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Climbing out of the Rabbit Hole: Balancing School and Life as an Intern

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Abstract

The life of a teacher candidate can be brimming with a plethora of emotion. Being accepted into the teacher preparation program may build the excitement of starting a lifelong dream of becoming an educator. Once classes and assessments are successfully completed, the internship experience is the final step to receiving that coveted degree. Just like “Alice in Wonderland” (Carroll, 1865/1871/1984), the adventure of completing internship and balancing life outside of preparing to become a teacher is like climbing out of the rabbit hole. This article focuses on three recent graduates of an Early Childhood preparation program who discuss how they successfully balanced working, being a newlywed, and being a mother and wife during their internship experience. These narratives were developed to provide insight to future interns in similar positions as they embark on exciting, yet challenging, transitions in their programs. From these narratives, teacher educators also gain awareness of the challenges that interns may face as they balance the requirements of internship and their personal life.

Relevant Literature

Teacher preparation programs seek to successfully prepare candidates to teach in today’s classrooms. In order to be effective educators of P-12 students, candidates must learn and apply the knowledge of teaching through clinical experiences (CAEP, 2013). Throughout their matriculation in teacher preparation programs, candidates learn how to engage P-12 students in learning, create classrooms that are conducive to learning, plan lessons that are developmentally appropriate for students in a specific grade level and classroom (Grossman, 2010; CAEP, 2010; Watkins, 2013). Candidates also reflect often on their experiences as they gather knowledge about being an effective teacher. This reflection is enhanced through the multiple forms of feedback they receive from the clinical teacher (CT) and field supervisor (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2012; Teacher Excellence and Support System, 2013).

The amount of time spent in the classroom as well as the learning expectations during clinical experiences may vary from program and discipline. Teacher educators and state departments of education determine the sufficient amount of time candidates should learn in field placements. The learning expectations in the field may include observing clinical teachers, planning and conducting lessons with individual, small, and large groups of students, as well as building rapport with the faculty and staff at the field site. Another vital learning component of the clinical experience is receiving feedback from the clinical teachers and supervisors (Grossman, 2010). It is imperative that candidates learn through hands-on experiences to develop their knowledge and pedagogy for successfully teaching in 21st century classrooms because teachers are the determining factor to a school’s success or failure (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Teacher candidates may assume they understand the demands of teaching prior to enrolling in teacher preparation programs and completing clinical experiences. These assumptions are based on their apprenticeships of observation (Borg, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick, & Parker,

1989; Holt-Reynolds & Knowles, 1991; Lortie, 1975; Zeichner, 1996). Many candidates learn fairly quickly that their perceptions are challenged once they have the direct experience of planning, teaching, disciplining, multitasking, and being a co-leader of the classroom community (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Coughlin, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

The descriptions of clinical experiences vary throughout teacher preparation programs. Prior to candidates' final semester or year in a program, clinical experiences may not be as lengthy and stringent. Candidates may only visit field placements weekly at various times. During the final stage of the program, candidates spend multiple hours with clinical teachers and students in field placement classrooms to aid in the development of their craft (Grossman, 2010).

Description of Early Childhood Program Internship Placement and Expectations

Teacher candidates enrolled in a central Arkansas university Early Childhood teacher preparation program complete many hours of clinical experience throughout their matriculation in the program. When candidates have completed three semesters of coursework and clinical experiences, they enroll in internship. They are placed in one classroom under the direction of the same clinical teacher (CT) for approximately 27 weeks. During internship, an apprenticeship model is utilized. The CT provides guidance and support in the areas of teaching and learning for the candidate. During the first semester of internship, the candidate becomes familiar with the basic routines of the classroom and teaching practices as the CT provides a gradual release of independence. During the second semester of internship, the candidate is responsible for more complex teaching strategies and teaching responsibilities.

The clinical teacher, university supervisor, and intern have vital roles during the internship experience. The most important role of the CT is to provide a co-teaching model for the candidate. The co-teaching model scaffolds learning for the inexperienced candidate. It is the responsibility of the CT to insure that student learning does not digress in the classroom. The CT also conducts daily communication with the candidate regarding plans for the next day, week, and month. The CT is asked to debrief with the candidate daily about the teaching and miscellaneous duties in the classroom or school. The CT reports the candidate's performance to the university supervisor during observation visits.

