



## A Case Study of a Speech-Language Pathologist's Supervision of Assistants in a School Setting: Tracy's Story

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*The purpose of this article is to present a single case study about a newly graduated speech-language pathologist working in a small, urban school district and her experiences with a series of speech-language assistants having various levels of qualification and personality types. The case illustrates how levels of professional supervision skills, pre-service paraprofessional training, professional/paraprofessional role distinctions, hiring practices, pay, and working conditions interact and impact on the successful use of speech-language paraprofessionals working in education settings. Evidence gathered in the case support the contention that pre-service preparation for speech-language pathologists to function in supervisory roles is an important factor in ensuring the appropriate use of speech-language paraprofessionals.*

### INTRODUCTION

Many issues are related to the successful use of speech-language (SL) paraprofessionals in school settings. Among these issues are pre-service paraprofessional training, professional/paraprofessional role distinctions, school-community relations, hiring practices, pay, and working conditions. However, the most important issue may be the formal pre-service preparation of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to function in the role of paraprofessional supervisor. Although there has been some discussion in the literature of supervisory issues, a very small empirical base exists that explores supervisory practice in schools today or the manner in which supervisory practices interact with the other issues mentioned above.

The purpose of this article is to describe a single case study about a newly graduated SLP working in an education setting and her experiences with a series of SL assistants with various levels of qualification and ability. The case illustrates how the above issues interact with the formal preparation of the SLP for supervision and impact on the successful use of SL paraprofessionals working in education settings.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Training of Professionals to Supervise Paraprofessionals

Speech-language pathologists, like teachers, hold de facto responsibility for the supervision of paraprofessionals who provide educational and related services in schools (Coufal, Steckelberg & Vasa, 1990; Coufal, Steckelberg & Vasa, 1991). ASHA has long recommended that SLPs be trained in the supervision of support personnel (ASHA,

1970, 1981). In an eleven-state survey of special education directors, Coufal, Steckelberg & Vasa (1991) reported that about 70% of school districts provided training on how to supervise paraprofessionals. Yet school-based professionals report little pre-service or inservice preparation in supervision skills (Vasa, Steckelberg & Ulrich-Ronning, 1982; Lindemann & Beegle, 1988) and have reported that most of their supervisory knowledge is derived from day-to-day, real life experience rather than from formal training (French, 1995).

#### Pre-service Paraprofessional Training

The practice of hiring paraprofessionals who have no pre-service training continues to exist in most states (Frith & Lindsey, 1982; Pickett, 1986). Although most authors have long recommended training (AHSA, 1981; Pickett, 1986), many paraprofessionals lack specific training for the tasks they perform in their current positions (Pickett, 1986; Pearman, Suhr, Gibson, 1993). The amount and type of preparation of the SL assistant and resulting skills should bear a direct relationship to the types of responsibilities they are given (ASHA, 1981) and the amount of supervision they are provided.

#### Role Distinctions

The roles and responsibilities of speech-language pathologists and the differentiation of responsibilities between professionals and assistants have been refined in professional guidelines developed over the years (ASHA, 1970, ASHA, 1981; ASHA, 1995). Yet, in practice, inappropriate role overlaps in school settings may be frequent (see Hansen, this issue). In some cases, paraprofessionals working in educational settings make decisions, create lessons, assess students, and determine objectives (French, 1994). In

one court case, the use of the paraprofessional violated state law because the paraprofessional did these things without the benefit of professional supervision (Morgan N. v. Los Fresnos ISD, 1993). In spite of the model that ASHA has provided, few states or professional organizations have developed guidelines that delineate appropriate tasks and responsibilities for professionals and paraprofessionals working together in school (French & Pickett, 1995).

### Hiring Practices

French (1993) found that practices of hiring paraprofessionals vary widely among educational programs. Many paraprofessionals are hired by centralized personnel departments; some are hired at the building level by the principal. In some cases, the supervising professionals are included in the screening and interview processes. Minimum educational criteria for hiring ranged from none to two years of college and many job descriptions listed personal characteristics, such as maturity, dependability, love for children, communication skills and willingness to take direction.

