

School Principals Enacting the Values of *Ubuntu* in School Leadership: The Voices of Teachers

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KEYWORDS Compassion. Group Solidarity. Human Dignity. Indigenous Knowledge. Respect. Trust

ABSTRACT Good leadership is a core ingredient for successful schools. In order to develop and practice sound leadership, can anything be learned from the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*? The aim of this paper is to explore how the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* can be harnessed to improve school leadership. The key question that drives this paper is: How can school principals in their day-to-day leadership practice demonstrate the values and principles of *Ubuntu* in their interactions with teachers? This qualitative study generated data through five focus group interviews with teachers. The findings suggest that serving as role models to staff, drawing teachers into the leadership practice, respecting diversity, being empathetic and sympathetic to the problems experienced by staff and being invitational to staff are some of the ways school principals can demonstrate the values of *Ubuntu*. School principals therefore need to rethink how they enact their leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Competent leadership is a central variable in the equation that defines organizational success (Murphy et al. 2007). There is a growing corpus of scholarship that supports the claim that good leadership makes a significant difference to learner outcomes and school effectiveness (Bush 2010; Rhodes and Brundrett 2010). Leithwood and Riehl (2003) declare that leadership has a substantial impact on student learning. They proclaim that leadership is second only to the effects of the quality of the curriculum and the teachers' instruction. Notwithstanding what is known about leadership, a large cohort of schools and learners in South Africa continue to underperform. Selebalo (2012) laments the poor performance of learners in South Africa in the annual national assessments and the national senior certificate examination. The underperformance of the schooling system was recently,

once again, brought into the spotlight with the release of the national senior certificate results in January 2015 (Ngcukana 2015).

The encouraging news is that many underperforming schools are simply not sitting back and accepting their fate. They are seeking creative solutions in order to turn their schools around. Some proactive school principals "have long started to look for alternative models that would improve their schools" (Msila 2008: 68). In order to improve the outcomes of schools, the gaze in Africa in general and in South Africa in particular has shifted to the improvement of school leadership (Naicker 2011; Eacott and Asuga 2014). Consequently, many countries in Africa are turning to leadership development programs to capacitate school principals. For example, in South Africa there is a national qualification, the Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership, which is aimed at improving the knowledge, skills and values of serving school principals and their school management teams in education leadership, management, administration and policy issues (Naicker 2011). Eacott and Asuga (2014), from their extensive research in Africa, however, observe a disturbing trend that school leadership preparation and development programs draws on Anglophone constructs of leadership. This matters "despite substantive rhetoric in policy and scholarship that context, or localization of knowledge" (Eacott and Asuga 2014: 2). It is known in terms of

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leadership that context makes a significant difference. Therefore, models and methods cannot be borrowed from other nations and effectively mobilized in Africa (Eacott and Asuga 2014).

The burning question that therefore needs to be confronted in Africa is: Are the authorities going about the process of improving school leadership incorrectly? Should they not be focusing on homebred frameworks to the problems? There are scholars who believe that this should be the case. Mohamedbhai (2013) for example, calls for the drawing on indigenous knowledge in solving Africa's problems. He points out that there are well-documented examples of the positive impact of indigenous knowledge systems on Africa's development. Mbeje (2010: 7) offers support for this argument by stating:

Africa has to do something different and uniquely African... We need to be proud of black leadership possibilities, practices, and styles and not see these as a shadow of Western white models.

Scholars in Africa are now calling for a more Afrocentric approach to leadership (Poovan et al. 2006). They believe that such an approach will render teams and organizations, such as schools, more effective. Msila (2015) indicates that research has shown the importance of African models in guiding successful organizations. The president of the Republic of South Africa, in his state of the nation address in 2014 called for people to "work together to rebuild *Ubuntu* and a culture of responsibility in the society" in order to improve society (Zuma 2014). In light of this, the aim of this paper is to explore how the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* can be harnessed in order to improve school leadership. To this end, the key question that drives this paper is: How can school principals in their day-to-day leadership practice demonstrate the values of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* in their interactions with teachers? The researcher specifically focuses on the interactions with teachers because it is the teachers who are at the "chalk-face" of the school and it is through the school principals' leadership that teachers are influenced to make a difference to student learning.

