Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of new teachers regarding the benefits of full-time mentorship based on one particular new teacher induction program. Six new
teachers and three mentors were interviewed in this study. Data indicated that full-time mentors could effectively introduce new teachers into the teaching profession if certain conditions were present. New teachers perceived the following benefits from effective full-time mentorship: increased confidence in their abilities, opportunities for non-evaluative observation and feedback, practice teaching of lessons prior to administrative evaluations, support with resources and materials specific to their situation, and the opportunity to ask critical questions in complete confidence. However, these benefits were not perceived when an unmanageable mentor-to-teacher ratio was present. One finding not prevalent in the literature was the characteristic of disassociation whereby teachers new to the profession had difficulties disassociating their professional work lives from their personal lives. The suggestion is made that further study is warranted to determine if the characteristic of disassociation could be used as a predictor of new-teachers at risk of leaving the profession. This study concluded by making eight recommendations for improving full-time mentor support and new teacher induction.

*Keywords*: full-time mentors, new teachers, induction, mentoring
Full Time Mentors: A Qualitative Study of New Teacher Perceptions

Introduction

Teachers recently graduated from university or college preparation programs are full of theoretical information and eager to take on a classroom full of energetic children. These beginning teachers are excited but nervous about going into their first classroom in their first school. Most believe there will be lots of supports and colleagues eager to share their knowledge of the way things work in the school culture and community (Panesar, 2010). Unfortunately, the theoretical teachings of teacher preparation programmes often fail to translate effectively into the school classroom (Canadian Teachers’ Federation [CTF], 2004; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Karsenti, Collin, Villeneuve, Dumouchel, & Roy, 2008; Panesar, 2010; Stoel & Thant, 2002), and new teachers find that there are many responsibilities that become overwhelming (Karsenti et al., 2008; Leithwood, 2006; Panesar, 2010). All of these responsibilities can translate into a daunting work load for the new teacher. In fact, the adequate preparation (or lack thereof) that new teachers receive prior to their introduction to the “real world” of teaching is one of the most cited reasons for new teachers leaving the profession (CTF, 2004; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future [NCTAF], 2002; Stoel & Thant, 2002).

Howe (2006) states that “nearly every teacher can relate to the difficulties encountered by beginning teachers and the excessive burden placed on first-year teachers” (p. 289). Many teachers enter their first classroom with an idealistic sense of reality and a subsequent feeling that their university preparation classes have left
them woefully unprepared for the true reality of the classroom (Howe, 2006; Panesar, 2010;). New teachers often find that they are assigned to the more demanding classrooms (Borman & Dowling, as cited in Karsenti et al., 2008; Kapadia, Coca, & Easton, 2007), given the hardest course loads, given numerous additional responsibilities, and asked to teach unfamiliar subjects (Ingersoll, 2002; Ontario College of Teachers [OCT], 2006).

As Ingersoll & Kralik (2004) indicate of the U.S. experience, the nineteen eighties and nineties brought about teacher shortages, fuelled by the large number of retirements and a staggering attrition rate for new teachers. With the shortage of teachers came a new philosophy of teacher recruitment and the expenditure of money to make it happen. As school divisions throughout Canada and the United States began to spend money on the recruitment of teachers, they also began to think seriously about protecting their “investments”; the concept of teacher retention was recognized. Divisions began to view induction and mentoring programs as strategies to enable the retention of new teachers (Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver, & Yusko, 1999; National Education Association [NEA], 2003).

**Significance of the Study**

A NCTAF (2002) study cited four primary reasons that new teachers left the profession during their first five years: salary, working conditions, teacher preparation (pre-service), and (lack of) mentoring. A study of Canadian “drop-out” teachers by Karsenti et al. (2008) determined that new teacher drop-outs in Canada identified very similar reasons for attrition. School divisions are constrained by
collective agreements as far as being limited in what they can offer as salaries and teacher preparation (pre-service) exists outside their purview, but working conditions, quality induction including a mentoring component, and professional development for new teachers (to bridge the gap between pre-service programs and teaching) are certainly within a school division’s control.