### Working Conditions and Pay

The working conditions of schools contain both incentives and disincentives for paraprofessionals (Logue, 1993; Frith & Mims, 1985). As an incentive for paraprofessionals who have children at home, the school schedule is desirable (Logue, 1993). In terms of personal prestige, paraprofessionals are viewed as critical team members in recognition of the important work they do, and many paraprofessionals believe that their work with children is important and meaningful (Logue, 1993; Shafer, 1984). Despite these positive factors, disincentives are numerous.

The demands on paraprofessionals are great, but they receive little training that prepares them for their duties. Burnout, a condition that results from prolonged distress (Fimian, 1988), sometimes affects the work of paraprofessionals (Frith & Mims, 1985; Logue, 1993). Distress is sometimes caused by circumstances in the school situation. Paraprofessionals have reported that stress results from working with difficult students, maintaining hectic schedules and too little time to complete assigned tasks (Logue, 1993). They also reported that low wages, the lack of respect from students, and lack of appropriate supervision are added causes of job dissatisfaction (Logue, 1993). French (1993) found that the average annual paraprofessional salary (for 37- 40 hours/week) is about one-third of the average teacher salary. Paraprofessionals are typically hourly employees whose pay scale ranges from minimum wage to \$12 per hour, have few benefits, and work on a school year calendar.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The term "speech-language assistant" refers to SL paraprofessionals who are employed in schools and clinical settings<sup>1</sup>. Speech-language paraprofessionals represent one category of approximately 400,000 paraprofessionals

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employed in education settings in the US. Paraprofessionals work alongside school professionals to provide education and related services to students in compensatory programs, general and special education (Pickett, 1994). Despite their widespread use, formal pre-service training for professionals (including SLPs) in the supervisory skills needed to use, supervise, and evaluate paraprofessionals appropriately is almost non-existent. To investigate the effects of this lack of formal pre-service preparation on an SLP and her SL assistants, two rival propositions were developed.

The first proposition is that SLPs who work in schools need systematic preparation to guide their work with SL assistants. It is predicated on the belief that a body of knowledge exists that is sufficient to guide the curriculum of a pre-service preparation program. Implicit in the first proposition is the contention that intuition and common sense are an inadequate substitute for formal preparation in supervision. The rival proposition suggests that SLPs do not require pre-service preparation in the supervision of paraprofessionals. Implicit in this second proposition is the contention that paraprofessional supervision lacks sufficient importance in the pre-service preparation of SLPs to justify replacing other program components. Also implied is that the intuitive or common sense approaches are adequate for supervision and that "home-grown" models of supervision result in acceptable practices.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Participants

Key Informant: A School-Based Speech-Language Pathologist. Tracy is an SLP, working in a small urban school district in a western US state. She was hired in January, 1993, immediately following completion of her master's degree in a respected program at a state university. Tracy's case load has varied little in the past 3 years. Currently, she has 9 students for whom she is the primary special education service provider, 52 for whom she provides secondary services. The services of the SL assistant position are equated to those of a .5 full time equivalent (FTE) SLP. Therefore, by district calculations, Tracy's case load is 41:1. The state education agency in the state where Tracy works recommended a ratio of 50:1, so her caseload is well within the state guideline and is typical of those in surrounding school districts.

Principal Investigator. The principal investigator is a university professor at a large urban university in a western US state. She is director of a federally funded program designed to train school professionals to deliver effective supervision and systematic on-the-job training for paraprofessionals working in education settings.

#### Setting

Interviews were conducted at various locations throughout the school district convenient to the key informant. The school district is in a highly industrial part of a large metropolitan area with children from lower socioeconomic circumstances. The home language of about

one-third of the children is a language other than English, and two-thirds qualify for free or reduced price lunches. The district supports full inclusion of children with disabilities and every child in the district attends his/her neighborhood school. Staffing patterns in the district have been adjusted in recent years to serve all children with appropriate personnel. Every school has at least two special educators and one school psychologist with expertise in counseling. In addition, occupational and physical therapy services, speech-language pathology and health services are provided according to student needs. Paraprofessionals are employed to work throughout the district to assure adequate services to all children.