In this paper, leadership refers to tasks encompassing goal setting, visioning and motivating (Jwan and Ong'ondo 2011). Leadership, however, cannot be understood without reference to management. The two processes complement each other and both are needed for an organization such as a school to prosper (Grant 2009). Management is viewed as an aspect of

leadership concerned with the maintenance of performance through planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling (Jwan and Ong'ondo 2011). In a school there are multiple leaders—formally appointed leaders and informal leaders (Spillane 2006). While the researcher acknowledges this, the focus of this paper is on the key leader of the school, the school principal who is regarded as the fulcrum on which the school turns (Supovitz et al. 2010). Because leadership is a practical activity, this paper focuses on the school principal's leadership practice in terms of enacting the values of *Ubuntu*. Leadership practice refers to the particular instances of leadership as they unfold in the moment-by-moment interactions in a particular place and time in the school (Harris et al. 2007). It has to do with what school principals do and the moves they make as they execute tasks in their day-to-day work (Spillane et al. 2001).

This paper is considered significant because it might have the potential of transforming the way leadership is enacted by school leaders. It brings an Afrocentric dimension to school leadership, which when practiced alongside other Western and European models may have the potential of turning around poor school outcomes. The paper commences by elucidating the objectives of the study and explanations of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Thereafter, an account on the research methodology underpinning this study is presented. The findings of the study follow and are presented using *a priori* categories derived from the key values underpinning the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. A discussion drawing on relevant literature is woven into the findings. The implications of an *Ubuntu* style of leadership for school principals and recommendations for capacitating school principals on an *Ubuntu* style of leadership bring this paper to conclusion.

Objectives of the Paper

The objective of this paper is to explore how school principals, in their day-to-day leadership practice, can demonstrate the values of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* in their interactions with teachers?

Ubuntu

Ubuntu emanates from the age-old philosophy of humanism and has at its base the notion of collectivism (Govender 2014). The essence of

Ubuntu is captured in the following isiZulu phrase “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which loosely translated into English means “we are who we are because of others”. The implication here is that “I can only be a person through others” (Msila 2008: 70). The key message here is that one can only be an effective and productive person through others. Herein lies a valuable lesson for school principals that they can only be productive if they work in harmony and in consultation with other people in the school organization. Interestingly, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* runs counter to the pronouncements of the “father of modern philosophy”, Rene Descartes who claims, “I think, therefore I am” (Mbeje 2010: 7). Descartes portrays a rather individualistic view of people. Extrapolating this thinking into school leadership, school principals are likely to be less effective in tackling the problems confronting schools. To be effective, one needs the collective effort of all members of staff (Bhengu 2006). In fledgling democracies like South Africa, new values are emerging that support collaborative cultures. National legislation such as the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, the *White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service* and national school syllabi incorporate the values of *Ubuntu* (Theletsane 2012).

Fundamentally, the values of *Ubuntu* relate to ways of treating others (care, respect and compassion), ways of being (sharing, sincerity, modesty and being positive) and ways of behaving (democratic, involving, motivating, consultative and demonstrating self-control) (Mbigi and Maree 1995; Bhengu 2006; Mbeje 2010; Eliastam 2015). *Ubuntu* is seen as humanness, a spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another (Theletsane 2012). It refers to the capacity in African culture to express “compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interest of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring” (Poovan et al. 2006: 17).

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study. Qualitative research emphasizes the lived experiences of the participants (Cohen et al. 2011). Working within the qualitative paradigm enabled the researcher to enter the participants’ (teachers) life and understand and make meaning of how they viewed

how school principals can enact the values of *Ubuntu*. In order to generate data, the researcher used focus group interviews. Focus group interviews produce data through group interaction (Morgan and Krueger 1998) and they provide multiple viewpoints related to the research question (Krueger and Casey 2000). In deciding on the number of focus groups, the researcher was guided by Rabiee (2004) who suggests that for a simple research question the number of groups should be about four to five. The researcher opted for five focus group interviews in order to get as many viewpoints as possible.

