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Professional Studies: The Zimbabwe Teacher Education Curriculum Burden Bearer?

Pharaoh Joseph Mavhunga, Oliver Mavundutse
and Attwell Mamvuto
University of Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

This study sought to probe the organisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe with particular focus on the Professional Studies section. The study was prompted by observations that new components were constantly added to the Professional Studies section without anything being removed, thereby congesting the section and threatening effective curriculum implementation. Data were gathered by the researchers through visits made to one Secondary Teachers' College in 2007 and two Primary Teachers' Colleges in 2008 on Academic Examining. Ethnographic techniques that included observation, document analysis and group discussions were used for data collection. The data so gathered were analysed using the qualitative approach.

Findings established that the Professional Studies component appeared to be the most unstable and most loaded curriculum component as compared to other academic components such as the Main Subject/Academic Study and the Theory of Education sections which lecturers in Professional Studies described as 'sacred cows' because they are rarely 'interfered with' whenever curriculum change and or innovation is muted. This has led to the perception that Professional Studies is an amorphous curriculum component that is somewhat blurred in terms of definition. As a result, it does not seem to command as much respect and commitment among students as other academic sections of the curriculum, a situation which is detrimental to effective implementation of the teacher education curriculum. The study recommends that a curriculum review be carried out with the view to rationalising, streamlining and reorganising the three academic components of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwean teachers' colleges.

INTRODUCTION

Observation over the years has shown that the Professional Studies component (previously known as Applied Education) of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe, also commonly referred to as Section Four, is ever expanding with new components added to it almost on an annual basis. The section has been bombarded in recent years with additions of components in response to new proposals for inclusion in the curriculum. The tendency has been that once teacher educators have been convinced of the need to introduce a new component in the teacher education curriculum, such components have almost always been accommodated in the Professional Studies section. So intense has this 'bombardment' been, to the extent that some teacher education practitioners, particularly those responsible for Professional Studies, have come to describe the curriculum component as the 'dumping ground' for teacher education curriculum innovators in Zimbabwe. Such connotations are obviously negative and detrimental to effective curriculum implementation. On the basis of these observations, this study was carried out in order to probe the organisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe in general, with particular focus on the Professional Studies section.

BACKGROUND

The Teacher Education curriculum in Zimbabwe, like anywhere else, has been changing over the years in one way or the other in response to the multiplicity of forces that relentlessly continue to exert pressure on the curriculum for change. According to Mukorera (1999), the evolution of the teacher education curriculum is largely attributable to the recommendations of the Lewis Tyler Report of 1974, the T3 Working Party of 1977, the Teacher Education Review Committee (TERC) of 1986 and the Oasis Workshop of 1988. One of the fundamental curriculum outcomes of all the efforts through the various committees and workshops was the establishment within the teacher education curriculum of a component that was labeled Professional Studies at the Oasis Workshop of 1988. This marked the compartmentalisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe into four distinct sections, namely Section 1 –

Teaching Practice; Section 2 – Theory of Education; Section 3 – Main Subject/Academic Study and Section 4 – Professional Studies.

One major concern for any curriculum planner according to Herbert Spencer (in Barrow 1976) is 'what fundamental knowledge is of most worth' that deserves to be selected for inclusion in a particular curriculum? Similarly, the question that teacher education curriculum planners have to continually grapple with is, what knowledge, skills, values and attitudes should be incorporated in a worthwhile and relevant teacher education curriculum? According to Mukorera (1999) the idea that a teacher should be 'an educated person' as well as a competent practitioner underpins the teacher education curriculum, raising another debate relating to academic versus professional components of the curriculum. Two schools of thought emerge in this debate; one arguing that all that one needs in order to teach well is a thorough knowledge of the subject while another argues that all a teacher needs in order to teach well is an understanding of children and the possession of appropriate pedagogical skills. Perhaps the answer lies in both, thereby justifying the compartmentalisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe as presented above. This paper concerns itself with Professional Studies as a component of the teacher education curriculum.