With the Canadian attrition rate of new teachers as high as thirty percent in specific subjects (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2004; Ewart, 2009; Phillips, 2002) in the first five years, it makes sense for divisions to look for ways to improve retention. In a study by Guin (as cited in Earley & Ross, 2006), teacher attrition was shown to result in negative school climates, contribute to low levels of trust and collaboration between colleagues, and require schools to rethink instructional goals each year resulting in a less comprehensive and unified instructional program.

Induction programs foster the development of feeling valued and respected. In addition, well crafted induction programs have been shown “to have positive effects on recruiting new teachers; teacher quality; student achievement; K–12 curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and professional development of veteran teachers” (Earley & Ross, 2006, p. 23), and “improve teaching quality, positively impact on teacher retention, and decrease the overall cost of recruiting, preparing, and developing teachers” (Earley & Ross, 2006, p.7).

This study examined a unique type of induction program based in an urban western Canadian school division. It used a qualitative, naturalistic inquiry
methodology to explore the perceptions of new teachers and mentors participating in an induction program.

In order to examine the effectiveness of this program, the primary research question that guided this study was, “Does the availability of a full time mentor teacher facilitate the successful introduction of a new teacher into the teaching profession?” To begin to answer that question, “successful introduction” needs to be defined. For the purpose of this study a successful introduction into the teaching profession is considered to have occurred if new teachers perceive increased confidence in their abilities, increased sense of value by the school communities in which they work, and a high degree of satisfaction with the skills and supports received from their mentors. In order to answer the primary research question, four additional research questions formed the basis of this study:

1. What are the challenges that new teachers face for which they need support?

2. Benefits and Challenges of Mentoring
   a. For New Teachers: What (if any) benefits do new teachers perceive from having access to a formal mentor? What (if any) challenges or issues remain?
   b. For Mentors: What (if any) benefits exist for mentors who work to support new teachers? What (if any) challenges or issues remain?

3. Benefits and Challenges of Program Structure
   a. For New Teachers: How has the structure of the mentoring program (full-time, non-evaluative, off-campus mentoring) facilitated new
teachers’ introduction into the profession, the school division, and the school? What (if any) challenges or issues remain?

b. For Mentors: How has the structure of the mentoring program (full-time, non-evaluative, off-campus mentoring) facilitated new teachers’ introduction into the profession, the school division, and the school? What (if any) challenges or issues remain?

4. What changes could be made to the current structure of the mentoring program to improve the service for new teachers and/or mentors?

**Mentoring and Induction**

While most teachers are informally socialized into the teaching profession (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1999; Kapadia et al., 2007), an increasing number of school divisions are instituting or advocating for more formal induction programs.

The school division in which this research was conducted has a formal induction program. The program employs one and a half full time mentors as coordinators (recent cut-backs have reduced the number of full time mentors from three to one and a half). New teachers on permanent contract (full or part time) are supported by one of the two mentors based upon several factors including their language of instruction (French or English) and their level of instruction (elementary or secondary). The mentor’s role includes spending time in the beginning teachers’ classrooms and providing meaningful support, feedback, and suggestions based upon their observations. The mentor coordinators also facilitate the mentorship program by organizing professional development opportunities, connecting new teachers to
experienced teachers of the same subject around the division for reflection and networking possibilities, providing divisional orientation information, being accessible for goal setting, planning, and personal support, and coordinating the in-school peer support system with school administrators. In addition, the mentors provide recognition, remuneration, and support of the in-school peers – “buddies” – by maintaining and publishing a mentor newsletter, and organizing receptions to honour the in-school peers for their work.

**Limitations of the Study**

The nature of the sample selection method limited participant selection in three ways:

1. Sample participants were available from only those who were in their first year or remained teaching in the school division after their first year. This limitation of the research resulted in the exclusion of any teachers who may have left the teaching profession during or after their first year of teaching and those who may have changed school divisions.

2. The study was limited to six new teachers and three mentor participants in one school division in Manitoba, Canada. Teachers and mentors voluntarily participated in this study. This may have restricted the type of sample that was available. Because of the sample size and natural settings subject to change, results may not be generalizable to other regions of Canada.

3. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, this may have excluded access to teachers who were struggling and/or unwilling to participate for reasons
such as workload and stress and may have been able to contribute valuable insights for this study.

