

Mrs. Anis Fathima A,

Head, Department of Life Skills

PERI Institute of Technology, Mannivakkam, Chennai

Anisbakash2024@gmail.com**Bazarial Begum S M**

Assistant Professor

Dhanalakshmi College of Engineering

Dr. V P R Nagar,

Manimangalam

Tambaram, Chennai - 601 301, E-mail id. basiriya278@gmail.com**Dr. S. Senthil kumar**

Assistant Professor of English, Department of Science and Humanities

Adhi College of Engineering and Technology (Autonomous)

No 06, Munu Adhi Nagar, Sankarapuram, walajabad. Kanchipuram (Dt). 631605.

Mail id: senkumarsk@gmail.com.**P. Kameshwaran**

0009-0000-5649-0983 (orcid id)

Kameshwaran709410@gmail.com

PERI Institute of Technology

Abstract

Youth mental health has become a central concern for educators, practitioners, and policymakers, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts where institutional resources remain uneven. While higher education continues to privilege cognitive achievement, students increasingly report stress, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and uncertainty about future pathways. This paper advances a balanced, practice-informed and theoretically grounded argument for integrating life skills education (LSE) within college settings, using structured group discussions as the primary pedagogic modality.

Adopting a convergent mixed-methods design, the study engaged 300 undergraduate students (aged 17–21) across five colleges in Tamil Nadu in a 12-week intervention. Quantitative measures (Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale and a Life Skills Inventory) were complemented by focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with faculty and counselors. Findings demonstrate statistically meaningful gains in resilience (mean increase 13.2%), communication competence, and emotional regulation. Qualitative data illuminate shifts in peer support, help-seeking attitudes, and practical application of coping strategies. The paper contributes to social work scholarship by situating LSE within resilience theory, social learning theory, and strengths-based practice, and by articulating the role of facilitators as reflective practitioners. It proposes a scalable, culturally responsive model aligned with India's National Education Policy (2020), offering actionable recommendations for institutionalization, capacity-building, and ethical facilitation.

Keywords: Life Skills Education, Youth Mental Health, Resilience, Social Work Practice, Group Facilitation, Higher Education, India**1. Introduction**

Across campuses, the emotional landscape of students is shifting. Academic intensity, precarious career trajectories, digital comparison cultures, and post-pandemic disruptions have collectively intensified psychological strain. In India, these pressures intersect with first-generation college experiences, gendered expectations, and urban–rural transitions, making the college years both aspirational and vulnerable.

Conventional curricula, organized around disciplinary knowledge, seldom equip students with the psychosocial competencies required to navigate conflict, uncertainty, and self-management. This gap is increasingly recognized within policy discourses that call for holistic, student-centered education. Life skills education (LSE) responds to this gap by foregrounding competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, communication, critical thinking, and coping.

Among delivery formats, **structured group discussions** offer a distinctive advantage. They shift classrooms from transmission to participation, enabling peer learning, normalization of emotional experiences, and rehearsal of real-life scenarios. For social work, such spaces resonate with group work methods, emphasizing mutual aid, reflexivity, and empowerment.

This paper examines whether and how group discussion–based LSE can enhance resilience and mental well-being among college students, and what it demands from institutions and facilitators to be effective and ethical.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**2.1 Life Skills Education (LSE)**

The World Health Organization conceptualizes LSE as a set of abilities for adaptive and positive behavior. For analytic clarity, the present study organizes life skills into three domains:

Domain	Core Skills	Functional Outcomes
Cognitive	Critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving	Better judgment, reduced impulsivity
Social	Communication, empathy, relationship management	Conflict resolution, collaboration
Emotional	Self-awareness, emotion regulation, stress management	Coping, well-being, help-seeking

2.2 Resilience Theory: Resilience is understood as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between individuals and their environments. Contemporary perspectives emphasize **protective factors** (e.g., supportive peers, adaptive coping) and **processes** (meaning-making, agency) rather than fixed traits. LSE can be interpreted as strengthening these protective processes.