PROFESSIONAL STUDIES DEFINED

Mukorera (1999), who did an extensive survey of literature and views regarding the composition of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe, attempted to define the four components of the teacher education curriculum (Professional Studies included) as follows:

The academic subjects supply the personal education and knowledge of the teaching subjects. Professional Studies deals with the knowledge of the teaching subject at school level and with some of the related executive skills. Further, executive skills are acquired and tested through school experience and Teaching Practice. Theory of Education provides the educational processes as opposed to the everyday, common sense knowledge acquired through Professional Studies and Teaching Practice.

While it seems relatively easy to categorise the range of knowledge and skills that fall within the Main Subject, Theory of Education and Teaching Practice respectively, it does not seem that easy when it comes to Professional Studies, hence the need to explore a bit further the definition of this area.

According to Hirst (in Mukorera, 1999) Professional Studies is that part of the teacher education course that is intended to equip the student teacher to effectively carry out his/her teaching role or job. An important question immediately springs to mind. Is this not what the whole teacher education curriculum is supposed to achieve? The definition above is obviously very broad and all encompassing, but necessarily so. Professional Studies seems to be what teacher education is all about and, perhaps, the broadness of the area becomes the source of the problem where any innovation muted in the teacher education curriculum ends up in Professional Studies.

Having analysed a number of definitions of Professional Studies, Mukorera (1999:40) identified the following function:

Professional Studies is, therefore, concerned with the job that the newly qualified teacher will actually do in schools—. The student teacher has, therefore, necessarily to be properly trained to do the job of the appointment—as well as to critically reflect on its framework and his/her responsibilities in relation to that.

Definitions by both Hirst (in Mukorera, 1999) and Mukorera (1999) view Professional Studies from an instrumental perspective in as far as it is meant to develop professional competence within student teachers. But then, again, what component in the teacher education curriculum does not have that aim – the development of a competent professional?

Traditionally, the Professional Studies Section was meant to cater for, among other things, the professional skills development of the student teacher through such areas as teaching methodologies, classroom communication and classroom organisation or management. In primary teachers' colleges, it is under Professional Studies that student teachers are trained how to teach all the subjects in the primary school curriculum.

At secondary teachers' colleges, the student teachers are trained how to teach their subjects of specialisation that they would be expected to teach at the secondary school level.

Over the years, as the Professional Studies section evolved, three syllabuses emerged namely Syllabus A meant to cater for general teaching methods, classroom communication skills, classroom organisation and teaching media; Syllabus B focusing on teaching methods for each of the school teaching subjects and Syllabus C which was/is a research project. With these three syllabuses, the Section has been viewed as quite loaded, with many components being averaged to arrive at a final mark on examining

With new thinking coming into the teacher education curriculum in recent years, unprecedented amounts of innovations have been introduced mainly through what have been termed contemporary subjects. Most of such innovations have tended to be lumped within the Professional Studies section, more specifically within Syllabus A. Among the most notable innovations was the introduction of Health and Life Skills Education, the introduction of National and Strategic Studies (NASS) and most recently, Computer Studies, among other innovations. This has tremendously increased the number of components that constitute the Professional Studies section to the extent that lecturers in the subject have voiced concerns that the section has become too bloated and, consequently, unmanageable. To what extent are these concerns justified? If they are justified, how do these concerns impact on content and skills delivery in the area? What adjustments, if any, should be done to the overall teacher education curriculum organisation in Zimbabwe in order to improve implementation? The research attempted to explore these issues, among others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study concerns itself with curriculum change/innovation and curriculum content organisation. For any curriculum to remain relevant, it has to continue to serve the needs and interests of its beneficiaries (Fullan, 1993), in the case of this study, teacher trainees who are the beneficiaries of the teacher education curriculum. Arguments have often

been advanced whether curriculum should ever change or remain static. Some notable education theorists of ancient times such as Plato held the view that the curriculum was a fixed and static device for bringing about the desired educational processes (Blenkin et. al., 1992). During Plato's era, (and to a certain extent even today), there were in-built devices to ensure permanence rather than to permit or promote change and this has always presented threats and challenges to curricula reform.