In terms of sampling, one education circuit was conveniently selected in the Pinetown District of the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Within this circuit, three primary schools and one secondary school were conveniently selected (Cohen et al. 2011) for participation in the study. Based on literature that focus groups generally comprise four to eight research participants (Struwig and Stead 2004), in each school seven teachers were purposively selected (Cohen et al. 2011) for the focus group interviews. In each focus group the researcher ensured that there was sufficient diversity in the group (gender, years of teaching experience and cultural backgrounds) so as to get a rich perspective on how school principals can enact the values of *Ubuntu*.

Informed by Henning’s (2004) assertion that data analysis involves converting raw data into patterns of meaning, the researcher audio-recorded all five focus group interviews and then transcribed them *verbatim*. The transcripts were thereafter subjected to a rigorous process of inductive content analysis (Cohen et al. 2011). The researcher used four *a priori* categories namely, trust and respect, group togetherness, compassion and human dignity that emerged from the literature review [see the works of Mbigi and Maree (1995), Bhengu (2006) and Eliastam (2015)] as key values of *Ubuntu* as an analytical framework. Throughout the research process all ethical protocols pertaining to anonymity, beneficence and non-maleficence were observed (Rule and John 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented using the four key values of *Ubuntu* as mentioned above. While these values are presented as separate entities for the purposes of this paper, in practice the values operate in unison and are inter-

twined with each other. Mbigi and Maree (1995) use the metaphor of the palm and fingers to describe the operationalization of *Ubuntu*. While the fingers (values of *Ubuntu*) are separate they are all connected to the palm (the overriding philosophy—*Ubuntu*). In order for the fingers to work efficiently, they will need the collective cooperation of the other fingers. Similarly, the values of *Ubuntu* need to work collectively and in harmony with each other in order to produce favorable outcomes.

Trust and Respect

In all five focus group interviews the values of trust and respect featured quite prominently. Mutual trust and respect are the bedrock on which leadership is built (Knauss 2007). Who will want to follow a leader whom one does not trust and respect? Participants were of the view that school principals can demonstrate trust and respect by distributing leadership, being transparent in day-to-day operations, engaging in participative decision-making processes and serving as role models.

The participants mentioned that school principals could demonstrate the value of trust and respect by drawing teachers into the leadership practice. Tazz mentioned, *“By delegating duties to teachers, the teachers feel that they are part and parcel of the administration...they feel part and parcel of the leadership process...you are actually showing respect to them that they can do the work or the job that you have assigned to them (FG1).”* Botha (2012) explains that by distributing leadership you are showing respect for the ideas of teachers, but more importantly you are empowering teachers as leaders. He adds that the delegation of responsibilities promotes interactions between school principals and teachers, which create collegial relations with innovative and successful practices to improve teaching and learning. Sibongile elaborated, *“people feel they own the school when they take on leadership positions... I think this promotes trust and respect...it mustn’t be the school principal only who is doing everything in the school (FG1).”* Literature, in fact, shows that in most successful schools, leadership functions are distributed across multiple leaders (Botha 2012). By distributing leadership there is tacit acknowledgement of trust in teachers. Trust is important because it serves as both, the glue

and a lubricant in an organization. As glue it binds teachers together and as a lubricant, it contributes to greater efficiency of the organization because teachers can have confidence in other people’s words and deeds (Smylie et al. 2007). Khaya pointed out an added advantage of distributing leadership. He indicated that *“by distributing leadership the principal will get to know the capabilities and abilities of his teachers...by so doing he will earn the respect of the teachers (FG4).”* In order to build trust and respect through the sharing of leadership, the school principal is required to support teachers in their leadership of committees. Bhengu (2006) points out that a leader who embraces *Ubuntu* supports his/her team in the attainment of their objectives.