2.3 Social Learning Theory: Bandura's social learning theory posits that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Group discussions operationalize this through modeling (peers demonstrating coping), vicarious learning (hearing others' strategies), and feedback loops.

2.4 Strengths-Based and Ecological Perspectives (Social Work) A strengths-based approach reframes students as resourceful agents rather than deficits to be corrected. Ecological systems theory situates the student within nested contexts (family, institution, community, digital spaces). LSE groups become **meso-level interventions** that can mediate stressors across systems.

3. Review of Literature (Critical Synthesis) A growing body of international and Indian scholarship underscores the benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL) and LSE for youth mental health. Meta-analytic work demonstrates that structured SEL interventions improve emotional skills, attitudes, and academic outcomes while reducing conduct problems. However, effect sizes vary by **implementation fidelity**, **facilitator competence**, and **cultural relevance**. Barry et al. (2013) highlight that mental health promotion programs in low- and middle-income countries show promise but often face scalability issues due to resource constraints. Durlak et al. (2011) provide robust evidence for school-based SEL, yet most studies are situated in Western contexts, raising questions about transferability. Nasheeda et al. (2019) argue that **experiential modalities** role-play, peer dialogue, reflective exercises are central to internalization. This aligns with Indian programmatic efforts such as the Adolescence Education Programme, which employ participatory formats to address sensitive topics. Critical gaps remain. First, **higher education settings** are underrepresented compared to school-based interventions. Second, there is limited attention to **process data** how students make meaning within sessions. Third, faculty often lack training in facilitation, leading to dilution of intervention quality. Finally, cultural scripts around stigma and authority can inhibit open discussion, particularly in mixed-gender or hierarchical classrooms. The present study addresses these gaps by focusing on colleges, integrating process-oriented qualitative data, and foregrounding facilitator roles within a social work framework.

4. Objectives and Research Questions**Objectives**

- Assess the impact of group discussion–based LSE on resilience and emotional regulation.
- Examine changes in communication, empathy, and help-seeking behaviors.
- Identify facilitators and barriers to implementation within colleges.
- Analyze the role of facilitators from a social work perspective.

Research Questions

- How do structured group discussions influence life skills acquisition?
- What measurable changes occur in resilience and related competencies?
- How do students and educators perceive the intervention?
- What contextual factors shape effectiveness and sustainability

5. Methodology

5.1 Design

A **convergent mixed-methods** design integrated quantitative pre–post measures with qualitative insights to capture both outcomes and processes.

5.2 Sample

Parameter	Details
Sample Size	300 undergraduate students
Age	17–21 years
Gender	Mixed (approx. balanced)
Setting	5 colleges, Tamil Nadu
Selection	Institutional consent and volunteer participation

5.3 Intervention Protocol (12 Weeks)

Week	Focus	Techniques Used
1	Orientation & Self-awareness	Ice-breakers, reflective prompts
2	Emotions & Triggers	Emotion mapping, storytelling
3	Communication	Role-play, feedback circles
4	Empathy	Perspective-taking exercises
5	Stress Management	Breathing, cognitive reframing
6	Decision-making	Case vignettes, pros–cons grids
7	Problem-solving	Group tasks, solution trees
8	Assertiveness	Scripts, boundary-setting practice
9	Relationships	Scenario analysis
10	Coping Strategies	Coping diaries
11	Conflict Resolution	Mediation role-play
12	Integration	Reflection, action planning

- Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC)
- Life Skills Inventory (researcher-developed, pilot tested)
- Focus Group Discussions (n=40 students)
- Semi-structured interviews (n=15 staff)

5.5 Analysis

- **Quantitative:** Descriptive statistics, paired comparisons (pre–post)
- **Qualitative:** Thematic analysis with iterative coding, triangulated across FGDs and interviews

6. Results and Data Interpretation

6.1 Quantitative Outcomes

Quantitative Outcomes

Indicator	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	% Change	Interpretation
Resilience (CD-RISC)	62.5	70.8	13.20%	Meaningful improvement
Communication	Moderate	High	—	Strong gains
Emotional Regulation	Low–Moderate	Moderate–High	—	Improved control
Help-Seeking Intent	Low	Moderate	—	Reduced stigma

Interpretation: Gains suggest that repeated, scaffolded discussions support both skill acquisition and attitudinal shifts. The increase in help-seeking is particularly salient for mental health promotion.

