used the one for English language but for literacy no madam have never seen it (T6).

In summary, the findings show that most of the respondents were aware or had an idea as to why literacy lessons were pre-designed.

5.2 Merits of pre-Scripted literacy lessons

Participants were interviewed on their views on the merits of pre-scripted literacy lessons in the teaching of literacy. The following were the findings

(a) Pre-scripted literacy lessons are helpful

Participants said scripted lessons were helpful in the teaching of literacy. They said it was an effective tool for effective teaching and that it was important that teachers use scripts as it was a blue print. They said no matter how confident a teacher is in his or her own abilities, entering a class to teach literacy with a script was a necessity. The following is what some participants had to say:

Scripted lessons are very helpful especially to those who do not know the language will just copy the lesson as it is. They will just ask others to explain the difficulty words (T10).

Because we have the stories from the book the learners are able to read and write. Learners are able to write early (T14).

Another participant said:

Like I said, some teachers have challenges in the teaching of literacy in Cinyanja in Lusaka because of where they come from so when they use these lessons they find it easier to prepare their lesson plans and deliver to the children. It also helps the teacher to look for teaching and learning materials as they are already listed for the teacher (H4)

(b) Pre-scripted lessons serves time

Findings revealed that, pre-scripted lessons serve time. Participants said when the teacher uses pre-scripted lessons they tend to spend less time on writing lessons

plans because the lesson is already done for them. They said, materials to be used in the lesson are already stated the only thing the teacher does is to look for those materials and deliver the lesson to the learners. One of the respondents said:

It does not waste the time. Despite the language barrier it is easy to follow because the lesson is already done for the teacher to follow through (T15).

Another respondent said:

It is easy for the teacher to prepare you are just following what is written for you. It helps with the materials to be used since they are already listed just look for those materials (T6).

(c) Pre-scripted lessons act has a guide

Findings showed that some respondents felt that scripted lessons help the teachers to move in the same direction. They said pre-scripted lessons help teachers with what to teach at a particular time. .This is what the respondents had to say:

It is a guide to help the teacher teach effectively. Since there is a guide it helps the teachers not to go out of the context (T2).

All the teachers will be guided in the same direction (H5).

It is there to guide the teacher that nothing is left out but they can divert from them. There are teachers who might not be good so it's a guide (curriculum specialist).

(d) Pre-scripted lessons serves as a teaching resource to untrained teachers

During the interviews, some of the respondents said the Primary Literacy Program is new to most of the teachers. They said teachers who have never taught grade three literacy and are not familiar with the teaching of literacy find it easier to use scripted lessons. This is because even when you do not know you just have to follow the steps to deliver a lesson.

One of the participants had this to say:

It helps the teacher to plan and teach effectively as they have a guide. It has helped some teachers who do not know how to plan literacy lessons (H2).

5.3 Demerits of using predesigned lessons

Participants were interviewed to get their views on the disadvantages of pre-scripted literacy lessons. The following were the responses:

(a) Pre-scripted lessons can't work for diverse learners

Findings revealed that, pre-scripted lessons with objectives and complete tasks

for the teacher to follow through may hold back fast learners and slower learners may be left behind. Respondents said, one single script cannot meet the needs as well as interest of all students. The following were some of the responses from the participants:

Using the same lesson plan to fast and slow learners is a disadvantage. It contributes to poor performance because the teacher may not add (T18).

The learners are misled because they learn at different paces. No one lesson plan can work for all the children with different levels of understanding (T19).

(b) Pre-scripted lessons are difficult to use because they are prepared by someone else.

Participants said using pre-designed lesson plans to teach literacy stifles teachers' potential. They said it was very difficult to execute a plan which you have not prepared. Some respondents said:

Some teachers may use scripted lessons without going through them they will just copy what is in the book. A lesson plan is used by me so when somebody does it for you it becomes a challenge (T20).

At times the work in the pre-designed lessons is very difficult to teach (T8).

(c) Pre-scripted lessons make teachers lazy

Respondents said in as much as teachers need support in terms of lesson procedure and materials to be used in the teaching of literacy, designing scripts for teachers to follow through makes them lazy and fail respond to the needs of the learners. The following were some of the responses from the respondents

They make you lazy when planning for the learners. The teacher does not think out of the box. (T6)

It promotes laziness. Teachers do not look to bring in new things they just rely on the pre-designed lesson (3).

(d) Pre-scripted robe teacher's creativity

Most of the respondents said teachers are professionals who come to the classroom with diverse knowledge. However, when they are provided with scripts they are robed of their creativity as scripts determines what the teacher will say what they will teach and when. Some respondents said:

You are not eclectic you just stick to the book even when children do not understand (T1)

It removes the issue of creativity. Some teachers become dependent on it and follow it like a bible. (Curriculum

specialist)

Respondents further explained that pre-scripted lessons are narrow and restrictive. They stated the following:

Someone may have his or her own way of teaching so sticking to the pre-designed lesson can be a disadvantage (T5).

