

## **RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT OF ON E'S OWN PRACTICE – A WAY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS'/PRESCHOL TEACHERS ' PRACTICAL COMPETENCE**

### **PĒTN IECĪBA UN PIREDZES ATĪ STĪ BA – SKOLOTĀJA PROF ESIONĀ LĀS KOMPETENCES VEIDOŠANA**

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#### **Abstract**

Within the context of research called “Changing the culture of educational institutions – a way to qualitative changes in preschool education”, implemented within a three year period and, because of the needs of this work, this paper reports the results of the research performed in the first year. The work was carried out with emphases on preschool teachers’ training for the process of research and improvement of their own practice by creating a stimulating environment of an educational institution which is attended by children ranging from one to six/seven years of age (preschool period). This practice should be in accordance with children’s nature and should change continuously, being in coordination with children’s needs, environment and education. We hold that there is no theory that identifies only the needs to be learned and then applies that in practice, but rather, that a stimulating environment is also being created and built jointly by doing and participating in continuous research of educational practice. The emphasis is on shared direct research, its discussion, continuous changing of one’s own environment and providing children with more freedom, games and learning, which constitutes qualitative living.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, practical competence, professional development, reflective practice, teacher/preschool teacher.

#### **Introduction**

According to our experience (Miljak, Vujičić, 2000, 2002) and the experience of other authors (Lieberman, Miller, 2002; Valli, Hawley, 2002; Elmore, 2002.; Hopkins, 2001; Rinaldi, 2001, Slunjski, 2006, Šagud, 2006), direct observing and changing of daily educational practice, especially the physical, material and organizational environment of a preschool institution, as well as continuous self-reflection and shared reflection, leads preschool teachers to new insights and better understanding of the same practice, and to connection and cooperation with the institutions that are willing to cooperate and undertake changes based on similar principles.

In addition to gradually changing the physical and organizational environment of a preschool institution and by the shared reflections of the impact of such changes, that is, action research, there was also a need to carry out changes in educational process and the way to treat children, adults, school support staff and parents.

By direct observation of the preschool teachers’ practice, it was concluded that it was not simple for them to solve the daily problems which they encountered in their direct practice and at the same time cooperate with the nursery head-teacher and the expert team (educationalists, psychologists). The actual questions were still the following: how many songs and recitations has a child learned, how much have they eaten, etc., whereas the way children live in such an institution, how they feel and what things they would like to do, learn and play appeared to be of a lesser importance.

On the other hand, Bruner (2000) calls attention to the question, whether the material acquisition, that is, how much a child learns is more important than the question as to how the school impacts on children in order for them to become autonomous, self-confident human beings, who would know how to cope with problems presented by ever-changing life and world.

Therefore, we hold that it is important to exactly adapt the environment in a preschool institution and its educational (children) groups to its children in order to create the environment that would lead to children's emancipation, not their manipulation (Bašić, 1999); that it is necessary to form a close and cooperative relationship with each child, treat them as reasonable persons and form the same relationship with each parent, preschool teacher and other colleagues.

## **Methodological approach to research**

### ***Research aim***

The aim of the first research stage was to train preschool teachers for the research and improvement of their own practice, that is, physical and organizational environment, and for the responsible direction of their own professional development within the process of lifelong learning, not forgetting the main aim – to coordinate all these characteristics with the nature and needs of children that are changing as well.

The following tasks emerged from the researched subject and its aims:

to form a group of preschool teachers who will attend the workshop • having a different form of professional training;

- to establish partnership and cooperation among six nursery schools in five different locations in the Istra County;
- to involve nursery head-teachers and preschool teachers into an action research group as equal partners in creating of a network of the Istra County nursery schools;
- to use the data on which the results of the action research are based in the creation of the programme of the preschool teachers' professional training and development in the process of lifelong learning.

The action research was defined as a methodological strategy (problem identification, data collecting, data analyzing and evaluation, introduction of changes and their reassessment) by which educational practice is being improved and relevant knowledge developed, based on the

social constructivistic paradigm. Therefore, it was important to investigate the extent to which the preschool teachers' activities are coordinated and to which they jointly deliberate over the developmental process of their institution. Our intention was to encourage the preschool teachers to deliberate over and develop the abilities of their own shared learning and research together with the expert teams and parents, their mutual integration that will contribute to a deeper understanding of children and the role of adults in their education and learning. In this matter, we have particularly emphasized the principle of research and participation.