In contrast, modern times have witnessed shifts and turns in curricula provisions in different education systems. The justification presented is that society is in a constant state of flux. It is not static, but ever changing in terms of value systems, belief systems, knowledge systems, amidst a host of contemporary pressures that demand change in society. Fullan (1991:3) weighs in buttressing the need for change when he says, "Everything must change at one time or another or else a static society will evolve." Consequently, curricula in different education systems have changed in the past, and continue to change in response to dynamics in society in order for them to remain relevant. The notion of a static curriculum has long been dispensed with in all progressive societies, though there still remain pockets of arguments in support of the traditional view of an absolutist stable curriculum as opposed to a relativist curriculum. Basing on the view that curriculum is relative to the needs of society and should seek to change as those needs change (Wheeler, 1967; Hoyle, 1971; Fullan, 1991; Blenkin et. al., 1992; Nkomo, 1995), the theory underlying change is, therefore, justified and curriculum change, like change in any other sphere of life, is as necessary as it is inevitable. This view provides the theoretical backcloth for this study.

Basing on the argument above, curriculum change and innovation in the teacher education curriculum is justified provided it is based on principles of planned change. The tendency in post independence curriculum reform is that it has tended to be piece-meal and spontaneous (Nkomo 1995), amounting to what some curricularists have described as 'pot hole sealing'. Curricula that result from such circumstances tend to be disjointed, poorly organised and often lack proper rationalisation, leading to passive resistance or total 'tissue rejection' by the user community. This study probed the organisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe with particular focus on the Professional Studies section.

THE PROBLEM

The teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe has been noted over the years to be ever expanding as new innovations are introduced, particularly so with the Professional Studies section. This has resulted in some complaints being raised that the section has become bloated leading to curriculum implementation and assessment problems for the section. This study sought to probe the organisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe in general and the Professional Studies section in particular as well as the attendant curriculum implementation and assessment problems in the section.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- How is Section Four of the teacher education curriculum in the selected teachers' colleges organised?
- What curriculum implementation and evaluation challenges, if any, arise out of the organisation of Section Four?
- What are the possible solutions to the identified problems?

METHODOLOGY

The study is of an illuminative nature and is rooted in the qualitative paradigm. Data were gathered through ethnographic techniques that included observation, analysis of documents (Professional Studies syllabuses and internal examiners' reports at three selected teachers' colleges), group discussions with lecturers in charge of Section Four in teachers' colleges as well as discussions with lecturers in the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) at the University of Zimbabwe for triangulation purposes. The DTE supervises work in Teachers Colleges through the Scheme of Association. Lecturers in the DTE were, therefore, found to be a valuable source of information regarding the subject since they are the ones who are the custodians of the curricula in teachers' colleges. They are also charged with the responsibility of monitoring curriculum implementation and examinations in these colleges.

Procedure

The researchers, who happened to have been external assessors to the colleges concerned, gathered data during academic examining visits to three teachers colleges; one secondary and two primary colleges. For ethical considerations the colleges are given pseudonyms. The secondary college shall be named College X while the two primary colleges shall be named College Y and College Z respectively.

During the visits, the researchers carried out a close analysis of Section Four Internal Examiners' reports and syllabuses for the three broad areas under Professional Studies in order to get information regarding the issues relating to the organisation of Section Four and problems relating to the organisation of the section, if any. Statements relating to those issues were teased out of the documents, particularly from the internal examiners' reports, as evidence. In addition, researchers had discussions with the lecturers in charge of Section Four in order to triangulate findings from the Internal Examiners' reports. Discussions were also carried out with two DTE Coordinators of the relevant colleges to find out their views on issues raised by the colleges regarding Section Four. Consistent with the qualitative approach, data were analysed as the study progressed as well as after exiting the research sites.

DATA PRESENTATION

In order to tease out the views of internal examiners regarding the organisation of Section Four in the three teachers' colleges concerned, an analysis of Internal Examiners' reports was done. For triangulation purposes, issues raised by internal examiners through meetings with external examiners (college lecturers) at the three colleges were also captured. These are recorded below college by college.

Data extracted from Internal Examiner's report for College X

- No distinctions were recorded in Section Four because of the numerous components that have to be averaged in order to arrive at the final mark.