The most important role of the university supervisor is to conduct regular observations and discussions with the candidate and the CT regarding the candidate's practice and dispositions within the classroom. The university supervisor serves as a liaison for the CT and intern.

The most important role for the intern is to use professional dispositions and learn the daily role of being a teacher. The intern is expected to shadow the CT daily and to observe, plan, collaborate, and deliberate with the CT daily. The intern should co-teach and teach independently consistently, developing rapport with the students in the field classroom as well as the administrators, faculty, and staff in the school. Additionally, the intern should become a member of the school community. It is critical for the intern to apply the pedagogy and strategies for teaching developmentally appropriate grade level curriculum. Toward the end of the first semester of internship, the intern is expected to teach the entire curriculum for two consecutive weeks. During the second semester of internship, the intern is expected to teach the entire curriculum for one week. At this time, the CT acts as an assistant for the intern relinquishing most of the teaching duties to the intern.

During the internship experience, the candidate has additional coursework responsibilities. The candidate enrolls in a seminar and early childhood social studies course.

The seminar course focuses on preparing the candidate to plan effectively for lessons, while the social studies course focuses on preparing the candidate to implement diverse and cultural lessons within the field placement. Each course has specific requirements that add to the candidate's list of important tasks to complete prior to graduation. As the finish line nears for teacher candidates during internship, the joys of fulfilling the goal of becoming an educator may become a challenge as life and its challenges perpetuate. Thus the question arises, how do teacher candidates balance life as a full time intern while being an employee, being a newlywed, and being a mother and wife?

The following reflections present the experiences of three interns. The three interns were invited to conduct a teacher candidate presentation at a student led conference at a university in central Arkansas. The interns' goals were to educate current teacher candidates and teacher educators on their experiences as interns balancing school and their personal lives. The interns believed their presentation would be strengthened by comparing and contrasting their experiences and transformation to Alice in Wonderland. The session concluded with words of wisdom to help current candidates successfully balance the roles of student, employee, wife, and mom.

Intern I: The Employee

Alice in Wonderland is the story of a girl who momentarily leaves her normal life in search of something bigger, something better, and something that would change her life forever. While in Wonderland, she encounters many different people and situations that help sculpt the person that she will ultimately become. Alice's time in Wonderland could be described as mad or crazy, and, at times, defeating. Yet, Alice always kept her goal in mind; she knew that she would ultimately have to climb out of the rabbit hole and make it back to reality. Each time Alice returned to Wonderland, she had lost a little of her naivety, curiosity, and "muchness."

This story directly relates to my experiences in internship in the sense when I started internship as a student and ended internship as a teacher. Each day, I grew and moved further away from the student-like mentality. There were many nights when I felt that the rabbit hole was nowhere in sight, but like Alice, I found the rabbit hole, fought my way out, and made it back to the real world with a teaching license in hand.

Entering the Early Childhood education program was a completely different ballgame for me compared to my previous years in college. Freshman and sophomore college classes were important but not nearly as important as these classes. I had to present myself as a professional and create relationships with my professors: the people who helped manage my life for the next two and a half years. While my core classes tended to have 30 or more students, these classes were much smaller so hiding in the background was no longer an option. My class schedules were set and frequent absence and tardiness were not tolerated. On Fridays, I was a field student sent to elementary schools. I was assigned one classroom each semester. In these classrooms, I spent most of my time observing and interacting with students. Each week I completed a reflection about my day and worked on assigned projects that were to be completed in my field classroom.

When I finished my last fieldwork, I took a deep breath and was so happy that it was over. I felt ready to take on internship. Little did I know how different internship would be compared to going to field only on Fridays. Rather than spending one day a week in the classroom, I was there every day for seven months. I was expected to create lesson plans, attend professional development meetings, and deal with discipline problems in the classroom. After

several weeks in the classroom, I was expected to gradually take over teaching and, by the end of internship I was teaching most, if not all, of the lessons. I was no longer hiding in the background. Instead I was fully immersing myself in the hectic life of a teacher.