In addition, my review of the literature (prior to the initiation of the study) included certain information and knowledge about how successful mentor and induction programs were constructed; not the least of which included the knowledge that many highly successful mentor programs had utilized full time mentors.

Two additional limitations need to be acknowledged. As an outside researcher, I was less familiar with the culture and climate of this particular school division. Secondly, the methodology of this study (interview rather than observation) may have limited my ability to understand what, if any, outside forces (e.g. culture and climate) were impacting or influencing the perceptions of new teachers.

**Delimitations of the Study**

A number of delimitations relate to the study parameters:

1. The study examined the perceived benefits of one example of a mentorship program housed in an urban school division in Manitoba, Canada.

2. The study was limited to six interviews with new teachers in their first five years of teaching representing two each from elementary, middle and secondary schools, and three interviews with the divisional mentors (two current and one former) who currently coordinate or coordinated the mentor program.

3. All data for the study was collected between September and December, 2009.
4. The research participants included first year teachers in the current year of the mentor program and second, third, and fifth year teachers who had participated in previous years of the mentor program.

**Teacher Attrition**

Teacher attrition studies reflect that as many as one-third of new teachers in Canada (Phillips, 2002; Ewart, 2009) and nearly one-half of new teachers in the United States (Fulton et al., 2005; Liu & Ramsey, 2008; NEA, 2003) leave the profession during their first five years. As the existing teacher population continues to grow older, and teacher retirements and responsibilities continue to increase, the problem becomes exacerbated.

Each time a beginning teacher leaves the profession the cycle begins anew; school divisions spend valuable resources finding new teachers, hiring them, often placing them in the same difficult situation just vacated by the last one, and hoping that they survive so the division does not have to start the whole process over again. A NCTAF (2006) policy brief calculated the annual cost of teacher attrition in the USA to be a staggering $7.34 Billion. In Ontario alone, the OCT (2003) determined that teacher attrition costs the province $44 million per year.

The solution is not in replacing teachers but instead in retaining teachers. In order for schools to retain teachers, teachers need to feel prepared and competent in the skills and knowledge required of them. Schools require retention strategies that enable new teachers to feel comfortable, to develop their professional capacities, and subsequently to feel satisfied (Leithwood, 2006). The research concludes that
teacher induction programs are effective measures to increase new teacher retention (Fulton et al., 2005; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Karsenti et al., 2008; Panesar, 2010).

**Teacher Retention Strategies: The Development of Teacher Induction Programs**

The literature indicates that less than fifty percent of all new teachers receive even limited induction and only one percent received comprehensive induction programs (Fulton et al., 2005; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), and “are proportionately less common in Canada” (Glassford & Salinitri, 2007, p. 17). Crocker and Dibbon (2008), in their study of recent education graduates across Canada, determined that the number of new teachers participating in some form of induction program nationwide was just 37 percent (p.101).

Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) indicate the effect that different qualities of induction programs can have on the retention of new teachers. Their research shows that while basic induction has only a minimal effect on retention rates, the addition of various supports such as collaboration, teacher networks, and additional resources can significantly improve new teacher retention.

Traditionally, mentor teachers have been chosen from among a new teacher’s colleagues. This practice places the mentor and mentee in close proximity throughout the school year. Would a formal division wide induction program, independent (and removed) of individual school autonomy, meet the needs of new teachers and improve new teacher retention?
Methodology

This study examined the value of a mentor program offered by a Manitoba school division as perceived by its new teacher participants. Because this study was perceptional and descriptive in nature, a qualitative research design using the naturalistic inquiry paradigm was considered appropriate. As part of the qualitative research process, this study was based upon an extensive literature review of research related to induction and mentoring programs, an analysis of documents related to the program under study, and semi-structured interviews with new teachers and divisional mentors who participated in the program.