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- The high failure rate can be attributed to the general negative attitude that students have towards Section Four. Students do not seem to attach much importance to this section.
- The section is under-staffed. There are only three members in the Section, yet we have an establishment of seven members. We urge Administration to do something about staffing in this section urgently.

Data from discussion with Internal Examiners at College X

- Students generally have a negative attitude towards PS as a whole. They regard TOE as 'the course'. We have to hunt down students in order to get assignments submitted for marking.
- Professional Studies has become the 'dumping ground' of any innovation that anybody out there considers should be part of the teacher education curriculum. We cannot cope any more with the ever increasing expansion in Professional Studies. Anyway, we will only do that which is possible.

Data extracted from Internal Examiner's report for College Y

- A member from this section was transferred last term to Home Economics. This has affected the staffing situation in the section since there are only four of us left. As a result, we had difficulties in coping with marking and moderation of examination scripts.
- Only two candidates out of 365 scored distinctions. Nine others missed narrowly because they did not perform distinctively in Syllabus B.
- The introduction of National and Strategic Studies in Section Four has increased our work-load. We, therefore, appeal to Administration to appoint another lecturer to teach the subject.

Data from discussion with Internal Examiners at College Y

- In Professional Studies Syllabus A, we are always short staffed because we are not considered a priority area as compared to

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Main Subject and TOE. Sometimes staff members are transferred to other 'more important' areas at very short notice leaving us with a huge work-load to grapple with.

Professional Studies is no longer manageable. There are just too many components and new ones are always added each time. Something should be done to streamline the area.

Data extracted from Internal Examiner's report for College Z

- No candidate scored distinctions in this group. The only candidate who was close to scoring a distinction did not do well in Syllabus B.

Data from discussion with Internal Examiners at College Z

- Professional Studies is a very broad area. There are too many components making up the area and many more are always added every year. Recently, National and Strategic Studies, Health and Life Skills Education and Computer Studies among others, were added to Professional Studies. It seems any new subject in teacher education has to be accommodated in Professional Studies. Other areas are never touched at all.
- Sometimes there are duplications of content between Professional Studies Syllabus A and TOE resulting in unnecessary repetition. At times this duplication ends up confusing students in terms of what constitutes Professional Studies.

Data from observation in the three colleges

Observations by the researchers during academic examining at the identified three colleges yielded the following information:

- Section Four mark profile in all the three colleges had four columns of marks from Syllabuses A, B and C and NASS which had to be averaged to yield a single final mark to be transported to the final mark profile that included the other three sections.

- Related to that, it was observed that in Colleges Y and Z (primary), the mark for Syllabus B was an average of marks from 11 subjects taught in the primary school curriculum.
- In all the three colleges, a lot of computational errors on mark profiles were noted and these were attributed to the many components whose marks had to be recorded, added together and averaged to get a single mark that had to be recorded in the final profile.
- In Colleges Y and Z (primary), multiple choice examination questions for Syllabus A were preferred instead of essay type questions in order to make it easy for the 'overwhelmed' markers to cope with the large number of students since Syllabus A was taken by all students.
- No distinctions were registered in Colleges X and Z; only 2 distinctions were recorded in College Y. The reason given was that many components had to be averaged in order to arrive at the final mark.
- A relatively high failure rate (21%) was noted at College X (secondary).
- Policies on how to arrive at the final mark and for the award of distinction were complex, particularly in Colleges Y and Z (primary) where students studied how to teach the 11 subjects in the primary school curriculum and marks from all the subjects are averaged to arrive at a mark for Syllabus B.
- In all three colleges, it was noted that Syllabus A was bloated. New content aspects are regularly added to this syllabus. For example, at College Y, Research Methods has been added to the Management section of the syllabus. At College Z, Computer Studies has been recently added. In all three cases, Health and Life Skills Education has been recently added. This is in addition to the already over-burdened syllabus, making the teaching and examining of syllabus A and the whole of Section Four a very complex exercise.
- Mastery of content and teaching skills in Colleges Y and Z (primary) in the eleven primary school subjects has been compromised because of lack of time to cover all subjects adequately.