In order to build trust and respect participants were of the view that school principals need to be transparent in the manner in which they operate. Bhengu (2006) pronounces that for those in positions of authority and responsibility the principle of openness is paramount. He adds that leaders need to be transparent with regard to information and must not withhold information, which is in the interest of others. Thembi indicated, *“There needs to be an open door policy...there must be no hidden agendas... For example [the principal must] be open with financial issues to teachers...he must show them everything is above board (FG1).”* Pumi extended the issue of transparency by looking at communication. In her view, *“There needs to be honest communication...communication must not undermine staff...rather communication should capacitate staff and empower them (FG1).”* Bhengu (2006) elucidates that if leaders communicate honestly and with the necessary decorum and dignity they will enjoy the support and respect of their employees. Witstock echoed Pumi’s sentiments when he expounded *“there must be open communication... everything must be transparent... there must be no hidden agendas... staff must know why we are making this decision (FG3).”* Sagren, however, sounded a word of caution here when he indicated that not all issues should be made transparent. Some sensitive issues need to remain confidential and school principals need to be paragons of trust and keep certain issues confidential. *“When you confide in your principal you expect him to keep that information with him and not engage in juicy gossip with*

his colleagues on what you have disclosed to him...this is a sign of trust and respect to you (FG2)."

Drawing teachers into the decision-making process regarding school matters is considered one way of showing trust and respect. In the African view of leadership, leaders are not soloists who take decisions based on their personal power. Rather, they see themselves as facilitators of a community who have the obligation to see and hear every employee in the organization (Managaliso 2001; Bhengu 2006; Iwowo 2015). Transposing this type of leadership to the school context, teachers will feel that their views and opinions are respected and that the school principal genuinely trusts and values their input on issues affecting the school. Bhengu (2006) emphasizes that a leader must place trust in people before she/he can expect trust from employees. In light of this, Sibongile volunteered that school principals should *"...try to be consultative... when there is something that needs to be done you have to involve your staff and make them part of the decision you are making... you have to be democratic...involve them...consult them...they have to be part of the decision (FG1).*" Ncube (2010: 79) emphasizes that doing things the Ubuntu way is to acknowledge that "decision-making [is]... participatory, transparent and democratic". Khaya indicated that listening to teachers and allowing them space to deliberate on school issues is a form of respect of their worth as human beings. He added that *"principals should listen to teachers...they must allow teachers to participate in decision-making...they must not dictate to teachers (FG4).*" The term "cooperacy" is relevant here, which describes collective or consensus decision-making by those people who are directly affected by the decision (Bhengu 2006).

In all five focus groups the participants mentioned that school principals should serve as roles models in terms of trust and respect. Ubuntu requires that leaders model the way for others (Ncube 2010; Msila 2012). They should walk the talk and not just talk the talk. Rox explained that, *"they should lead by example...it is said practice what you preach...if they want the teachers to behave in a certain way they must also do that (FG 1)".* As a role model, the school principal legitimizes his/her leadership "by commitment to...values [such] as honesty, sincerity, truthfulness...and respect for others" (Ncube

2010: 79). Respect is the acknowledgement of the school principal of another person as a fellow human being whose dignity should always be held in high esteem (Bhengu 2006). Pinkie averred that respect is a two-way street. She explained *"you get respect when you give respect (FG2).*" Ncube (2010) holds that one should not expect others to exhibit behavior such as trust and respect if one cannot oneself demonstrate it. To paraphrase Bhengu (2006), a person is treated pretty much the way he treats others. One actually sets an example of how one should be treated. The adage "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is therefore apposite here.

Group Togetherness

Group togetherness is a cornerstone of the philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Eliastam 2015). The "self" is seen as entrenched in the group and the individual identity of an African person is seen as non-existent (Poovan et al. 2006). The core belief here is that "together we can". Key sub-themes that related to how school principals can promote group togetherness include the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs) and encouraging staff social gatherings.

