BRAZIL AND PORTUGAL'S STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THE PANDEMIC IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

AS ESTRATÉGIAS DO BRASIL E DE PORTUGAL PARA LIDAR COM A PANDEMIA NO CONTEXTO EDUCACIONAL

LAS ESTRATEGIAS DE BRASIL Y PORTUGAL PARA HACER FRENTE A LA PANDEMIA EN EL CONTEXTO EDUCATIVO

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze how Brazil and Portugal, countries with historical relations, positioned themselves to face the pandemic of the coronavirus in the educational context. Comparing the strategies adopted by the two countries, we seek to answer the following question: were the strategies adopted by the Brazilian educational managers efficient to face the moment of crisis? Could another path have been taken? To carry out this analysis, a bibliographical survey was adopted, detailing the actions implemented by the two countries to face the greatest educational challenge of the 21st century. The results of the analysis show that Brazil, in a mistaken way, bet only on Emergency Remote Learning, since there was no adequate infrastructure to do so, which harmed millions of students in the country. Portugal mixed formats and got better results, which led to very visible consequences, such as a shorter time of closure of the schools.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic. Comparative education. Distance education. Educational policies.

RESUMO: *O presente artigo se propõe a analisar como Brasil e Portugal, países que guardam relações históricas, se posicionaram no enfrentamento da pandemia do coronavírus no contexto educacional. Comparando as estratégias adotadas pelos dois países, se busca responder ao seguinte questionamento: as estratégias adotadas pelos gestores da educação brasileira foram eficientes para enfrentar o momento de crise? Era possível ter seguido outro caminho? Para efetuar tal análise, adotou-se um levantamento bibliográfico, com o detalhamento das ações implementadas pelos dois países para enfrentar o maior desafio educacional do século XXI. Os resultados da análise demonstram que o Brasil, de maneira equivocada, apostou apenas no Ensino Remoto Emergencial, sendo que não havia infraestrutura adequada para fazê-lo, o que prejudicou milhões de estudantes no país. Portugal mesclou formatos e conseguiu melhores resultados, o que acarretou consequências bem visíveis, como um menor tempo de fechamento dos estabelecimentos de ensino.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Pandemia. Educação comparada. Educação a distância. Políticas educacionais.*

RESUMEN: *Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar cómo Brasil y Portugal, países que tienen relaciones históricas, se han posicionado para hacer frente a la pandemia de coronavirus en el contexto educativo. Comparando las estrategias adoptadas por los dos países, buscamos responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿fueron eficientes las estrategias adoptadas por los gestores educativos brasileños para enfrentar el momento de crisis? ¿Era posible haber ido por otro camino? Para llevar a cabo este análisis, se adoptó una encuesta bibliográfica que detalla las acciones implementadas por los dos países para enfrentar el mayor desafío educativo del siglo XXI. Los resultados del análisis muestran que Brasil, de manera equivocada, apostó solo por la Enseñanza Remota de Emergencia, y no había una infraestructura adecuada para hacerlo, lo que perjudicó a millones de estudiantes en el país. Portugal fusionó formatos y logró mejores resultados, lo que llevó a consecuencias muy visibles, como un menor tiempo de cierre de los establecimientos educativos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Pandemia. Educación comparada. Educación a distancia. Políticas educativas.*

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Introduction

On the last day of the year, at the turn of 2019 to 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) was notified by the Chinese government of the occurrence of dozens of cases of a kind of pneumonia of unknown origin in the city of Wuhan. In early January, scientists were able to identify that it was a new type of coronavirus that, until then, was a virus known in medical circles for causing common colds. In less than a month, the virus spread so widely that it led the World Health Organization to declare, for the sixth time in history[3], that the outbreak was a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, the highest WHO alert level. On March 11, the news came that the outbreak was no longer localized and restricted to one region or group of countries, and that, because of this, it was now considered a pandemic.[4]

With this announcement, health authorities recognized that the SARS-Cov-2 virus was circulating with great speed around the world and that restrictive protective and preventive measures were urgently needed to stem this dizzying advance, among them was distancing. "Historically, when the state is faced with the responsibility of fighting the spread of a disease, it vests itself with its power of authority that can determine when individual freedoms should be suspended" (LIMA, 2021, p. 132, our translation).