### Research Design

A single case interview study was conducted (Yin, 1989). Tracy's story is a "revelatory" case in that it provides a real life example of how the issues of supervisor preparation, training, employment, pay, working conditions, and community relations issues discussed in the literature interact and impact on the use and supervision of SL assistants. It is also a "revelatory" case because it provides insight into the thinking of a recently prepared SLP employed in a school setting with respect to her preparation as a supervisor of SL assistants.

### Procedures

A small number of open-ended questions were asked during each of 7 interviews to control for interviewer bias. The first interview began with the prompt, "Tell me about your experience as the supervisor of a paraprofessional." Subsequent interviews began with corrections of the data collected to that point, and then proceeded with the prompt, "Tell me what has happened since we last met." Additional probes were used only occasionally to clarify or verify Tracy's statements. After each interview, the principal investigator typed up her hand-written interview notes and submitted them to Tracy for review. At each subsequent interview, Tracy made corrections to the previously collected data and added information to enrich the data base and update the chronology. At the end of the interview process, the revised notes were given to Tracy's immediate superior for verification.

### Data collection

Interview data were gathered during 7 interviews conducted between August, 1994 - September, 1995. After one year of back and forth sharing of case notes and partial draft reports, the investigator and the key informant were in agreement as to the facts of the case, from Tracy's point of view.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a pattern-matching technique. The data were collected and analyzed in chronological order, and a narrative was constructed to describe Tracy's acquisition of supervision skills. The narrative illuminates the changes in Tracy's supervision practices that resulted from a combination of professional maturation,

on-the-job experience, trial and error experimentation, and formal paraprofessional supervision training. Reliability of Tracy's information was checked by submitting the completed interview notes to Tracy's district special education administrator. The administrator reviewed the data and offered comments. The administrator's memory of events and district records provided a triangulated verification of the data.

### Results

Paraprofessional 1: Anita. Upon employment, Tracy was assigned an SL assistant, Anita. Anita had already worked in this position for the previous four months. Tracy had not anticipated an assistant and wasn't sure what an SL assistant in a school setting would do. In fact, Tracy's pre-service preparation focused on clinical settings and she was a little unclear about her own role as an SLP worked in a school setting. She commented, "I was somewhat relieved to hear that I had an assistant who had been around for a while. I knew that I had a lot to learn."

Anita held a baccalaureate degree in communication disorders and an out-of-state teaching certificate. By the time Tracy started, Anita had been trained through the district's inservice training program to perform a variety of routine tasks under the supervision of the professional. Tracy felt relieved that Anita did not seem to require much supervision. They became friends and enjoyed working together. Tracy said, "I felt, at the time, that Anita was my peer and in some ways, my mentor. I was a beginner. I didn't know how to schedule my time very well and figuring out how to manage all the paperwork was a challenge." However, Anita left her position at the end of that school year to pursue a teaching career.

Paraprofessional 2: Madison. Madison was hired to take Anita's place. She was a young woman who indicated on her application that she held a bachelor's degree in speech communication. The position did not require a degree, so no official verification of Madison's claim was made. Later, Tracy learned that at the time of application, Madison had no degree. Madison had indicated during her interview that she was willing to learn all aspects of the job work with students with all types of disabilities. However, soon after working with Madison, Tracy got the impression that Madison didn't like the students in special education. Tracy commented, "Madison didn't think that kids with severe cognitive and language needs were important. She treated them as if they were beneath her." For example, when students raised their hands to request help, Tracy thought Madison deliberately ignored them.

Tracy assumed that Madison's attitude was so basic to her personality that training would have little effect. Tracy later admitted that she "tip-toed" around Madison because she was unsure of what to do. Madison eventually told Tracy that the job was not what she thought it was going to be. By February, Madison had used most of her sick days. One day, in early March, Madison failed to show up for work. When Tracy finally reached Madison, she discovered

no emergency or crisis. Madison had simply decided not to go to work. Tracy begged Madison to return to work and to stay in the position, in spite of Madison's poor performance up to that point. Madison blamed Tracy for her dissatisfaction with the job. Tracy promised to make it better, to help her with what she needed, however, Madison did not return to her position in the district, and Tracy's worst fears were realized. She had to start over with a different paraprofessional.