Figure 1: Pre–Post Comparison of Life Skills and Resilience Indicators

The quantitative findings are further illustrated in Figure 1.

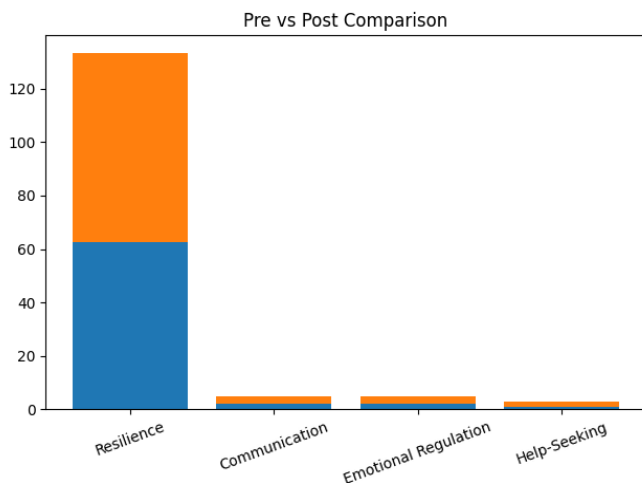
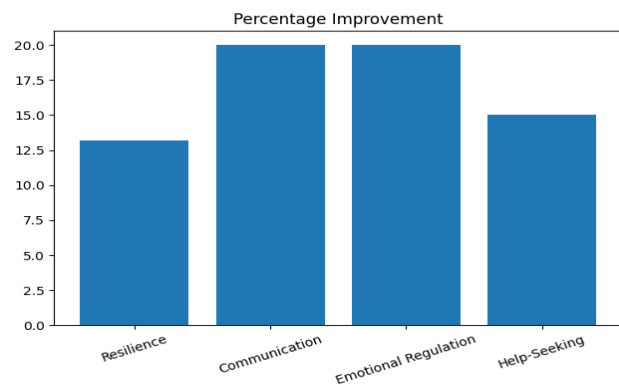


Figure 2: Percentage Improvement Across Key Competencies
 The percentage improvements across key competencies are presented in Figure 2.



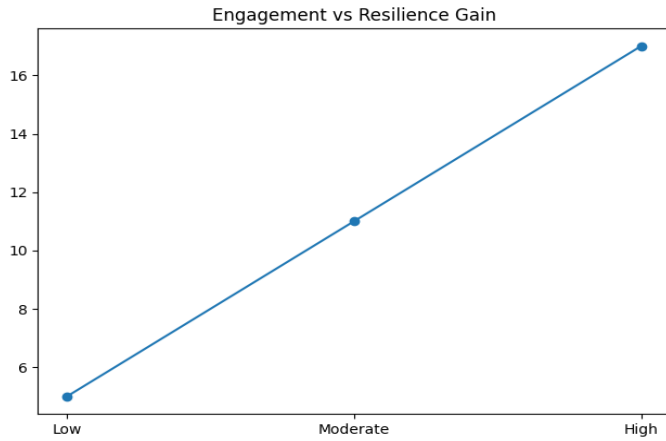
6.2 Qualitative Themes (with Illustrative Excerpts)

Theme	Description	Illustrative Insight
Confidence & Voice	Willingness to speak and assert	“I could finally say what I feel without fear.”
Peer Support	Mutual aid and normalization	“Others also feel the same—I’m not alone.”
Applied Coping	Transfer to real situations	“I used breathing before exams and arguments.”
Empathy Growth	Perspective-taking	“I understood my friend’s side better.”