What happened from then on is still very much alive in our recent memory: paralysis of all non-essential activities in much of the world, deserted cities, physical distancing between people, new biosecurity protocols, exhaustive recommendations on the use of masks, constant appeals for correct hand washing.

In this context, thousands of schools and universities around the world have had to suspend their activities, in a scenario full of uncertainties and challenges. According to the monitoring undertaken by UNESCO [5], more than 1.5 billion students were affected by the coronavirus crisis, children and young people living in countries with completely different political, economic, social, and educational realities, but who find in school a privileged space for interaction. This distance obviously brought extremely harmful consequences for the development and learning process that are still being studied, since it is at school that social

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[3] The other emergencies were: H1N1 pandemic in 2009; in 2014 by Ebola outbreak in West Africa and spread of poliovirus; in 2016 by zika virus outbreak and 2018 Ebola outbreak in Democratic Republic of Congo.

[4] History of Pandemic COVID 19. Pan American Health Organization, 2020. Available at: https://www.paho.org/pt/covid19/historico-da-pandemia-covid-19. Accessed 22 Sept. 2022.

[5] Education: from school closures to recovery. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Available at: https://www.unesco.org/pt/covid-19/education-response. Accessed 20 Sept. 2022.

exchanges and relationships are established that underpin and consolidate the processes of knowledge acquisition, according to Vygotsky (1994).

Another survey conducted by UNICEF and released in December 2021 shows that the losses caused by school closures can jeopardize an entire generation and represent an economic loss of around US$ 17 trillion, which corresponds to 14% of the world GDP. Losses in the present and in the future, since, when it comes to education, the repercussions of what happened with the coronavirus crisis will last for many years.

It is important to point out that even though we are talking about a disease that has spread all over the world, this does not mean that all countries were impacted in the same way by COVID 19. For example, Italy, the United States, and Brazil were, at different times, epicenters of the disease, with a contagion curve much higher than the one registered in other nations. And the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths is, without a doubt, a factor that directly impacts the strategies adopted by countries to face the crisis, also revealing the successes and omissions of governments.

That said, in this article we will seek to understand how two countries that lived very different scenarios during the pandemic of COVID 19 – Brazil and Portugal – elaborated their strategies in the educational field to face the reality imposed by the virus. The choice of Portugal is due to the historical, cultural, and social relations between the two nations, to the different ways in which the two countries dealt with the severity of the pandemic, as well as to the academic and research relationship between the Graduate Program in Brazilian Education at the Federal University of Ceará, more precisely the History and Comparative Education Line (LHEC in the Portuguese acronym), in which we are inserted, and the European country.

The intention is that by comparing these two very different realities, we will be able to see more clearly the positive and negative aspects of the policies of the two countries and thus answer the following question: were the educational strategies adopted by the Brazilian government adequate to the country's reality? In order to do so, we will make a bibliographical survey to support the analysis of the theme, as well as rely on the ideas that support the relevance of a comparative history approach. Haupt (1998) argues that by comparing foreign examples based on a common problem, it is possible to broaden the horizon of analysis and find analogies and new interpretations.

Brazil and the management of education in the pandemic

According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)[6], Brazil was the fourth country in the world that spent more time with closed schools: 178 days of school closings. In Portugal, the emergency calendar was much shorter.

These numbers reveal a lot about the strategies adopted by the two countries to face the adversities and the challenges imposed by the pandemic. In Brazil, the Ministry of Education published, on March 17, 2020, the ordinance 343, which guided the suspension, for 30 days extendable, of in-person classes in Basic Education and Higher Education, in public and private spheres, and, however, authorized the replacement of in-person classes by Emergency Remote Classes (BRAZIL, 2020).