When internship started, I really started to be affected by the changes in my life. I felt very overwhelmed and unsure of my future. Not only did I struggle with all of the transitions, but I also struggled with all of the different roles I had to play. At any moment I had to be a student, teacher, friend, sister, daughter, or employee. When I realized that I was really starting to struggle, I called in reinforcements. My family and friends were huge supporters of mine and helped comfort me during my darkest moments when I felt that the work was just too much. I was able to vent to them and any time that I needed words of encouragement, they were there. They also understood that my life was going to be consumed with school. The best advice that I was ever given was by an old colleague of mine. He told me to send a message to my friends and family letting them know that for the next year I would not be around as much. I had to focus on internship, but once internship was over, I would be back. I did just that and I definitely think that it helped people understand that internship had to be my top priority and they didn't take missed social gatherings so personally.

The biggest lesson I learned from internship was to organize. I struggled so much with organization, but I quickly learned that without organization, expectations would only be harder for me. During internship, my brain was constantly on overload. Even things I thought I could remember, I couldn't so I learned to write everything down. My calendars became my bible. I had a weekly, monthly, and yearly calendar. Another tool I used was post-it notes. I constantly had a stack with me to stick on my binder or put in my pocket to ensure that the task would get completed.

Another valuable lesson I learned was procrastination was not my friend. I believed I owed my students a well-planned lesson and a happy teacher to teach it. Being awake in the middle of the night attempting to plan a lesson would not make a happy teacher. I realized that procrastinating only leads to mistakes. One way to avoid procrastination was to create a schedule that allowed for time for myself, family, friends, and work. The difficult part was prioritizing my time. I had to decide what role I was playing. It's Friday night, was I going out with friends? Was I staying in to study or work on lesson plans? Was I spending time with family? I set a rule for myself during internship that I would spend one day of the weekend with either friends or family. The other days were spent working. I felt that this helped me feel like I was not missing out on so much.

When I failed to prepare, the students would catch on and they could make me feel incompetent. Before going into internship, everyone should know that being an intern is a full time job. I was expected to be there every single day with a smile on my face. I had to look professional each day. I was expected to create lesson plans and the materials to go along with them. This is all while still taking one or two classes. Internship was exhausting. There were days when I felt like a failure, but there were more days when I drove home smiling about something great that happened at school. Students tested my nerves and questioned my authority and it was up to me to handle the situation appropriately. This is all while not getting paid in money. Even with the hard times, internship was a fantastic experience. I learned so much and I felt very prepared to walk into a classroom and make it mine.

Intern II: The Newlywed

Two weeks before I started the Early Childhood program I got married. Getting married can be one of the most stressful times of anyone's life. This was true for me as well. That was, until I started the program, not only because the program was more rigorous than I was used to, but because my personal life was changing as well. The person I was yesterday didn't matter so much because I wasn't that person anymore. I was learning to be a whole new person. I was learning how to be a wife. There were certain expectations my husband and I both had going into the marriage. We quickly found that some of the expectations were unreasonable. My husband and I grew up in different households and family dynamics so we had different thoughts on housework. He was neat, I was not. My organization was the messy kind of organized. I took my time getting chores done. My main excuse was that I was too busy or too tired to do it when I should have. I would also give the old "if I want it done, why don't I do it," speech. This was our biggest problem. Looking back now, it seems ridiculous.

The program brought on new responsibilities much like Alice being thrown into a new world she was unfamiliar with. During the first three field semesters in the program, I had to learn how to balance all of the new responsibilities my classes presented as well as my new life with my husband. Because of the schedule of my classes, I had more time to learn how to deal with his ways and alter some of mine. I only went to my field placement once a week. The rest of the week was more relaxed. House chores and homework got done with time to spare. I could give him and our families more of my attention. As the program continued, it got more work intensive. Eventually, I had to learn to say no to family on occasion so I would have more time to finish projects and lesson plans for field.

When I started internship, expectations got out of hand quickly. Internship included so many different experiences. It was exciting, terrifying, interesting, overwhelming, exhausting, and fulfilling. I was so anxious on the first day of internship. School was not in session yet. My CT and I were going to professional development sessions, setting up the classroom, and getting everything ready for those smiling faces. I only had a couple of days to get to know my CT. It was fascinating learning how much preparation the teachers had to do including all of the little things they have to think about, like name tags, seating arrangements, and getting the materials ready, not to mention all of the paperwork that goes on before the students even get there. It was nothing like my time in field. It was a new behind-the-scenes view of the life of a teacher.