In all three colleges, Section Four now has two examination question papers in Syllabus A and NASS which is an anomaly if compared with other academic sections of the curriculum.

Focus group discussion with DTE lecturers

A 'mini' focus group discussion was conducted with two DTE lecturers who were coordinators for Colleges X and Y under study but who had experience from other colleges in the country as well. They confirmed the concerns raised by internal examiners in their reports as well as those raised by college lecturers during discussions. Additionally, the DTE lecturers raised the point that due to the congestion in the Professional Studies section, some primary colleges have resorted to clustering the eleven primary school curriculum subjects under Syllabus B. Each student is then asked to choose one subject from each cluster to study, leaving out others. This is particularly so under the 2-5-2 teacher education model in which the student spends two terms doing residential (theoretical) courses, five terms on Teaching Practice and a final two terms on residential courses. The arrangement, the DTE lecturers noted, allocates a total of four terms for residential (theoretical) studies which is considered inadequate particularly for Professional Studies with its many components.

Due to the time constraint, it was reported that colleges have resorted to clustering the 11 primary school subjects in order for them to fit within the limited time scale. This, it was noted, has a negative effect on curriculum implementation in that students can opt to leave out some subjects, yet they (students) are expected to teach all 11 subjects when they join the school system. What makes the situation worse is that some subjects taught in the primary school curriculum such as Art, Music and Physical Education are not offered in most secondary schools, hence some student teachers may not have studied them when they enroll at teachers colleges. Therefore, if some students opt not to do these subjects at a college as normally happens, it means they will graduate from college with neither the content nor the methodology to teach those subjects effectively.

Another concern raised by the DTE interviewees was that while much effort is made when new components are added to the teacher education curriculum to ensure that Professional Studies maintains its credibility as a major section in teacher preparation, lecturer qualification has, in some cases, not been taken seriously when allocating lecturers to teach the new components. For instance, when NASS was introduced, lecturers who had majored in History were allocated the new subject. As a result, it has been observed that lecturer deployment in Professional Studies is based on convenience rather than merit which is not the case with other sections such as TOE and Main Subject where DTE and Senate Subcommittee on Associate and Affiliate Status insist on appropriate lecturer qualification.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study yielded a number of pertinent issues regarding the composition and organisation of the teacher education curriculum in Zimbabwe in general and Section Four (Professional Studies) in particular. All participants concurred that the Professional Studies section is over-loaded particularly under the 2-5-2 training model that most primary colleges are using. Too many components congest this section and this has resulted in a number of curriculum implementation problems. Of the three syllabuses that constitute Professional Studies, Syllabus A seems to be the most highly congested. It seems most innovations in the teacher education curriculum end up being accommodated in Section Four and, in most cases, in Syllabus A. Recent examples of such innovations are the introduction of NASS, Health and Life Skills Education, Research Methods, Computer Studies, among others.

A number of problems relating to the congestion in Section Four in general and Syllabus A in particular were noted by participants. Section Four is the most complex academic area to teach and examine. The four aspects, namely Syllabuses A, B and C and NASS are taught and examined separately, yet marks from the four different areas have to be aggregated using complex ratios in order to arrive at the final mark for Section Four. The processing of marks in the section is tedious and often fraught with computational errors. Students hardly score distinctions in this section

due to the number of aspects that have to be aggregated to get the final mark and also because of the amount of work that has to be covered within limited time. In an attempt to address this issue, very complex policies on how to award a distinction in the section have been developed. The DTE Handbook (2004: 20) stipulates;

For the award of a distinction in PS or Section IV, a candidate must achieve an average grade of 80% on the CDS and PSA examination computed together, and additionally, the candidate's work in the PSB profile must show clear evidence of distinctive quality.

The distinctive achievement in PSB has been interpreted as attainment of above 70% in each of the 11 primary school curriculum subjects. No other section of the teacher education curriculum has such a complex examining policy. Consequently, candidates seem grossly disadvantaged in Section Four.