6.3 Comparative Analysis by Engagement Level

Figure 3: Relationship Between Engagement Level and Resilience Gains

A clear relationship between session attendance and resilience gains is depicted in Figure 3.

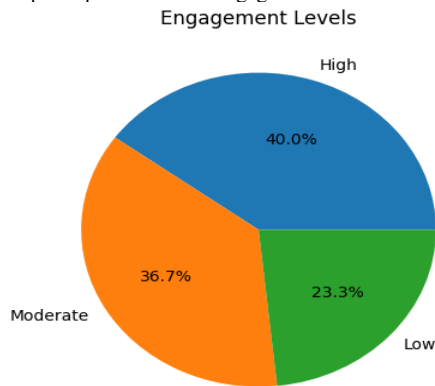


Group	Attendance	Average Gain (Resilience)	Notable Pattern
High Engagement	≥10 sessions	+16-18%	Strong peer bonding
Moderate	6-9 sessions	+10-12%	Skill uptake uneven
Low	≤5 sessions	+4-6%	Limited change

Inference: Dose - response relationship indicates that consistency matters; sporadic exposure yields modest benefits.

Figure 4: Distribution of Students by Engagement Level

The distribution of participants based on engagement levels is shown in Figure 4.



7. Discussion (Linking Theory, Evidence, and Practice)

Findings align with **resilience theory**, suggesting that LSE strengthens protective processes (emotion regulation, social support). The group format operationalizes **social learning**, enabling modeling and reinforcement of adaptive behaviors. From a **strengths - based** lens, the intervention leverages existing peer resources, shifting students from passive recipients to co-constructors of knowledge. Importantly, the study reveals that **process conditions** psychological safety, facilitator neutrality, and culturally resonant examples mediate outcomes. Where facilitators dominated or moralized, participation declined. Conversely, reflective questioning and validation increased engagement. The observed rise in help-seeking intentions addresses a critical barrier in Indian contexts **stigma**. Normalization within peer groups appears to lower thresholds for accessing support.

8. Social Work Practice Implications

8.1 Facilitator as Reflective Practitioner: Facilitators must balance structure with openness, practicing active listening, non-judgment, and ethical boundary-setting. Reflective supervision can enhance fidelity and responsiveness.

8.2 Group Work Method: The intervention mirrors classic social work group processes forming, storming, norming, performing requiring attention to cohesion, conflict, and inclusion.

8.3 Ethics and Safeguarding: Clear protocols for distress, confidentiality, and referral pathways to counseling services are essential. Informed consent and voluntary participation must be upheld.

8.4 Cultural Responsiveness: Examples, language, and norms should reflect local realities (family structures, gender norms, linguistic diversity) to ensure relevance and uptake.

9. Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Challenge	Manifestation	Strategy
Limited Training	Didactic facilitation	Structured training + supervision
Time Constraints	Irregular scheduling	Credit-bearing modules
Student Hesitation	Low initial disclosure	Gradual trust-building, smaller groups
Institutional Buy-in	Peripheral status	Policy alignment, outcome reporting

10. Policy and Program Model (Proposed)

10.1 Conceptual Model: LSE for Resilience (College Setting)

Input	Process	Output	Outcome
Trained facilitators, curriculum, time	Weekly group discussions, experiential activities	Skill acquisition, peer support	Improved resilience, well-being

10.2 Alignment with NEP 2020

- Holistic development and socio-emotional learning
- Flexible, credit-based curricular integration
- Teacher capacity-building

10.3 Scaling Pathway

Pilot → Institutionalization (credit module) → Cross-campus replication → Monitoring via portfolios and periodic assessments

11. Case Illustrations

Case 1: Exam Anxiety to Adaptive Coping: A second-year student reported severe pre-exam anxiety. Through sessions on emotion regulation and coping diaries, the student adopted breathing techniques and cognitive reframing, reporting reduced panic and improved performance.