It may narrow their teaching to this lesson they do not want to go outside the box they would rather stick to the lesson as it is and not see how they can teach the lesson using different methods (H14).

However, one participant had this to say:

There are no disadvantages because it is a rule. Government cannot leave everything to the teachers (T9)

From the above responses, participants views on the advantages of pre-scripted literacy lessons was that scripts are a guide in the teaching of literacy and that they helpful to the teacher. The main disadvantages included the fact that they are restrictive, they take away the teacher's creativity and that they cannot work for all learners.

The findings have shown that pre-scripted lessons have both advantages and disadvantages. Below, we provide a discussion of the findings.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings were presented thematically in the previous section. The discussion will be presented under two themes following research questions/objectives. Below is the discussion:

6.1 Reasons why Literacy Lessons were pre-designed by policy makers

According to the findings it was clear that most participants were aware as to why literacy lessons were pre-designed by policy makers. Policy makers and curriculum designers believe that the variation in teaching practices can be minimized using scripted and standardized curriculum (Yoon, 2013). The study showed that, literacy lessons were pre-designed by policy makers in order to work as a guide to the teacher. Scripted lessons help teachers to look for teaching and learning materials as they are already done for them so it becomes easier to look for those materials stated in the book. These findings are in line with Guccione (2011) who stated that, scripts designed for teaching curriculum are not meant to eliminate that amount of teacher preparation, but are to be as a scaffold for teachers to adhere to the topics and skills required of students. He added that, when used properly, scripted teaching programs are used as a tool that teachers can add and subtract parts of the structure to create a learning environment that facilitates appropriate instruction individualized to the needs of their learners. What can be drawn from the findings is that teachers are not supposed to follow the scripts step by step but they just work as a guide in their teaching.

Further findings revealed that, pre-scripted literacy lessons were designed by policy makers to simplify teaching. A participant informed the researcher that, teaching literacy in Cinyanja was very difficult. It was therefore, important that teachers had a base where to start from. Teachers, especially new and inexperienced teachers had challenges in preparing lesson plans, because of language barrier and also that teachers have different capabilities. Reeves (2010) also found that, teachers did not possess expertise to teach well and they needed curricular which are scripted. This was supported by Herbert and Morris (2012) who found that, scripted curriculum reduces the problem many teachers experience of transferring formally acquired knowledge to classroom practice. This seems to suggest that, scripted lessons make the work of the teacher easier especially for those who struggle with Cinyanja as they will just follow through the script. However, this does not resonate with Bernstein's concept of weak framing which occurs when the teacher is able to select topics on the basis of pupil interest, or some principle, and organize the sequence and pacing of material according to pupil's readiness and stage of development (Bernstein, 1990; Mumba & Mkandawire, 2020). It also works against the principle of learner centered teaching where lessons should serve the learner and not the teacher.

Apart from simplifying teaching, the findings revealed that, literacy lessons were pre-designed for uniformity. One of the participants informed the researcher that Grade three literacy lessons were pre-designed to make it easy to prepare tests and exams for the learners. Another participant revealed that it was important that children can be moving at the same pace in every school in Zambia. This is reasonable considering that all pupils in Zambia sit for the same summative assessment. In fact, schools now have uniform formative assessment which pupils write in week 5 and 10 of every term. With these uniform assessments coming at the same time, it is reasonable that teaching and learning processes are uniform.

However, this is not supported by Grossman (2010) who stated that the top-down standards imposed by policy makers are problematic. They impose content specifications without taking into consideration the different needs, opportunities to learn and skills that may be appropriate for specific schools. The statement by Grossman seems to suggest that, teachers should not be strictly dictated by policy makers. This is because teachers are experts in the classrooms who should know how to teach and later test and examine the learners based on the skills and competencies they have acquired. Thus, teachers sticking to pre-designed lessons for uniformity is against Voller (1997) who described the roles of the language teacher in an autonomous environment as, a facilitator who encourages decision making processes, a counselor who reacts to the constant needs of the learners, and a resource who makes his or her knowledge and expertise available to learners when it is needed.

Another theme which imaged from the findings was that lessons were pre-designed to ensure total coverage of the syllabus. The findings revealed that literacy lessons were pre-designed in order for the teacher to cover all the lessons outlined in the syllabus. One of the respondents said, scripts help the teachers follow the sequence while focusing on the assessment which follows. This revelation agrees with the findings of a study by Madaus (1991) where it was revealed that test questions, like curriculum guides imply content goals by adding authority to selected goals and topics. Like guides, they identify certain topics and skills as essential.