For the first three months, I was exhausted. When I got home, I would take a nap until my husband got home from work. I'd get up to prepare dinner and stay up for about an hour with him, usually watching something while we ate dinner, and I would go to bed. If I didn't go to bed, it was because I had to work on lesson plans for the next day or week. I didn't give much time to him or working on our relationship.

For a while, I felt like a bump on a log in the classroom. I had to observe my teacher's teaching style, learn the behavior management strategies, get to know the kids, get to know the staff, and familiarize myself with the resources available to me. Not a week in, it was time for me to teach. My cooperating teacher told me to start doing the morning message. I taught lessons before, but they were lessons I had planned for weeks. This was impromptu. Something I had to do from memory. I was terrified, but something wonderful happened that day. I was successful! It was an exciting day! For weeks, I was teaching the morning message. I got more comfortable in that classroom and started teaching a little more. I gained a bit more energy because I wasn't terrified anymore. I was getting the hang of things in the classroom and getting

better at spending time with my husband instead of sleeping all the time. However, life changed for me very suddenly.

I was in a special situation and got moved to a new classroom after the first nine weeks. This was stressful in itself because I felt like I was starting over. I had to become acclimated to a whole new set of students on top of a very different teaching style that my new CT had. Because of all of the changes, I was drained. I didn't get to do my two-week-teach. Instead, I did a three-week-teach in my last semester. It was difficult to say the least. My CT stepped back completely, as was expected, and I had to deal with all of the stressors that come along with teaching a class that had a couple of difficult students. It was a very valuable learning experience for me, but for those three weeks, I breathed lesson plans and strategies for dealing with the behavior in the classroom.

All of my time studying and looking for new ideas, and all of the time my CT spent helping me prepare myself and giving me input gave me a newfound confidence. I found myself with more energy. I napped less in the afternoons, not only by necessity, but I also began feeling more confident and successful. This helped me get more things done but I still wasn't spending as much time with my husband as I wanted to and should have.

I sat down with him and we came up with a more reasonable schedule. I would let him know when I had to stay late at the school so he would prepare dinner. I would also tell him when a big project was coming up to let him know I wouldn't be able to do everything I usually did so he would pick up some of the slack. We had to schedule time to spend together. We ate dinner together every night. We also came up with date nights on Friday that consisted of us cooking a new meal together. It gave us time to reconnect. This was when I realized how unfair I had been and how unaware I was of his situation and how it was affecting him. I started consciously asking him about his day. Chores weren't an issue anymore because I made better use of my time. We followed our new routine. I found myself happier with school and my marriage.

Besides needing more time with my husband, I needed to make more time for myself to preserve my sanity with so much to do. I would unwind on my computer with Netflix and Pinterest. I also started playing computer games with my husband and found that I actually really enjoyed them. These were the most relaxing things to me without putting me to sleep. As much as I enjoyed these things, I realized that they weren't helping my health. I was on my feet most of the day at school, but when I got home, I sat in my chair all night. Plus I realized all of the stress eating I was doing. It was taking a toll on my health.

I decided I needed to be healthier physically and mentally. I decided to work on my diet and take better care of myself. After I cut out sodas, I began to notice more energy, clearer skin, and being able to stay up until 9 or even 10 p.m. It was amazing! I was able to set an appropriate sleep schedule, ensuring that I got 7-8 hours at night.

The most important thing for me in all of this was and is my support system. My husband is number one on that list. He helped me hold myself accountable for becoming a healthier person and supported me through the adventures of becoming a teacher. We both want to be healthier because someday soon, we hope to start a family of our own. My family was also a major support system during internship. They were so encouraging and understanding when I couldn't go see them because I had work to do. I built relationships with my classmates and supervisors. These new friends and guides were keys in venting about the struggles and blessings that internship consisted of. Those students expected me to be my best every single day, and I couldn't give them any less.