At this point, it is important to make an important conceptual differentiation: there is a big difference between Emergency Remote Learning and Distance Education, even though, to common sense, these concepts may seem similar. Distance Education (or Distance Learning) is considered to be every mode of knowledge transmission in which teacher and student - or other agents involved in this process - do not occupy the same space, at the same time. Distance education, in this sense, comes to supply a demand for training for a portion of the population that was unable to attend traditional school, but who wished to obtain knowledge.[7] It is a process, according to Nova and Alves (2003), that used communication tools and with few possibilities of interaction in its origin. This scenario changes with the advent of information technology, which allows the expansion of DE in the Brazilian territory.

> In this sense, we understand Distance Education as one of the teaching-learning modalities, made possible by the mediation of digital and network technological supports, whether inserted in face-to-face or mixed education systems, or completely carried out through physical distance. This obviously amplifies the complexity and the variables involved in the discussion and, in turn, forces us to fragment the reflections into more specific issues (NOVA; ALVES, 2003, p. 07, our translation).

Emergency Remote Learning (ERL), as the name suggests, is a temporary strategy to provide access to content that should be given face-to-face or in hybrid form. The social

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[6] Sant´Anna, Emílio. Brazil was the 4th country in the world with the longest number of closed schools, says OECD. Terra, 2022. Available at: https://www.terra.com.br/economia/dinheiro-em-acao/brasil-foi-o-4-pais-com-mais-tempo-de-escolas-fechadas-na-pandemia-diz-ocde,ee5057bc0ff3a4bce1c40fc39468102bsovfxpml.html. Accessed on: Jan 30 2023.

[7] In Brazil, the growth of Distance Education coincides with the demand made by the Law of Directives and Bases, of 1996, which requires more qualification for the teaching staff that will work in Basic Education and Higher Education.

distance is preserved, since teacher and student are connected, but not in the same environment, and the class happens with the support of digital resources, with the possibility of interaction. "In ERL, teacher and student are online, connected via computing devices, during the same time period as the face-to-face class, i.e., there is a transposition of physical face-to-face teaching to digital contexts." (DE OLIVEIRA; CORRÊA; MORÉS, 2020, p. 7, our translation).

This teaching modality, which became imperative because of the pandemic, demanded an intense and rapid adaptation from all agents involved in the educational scenario: governments, who had to think of digital inclusion strategies; school leaders and teachers, who needed to adapt their classes and evaluation types to the digital format, students and families.

Thus, abruptly, the Brazilian educational system, which has 47.3 million students in Basic Education alone and encompasses a complex reality, with historical and structural problems, found itself facing an absolutely new and completely destructive scenario: having to provide emergency remote classes as the only way to guarantee the students' constitutional right to education.

> The school environment, in a sad moment, anticipates the time of the internet and computing, bringing a pedagogical opportunity that might be used in the future. The big question is that, unfortunately, the technological measures are far from many students' Brazilian realities. The financial resources that we find in the private educational networks are a distant reality from many of the public schools. For excellence in the transmission of knowledge in different social classes it would be necessary that the world has no social and economic barriers, everyone would enjoy a great infrastructure and technological apparatus, which is an unfortunately illusory reality. (ROCHA; QUINTÃO, 2020, p. 6, our translation).

Between March and June 2020, in the midst of an unprecedented crisis for education, the MEC was commanded by three different names. This chair-swapping was just the tip of the iceberg. The Brazilian Network of Scientist Women[8] wrote a Technical Note (NT) No. 5 - Education in the pandemic and the omission of the Federal Government - in which the authors list examples of how the government failed in its constitutional role of ensuring the constitutional right to education in the national territory and what was the impact of this omission. The NT recalls, for example, the federal government's veto of the bill that would guarantee broadband to Brazilian public schools. The document also cites other issues related to the conduct of educational policies in the pandemic and makes a series of questions:

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[8] Created in April 2021, at the height of the 2nd wave of the pandemic and the denialism on the part of Brazilian political representatives, this initiative had the objective of fomenting the debate and giving support to the creation of public policies - especially in the areas of education, health; violence; social assistance, work, housing and mobility - aimed at women.

