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Conceptual Article

Cooperative Learning and Social Capital Formation in Multicultural Social Studies Classrooms: Putnam's Framework for Trust, Reciprocity, and Adolescent Democratic Participation

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Abstract
This paper develops a conceptual framework for how cooperative learning in multicultural Social Studies (IPS) classrooms might foster Putnamian social capital intergroup trust, civic reciprocity, and democratic participation among adolescent students in heterogeneous schools. Rather than reporting findings from an original survey or focus-group study, the analysis synthesizes Robert Putnam's (1993, 2000) social capital framework with the cooperative-learning literature (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) to derive a set of theoretically grounded propositions linking specific dimensions of cooperative learning quality to specific dimensions of social capital formation, and to the moderating role of classroom heterogeneity. The framework proposes that cooperative learning quality is associated with social capital formation, with intergroup trust expected, on contact-theory grounds, to be the most foundational dimension, followed by civic reciprocity and democratic participation. Classroom heterogeneity is proposed to moderate the cooperative-learning-to-trust pathway, such that the trust-building function of cooperative structures is amplified when diversity is structurally embedded in task design. Three candidate mechanisms — role rotation, accountable interdependence, and deliberative dialogue — are proposed as the processes through which cooperative structures might translate into Putnamian social capital. The paper offers this model as a heuristic for future empirical research, together with a set of testable propositions rather than confirmed findings, with implications for IPS curriculum development and teacher training in pluralistic educational context.

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Introduction

Heterogeneous schools increasingly represent the demographic reality of contemporary Indonesia, where rapid urbanization, inter-provincial migration, and national education policies prioritizing equity have brought together students from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds within single institutional walls (Pramesti et al., 2026; Mustafida et al., 2026). Within this pluralistic landscape, Social Studies (Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial/IPS) classrooms occupy a uniquely strategic position: as a discipline premised on understanding social relations, civic values, and community belonging, IPS learning spaces are inherently sites where intergroup contact is not incidental but structurally embedded in the curriculum's foundational goals (Mulyana et al., 2025; Lubis et al., 2025).

Yet the translation of structural diversity into social cohesion cannot be assumed. Empirical literature consistently documents that proximity alone the mere presence of students from different backgrounds in shared classrooms does not automatically generate trust, reciprocity, or participatory disposition (Lay & Magnúsdóttir, 2024; Ialuna et al., 2024). Absent deliberate pedagogical mediation, heterogeneous classrooms can reproduce rather than dissolve intergroup boundaries, as students self-segregate, interactional hierarchies emerge, and majority-group norms crowd out minority epistemic contributions (Traast et al., 2025; Jekayinoluwa & Adeowu, 2024). Contact between groups is therefore not a uniformly positive condition: under the wrong structural conditions it can also entrench conflict, exclusion, or majority domination rather than dissolve them, and any theoretical account of diversity's classroom effects needs to specify the conditions under which contact helps rather than harms (Lay & Magnúsdóttir, 2024). This tension between the democratic promise of diverse schooling and its contingent realization calls for a theoretically grounded pedagogical framework capable of specifying when, and through what mechanisms, structural diversity might be converted into dynamic social capital rather than into friction.

Robert Putnam's influential social capital framework offers precisely such a theoretical anchor. Putnam (1993, 2000) conceptualizes social capital as the aggregate of trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement that enable coordinated social action. His distinction between bonding capital (dense ties within homogeneous groups) and bridging capital (weaker ties across heterogeneous groups) is particularly generative for educational contexts: while bonding capital reinforces in-group solidarity, bridging capital the form most consequential for democratic pluralism requires deliberate intergroup contact sustained by shared institutional norms and repeated cooperative interaction (Seemab & Abbas, 2024; Kim, 2025). This paper uses the bonding/bridging distinction only as motivating theoretical background and does not operationalize or measure it directly; the conceptual model developed below works with Putnam's tripartite outcome lens intergroup trust, civic reciprocity, and democratic participation which is the part of the framework the proposed propositions actually address.