Elliott (1998) defines action research in the context of reform and innovation and thinks that educational innovations can be best viewed as “controversial experiments that are open for continuous assessment through an open dialogue and debate based on facts” (Elliot, 1998), where the integral element of such processes is a shared professional contribution of researchers and practitioners.

Regarding the field of education, action research is most frequently connected with teacher

professional development, the process of learning and development, and curriculum application (Elliott, 1998; Dantow, 2002, etc.).

Increasingly, a teacher has been seen as an important factor in reform changes and there has been the recognition of the necessity for their full participation and leadership within those changes.

Kemmis i Wilkinson (1998) point out that action research impacts on all the people who design their practice through it, especially on practitioners, their understanding of practice and situations in which they participate. At the same time, this process is individual and also social reality, and thus every action research is being viewed as participative and collaborative. Within it, individuals interpret themselves and their actions in the social and material environment, and change them simultaneously under the influence of shared interaction and discussion.

The point of such research is in the emancipation of individuals through self-realisation and self-development, as well as the experience of practice as something that the individual defines and critically modifies him/herself. According to Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), all this does not bring about necessary changes unless all participants provide reflection, that is, dialecticity by which the reality is being investigated on the level of its change. When deliberating the research plan, many circumstances could not be defined in advance due to the complexity, unpredictability and changeability of the social context within which the same research was implemented. We made efforts to determine a sufficiently open and flexible research plan that would provide further modifications and supplements. The beginning of our research plan was in need of changing preschool teachers' professional training, based on the transmission paradigm of teaching, into transactional and transformational ways of learning that are oriented on problem solving. We agree with Lesourn's view (1993, 298) which holds that it is necessary "to abandon the unrealistic idea about a deep renewal of the entire teacher population. (...) Another undoubtedness is that small breakthroughs can give rescue offering impetus to this huge mass. (...) The state of this environment can be changed only by completely small actions that are persistently repeated from all sides".

### **Research development**

The action research which included preschool teachers of the Istra County, coming from Pula (two institutions), Labin, Poreč, Rovinj and Pazin, was initiated in the academic year 1999/2000 with 12 preschool teachers and a researcher. Two preschool teachers coming from each nursery school were involved in the action research and their responsibility was to try to organize similar discussions, research and mutual connection in their institutions that differed in size and number of children and staff, and to give support to the expansion of different approaches within the realization of educational process with the children in their nursery schools. The observation and video recording of educational practice, as well as shared analysis (evaluation) and discussion on the implemented activities took place every month, from October to June 2000 (six meetings altogether), on the basis of which we provided further guidelines, suggestions and action hypotheses for new actions.

The role of the researcher was to encourage the preschool teachers for a detailed observation, interpretation and better understanding of children and their activities, and not to instruct them about the way they should organize the space and time in an intellectual manner or what exactly and how to talk with children. We started with a different programme of professional training in the course of creating nursery schools that are truly "built" in such a way where children are to be understood, respected and allowed to be free in their development. Contemporary interpretative research of children's development and education, especially

preschool education (Rinaldi, 2005, etc.), also emphasizes the importance of this principle. Therefore, our first task was directed to humanization of environments where children live, their independence, autonomy and development of their potential. We hold that great significance should be given to creation of conditions and environment in every institution and every single educational group. Creating such conditions and environment, we endeavor to see and hear every single child. We want to create an environment that is not limiting, that facilitates creation of various, more human social and emotional relationships among all the participants of the process.

In this way, we open space for the development of different forms of children's intelligence (Gardner, 2000) or different forms of children's learning. In another words, we did not engage in talking as to how we should work or report other people's views, but orientated on the improvement and development of our own knowledge through a direct investigation of our educational practice. We did so in a way that we empowered the preschool teachers' personality with regard to gaining self-confidence, confidence in other people in their own environment and confidence in children.