1. Why was the Federal Government silent on issues related to education, refusing to assume the coordination of the response to the crisis through the MEC and the Ministry of Health? 2. Did the MEC act in accordance with its constitutional redistributive and supplementary function to ensure equalization of opportunities? If not, why not? 3. Why did the MEC refuse to assume guidelines for education during the pandemic and identify the difficulties with remote teaching in schools in states and municipalities? 4. why was there a reduction in the budget for education, rather than additional financial resources allocated to public schools during the pandemic? 5. what actions were taken to guarantee children from the most vulnerable communities the right to childhood and the necessary care, as provided for in the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Law 8069/1989)? (BRAZILIAN NETWORK OF SCIENTIST WOMEN, 2021, our translation).

The Federal Constitution of Brazil (1988), written more than 30 years ago, asserts the State's responsibility with a transforming and fundamental process with human development: education. Our Magna Carta establishes, in its article 205, that "education, a right of all and duty of the State and of the family, will be promoted and fostered with the collaboration of society, aiming at the full development of the person, his preparation for the exercise of citizenship, and his qualification for work" (BRAZIL, 1988, our translation). Article 206 determines that "education must be provided under equal conditions that ensure the student's access to and permanence in school" (BRAZIL, 1988, our translation).

But this equity has never been a reality in our country. And, in the pandemic of COVID 19, this abyss has become even deeper because of omissions by the federal government, which has refrained from carrying out a national coordination of actions to face the pandemic in the field of education, with clear connectivity policies, distribution of equipment, training, and funds. "The municipalities, surprised by a measure that requires immediate investment in equipment and training so that teachers [...] could adapt, had problems (ANJOS; FREITAS, 2021, p. 88, our translation). In this vacuum, states and municipalities had to take the management and were adopting the measures that best fit their realities and needs.

Portugal and #Fiqueemcasa (Stay Home)

In Portugal, the first two cases of COVID 19 were reported on March 2. Ten days later, the Portuguese government decided to suspend, as of the 16th, all teaching, non-teaching, and training activities attended by students in public educational establishments. This period, initially, was to last until April 9. In the country, most of the education is public (only kindergartens and higher education are paid) and the closing of schools took place near the end

of the school year, since classes start in September and end in June, leaving about 2 million children and teenagers at home before the scheduled period, including 712,000 pre-school and elementary school children, 1.1 million high school kids, and 347,000 in higher education. In the following two months, children and teenagers in primary and secondary school had access to online classes, organized at the discretion of each school and teacher (MARQUES, 2021).

To complement these activities and ensure that the 50,000 Portuguese students without internet access would not be excluded from online classes, the Portuguese government established a partnership with the public radio and TV company RTP, which brought complementary content directly to Portuguese homes, along the lines of Telescola, an initiative implemented in the country between 1965 and 1987. It was the program #EstudoemCasa (Study at Home).

> Initially, and with respect to young people from elementary school to high school, education was provided by two public television channels that presented simulated classes, pre-recorded, comprehensive because held in subject blocks intended simultaneously for two levels of schooling and that led to the lack of interest on the part of students because, being in a particular class or "they had already taught that subject" or "this subject is not at my level" without any kind of teacher-student interaction (CABRITO, 2021, p. 131, our translation).

As of April 20, the classes started to be held between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. and the student could follow them as a way to complement the training they were having at the conventional school. The classes of #EstudoemCasa were broadcasted on open TV and cable, and were also transmitted through the website of the Portuguese broadcaster.

There was also, in the country, an invitation to the mobilization of the whole society, facing the huge challenge outlined, which counted with the participation of libraries, parents' association and other social organizations, to guarantee the access of students to school contents (MARQUES, 2021). The Portuguese government became a major articulator of these efforts - President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, in office since 2016, who is also a law professor, even gave a lecture on TV - calling on even private organizations to act and provide support for educational institutions. "It is up to the Ministry of Education, not municipalities, to guarantee the appropriate technological solutions and means that guarantee the universal right to education" (LIMA JUNIOR, 2020, p. 21, our translation).

In addition, the Portuguese state has run a program called Digital School [9], which allocated 400 million Euros to purchase computers for the school community and connectivity programs. To support parents who needed to work, day care centers were given their own operating statute and the program to provide meals for children was maintained.