If I had to do it all over again, knowing what I know now, I would anticipate the entire time shift. I would give my family more warning about the amount of time I would have to spend on working. I would schedule every detail of my life. My planner became a necessity. I would use it more effectively. I would initially change my eating and exercise habits to keep my body and mind healthy. Last, but certainly not least, I would be more considerate and mindful of the people around me and make more time for them, especially my husband.

Internship was an amazing experience for me. It was filled with learning experiences. Every day I learned something new. Meeting the kindergarten team and working with them was invaluable. I was able to listen to their thinking, learn how to use the curriculum maps and teacher resources. I was encouraged daily by the feedback from my CT, my teammates, and my students. I built relationships that I will never forget and learned things that I will always remember and be able to put into action in my own classroom. It confirmed for me that teaching is my passion. I am a teacher.

During her time in Wonderland, Alice became more familiar with the tasks set in front of her and how to handle them. This was much like internship. The more I did in the classroom, the more time we spent practicing, studying, and planning, the more familiar I became with my surroundings. I finally began to understand the road in front of me and how to get to the end. As time progressed, the light at the end of the rabbit hole became brighter. I was finally climbing out.

Intern III: The Mother and Wife

I have been married for two years to my best friend of 19 years. We have one daughter who is 11 years old and in the 6th grade. I also have two fur babies, a Yorkie and a Shitzu. The quote by Lewis Carroll (1984) does an excellent job of summing up my experience as an intern and managing a family. The quote states, "My dear, here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place. And if you wish to go anywhere you must run twice as fast as that" (p.125). This quote is a reflection of my experience because as an individual, living life every day presents its own victories, trails and tribulation. When I incorporate a family and the responsibility of having a family, there is twice as much work, pressure, obligation, and accountability. As a wife and a mother juggling the balances of those jobs can be difficult. When I factored in school and internship, it provided some interesting challenges.

I must be honest. My internship was amazing. I would not change anything. I had an excellent CT who is National Board Certified. I was greeted each morning by 19 smiling kindergarten faces eager to learn. I learned so much and enjoyed every day. However, managing internship with a family was much harder than I expected. Managing internship with a family was a test of my ability to have effective time management, remain a good and effective wife and mother, as well as balance being a dedicated intern.

Prior to internship I was a stay-at-home wife and mom. I took great pleasure in tending to my home and my family. When I started internship it was quite an adjustment for both me and my family. I will never forget my first week of internship. In the classroom I was great. I was beginning to build those relationships with the staff, the kindergarten team as well as my students. My lessons were innovative and interactive. I was eager to put my learning, ideas, and skills to the test. But when I arrived home, it was as if a tornado had demolished the organization and schedule of my home. I was bombarded with questions, homework help, needs of the home, barking from the dogs and so much more. I had two meltdowns in one week because I was not accustomed to such chaos and lack of organization in my home.

When I started my internship I realized that it would be a big step for me but I did not take into account how this change would affect my family and the structure in which had been established. After the first week of school, I realized this would be a huge change for me and my family. The first step to help me survive internship was time management and creating a schedule. I had to create a schedule not only for myself but for my family and even our dogs. By creating a family scheduling tool, it provided a sense of structure and organization that helped me and my family to be efficient with the changes. The scheduling tool that we used was a calendar we created each month as a family. We put everything on the calendar from homework due dates, after school activities, work schedules, meetings, sleepovers and even playdates for the dogs. This tool was essential in helping me plan ahead.

The second step that helped me to survive internship was establishing open communication with my CT and supervising instructor. I am a private person when it comes to my family. This task was a tad bit difficult for me but was worth the effort in the end. As a parent, family always comes first for me. I needed to establish the communication with both my CT and supervising instructor to discuss events or circumstances that occurred that would cause me to miss a day of internship or require me to leave early. I believe that having a plan in place helped prepare everyone in the event of an emergency. I also needed to establish that open communication to be able to institute that support system that helped me to succeed. For example, I stayed up late with my daughter while she was sick. The next morning I was greeted by 19 eager smiling faces and I was tired, stressed, and had a migraine headache. I was able to openly explain to my CT why I was not my normal self. She understood and we were able to develop a game plan that accommodated my needs for that day. I learned through internship that having open communication as well as a support system is crucial when having a family.