Developing mutual confidence is the basis for developing a preschool teacher's personality and their practical competence. On our way, some prejudices should have been overcome, such as fear of making a mistake, fear of presenting one's own personal viewpoints and fear of guilt, and it should be known that there is a long way from understanding to checking and changing the practice. We used mistakes as an actual way to encourage learning because they provided us with the opportunity to realize our viewpoints and our implicit pedagogy (whether it is wrong or not), to discuss them and check them directly in practice. In this process of acquiring and building knowledge by direct work in practice or knowledge in action (learning by doing), everybody was to follow his way and we were to differ from each other although the process was being guided jointly.

Therefore, we hold that it is necessary to create a community of reflective practitioners that will, according to the above outlined principles, challenge the conditions, environment and organization of an institution, the so-called hidden curriculum, because they want for children to feel in it, learn and live a happier and more comfortable and interesting life than in their family homes. We could say that in such relations there is a circle determination: a community of reflective practitioners create such environment, treat children according to their opinion or theory they have about them as human beings and about their way of life, learning and education in an institution, and thus the children react and behave exactly as they are expected.

At the end of the first meeting, we took a look at the video recordings as the examples of good practice, with the special emphasis on the environment in an institution. The seminar participants had some very interesting statements regarding our first meeting. The first encounter with the researcher was *"confusing"* or *"this is the first time in my educational practice that someone is interested in my work in this way. The researcher respects us as persons, as preschool teachers who are professional and competent for the work they do."* *"I was also surprised by the fact that there will not be any lectures."* *"Until now, professional training was stereotypical, we have only been sitting, listening and taking notes, and we never had any chance to get new information by direct work."*

It was obvious that the preschool teachers were used to traditional forms of professional training that usually come down to informing and instructing them about what and how they should work. We have stressed out that many times in practice we have witnessed that such

professional training could result only in breakthroughs on the superficial, organizational level of an educational institution, but not in real improvement of the quality of educational practice.

For this reason, we all agreed upon a completely different form of professional training that would have a research character, not an instructional one, that would imply shared identification and creation, not the transfer of knowledge that already exists, and that would be based on the dialogue of all the participants, and not the monologue of the research leader. We made the preschool teachers familiar with the purpose of recording and shared analyses of the activities that are not aimed at control and criticism. A video camera is an important instrument of creating research culture because it provides opportunities for recognizing and then changing less successful educational interventions of preschool teachers which would otherwise remain unconscious and unchanged.

## **The Second Meeting**

During the second meeting, we recorded the situations inside two of the educational groups. In the first nursery school, the children did not pay much attention to us, they were engaged in their activities and this was a good, vivid example of a pleasant and stimulating environment. In contrast to this nursery school, in the infant nursery group of the other nursery school there were some problems present that are usual for such kind of group and a preschool teacher who still does not know what is requested and expected from them. However, the efforts to improve such a situation were noticeable and this was pointed out quite clearly in direct work and the analysis of the recordings. The very first presence in educational work and recording everything that happens in a group, followed by later analysis and discussion, were marked by large excitement of the preschool teachers and their efforts to manage everything in a way they were taught during their schooling and methodic exercises in particular. Excitement and certain tension were felt in the whole of the institution, ranging from the attitudes such as *“Thank goodness they are not coming to my group”* to certain anger and even negative attitudes towards everything that happens (in a sense: *“Who are you to interfere in my work in the group?”* or *“I suppose I know how to work after so much working experience.”*). This is the reason why we did not enter the other groups in the first round of the action research, but restricted ourselves to the group whose preschool teacher was also a member of the research team.

In every nursery school collective, there were employees who, more or less aggressively, expressed disagreement with our attempts. It arised from the beliefs that the changes we bring about downplay children’s safety in a nursery school, make a mess and uncleanliness, disturb and confuse children, make the role of a preschool teacher unclear (unimportant), and so on. As one of the preschool teachers explains in their notes, such disagreement is *“a result of the outdated truth about a child’s nature and the regularities of children’s development.”* *“We dared to have full confidence in our children and we showed this to them. They accepted it showing us daily that many our beliefs concerning their (non)abilities and (im)maturity are in fact professional misconceptions, and surprising us with daily amount and intensity of their abilities and knowledge.”*

While analyzing the recorded material, we did not go into details for a number of reasons. First of all, we understood this first round as familiarization with the current state in every single nursery school and group that were included in this project, with difficulties that occur there daily, ranging from the organizational ones to the human, loyal, spatial, material and other. At the same time, we endeavoured to develop genuine cooperation and feeling of unity

among the participants because we held that these were the bases for long-term creative and quality work. We thus wanted to stress positiveness in the first analyses and encourage the preschool teachers to bring about further changes because we were aware that they need our joint support and understanding of their actual situation, and we tried to show this on every possible occasion.