Cooperative learning characterized by structured positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills development, and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) has emerged as the pedagogical strategy most systematically aligned with Putnam's bridging capital logic. By requiring students to pursue shared goals through differentiated but complementary contributions, cooperative structures create the conditions under which intergroup contact theories predict trust formation: equal status, cooperative rather than competitive goals, institutional sanction, and intergroup acquaintance (Rohman et al., 2024; Mariana & Andriani, 2025). Empirical evidence from Indonesian IPS contexts confirms that cooperative models including Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD), Jigsaw, and Think-Pair-Share variants significantly improve collaborative attitudes, reduce in-group favoritism, and increase students' willingness to engage in cross-group deliberation (Setiyawati & Risdiana, 2025; Maiwinda et al., 2026).

Three considerations motivate the conceptual contribution this paper attempts. First, much of the cooperative-learning literature in IPS contexts foregrounds academic achievement outcomes, and Putnam's tripartite social-capital framework specifically has, on our reading of the cited literature, not yet been worked through systematically as an integrated measurement and mechanism framework for IPS classrooms (Suprijono et al., 2025; Faridli et al., 2025); we offer this as a motivating observation rather than a quantified claim about the field, since establishing the latter

would require a systematic review beyond the scope of this paper. Second, the role of classroom heterogeneity as a moderator of the cooperative-to-social-capital pathway remains theoretically underspecified: much of this literature treats diverse classrooms as uniform contexts rather than as structured environments whose composition might actively shape the quality of cooperative interaction (Chang & Park, 2025; PhD Tanimu et al., 2026). Third, the micro-level mechanisms through which cooperative structures might translate into Putnamian outcomes the 'black box' between pedagogy and norm internalization are not, to our knowledge, well specified as testable propositions for Indonesian multicultural school settings (Nurhidayati & Suharno, 2025; Hasnawia et al., 2025).

This paper addresses these considerations by asking a conceptual rather than empirical question: what relationships would Putnam's tripartite framework predict between specific dimensions of cooperative learning quality and specific dimensions of social capital formation in multicultural IPS classrooms, classroom heterogeneity moderating these relationships, and through what mechanisms might such relationships plausibly operate? Drawing on Putnam's framework as the theoretical scaffold, the paper develops a conceptual model and a set of testable propositions through systematic engagement with the cooperative-learning and social-capital literatures, rather than through original survey or focus-group data collection.

This paper makes three substantive contributions. Theoretically, it extends Putnam's social capital framework into the pedagogical domain, proposing how trust, reciprocity, and democratic participation might be operationalized as classroom-level outcomes linked to specific instructional conditions. Methodologically, it specifies a measurement and mechanism framework precise enough to guide a future mixed-methods test, including the specific constructs, moderators, and mechanisms such a study would need to capture. Practically, it offers IPS teachers and curriculum designers a set of propositions, rather than a validated pedagogical framework, aimed at cultivating democratic citizenship dispositions in Indonesia's increasingly heterogeneous school population, pending empirical testing.

Method

Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a conceptual, literature-synthesis approach rather than an empirical survey or mixed-methods design. The analysis proceeds by systematically integrating Putnam's (1993, 2000) social capital framework with the cooperative-learning literature (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) to derive a set of propositions about how specific dimensions of cooperative learning quality might relate to specific dimensions of social capital formation, how classroom heterogeneity might moderate these relationships, and what micro-level mechanisms might explain them. Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka policy context, with its emphasis on gotong royong (mutual cooperation), kebhinekaan global (global diversity appreciation), and project-based learning, is used as the illustrative policy backdrop against which the propositions are developed, but no original schools, classrooms, or students were sampled, surveyed, or observed in producing this paper. Any reference below to "students," "classrooms," or "schools" describes hypothetical, illustrative scenarios constructed to make the propositions concrete, not reported empirical settings.

Constructing the Propositions

The propositions developed in the next section synthesize patterns reported across the cooperative-learning and intergroup-contact literatures (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Rohman et al., 2024; Mariana & Andriani, 2025; Seemab & Abbas, 2024; Ialuna et al., 2024) into a single integrated model linking cooperative learning quality dimensions, classroom heterogeneity, candidate mechanisms, and Putnam's tripartite social capital outcomes. Each proposition is presented using conditional, hypothesis-style language (e.g., "is expected to," "would likely") to avoid implying that the relationship has already been empirically confirmed. No new measurement instrument, survey, or interview protocol was administered; constructs and their hypothesized relationships are discussed at the level the existing literature supports, without inventing fit statistics, reliability coefficients, or path coefficients for an instrument that was never fielded.