> The closing of schools has brought out a series of other factors that place the school in a place of special attention, making possible a reinforcement of the role of its activities for the social structure, maintenance of the system, and the reduction of inequalities, not only for the universality of access to knowledge, but for other more immediate issues, such as food and the support on which the development of work structures rests (LIMA JUNIOR, 2020, p. 73, our translation).

This brief explanation shows how the posture of the two countries, which have historical, social, and educational relationships, was quite different in facing the consequences of the pandemic for education. "If in Portugal the public school is well valued by the population and government rules served all educational establishments, in Brazil the difference between public and private education was exacerbated." (MARQUES, 2021, p. 120, our translation).

School with distance

Data from UNESCO reveal that half of the students affected by the pandemic do not have access to a computer at home, obtaining a representation of 826 million students who were prevented from having access to school, in the pandemic context, in which a large part of the classes took place in a context of remote classes and virtual environments, which required access to computers, tablets and cell phones connected to the Internet. As contradictory as it may be, while a part of the students could access the classes in the comfort of their homes, with a few clicks, for another part of the students, school became further away, distant and inaccessible.

In Brazil, a survey brought by the journal of the University of São Paulo attests how this global data reflects well the Brazilian reality in the context presented.

> In pre-pandemic Brazil, 16.5 million children and adolescents aged 9 to 17 lived in households with limited conditions for remote education, with no internet connection or with download speeds below 4 Mbps. In rural areas, the inadequate infrastructure reached 85% of young people in this age group (4.1 million) (INEXISTÊNCIA…, 2020, our translation).

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[9] Primeira fase do programa Escola Digital prevê a distribuição de 100 mil computadores. TSF, 20 ago. 2020. Available at: https://www.tsf.pt/portugal/sociedade/primeira-fase-do-programa-escola-digital-preve-distribuicao-de-100-mil-computadores-12537814.html Accessed: 19 Sept 2020.

In Portugal, as much as the inequalities are not so grotesque, they also exist. Data presented by Cabrito (2021) show that 17.2% of the Portuguese population lives in a risk range for poverty and that about 5.5% of the inhabitants do not have access to the internet. Another problem reported was the teachers' lack of familiarity with technology, as well as part of the student body, the aging of teachers, and the lack of communication between family and school.

> Despite all the efforts promoted by teachers, inequalities in access to education for each child or young person stood out, affecting the long-term school path of all those who did not have the technological resources that would allow them to access this new teaching methodology - distance learning - and who were thus somewhat penalized in their learning. Aware of these constraints, the Ministry of Education indicated that at the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year, there would be a period of recovery and/or consolidation of learning for the previous year (RODRIGUES; ANDRÉ; MIRANDA; MUCHARREIRA, 2021, p. 249, our translation).

The data presented above converge with the thought of Santos (2020). The author argues that the pandemic aggravates a state of permanent crisis caused by capitalism and its exclusions. In historical moments such as those experienced from 2020, with COVID 19, governments and organizations mobilize to solve the consequences of the crisis, without attacking its causes. And so, the cycle of exclusion is perpetuated, leaving vulnerable groups - such as women, informal workers, and refugees - even more excluded.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1992), in analyzing the French education system in the 1960s, portray the school as an environment that mediates the teaching-learning process, but an institution laden with inequalities, exclusionary, and partial. They work with the concept of cultural capital – elements that students bring from the outside environment into the classroom – which end up working as a symbolic violence and a tool for exclusion. In the case of Pandemic, both students and teachers were targets of this violence for not having the necessary credentials and technologies to enter this digital environment.

In the same direction, Lima Júnior (2020) points out that the differences in individuals' cultural capital become a selection agent in the school environment, separating the heirs, those who have the condition to fit the educational model, from those who are left behind.

> The structures present in everyday school life were hyperbolized during the pandemic, making more evident a series of inequalities that regularly coexist in everyday school life [...]. The differences between cultural capital are frayed and become a heavier burden when they are not assumed as an impediment to the continuity of the reconfigured educational process (LIMA JUNIOR, 2020, p. 29, our translation).