Using concrete living examples, the preschool teachers were provided with the opportunity to start to have a presentiment of what forms a stimulating atmosphere and quality environment of a group, and in what way they will try to do the same under their own concrete conditions.

### **The Third Meeting**

The third meeting went by in a similar way, with the same difficulties and very similar atmosphere. A positive atmosphere was formed out of shared trips from place to place, from one nursery school to the other, keeping company with others after formal parts and during lunch, and sharing the joy and difficulties that occurred at the time. The majority of headteachers and expert teams attended the shared meetings and familiarized with educational practice directly, talked and discussed with the preschool teachers, and listened to their opinions and viewpoints, as well as difficulties they encounter daily.

We started to understand the advantages of such work where we went from one nursery school to the other and some preschool teachers commented the following: “we got the opportunity to see how other preschool teachers work in other nursery schools in Istra and yet we have a scarce opportunity to see how our colleagues work in other groups inside our institution.” On the other hand, the preschool teachers started to cooperate and ask each other for advice, regardless of their place of living. These apparent large organizational difficulties (e.g. how we can miss from work for two days, how we will travel, will we get there on time, etc.) turned into real challenges that were both positive and interesting. What became most prominent here was the emphasis of the principle that direct teaching should be, as much as possible, supplemented by direct gaining of experience. The number of preschool teachers who wanted to participate in the work and tours around other nursery schools has tripled. The reason is what they said in a directed interview: *“It is hard to pass along everything what happens in other nursery schools and to convince your own colleagues in the same nursery school that many things are possible and explain how they can be built and created. Genuine experience and changes start to realize only when other preschool teachers are directly convinced by them, when they see and talk to the preschool teachers who have already realized them.”*

### **The Fourth Meeting**

With respect to the fourth meeting, a real transformation took place. Suddenly, many other preschool teachers started to attend our meetings. The number of them was increasing and was hard to predict. In one instance, there were forty-three preschool teachers altogether. What happened? Why suddenly such a large number of preschool teachers wanted to attend these meetings? The reasons were not the usual ones, such as: “at least I will not work today”. On the contrary, all of a sudden there was a real interest for what happened in the nursery schools. The preschool teachers did everything to attend the seminars. The reason was that big and visible changes started to occur while working with children. There were still some questions that remained open, but the most important transformation was the one regarding the work of the preschool teachers, that is, the participants of this seminar, the understanding of educational practice and children, their capacities and personality traits.

When the preschool teachers freed themselves from jitters, they started to breathe more freely, change their environment more independently and daringly, and observe the way how these changes were experienced by their children. The comments were the following: *“I was satisfied with what I managed to do, and I also got children’s confirmations the following day.”* *“As children commented, we built many “little rooms”. New nooks were made in the hall and we change the contents all the time.”* *“We do not chase after them in order to get them to tidy up their toys, we do not listen to so much crying anymore and there is no much sneaking either.*

*Everyone finds their own games. However, they do not use boxes just as boxes, but they become a big train, a dust or floor cloth or a baby pram; they invent a hundred other things out of one. Seeing their satisfaction, joy and the way they influence each other and also us, we cannot feel anything else but satisfaction as well.”*

The facts show, that children gain (not acquire) and develop practical understanding and knowledge about the environment they live in, through practice and action. Similarly, they also understand the physical environment in which they are spending every day, by which we mean the arrangement of space, materials, aids and toys that are or are not at disposal. An environment directly represents what a preschool teacher expects of it, what kind of picture or theory about children they support and apply in their daily work.