The Study Environment

The study environment is a Manitoba public school division comprised of a centralized school board office which oversees many individual schools ranging from primary through high school. There are 22 elementary schools and six secondary schools in the English program and nine elementary and three secondary schools following the French or Partial French program. The division has a teaching staff of approximately 1,100 and a non-teaching staff of 800 servicing over 15,000 students. This particular school division uses a mentoring program for new teachers as part of its induction model. What sets this program apart is its use of full-time mentors to coordinate the induction program and to mentor the division’s new teachers. The full-time mentors are independent of individual schools; they are employed by the division and work out of the board offices.
At the outset of this study, the induction program was coordinated by three full-time mentors. The divisional mentors were responsible for approximately 60 to 80 first and second year teachers. Each of the divisional mentors was responsible for one of the educational levels, early years (grades one through three), middle years (grades four through eight), and senior years (grades nine through twelve). The three mentors were teachers who had demonstrated exemplary teaching. As a group they offered a range of career experiences including regular classroom instruction, special education, student services, and specialist areas.

Prior to the 2009-2010 school year (the data collection period), the induction program underwent several changes and reduced funding. The most notable change was the reduction in full time mentors from three to one and a half. In order to keep a lower mentor-to-new-teacher ratio the decision was made to remove supports for second year teachers (effectively making the program a one year induction model), while adding supports for new (first year) administrators. A second significant change occurred; in the previous induction model (prior to the 2009 school year) the mentor teachers were selected from among teaching peers. In the current induction model the mentors selected were both former administrators. This change was most likely made because of the new program mandate of mentoring both new teachers and new administrators.

**Participant Selection**

Three mentor coordinators (two current and one former) were invited to participate in the study through a letter of invitation. After gaining their consent to
be involved in the study, the divisional mentors were able to distribute an invitation for current and past program participants to volunteer for the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select six new-teacher participants representing the three levels of schooling; early, middle and senior years. The participants were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the value of full-time mentoring for new teachers.

**Data Collection: “Orientation and Overview” Phase**

The primary sources of data used in this study were the qualitative perceptions of new teachers who were participating (or had participated) in the induction program utilized by this particular school division. Further data was obtained by interviewing the divisional mentors who coordinated the program and by reviewing program documentation.

**Data Analysis: “Focused Exploration” Phase**

Participant interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The recorded interviews were then transcribed into a word document and returned to the participants for the purpose of member checking. Participants verified the accuracy of the data and could choose to add, delete, or augment comments. Once the accuracy of the data had been verified the transcription was entered into a qualitative research software application (NVivo) and compared to previous interviews in order to discover emerging categories.

**Data Interpretation: “Member Check” Phase**

Seven strategies were used to assure the validity and credibility of the research. The collection of rich data, the subsequent validation of the data by
participants through member checking, searching and accounting for discrepant data, triangulation and comparison of data, and finally the presence of external auditors all ensured that the data were as valid and credible as possible.

**Results**

The questions asked of new teachers were an attempt to elicit responses that would illustrate new teacher perceptions of the mentoring provided through their school division’s new teacher induction model. Lincoln’s and Guba’s (1985) idea of identifying themes in three categories, 1) consensus themes – when the majority of participants mention the same idea, 2) supported themes – when approximately half of the participants mention an idea, or as 3) individual themes – when an idea is only mentioned by a small minority of the participants were selected as the means to report the findings.

**Challenges Facing New Teachers**

Consensus themes included administrative tasks, classroom management issues, stress and workload, and time management. Supported themes included a lack of mentor support, an inability to organize effectively (especially centered on the inability to locate resources and materials), and an inability to disassociate personal and professional lives. Two individual themes were reported by new teachers, including a struggle to navigate the culture of the school and an unwillingness to ask for help. While most of these challenges for new teachers are well documented in the literature (e.g., Leithwood, 2006), only one challenge presented itself that had not previously been outlined in the research: the inability for some new teachers to
disassociate their home and school life. This study found that new teachers carried the stress and emotions experienced at work home to their personal life. A subsequent review of the research turned up only one Canadian study of new teacher drop-outs reporting the challenge of disassociation (Karsenti et al., 2008). In Karsenti et al.’s study, it was determined that one of the characteristics of new teacher drop-outs was the perception that the professional workload and time required interfered with their recreation and personal interests. New teacher drop-outs tended to neglect these attributes of their personal lives and therefore cited the inability to disassociate work from home as a reason they left the profession. Karsenti et al. found that a percentage of new teacher drop-outs perceived that, “in order to fulfill their professional duties, their social and family lives had to suffer” (p. 39).