**Paraprofessional 3: Gerri.** Gerri, a 31 year old woman who had lived in the community all her life was hired as Madison's substitute from March through June, 1994. Gerri held a diploma from a high school in the district. She had held a previous position in the district, in a preschool program, and had a poor reference in her file from her supervisor; but Gerri was available. When two ads in the local newspapers attracted no other applicants, she was hired.

Gerri had poor grammatical skills and her written language lacked organization and coherence. She seemed to have low self-esteem, but at the same time, Tracy thought that Gerri had intuitive skills for working with children and a strong bond with the special education students. Tracy said of Gerri, "She found the good in them. She was 'in tune' with the kids." Tracy also thought Gerri was a good worker during the first months of her employment.

Having learned from her previous experience with Madison, Tracy was more directive with Gerri. She set goals and worked with her to get her to the point that she could meet those goals. Tracy established regular meeting times with Gerri so she could provide training on specific tasks and to monitor Gerri's work. Gerri told Tracy how much she loved the job and that she wanted to make her career as a paraprofessional. She said she wanted this job because it was near home, provided a steady income, reasonable working conditions and hours. As a single mother struggling to maintain custody of her children, these working conditions were important.

In June, 1994, Gerri was notified of the district's intention to not reappoint her for the following year. That summer, the position for a speech-language assistant was posted and advertised. In late July, there were 9 applicants, and Gerri was among them. Gerri and 3 other applicants were selected for interviews which were held in late August. Reluctant to rehire Gerri because of the poor recommendation and her poor oral and written language, the district sought other applicants. Tracy believed at the time that the district administrator wanted to hire someone with a bachelor's degree (in spite of the fact that the job description did not require a degree). She argued against that requirement, pointing out that bachelor's level people aren't likely to stay in a position that only paid \$6.81 per hour, 32 hours per week, for a total of 180 days a year. She also specifically advocated for Gerri. She believed that Gerri's lack of written language proficiency was less important than her innate ability to relate to and respond to children. Tracy emphasized, "You can't train intuition," but admitted, "She does need skills."

When asked what knowledge and skills she wanted Gerri to demonstrate, Tracy said, "Gerri should know the reasons behind the label of speech language, what that means about the child, and how to problem solve. For example, I sometimes give her two or three activities to do and she has to choose to do one or all of them depending on whether the kid 'gets it' right away or not. I think she should also have more ideas about behavior management. And of course, she needs to use better grammar." When attempts to hire a person with better skills failed, the district rehired Gerri for a one year appointment shortly after the opening of school. The district placed the condition on Gerri's employment that she pass a basic written and oral communication course at the community college and agreed to reimburse the cost of tuition after she brought in proof that she passed the class with the grade of "C" or better.

In October, 1994, Tracy took a course called "Paraprofessional Supervision Academy." She gained information about roles and responsibilities for paraprofessionals, liability and legal issues, as well as the skills of directing, delegating, and giving feedback. The course provided materials for assessing her own work style and preferences as well as the paraprofessionals' work style preferences and skills.<sup>2</sup> These tools helped Tracy create unique job descriptions for tasks she would assign to her SL assistant and included forms for the documentation of on-the-job coaching and skill monitoring.

In January, 1995, Gerri enrolled in her first community college class. That spring, she passed the class with a "B" and received her tuition reimbursement. She was rehired for the 1995-96 school year, but was reassigned to a position where her services were shared by 2 first-year SLPs who served as co-supervisors. Gerri called Tracy often during the fall of 1995 and told her that she was not getting along well. Tracy thought, "Gerri was very loyal to me and she may not bond with others because of it, but, I think they're also struggling with Gerri's personality. . . ." Tracy thought that the new SLPs were a little overwhelmed and may not know how to supervise. She says, "I gave them all the information about supervision that I got from my class, but I don't think they're following through with it."

**Paraprofessional 4: Carla.** At the same time that Tracy supervised Gerri (1994-95 school year), she also supervised Carla on a half time basis. Carla worked part-time with another professional who communicated frequently with Tracy. Together, Tracy and her colleague used the district training curriculum to train Carla to perform various tasks. Carla was also a graduate of the local high school, but had worked in the district as an SL assistant for nearly 5 years. In spite of the time Carla had on the job, Tracy was concerned about Carla's ability to learn new things. "Things just did not sink in. She was a very concrete person. She loved articulation because there's only one right way." Tracy also found that Carla could not follow 4-5 step oral directions well. "I had to write out directions if they went beyond 2 or 3 steps, because she did not seem to remem-

ber them. She even started with step 5 once. I think the only step she remembered was the last one, so that's all she did."