Teams and work groups can be used in an organization to ensure group togetherness and solidarity (Bhengu 2006). In the school context, a creative way to give effect to this is through the formation of PLCs (Fullan 2009). PLCs bring teachers together from across the school to learn and think together about how to improve their practice in ways that lead to improved learner achievement (Botha 2012). "Through the combined efforts" of teachers "in the service of their community" they can enhance school performance (Theletsane 2012: 271). This, however, can only be achieved through a school principal who embraces the notion that "difficult goals and tasks can only be accomplished collectively" (Theletsane 2012: 271). The school principal should create a culture where she/he engages in activities with teachers rather than dictating to teachers what is to happen (Loader 2010). Rox indicated that school principals should *"encourage working together in PLC's...so teachers can share challenges regarding work...they can learn from each other (FG1).*" But unfortu-

nately in many schools in South Africa, teachers work in isolation and their lack of knowledge and skills means they may not know how best to challenge learners with high-level learning tasks. The isolation of these teachers means that they remain vulnerable and fail to meet the requirements of effective teaching (Botha 2012). It is therefore imperative that the school principals support PLCs. Sbu concretized how this can be done by stating, *“School principals must create space and provide resources for teachers to meet regularly in group contexts such as departmental committees and subject committees (FG2).”* A leadership practice underpinned by the values of *Ubuntu*’s will require the school principal to be a cohesive force within the school (Theletsane 2012). The school principal must in fact be the adhesive that holds the teachers together. Zak extended Sbu’s ideas and indicated that *“if the staff meets every morning then everyone gets together and discusses the events for the day...even if it is for five minutes...it is a way of bringing the whole staff together (FG5).”*

Encouraging staff social gatherings was mentioned in all five focus group interviews as a way for the school principal to promote group solidarity. The best leaders use social events as opportunities for staff to strengthen relationships, engage with shy colleagues and express appreciation (Zetlin 2013). Zarina explained that *“...in my previous school we had a lot of this [staff social functions]...you may not like a person but through interaction you get to know them...you find out something good about them...and then you don’t have this barrier between yourself and them (FG3).”* Thabo mentioned, *“School principals that invest in activities that bring staff members together are schools where there are good relations among staff (FG5).”* Mangaliso (2001) advises that while these gatherings are fun they simultaneously promote a sense of trust and belonging, which supports the basic human values in *Ubuntu*. He adds that a periodic celebration of the milestones accomplished by an organization goes a long way in establishing a sense of belonging and commitment to organizational goals and objectives. Irene spoke of her personal experiences of how at her school her principal used staff social gatherings as a vehicle to manage conflict within the school. She explained, *“There has been a lot of conflict in our school. There are in fact*

two staffrooms occupied by two groups...they do not associate with each other. What the principal did was suggest that every Friday we all have lunch together...for three weeks it has been going on and I can actually see a change (FG4 Irene).”

Compassion

Compassion is a key social value of *Ubuntu* (Nussbaum 2003). Participants articulated that compassion could be demonstrated by school principals getting to know their staff better and through the display of emotions such as sympathy and empathy.

In order to show compassion, participants believed that school principals needed to get to know their staff members better. By so doing they will be able to understand better the behaviors and actions of their staff members. Pinky explicated how this can be done practically. She asserted that school principals should *“interact with teachers...sit in the staffroom with teachers when having lunch...be interactive. Make small talk such as how was your weekend? Or I hear your mom was unwell how is she doing? (FG2).”* Leaders should “wander around” and get to know their staff better “because a desk is a dangerous place from which to watch the world” (Knauss 2007: 51). The participants also explained that the attribute of the school principal being a good listener was important in getting to know staff. Witstock explained, *“The main thing to do is listen...when somebody walks into your office no matter how busy you are, put your pen down and listen (FG3).”* Similarly Nami explained that *“when you speak to some people they are not listening to you...they are even ready to answer without fully listening to you. If the principal is prepared to listen to what I need to say as a teacher I think to me that demonstrates love and care (FG5 Nam).”* Good leaders are considered good listeners. When a leader listens attentively, it is a sign of the leader valuing people (Knauss 2007; Cerit 2009). It is an acknowledgement that the leader cares about the plight of the staff. It is only when a leader genuinely listens is she/he able to understand the problems experienced by staff and set about resolving problems. In Wolvin’s (2005) view a listening leader engages with staff in order to understand their needs, motivations and issues.