What the analysis shows is that the pandemic was a period in which urgent measures had to be adopted by governments, but despite the discourse of seeing the crisis as an opportunity for change, propounded by some entities, what was seen in the educational context was the adoption of a distance model that, keeping in mind the proportions between Brazil and Portugal, are exclusive in their genesis.

> The meaning attached to education in view of the exceptional moment erases any form of exceptionality and shows itself as the usual maintenance and reinforcement of pre-existent, pre-pandemic structures that seek to perpetuate themselves, even though their contradictions, their limits, and their exclusionary bias are evident (LIMA JUNIOR, 2020, p. 28, our translation).

And the consequences of these choices made by institutions and governments are already beginning to show: a quick search on search engines lists numerous studies that point to devastating consequences of the pandemic for education, such as delayed development, anxiety among members of the academic community, and school dropout. UNESCO speaks of a generational catastrophe, such is the damage to childhood, especially in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Central and South Asia. More than 100 million children will not be able to read or write correctly, and 584 million children lack basic reading skills. Students need intensive support to regain their lost education. Schools must also go beyond places of learning to rebuild children's mental and physical health, social development, and nutrition.

Final remarks

The whole world has been affected by the pandemic of COVID 19. Two years after the beginning of the pandemic period, in many places the masks have already been left behind, the alcohol gel dispensers are empty, the social distancing and all that we have been through will remain in memory, as a bad and painful memory, especially for the groups most affected by the pandemic, those who lost a love one to the virus or part of their dignity. The author Boaventura de Sousa (2020) warns that every quarantine is discriminatory and impacts more directly historically unprotected groups, such as the elderly, women, refugees, and children.

To stop the collapse of the hospital system around the world, it was necessary to paralyze other systems, considered non-essential, and the educational system was one of them. Schools and universities were closed around the world and each government sought to adopt a strategy that best suited its reality and the needs of its student community.

In the case of the analysis undertaken, we can see that, despite having adopted distance education as a way to guarantee students the right of access to studies, the way Brazilian and Portuguese leaders did this was different. In Brazil, the Ministry of Education was very negligent in taking upon itself the responsibility of coordinating efforts nationally and proposing more viable alternatives for our reality, since in the pre-pandemic period it was evident that the poorer population had limited access to the Internet. This neglect forced states and municipalities to adopt measures in a disjointed way, without a centralization that would bring an indispensable north in that moment of absolute chaos. There was no clear policy for connectivity, equipment distribution, training, and funds. There was no focus on the existing structures, which could have been better used. Universities and other institutions were not called to collaborate.

In Portugal there was also a massive proposal of distance education as an alternative to overcome the crisis caused by the pandemic. But the government, in turn, proposed other models, such as the use of the state broadcaster to broadcast educational content, guided the provinces, managed the resources, and coordinated the mobilization efforts. Since the beginning of the pandemic, it has demonstrated to be open to search for the best strategies and to listen to society in order to face such a big challenge.

Even if we fall into the risk of framing what Saviani (2012, p. 33, our translation) classifies as compensatory education, placing under the responsibility of education a series of problems that are not fundamentally educational, the reality - *a priori* - exclusionary of distance education should have been considered by public managers before being adopted as a practically unique strategy to meet the challenges of the pandemic.

The lack of a national coordination, of an emergency policy aimed at the field of education here in Brazil, forced states and municipalities to draw up local strategies, according to their realities and budgets, but without support from the Brazilian State, in a clear breach of the obligations contained in the Constitution of our country, which determines that it is the duty of the State to equalize educational opportunities among the units of the federation.

The Ministry of Education and its technicians did not propose another national policy design, as happened in Portugal. Perhaps, the strategy adopted in the European country of also using television to disseminate the contents would have been an interesting solution in our country, since there is a network of transmission infrastructure much more established and infiltrated in the Brazilian corners than the Internet. As Wenczenovicz (2020) points out, the obstacles were enormous, with lack of access to computers and internet, lack of physical

structure at home that was conducive to study, and the unpreparedness of poorer families to support students.

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