The last step I learned was accepting the sacrifices during this time. It was a drastic change from being a stay-at-home wife and mom to going to internship Monday through Friday. I have always been a family person. I made it my mission to be at all events and gatherings. Upon entering internship I had to sacrifice the things I wanted to do in order to do the things I needed to do. I would occasionally have to miss family gatherings or afterschool activities because I had other responsibilities related to internship. I may have had to miss family movie night in order to prepare for a lesson the next day. This was difficult for me to initially grasp. It was not only a sacrifice on my behalf but also my family. The roles and responsibilities changed drastically within my home. Before internship I handled most of the responsibilities in my home. During internship a lot of those responsibilities fell upon my husband and we had to monitor and adjust our way of functioning.

During internship, there were happy days and some sad days. There were days when I felt overwhelmed and days I felt at ease. There were days I didn't want to get out of bed and days where I woke early and eager to get to the school. On those cloudy days I had to find my motivation. I believe in education and the power that it holds. My motivation to get out of bed was my daughter. I preach the importance of education in my home and I want to be that example for her. I wanted to be able to provide my family with a better way of life. I wanted to ensure that I had a career that I loved and not a job I tolerated. I want to make a difference in the life of a student and hope in that difference I am able to affect others.

Internship was a remarkable experience and being able to bring my family along for the journey was a true learning adventure. I am grateful for the opportunity to have learned the amazing things I learned along the journey and the wonderful people I met. I find myself being

more grateful for the things I learned about myself that will make me a better person and better teacher.

Conclusion

Clinical experiences for teacher candidates aid in the development of their craft for teaching. They are an essential component of the teacher preparation program (Grossman, 2010; CAEP, 2010). Candidates' perceptions of teaching and apprenticeships of observations are suddenly challenged during clinical experiences (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Coughlin, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). These perceptions are challenged even more during the long hours and greater expectations of internship. They begin to live the life of a teacher. They experience the multitude of hours spent preparing for lessons, activities, routines and procedures, and additional administrative tasks. They experience the exhaustion, frustration, laughter, and rewards that come with teaching each day.

The demands of becoming a teacher can be overwhelming for a teacher candidate. Teacher educators are charged with the task of making their programs more rigorous to meet the demands of the 21st century classroom; therefore the tasks for candidates become bounteous. The demands of life change as the candidate is busy cultivating the craft for teaching and managing personal responsibilities. The responsibilities of life may suddenly be altered. Balancing the demands of college courses, working, adjusting to being a newlywed, and being a mother and wife can pose a challenge but it can be completed.

The internship experience is a vital component of enhancing the candidate's knowledge of the multitude of responsibilities for being an educator (CAEP, 2010). The experience can present many demands and overwhelming feelings. A candidate must be prepared for the challenge and be willing to adjust to this new lifestyle to be successful.

Each candidate should devise a plan that will help make the transition and be successful during the internship experience. It is important to manage time by creating a schedule that is conducive to one's lifestyle. Another key element is communicating with family, CT, supervisor, and employers with the changes that have evolved in life. Calling on these people to vent about frustrations that may occur in the field classroom, college courses, or life outside of school may ease feelings of being overwhelmed. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle can also help ease feelings of being overwhelmed. It is important to eat right, exercise, take vitamins, unwind, and save time for fun. As an intern it may feel like one will never get out of the rabbit hole, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. It is important to live one day at a time reflecting on accomplishments and working on ways to do something better. This overwhelming moment in one's academic career will cease and the degree and teaching certification will be rewarded then the ultimate reward of having one's own classroom is bestowed.

Just like Alice transforms and evolves throughout her time in Wonderland, teacher candidates advance through a similar process. Alice changes mentally and physically to adapt to her new surroundings. She encounters many characters and learns many ideas. Once teacher candidates enroll in teacher education programs, they begin new adventures in a land never traveled as they learn content and pedagogy for teaching students how to succeed in the classroom. Internship presents new challenges, and interns may find themselves trapped in a rabbit hole trying to successfully make it out, like Alice. But once they adapt and learn from their experiences, they successfully come out ready for bigger adventures to begin as they become classroom teachers.

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