Participants were of the view that school principals can demonstrate compassion by being sympathetic and empathetic towards staff. Sympathy and empathy are key attributes of an emotionally intelligent leader (Goleman 1995). Thembi encapsulated what this means when she stated that *“there is a need for the school principal to feel for others...to put yourself in the other person’s shoes and feel their emotions...by so doing you will be showing that you are concerned...you are acting as the person who understands other people’s issues (FG1).”* Compassion is not about being seen as being easy or a pushover (Knauss 2007). Rather, it is about expressing and demonstrating concern. Sibon was more to the point when she stated, *“it’s about being sympathetic...empathetic. For instance, if a teacher comes late, the principal needs to understand the problem behind the late coming...as a leader the principal has to understand that we are human beings and that things happen (FG1).”* School principals therefore need to understand the dilemmas that teachers are confronted with and need to show a willingness to want to help them through their strife (Poovan et al. 2006).

Human Dignity

There must be dignity in a leader’s dealings with staff (Bhengu 2006). In four of the five focus groups the participants mentioned that treating people with human dignity was a right espoused in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. *Ubuntu* encourages humanness and recognizes the sanctity of human life (Ncube 2010). The participants mentioned that school principals could demonstrate human dignity by respecting diversity among staff and being invitational to members of staff.

Rox indicated that school principals need to understand the uniqueness of each and every staff member. She explained, in the South African rainbow nation especially, school principals need to be cognizant of issues of diversity. She stated, *“...principals should be very sensitive to diversity...they have to understand that staff are coming from different backgrounds and therefore the principal needs to take this into account when interacting with staff (FG1).”* In other words, the school principal needs to be tolerant of others. She/he needs to understand that no two people are alike and each individual

has their own opinions, likes, dislikes, interests and personality (Bhengu 2006). Consequently, the school principal in Zarina’s views *“must acknowledge the diversity among staff in terms of people’s viewpoints, their religion, their belief systems, race, gender...[however] she/he at the same time needs to treat everyone fairly and equally (FG3).”* Witstock built on Zarina’s view by indicating that there is strength in diversity and the school principal can harness this strength for the upliftment of the school. She added that the school principal should therefore *“value ideas from different groups of staff members because these ideas are based on particular beliefs and cultural practices of people (FG3).”* The school principal may not agree with the ideas and beliefs of some or all of the teachers on his staff. She/he, however, needs to have an open mind because one does not know what one can learn from other people whose views and beliefs might be different.

Participants were of the view that school principals need to be invitational leaders. Egley (2003) reports those school principals who are perceived to be effective, exhibit aspects of professionally and personally inviting behaviors. Zak explained the school principal needs to be the first staff member at school so that she/he can welcome people to the school. He indicated, *“This will show the teachers that the school principal is welcoming and cares about us (FG5).”* Sibon indicated, *“By being invitational you are acknowledging the worth of people... you are acknowledging their humanness (FG1).”* Manisha indicated that school principals could be invitational by doing the *“simple things”*. She added that *“when someone does something acknowledge them...just a word or two recognizing the achievement...this shows that you care...this shows that you are aware of me as a human being and what I am doing (FG3).”* A leader’s actions and words can therefore either encourage or discourage initiatives from staff (Loader 2009). School principals need to be cognizant at all times as to how they are responding to staff.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how school principals, in their day-to-day leadership practice, can demonstrate the values of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* in their interactions with teach-

ers. In order to do so, it calls for rethinking on the part of the school principals on how they go about their business of leading people. Rather than viewing school leadership as “power over people”, school principals need to make the shift to seeing school leadership as “power with people”, a fundamental principle, which underpins the *Ubuntu* style of leadership. In practice, it is about seeing the staff as assets. It is about being a role model to staff. Moreover, it is about demonstrating to staff that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Injecting the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* into school leadership should be the norm in the African school contexts. This paper therefore recommends that school principals be capacitated on how they can infuse the values of *Ubuntu* in their day-to-day leadership practice. Leadership development programs offered by institutions of higher education for school principals should have a module on *Ubuntu* and school leadership. In-service professional development for school principals should also foreground the values of *Ubuntu* in school leadership.

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