### **The Fifth Meeting**

During our fifth meeting, we noticed that some preschool teachers initiated changes in their physical environment in another way. They started to *“bring various materials for playing, that is, unshaped materials. Children accepted them with enthusiasm and played nicely. They changed the activities, made agreements and comments, and more importantly, they were not fighting (...). They started to express their wishes more often and give me new ideas for even more constructive and imaginative games (...). After that, we started to redecorate the coatroom. Having two other colleagues helping us, we moved the coatroom to the central part of the hall, while the space of the former coatroom become a big playing space. I filled the part of it with sand, put there a little workman (along with nails, a hammer and some boards) and covered one of the walls with large papers where children could paint (...); personally, I have got so much with this new space because children choose the place and materials themselves, and play everywhere. And I had the feeling that there is not so many children present, there was no crowd, noise, aggression...”*

By the appearance of the group room and other spaces in an institution, it was possible quite quickly to assess what kind of a conception a preschool teacher supported. Children should have the possibility to choose the attractiveness of the space for various group or individual activities – their isolation or choosing the partners for playing, either with older or younger ones. They need to have the opportunities to learn by doing from their earliest age is a view often repeated by Miljak (2001) in direct contact with preschool teachers. Children need to be provided with daily opportunities to engage in, manipulate and investigate actively with different things, materials and means, and to participate actively in daily life-practical activities. Starting from pouring water or sand from one pot into another in order to learn how to pour a liquid and which pot is bigger and can contain more water; from trying out, by manipulating with various things, what is big, small, empty, what can be put into something else, what swims and what sinks, to eating independently along with daily opportunities for the same, containing many trials and errors.

## **The Sixth Meeting**

During the sixth meeting, we noticed that the group atmosphere is modified by the changes in the organization of the space. The preschool teachers involved in this research project of professional training were also convinced by this observation: *“Children separate themselves from their parents without any problem because they are attracted by something new in the room. We feel that we are one big family.” “I redecorated the room, moved the coatroom away and we started to organize nooks in the hall. We slowly started to associate with the children from the other groups. This is the hardest step. Most of the preschool teachers are still not sure about it and you cannot achieve anything by force.”*

The conclusion of the majority of contemporary studies coming from this domain (Mortimer, 1999) is that children should still feel free within the bounds of permission, that is, they should understand that their behaviour and freedom must pose no threat to other children's freedom. Practising such freedom and responsibility daily and from the first day in a nursery school, and having a stimulating environment and atmosphere with the high level of expectance for every single child, we can realize such achievements which could not even be assumed at first. This is why a nursery school needs to be conceived as a workshop for researching and experimenting; a laboratory for individual and group learning of both children and adults, that is, preschool teachers.

With regard to the Reggio pedagogy, Rinaldi (2001) thus points out that the problem is not our questioning of how to teach children, but the answer to the question of what and how children can learn from a certain situation, and thus we need to construct situations where they will independently discover not only the understanding of a specific subject, but also their own learning style and where they will reach a deeper understanding of themselves.

We first started with the changes in space, that is, the psychical environment because spatial changes are most visible and they impact most efficiently on the change of children's behaviour. Almost all the nursery group rooms in the Republic of Croatia have the same nooks (doll, hairdresser's, building nook, etc.) or how the preschool teachers in one nursery school wrote down: *“...regarding the infant nursery, the room space is filled up with children's beds (the metal ones), the coatrooms are completely empty and closed doors represent strict separation from the other educational groups. In the groups, there is a small number of impetus for playing, that is, the classical ready-made didactic material is the dominant one. All the rooms are alike in many ways. The cupboards are arranged strictly in a row in order to get well laid out space. A preschool teacher is the center of every attention and shows a syndrome of a protector. A parent is a passive observer who does not enter the room but only the coatroom. The information about children refer to their nutritional needs, care needs and everything else what they “learned” in the nursery school. In such space, a child lives according to established practice that is adapted to a preschool teacher and the average of other children in the group”*.

With time, the space changed and preschool teachers realized that children liked it, so they gave them the opportunity to “form the nooks” themselves. Therefore, the number of nooks increased significantly, up to the number of 25 in a single room (secret and love nook, nook of happiness, resting nook, flower nook, hiding nook, isolation nook, etc.).