Tracy requested Carla as her assistant in spite of these problematic characteristics and Carla was offered a continuing position for the 1995-96 school year, working only with Tracy. The day before school started, Carla called to resign, saying that she had gotten another job. Tracy says, "Carla had a bad experience once with high school students and was pretty nervous about going there. I assured her that I would always be there in the building with her and could help her out if she had trouble." Tracy believes the high school assignment led Carla to look for another job.

Paraprofessional 5: Pam. As of mid-September, 1995, with Tracy's input, a person with a bachelor's degree in communication disorders was hired. Pam moved to the school district from another state and is establishing residency for one year to qualify for in-state tuition rates when she applies to a master's degree program at the state university. If accepted, Pam will quit working to attend school full time. Tracy says, "Even if I had to rehire every year for this position, if I can continue to find people this qualified, it's okay. Pam is already doing things that Gerri is just now learning and that Carla never would have been able to do."

## DISCUSSION

Effects of Formal Preparation on Supervision Practices. In response to probes about the kinds of activities she would assign to her assistants, Tracy reported that she learned to vary the level of responsibility according to her perceptions of the assistant's skills. Sometimes Tracy would have the assistant work directly with students on speech sounds based on the assessments she had done. Sometimes she gave the assistant several activities from which to choose. Tracy used a detailed data collection and communication system contained in a notebook that she developed as a result of the Paraprofessional Supervision Academy. After each session with a student, the assistant noted whether the student could produce the sound independently without prompts, with prompts, or couldn't produce the sound.

Role Distinction. In the beginning, Tracy worked with an SL assistant who was pleasant and knowledgeable. Anita helped Tracy by telling her about the kinds of tasks the former SLP assigned to her, thus establishing a delineation of roles and responsibilities. While the best practices outlined in the literature would suggest that Tracy should have been the one to create the role and responsibility distinction in conjunction with the assistant, in reality, the assistant did so. Tracy reflected, "I loved working with Anita because she knew what to do. I was so new and I had no idea how to supervise another adult. Fortunately, she didn't need much from me. We became close friends and have continued our friendship.

I don't create friendships with paraprofessionals, any-

more. At first, I thought that's what supervision was - friendship. I thought that if I was nice enough, we could work together well. And it worked that way with Anita, but now I've realized that Anita was an unusual case and that it doesn't make sense to do supervision through friendship. In fact, it probably makes it more difficult with a person who isn't as skillful as Anita." Tracy realized, "I made some basic mistakes working with Madison. For one, I thought that I could be friends with her like I had been with Anita. It didn't pan out that way. I should have provided specific training, set goals, and monitored Madison's progress toward those goals. It did occur to me at the time that I had missed something, but I was afraid that Madison would leave and that I would have to start all over with a new paraprofessional - or that it would take a long time to hire a new one and I would be without any assistance in the interim. Of course, that's exactly what happened. She left and I had to start over." Tracy now realizes that it was a mistake to be intimidated by the thought of an assistant leaving.

Hiring. Tracy recognizes that she has done a real about-face regarding hiring a person with a bachelor's degree. She commented, "After Madison left, I thought that hiring a person who liked the kids was more important than hiring a person with knowledge and skills. Now, after working with Gerri and Carla, I realize how exhausting it is to have to train someone to do all the tasks I need them to do. Now I favor hiring someone with a bachelor's degree - they need less [on-the-job] training. I'd rather hire someone who knows what to do rather than someone who has no clue. Then, even if they don't stay forever, I at least have someone who knows what they're doing for that year."