Case 2: Conflict Resolution in Peer Group: A group conflict over project roles was addressed using mediation role-play techniques practiced in sessions. Students negotiated responsibilities and reported improved collaboration.

12. Additional Fieldwork Narratives

Case 3: Managing Family Pressure and Career Anxiety: A final-year student experiencing pressure to conform to family career expectations reported persistent anxiety and indecision. Through decision-making and assertiveness sessions, the student developed the ability to articulate personal goals respectfully. Over time, the student engaged in a structured conversation with family members, resulting in a negotiated plan that balanced personal interests and familial expectations.

Case 4: Social Withdrawal to Peer Engagement: A first-year student initially displayed minimal participation and avoided peer interaction. Gradual exposure through small-group discussions and empathy exercises enabled the student to build trust. By the end of the program, the student actively contributed to discussions and reported forming meaningful friendships.

Case 5: Anger Management and Conflict Reduction: A student with frequent interpersonal conflicts learned emotional regulation techniques such as pause-response strategies and reflective listening. Post-intervention, both peers and faculty noted a reduction in confrontational behavior and improved classroom dynamics.

13. Limitations of the Study: Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations:

- **Sample Scope:** The study was limited to five colleges in Tamil Nadu, which may affect generalizability to other regions.
- **Short Duration:** A 12-week intervention may not capture long-term behavioral change.
- **Self-Reported Data:** Some measures relied on self-reporting, which may introduce response bias.
- **Facilitator Variability:** Differences in facilitator skill levels may have influenced outcomes.

14. Future Research Directions

Future studies can build on this research by:

- Conducting **longitudinal studies** to assess long-term impact
- Expanding to **diverse geographical and socio-cultural settings**
- Comparing **different delivery methods** (digital vs in-person)
- Integrating **clinical assessments** alongside self-report tools
- Exploring **gender-specific or discipline-specific interventions**

15. Appendices**Appendix A: Sample Life Skills Session Questions**

- What situations make you feel stressed, and how do you usually respond?
- Can you recall a time when you handled a difficult situation effectively?
- How do you express disagreement without hurting others?
- What strategies help you stay calm during conflict?

Appendix B: Sample Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. How did you feel participating in group discussions?
2. Which sessions were most useful and why?
3. Did you apply any life skills in real life? Give examples.
4. What challenges did you face during the sessions?

Appendix C: Life Skills Self-Assessment (Sample Items)

Statement	Scale (1-5)
I can manage my emotions effectively	1-5
I feel confident expressing my thoughts	1-5
I can resolve conflicts calmly	1-5

16. Conclusion

The findings of this study reinforce the growing recognition that life skills education is not an optional addition to higher education, but a necessary component of holistic student development. When delivered through structured group discussions, life skills education becomes more than a set of abstract concepts it transforms into a lived, shared experience where students actively engage, reflect, and learn from one another. This participatory format creates a supportive environment in which students feel heard, validated, and encouraged to explore their emotions and responses to real-life situations.

The effectiveness of this approach lies in its ability to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. Students are not merely informed about coping strategies; they are given opportunities to rehearse them, question them, and adapt them to their own contexts. As seen in the study, this leads to tangible improvements in emotional regulation, communication, and resilience. Equally important is the sense of collective belonging that emerges within these group settings. Many participants reported feeling less isolated in their struggles, suggesting that such interventions also play a crucial role in reducing stigma around mental health.

From a social work perspective, the relevance of this approach is particularly significant. The use of group discussions reflects core social work principles such as empowerment, mutual aid, and strengths-based practice. Facilitators, in this context, are not simply instructors but enablers of dialogue and reflection. Their role requires sensitivity, ethical awareness, and the ability to create safe and inclusive spaces where diverse experiences can be expressed without judgment. This highlights the importance of proper training and continuous support for those leading such interventions.