Most of the preschool teachers said that the changes were realized not only by the understanding and support of their headteachers and expert teams, but also by parents' help. They were bringing the material, sawing the cupboards and painted the walls. *“We respect the*



*parents and the feeling is mutual. We are not aware of everything that can be done if we create mutual respect.” “The quality of staying in the nursery school has increased by the introduction of self-service meals and unobligatory sleeping. According to their wish, children stay there longer (after 1 p.m.) and they often do not want to go home when their parents come to get them. Parents started to notice their children’s satisfaction, while their initial scepticism, when they thought this will not succeed, has vanished and now they admit their children engage with what they want, respect agreements and rules, and are being respected as an individual inside the nursery school. Their satisfaction and approval is a great impetus for further work.”*

## **Conclusions**

During our shared work and research, we found out that finances and spatial conditions are not a big obstacle to that kind of work. The biggest problem is people that are not willing to cooperate and change, and do not develop children because they are limited by their theory (theory as dogma) through which they view a child and their educational practice. On second thought, this picture or theory that a preschool teacher possess about a child shapes his/her overall behaviour and effect on the child. The video recordings of the discussions held in every nursery school served us as a basis for documenting the context and process of learning of the preschool teachers, research assistants, headteachers and researchers. The monitoring of the preschool teachers’ work and complete atmosphere in the nursery schools was followed by analyses (discussions) by which we tried to reach their reflection and self-reflection in order to decide upon further steps or strategies. The overall analysis and evaluation were critical, reflective and directly orientated on the preschool teachers’ and children’s actions, physical environment, organization of space and offer of the material. This step of the action research revealed the preschool teachers’ opinions of their own activities, their colleagues’ activities and, at the same time, raised the awareness of the metalevel of their learning.

When preschool teachers initiated changes in their educational groups, that is, nursery schools, the same process was analysed in more detail by means of video recordings, aimed at the development of a preschool teacher into a critical observer of his/her own and also other people’s practice. The changes were assessed in a critical manner and then modified and reconstructed. Most important for us was to identify a debatable situation (“problem”) and come to different forms of reflection and a wide repertoire of different answers, ideas and strategies that would be applied in new actions. We wanted the preschool teachers to understand a new problem as a variation of an old one, and to transfer the reflection from the past experience to a new situation.

While discussing, each participant constructed his/her own significance and sent the message to the other members of the group in a way they can understand it. Here, the researcher had a complex role because their verbal and nonverbal messages needed to be clear and explicit. One of the important objectives of the action research was connected with the preschool teachers’ motivation for a free, open and critical dialogue. The fact is that their previous formal education and subsequent forms of professional training did not give sufficient attention to their opinion, initiative and independence, nor was the special effort made for them to practise dialogue and cooperative learning.

The action research contributed to the change of opinions and position of all of its participants, regardless of their knowledge or experience, changing the action that was conditioned by “reflection in action”. The basic principle of working with the preschool

teachers was to try, check, self-reflect and reflect, plan further and bring about new changes and actions. We started to understand children as a challenge that would provide us with an insight into our “reflection in action”, flexibility and sensitivity. We used every situation that included children (whether successful or not) for learning and changing our cognizance of children and their actions, as well as our role in it.

The aim of our reflection and discussion was to provide a better understanding and organization of one’s own experience, and also co-construction of new knowledge and comprehension. The aim of the documentation was to serve to the preschool teachers in shared reflection and consideration of the way they can support the process of children’s and their own learning, with regard to the development of research culture that never ends but can only change directions and intensity. As our research includes six different nursery schools, towns, cultures and, thus, specific qualities, one of its characteristics is cultivation of diversity culture. Diversity gave a specific connection and atmosphere to the research, and also specific enthusiasm in the preschool teachers and headteachers of all the nursery schools. The intensive connection of different cultures was also the initiator of changes and creative ideas. Our real intention was to initiate the so-called deep circle of learning (Senge, 2002) in the preschool teachers, that is, we assumed that their new skills and abilities, within a new way and form of professional training, will gradually change everything they can identify and understand in practice and also their awareness and sensitivity, and form new beliefs and hypotheses that will provide further professional development. In doing so, we particularly emphasized the importance of mutual trust, respect and cooperative relationships among preschool teachers themselves, as well as between them and children.

We have concluded that a poor, sterilely equipped space is almost always a reflection of a traditional nursery school culture and that a rich offer of materials could, and does not have to, lead to deeper changes of educational institution culture. We could name this first year as the phase of the evolution of the way of thinking about children, nursery schools and also ourselves, that is, the phase of complete redefinition of our role in the development, creation, research and improvement of our own educational practice.

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