One factor in hiring a person with a bachelor's degree in communication disorders for a SL paraprofessional position is that such a person would probably come to the job interview with some appropriate expectations as to what the job entails. Without a comprehensive job description, a person without a formal background in speech-pathology would not have that advantage. Although Madison was given the school district's legal job description for the SL assistant position, it was not sufficient to open frank communication between the SL supervisor and the SL assistant about the details of the job. When problems with Madison's job performance and absenteeism were mounting, she told Tracy that the job was not what she thought it was going to be. In fairness to the job applicant and the supervisor, a detailed discussion about caseload composition and job responsibilities could help both participants determine whether the applicant is comfortable with the job during the interview process.

Working Conditions and Pay. Issues of working conditions and pay became important factors in the maintenance of several SL assistants in this case. Gerri commented that she loved the job and wanted to make her career as a paraprofessional because the job was near home, it provided a steady income with reasonable working conditions and hours. However, other more competent paraprofessionals,

such as Anita and Pam, were using the position as a transition step to a higher level of professionalism. Administrators and supervisors should anticipate that both types of personnel have their strengths and weaknesses in terms of staffing.

## IMPLICATIONS

**Proposition 1.** Tracy's case provides rich and compelling evidence that supports the proposition that the formal, pre-service preparation of SLPs to supervise SL assistants in education settings is important to guide their work with paraprofessionals. Formal preparation should equip SLPs to: (1) clarify professional/paraprofessionals' roles, (2) develop job descriptions, (3) provide appropriate supervision commensurate with the abilities of the paraprofessional, (4) promote paraprofessional skill development, and (5) evaluate job performance (ASHA, 1981; Pickett, Vasa, & Steckelberg, 1993; Pickett, 1989). Tracy's intuition led her to employ some of the effective practices, but not others.

When Tracy received formal training in supervision, she learned how to create an individualized job description that detailed the specific requirements of the position in a way that improved her communication with her assistant. Tracy reflects on her own skill development as she describes the difficulties that Gerri is now experiencing with the two new SLPs to whom she is currently assigned: "They created a new job description for Gerri, without her input. She doesn't have any buy-in and is not very happy. The thing I always believed, and then confirmed during the class, is that you have to respect who a person is and what that person knows in order to supervise. [The new SLPs] should do the work sheets that I did with Gerri to create a job description that works for both of them and for Gerri, too."

Tracy strongly recommends that formal preparation in supervision should be provided for all SLPs and teachers who supervise paraprofessionals. She believes that fair treatment of paraprofessionals will only evolve when professionals know how to supervise adequately and have the skills and tools to perform supervisory functions. District administration agreed with her, and said, "All people that supervise paraprofessionals need this type of class. We haven't had anything available until recently."

**Proposition 2.** The evidence gathered in this case did not support the second proposition that intuitive or common sense approaches to supervision are adequate and that "home-grown" models of supervision result in acceptable practices. Tracy's story demonstrates that changes in supervisory practices developed from trial and error learning can be emotionally painful and very time consuming.

## CONCLUSION

The high turn-over of SL assistants related in Tracy's story are not necessarily typical. Many SL assistant positions are filled by people who remain for the long-term. Yet

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the people dynamics described in this case could happen anywhere. For Tracy, the formal preparation in supervision came at a good time. She had experienced enough difficulty with supervision to know that she was ready for some specific skills and tools. She expressed regret that she had not had preparation prior to assuming supervisory responsibilities so that she could have avoided the pain of making serious mistakes while on the job. Tracy's story supports the proposition that SLPs need formal preparation in supervisory skills prior to their employment in education settings. The rival proposition that intuitive approaches to supervision are adequate cannot be supported by the evidence in Tracy's case.

Although many authors create logical arguments that the employment of paraprofessionals is beneficial to students (Courson & Heward, 1988), little empirical evidence exists to help support or question those arguments (Jones & Bender, 1993). No attempt was made in this study to determine the outcomes or effects of supervisory preparation or actual supervision on the students for whom Tracy held responsibility. This is an important research topic for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the general term paraprofessional refers to non-licensed, or non-certificated personnel who work along side any professional personnel (e.g., speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, teachers, psychologists, nurses) in school settings.

<sup>2</sup> The materials mentioned here and used in the course include worksheets on the professional's work style, the paraprofessional's work style, the professional's needs, and the paraprofessional's skills. They are all contained in Building Team Pride, by M. J. Emery which is listed in the references.

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