Interestingly, two (33%) of the new-teacher participants in this study identified disassociation between their work lives and their home lives to be a challenge. In their zeal to impress administrators and colleagues and an eagerness to “be perfect” – in the words of one participant – they neglected their personal lives in favor of their professional lives. Could the disassociation characteristic found in this study – and reported by Karsenti et al.’s (2008) drop-out teachers – be an early indicator of new teachers at risk of leaving the profession? This may be an avenue for future research that could inform teacher retention strategies.

The challenges experienced by the new teachers provide a rich background in which to view the perceptions of new teachers towards the benefits or challenges of
being mentored by a full-time, non-evaluative, off-campus mentor within a structured induction program.

**Benefits of Having Access to a Full-time Mentor.**

The second set of questions posed to the new teachers attempted to discover their perceptions about the benefits and/or challenges of having a full-time divisional mentor. Two consensus themes emerged from the data; the perception of the new teachers that the non-evaluative function of the divisional mentor was a benefit and the benefit of having a person capable and available to give meaningful feedback and in-class observations. Four supported themes emerged from the data; practice evaluations – the demonstrating of a lesson and receiving feedback prior to an administrative evaluation - were viewed as particularly useful, the perception that having a full-time mentor increased confidence levels, the availability of a more flexible and broader source of resources, and the opportunity for new teachers to ask questions in confidence. The final individual theme was the flexibility offered by the mentors.

**Challenges Related to Having Access to a Full-time Mentor**

While the more experienced teachers said they had experienced no challenges (a supported theme) with the mentors when they went through the program, the current first year teachers were experiencing a variety of challenges; those challenges make up the remaining supported and individual themes. Three individual themes emerged; that classroom visits made one teacher nervous and caused her stress because she perceived them as being evaluative, a concern with the mentor’s
knowledge of particular content areas, and a difficulty making contact with the mentor.

Benefits of the Current Program Structure

Four consensus themes emerged regarding the benefits of the mentor program structure. Participants perceived the access to an in-school buddy, the full-time mentor, learning the politics of teaching, and the development of a teacher network as positive components of the program that helped them in their first years of teaching. The availability of resources was the only supported themes reported. The individual themes included an increased level of confidence, the non-evaluative nature of the program, the availability of professional development, and the perception that participation in the program improved the likelihood of future employment.

Challenges Related to the Current Program Structure

Two consensus themes and two individual themes emerged from the question about program structure. New teachers reported that the professional development offered by the program was irrelevant or simply not useful to them and that the lack of program support for teachers hired on term positions was a drawback to the current program structure. The two individual themes that emerged occurred because of the way in which the professional development was offered. Teachers found it harder to plan for substitute teachers to attend professional development activities than if they had just remained in their classroom and taught. The second theme concerned the information and activities offered as professional development.
The new teachers would have preferred to receive more hands-on strategies and tools and less theory work; both of these themes perhaps indicative of why some of the teachers found the professional development to be irrelevant.

**Suggested Program Changes**

The final question offered new teachers the opportunity to suggest ways in which they felt the program could be improved. The majority of teachers felt that increasing the number of times mentors were in the classroom would be beneficial. Four additional consensus themes included the introduction of more relevant professional development, the availability of more practical resources and materials during these workshops, the perception that new teachers would benefit from more release time in which to foster and develop networks among their peers, and the introduction of mentor program supports during the first teaching experience.

No supported themes emerged, but four individual themes were reported in the data. One theme was the suggestion that program supports could be improved if they were less generic to teaching and more specific to specialized positions. Another was that the program should strive for continuity of mentors (i.e. longer terms). The third individual theme was to increase funding to the program, and fourthly the theme to improve the program by removing the existing mentor’s dual role within the division. As one would expect, the suggestions very closely aligned with the challenges experienced by the new teachers.
Recommendations

Many of the challenges mentioned by the mentors including building rapport, scheduling of teacher observation times, and maintaining regular communication with new teachers can be attributed to the large number of new teachers and new administrators for whom each mentor was responsible; as the mentor-to-new-teacher ratio increased the time available to meet with individuals decreases. For this reason it is important to keep the mentor-to-teacher ratio at a manageable number without compromising the supports available to new teachers.