6.2 Merits and Demerits of Pre-scripted Literacy Lessons

As hinted earlier, the study intended to establish the merits and demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons in Zambia. The findings revealed that most of the participants felt that pre-scripted literacy lessons were helpful. Participants indicated that scripts were an effective tool for effective teaching. Additionally, the findings showed that, participants agreed to the use of scripted lessons due to the issue of language. In Lusaka, the language of classroom instruction is Cinyanja and teachers who do not know how to speak cinyanja and later use it to teach literacy felt that using pre-scripted literacy lessons was helpful. This resonates with Mkandawire (2022) who observed prescribed literacy lessons help control what teacher offer in applicable schools. Further, Hebert and Morris (2012) stated that scripted curriculum reduces the problem many teachers experience of transferring formally acquired knowledge to classroom practice. They believe that by following pre-annotated teaching routines in the context of the surrounding feature of the lesson rather than as a technique in isolation, and eventually, by testing the routines in their own context teachers would generalize.

Another advantage of using pre-scripted literacy lessons revealed in the study was that scripted lessons served time. Participants said when teachers used scripted lessons, they spent less time on writing lesson plans and looking for materials since they were already stated. Instead, they focused on how they were going to execute the lesson to the learners. However, teachers sticking to materials pre-scribed in the lesson is against Bock (2014) who noted that, semiotics are constantly being

made and remade. She suggested that communicative and meaning making is a creative process in which participants can resemiotize and repurpose semiotics in order to communicate meaning in a particular context. Therefore, learning materials can be drawn from different sources and not necessarily from a single source as suggested in pre-scripted lessons. During the lesson observation, it was observed that most of the teachers were only using text books and chalk board as learning materials pre-scribed in the book.

The other advantage that emerged from the interviews was that, pre-scripted literacy lessons were a guide in the teaching of literacy. From the findings, the study revealed that scripted literacy lessons helped teachers to move in the same direction. They help teachers with what to teach at a particular time. However, this is what Bernstein considered as strong framing where content is organized and topics are sequenced to be completed in a predetermined order (Bernstein, 1990). It is the view of the researcher that when teachers use pre-scripted lessons to teach certain topics and at a particular time then the interest of learners is not considered. Other findings on the advantages of pre-scripted literacy lessons revealed that, pre-scripted lessons were good for teachers who did not know how to teach literacy. Further, study revealed that the PLP is a new program and most of the teachers especially those who had never taught grade three found it easier to teach using pre-designed lessons as they were just following steps to deliver a lesson. The findings agree with Commeyras (2007) who stated that scripted teaching presumes that any person can come into a classroom and teach a lesson if they follow the script.

Although pre-scripted lessons had notable advantages, they had disadvantages too. The findings revealed that pre-scripted literacy lessons cannot work for diverse learners. When teachers use scripted lessons, it becomes difficult for them to understand and respond to the sociology of the classroom (Hall, 2009). Children learn at different paces and therefore no one lesson plan can work for all the learners. Other findings revealed that teachers found it challenging to use pre-scripted lessons as they were prepared by someone else. Some participants felt that using lesson plans designed by policy makers to deliver lessons took away their freedom and that it became difficult to execute a plan which they had not prepared. Reeves (2010) supports the findings when he stated that scripted teaching deprofessionalizes teachers, stifling their creative potential and makes teaching decontextualized.

Other demerits of pre-scripted literacy lessons held by participants were that, pre-scripted lessons make teachers lazy. They said scripts designed for teachers to follow through made them lazy and fail to respond to the needs of the learners. A teacher needs to think outside what is pre-designed in the syllabus. They need to bring life to scripts instead of sticking to what is pre-scribed by policy makers. From the lessons observed, most of the teachers used the materials and methods as pre-scribed in the book. This does not resonate with Mwanza (2016) who found that most of the teachers despite being under the authority of the government through the syllabus and policy had powers in the classroom in which they negotiated the provisions of the syllabus. The researcher observed that, by the

teacher sticking to methods and materials pre-scribed in the book meant that teachers were not eclectic. Mwanza and Mkandawire (2020) perceived such teachers as good curriculum implementers as they rigidly followed the curriculum as prescribed by the state. Other views from the interviews were that pre-scripted literacy lessons robbed teacher's creativity.

The findings from the lesson observation revealed that some teachers were following the prescribed literacy lessons religiously like a Bible. This is because pre-scripted lessons tells the teacher what to teach, when to teach and how to teach. When teachers are not creative in their teaching, learners suffer. A teacher who is not creative cannot attend to the needs of the learners. The views that pre-scripted literacy lessons were narrow and restrictive is what came out of the interviews with the participants. A narrow and restrictive curriculum does not resonate with Li (2017) who pointed that, in a multimodal classroom learning provides multifaceted communication platform independent of time, space and distance and other factors.

7. Conclusion

The findings showed that teachers do not support the use of pre-scripted lessons in the teaching of literacy. The implication arising from the above findings is that teachers are professionals and do not need a scripted curriculum in order for them to teach literacy. Thus, teachers can be encouraged to be autonomous only if pre-scripted literacy lessons which tells teachers what to do and when are done away with.

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