At the institutional level, the integration of life skills education requires a shift in priorities. Colleges must move beyond viewing mental health as a peripheral concern and recognize it as central to academic success and overall student well-being. Embedding life skills sessions within the curriculum, allocating dedicated time, and establishing clear support systems are essential steps toward this goal. Without such structural commitment, even well-designed interventions may struggle to achieve long-term impact.

While this study demonstrates promising outcomes, it also underscores the need for sustained and context-sensitive implementation. Life skills education should not be treated as a one-time program but as an ongoing process that evolves with students' needs and experiences. Future efforts must continue to refine these approaches, ensuring that they remain inclusive, culturally relevant, and accessible to all students.

In conclusion, structured group discussions offer a practical and meaningful way to integrate life skills education into higher education. By fostering resilience, enhancing interpersonal understanding, and promoting emotional well-being, such initiatives prepare students not only for academic challenges but for the complexities of life beyond the classroom. Strengthening these efforts through institutional support, trained facilitators, and ethical practice will be key to building healthier and more resilient student communities.

17. References

- Barry, M. M., Clarke, A. M., Jenkins, R., & Patel, V. (2013). A systematic review of mental health promotion interventions for young people in low and middle income countries. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1), 835. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-835>
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- Lomas, T., Medina, J. C., Ivztan, I., Rupprecht, S., & Eiroa-Orosa, F. J. (2017). The impact of mindfulness on educators. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 61, 132–141.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.10.008>
- Nasheeda, A., Abdullah, H. B., Krauss, S. E., & Ahmed, N. B. (2019). A narrative systematic review of life skills education. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 24(3), 362–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1479278>
- Patel, V., Flisher, A. J., Hetrick, S., & McGorry, P. (2007). Mental health of young people. *The Lancet*, 369(9569), 1302–1313. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(07\)60368-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(07)60368-7)
- Singla, D. R., et al. (2021). Implementation and effectiveness of adolescent life skills programs. *Global Mental Health*, 8, e24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2021.18>
- UNESCO. (2012). *Adolescence Education Programme*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNICEF. (2021). *The State of the World's Children 2021*. New York: UNICEF.
- World Health Organization. (1997). *Life skills education for children and adolescents in schools*.
- World Health Organization. (2020). Adolescent mental health.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.
- Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press.
- Rutter, M. (2012). Resilience as a dynamic concept. *Development and Psychopathology*, 24(2), 335–344. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000028>
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. Basic Books.
- Saleebey, D. (2006). *The strengths perspective in social work practice*. Pearson.
- Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Wang, M. C., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning*. Teachers College Press.
- Tagat, A., Balaji, A., & Kapoor, H. (2025). The impact of life skills education on socio-emotional development and school-related outcomes among adolescents in India. *BMC Public Health*, 25, 759. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-21195-0>
- Sherif, Y., et al. (2023). Effectiveness of life skills intervention on depression, anxiety and stress among children and adolescents. *Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 30(3), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.21315/mjms2023.30.3.4>
- Alinejad-Tilaki, A., et al. (2025). Health literacy and its relationship with mental health and quality of life in freshmen students. *BMC Public Health*, 25, 106. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-21202-4>
- Sundqvist, A., J., E., et al. (2024). Educational transitions and young people's mental health: A systematic review. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2024.2373278>
- Ndeti, D. M., et al. (2022). Life skills training to improve mental health and academic performance. *BMC Psychiatry*, 22(1), 131. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-022-03781-x>
- Hvalby, L., et al. (2024). Life skills in compulsory education: A systematic scoping review. *Education Sciences*, 14(10), 1112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14101112>
- Li, F., & Yao, H. (2026). Mental health education among college students: Resource allocation effects. *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1687722>
- Gunnes, M., et al. (2025). Young adults NEET: A global scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 25, 3394. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24781-y>