Mentoring organizations and experts suggest that a 1:15 ratio is ideal (NTC, 2006; Sweeney, 2004). In this study the mentor program successfully used a 1:20 mentor-to-new-teacher ratio in the first eight years of its operation. In the current year the division chose to reduce funding to the program which resulted in less mentors, necessitating a decrease in supports from two years to one and increasing the mentor-to-teacher ratio to approximately 1:30. This ratio increase reduced the quality of supports available to the new teachers and decreased collaboration time between mentors and new teachers.

Recommendations for Practice

Perceptions of the new teachers participating in this study helped to suggest the following recommendations to facilitate the use of a mentor in the induction of new teachers to the teaching profession;

1) Remove or limit the evaluative function of mentors,
2) Limit the number of classroom duties assigned to mentors,
3) Limit the mentor-to-teacher ratio,

4) Provide support for new teachers entering the profession on temporary term positions,

5) Rigorous mentor selection from among experienced teacher colleagues,

6) Provide a voice for new teachers; incorporate new-teacher input into the induction model,

7) Emphasize teacher improvement over teacher enculturation, and

8) Ensure the induction/mentoring model occurs over at least two years.

Recommendations for Further Research

Throughout the course of this study questions arose which were outside the scope of the research. The following recommendations are made for further research;

1) It would be interesting to study, in light of the recent cut-backs to the program, whether the division’s retention rate could be maintained or whether it declines over time.

2) An in-depth observation of the culture of the school division and its effects and influence upon the perceptions of new teachers regarding their induction into the teaching profession may be worthy of future research.

3) Additional study is needed to track new teachers who leave the teaching profession in general. One of the limitations of this study was its inability to question new teachers who had left the teaching profession about their perceptions of the induction program and where it had failed them. It
would be beneficial to study teachers who had left to understand how induction programs can be improved to provide additional supports for new teachers.

4) It would be interesting to see if further research, both in this particular school division and across Canada, could study the disassociation factor to determine if it can be used as a predictor characteristic of new teachers who are at risk of dropping out of the profession.

5) More Canadian studies of induction and mentoring are needed. The review of existing literature turned up proportionately fewer Canadian studies. Since this study was limited to one school division in a geographically limited area and utilized a relatively small number of participants, similar studies could increase the sample size and/or involve other geographic regions in Canada, thereby continuing to expand the Canadian knowledge base.

A Personal Conclusion

_I did not have the benefit of any mentorship support, induction program, or even a formal in-school buddy to introduce me into the teaching profession. As a new teacher I struggled through as best I could, intimidated by the more experienced teachers and afraid of appearing as if I did not know anything. Looking back, I cringe to reflect upon my experience; the late nights, lack of sleep, and tough teaching assignments only made worse by my lack of classroom management skills and strategies._
As a new teacher I was hesitant to ask basic questions of my administration or colleagues, instead using the office staff to answer procedural questions and bouncing curricular and classroom management questions off any teacher who could spare a few minutes to help me. There is no doubt in my mind that I would have benefited immensely from some kind of induction support along the way. As Weiss and Weiss (1999) point out, “beginning teachers who are mentored are more effective teachers in their early years, since they learn from guided practice rather than depending upon trial-and-error alone” (p. 3). Regardless, I still teach; I did not become another teaching casualty. I believe that ten years after entering the teaching profession I am at a point where I feel confident in my role as a teacher. I survived the hard way. I taught myself from the ground up; I watched and learned from those around me. I am fortunate to still be teaching and to still be enjoying it.

There are many who suggest that induction happens with or without a formal program (e.g., Feiman-Nemser et al., 1999; Kapadia et al., 2007); perhaps my experience in teaching supports that statement. I wonder though how much more I could have given to my students during those years when my focus as a teacher was learning instead of teaching. I know that student achievement during my initial years of teaching was at the bare minimum; I can’t help but feel that the true purpose of teacher induction programs should be to reduce the amount of time that a new teacher requires to learn and increase the quality and efficiency with which a new teacher can teach his/her students. High quality induction programs accelerate a new teacher’s professional growth towards becoming an exemplary teacher, and
support them to become more effective practitioners during their early years in the classroom, thereby improving student achievement (Moir, 2009; NTC, 2007). When all is said and done, these programs are about making sure students receive the best possible education that educators can give them, right from the start.
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