Related to the finding above is the other finding that there is a tendency for colleges to consign any new curriculum areas to Section Four. While innovations are as inevitable as they should be welcome (Wheeler, 1967; Fullan, 1991; Blenkin et. al., 1992), concerns are raised when all innovations get 'dumped' in one section of the curriculum, at times with questionable rationalisation. The inclusion of NASS in this section is often cited as a case in point. No wonder some participants (lecturers) have described Section Four as the 'dumping ground' of teacher education curriculum planners. This could account for the reported negative attitude towards the section by students. College administrators do not help the situation when they do not timeously attend to staffing deficiencies in the section as indicated in the internal assessors' reports.

The study also found that there tends to be some duplication of content between Professional Studies Syllabus A and Theory of Education. For example the topic on Piaget's stages of cognitive development and implications for the classroom is taught under TOE, yet the same content is also taught under Professional Studies Syllabus A when dealing with teaching methods. These are normally derived from developmental and learning theories. Two problems arise. Firstly, students may get confused

as to what exactly constitutes Professional Studies as opposed to TOE. The relationship between the two sections may not be clearly discernible. Secondly, time gets wasted through repetition of content.

The issue of the 2-5-2 model of training in primary teachers colleges was noted as having a negative effect on the implementation of the teacher education curriculum, particularly where PS is concerned. The different components within the Professional Studies section cannot fit into the four residential terms adequately, it was noted. As reported earlier, this has led to clustering of the 11 primary school subjects studied under Syllabus B in some colleges. Because students are allowed to choose a subject from each cluster and leave out others, it means a student can graduate without learning how to teach some subjects. This, obviously, has a negative effect on the quality of the product.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Section Four of the teacher education curriculum in the three colleges that were studied is overloaded as it tends to carry the burden of accommodating any innovations that are introduced in the teacher education curriculum. Too many components congest this section giving rise to curriculum implementation and assessment challenges. Syllabus A is the most affected area as most innovations to the teacher education curriculum end up being accommodated under this syllabus whose content ends up bloated, resulting in lack of coherence and content delimitation problems. Questions arise as to what exactly constitutes Professional Studies as a field of study in teacher education. This has a negative effect on effective teaching and examining of the section as highlighted in the study.

Since only three colleges were covered in this study, the results cannot be conclusive and generalisable to all teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe. This calls for a broader study covering a more representative sample of the teachers' colleges in the country. However, the findings in the present study still provide an important indicator to the possibility that the organisation of the teacher education curriculum might need revisiting with the view to rationalising it. Of particular attention should be the

Professional Studies section which, as noted above, has become congested, presenting implementation and assessment problems.

A number of suggestions can be proffered to mitigate the problem cited above. One suggestion to deal with the problem would be to overhaul the whole teacher education curriculum with the view to increasing the number of sections in line with the ever expanding knowledge base. A fifth section could be created in the curriculum to accommodate the 'miscellaneous' aspects of the curriculum that are currently straining the PS section, leaving the section to focus on its core business of developing pedagogical and professional skills. The second option would be to rationalise the TOE and PS sections of the curriculum with the view to moving some aspects of Professional Studies to TOE. There seems to be an artificial demarcation between the two areas. While it is agreed that theory informs practice, it is suggested that teaching methods, for example, can be taught in conjunction with theories that inform methods. Teaching methods could, therefore, be integrated in TOE, just as one example. This could lessen the burden presented by congestion of Section Four, leading to improvement of its teaching and examining.

Another way of decongesting Section Four would be through horizontal integration by infusing content from the new components into already existing syllabuses across the curriculum. It would then be up to subject specialists for the various syllabuses to figure out how best to effectively reorganise the syllabuses for effective teaching and learning to take place. The danger with this approach, like in most other cases where horizontal integration has been attempted, is the tendency to trivialise the new content in an attempt to avoid distorting the existing content within the syllabus.

As a final suggestion, a teacher education curriculum review committee could be set up along the lines of the Teacher Education Review Committee (TERC) of 1986 to take a holistic look at the issues raised which would include a clear definition of what PS entails. Rationalisation of TOE and Professional Studies sections should be at the centre of such an exercise, leading to a rational allocation of content to the two sections, following concise definitions of the two related but different sections, among other things. After all, it seems quite a while since the

last teacher education curriculum review and this is not consistent with current curriculum trends and practices.

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