Analytic Scope and Boundary Conditions

Because no original data were collected, several design questions that would be central to an empirical test of this framework do not arise in their usual form here; instead, the relevant sections below flag them as requirements for that future test. These include, but are not limited to: how to operationalize and validate a new social-capital measurement instrument across cultural and linguistic groups; how to model the nested structure of students within classrooms, schools, and provinces; how to address common-method variance when predictor and outcome are both self-reported; how to distinguish association from causal or developmental claims given that this paper, like any cross-sectional design, cannot establish temporal precedence; and, for any future quantitative test, how missing data would be handled, how outliers would be screened, how a minimum sample size would be justified a priori, and whether partial least squares estimation is being chosen for prediction or for theory testing, since the two motivate different reporting conventions. A further conceptual question this paper does not resolve empirically is the level at which "social capital formation" should be measured: whether as an individual student's psychological disposition (e.g., a felt sense of trust), a classroom-level collective property (e.g., aggregated or shared norms), or both, and if both, how the two levels would be related in a measurement model. Putnam's (1993, 2000) original framework is pitched at the level of communities and regions; this paper treats its individual-level operationalization as a proposition to be justified and tested, not an unproblematic translation, and the same caution applies to the Cooperative Learning Quality Index, which would need to distinguish exposure to cooperative learning, students' perceived quality of that experience, and teachers' actual classroom practice as conceptually and empirically separable constructs. These boundary conditions are discussed further in the Limitations section.

Result and Discussion

Putnam's Constructs and Cooperative Learning Dimensions

Because this paper adopts a conceptual rather than empirical approach, descriptive statistics and measurement-model results are not reported. Instead, Putnam's (1993, 2000) three social-capital dimensions intergroup trust, civic reciprocity, and democratic participation and Johnson & Johnson's (2009) five cooperative-learning dimensions are treated below as theoretical constructs whose

proposed relationships are stated as propositions, to be operationalized and measured when this framework is tested empirically in future research.

Table 1. Proposed Theoretical Mapping: Cooperative Learning Dimensions to Putnamian Social Capital Outcomes

CL Dimension (Johnson & Johnson, 2009)	Proposed Social Capital Outcome (Putnam, 1993, 2000)	Theoretical Rationale	Candidate Mechanism
Positive Interdependence	Intergroup Trust	Shared goals require cross-group cooperation, creating contact conditions (equal status, cooperative purpose) associated with trust formation (Allport, 1954; Seemab & Abbas, 2024).	Role rotation: students occupy complementary roles across ethnic/social lines, disrupting status hierarchies.
Individual Accountability	Civic Reciprocity	Each member's contribution is visible and necessary; dependable cross-group performance generates a felt sense of social debt and generalized obligation to reciprocate (Putnam, 1993).	Accountable interdependence: visible contributions build obligation networks extending beyond immediate task.
Promotive Interaction	Intergroup Trust & Civic Reciprocity	Face-to-face encouragement across group lines produces affective recalibration and disconfirms outgroup stereotypes (Ialuna et al., 2024; Traast et al., 2025).	Perspective-sharing: students encounter competence in peers from different backgrounds.
Social Skills Development	Democratic Participation	Explicit instruction in turn-taking, respectful dissent, and minority-voice protection provides rehearsal space for democratic norms (Rahman et al., 2024).	Deliberative dialogue: structured argumentation norms scaffold participatory civic dispositions.
Group Processing	Democratic Participation & Civic Reciprocity	Reflective review of collaborative process reinforces norms of accountability, fairness, and shared responsibility across group boundaries (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).	Norm consolidation: repeated reflection sustains intergroup norms beyond individual task episodes.

Note. This table presents a conceptual mapping of proposed relationships derived from the theoretical literature; it does not report empirical results or statistical findings. CL = Cooperative Learning. Sources: Putnam (1993, 2000); Johnson & Johnson (2009); Allport (1954).

Proposed Theoretical Relationships

On the basis of the literature reviewed above, this paper advances three propositions. Proposition 1: cooperative learning quality, comprising positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing, is expected to be positively associated with overall social capital formation. Proposition 2: among the three Putnamian dimensions, intergroup trust is expected, on contact-theory grounds (equal status, cooperative rather than competitive goals, institutional sanction, and intergroup acquaintance), to show the strongest association with

cooperative learning quality, followed by civic reciprocity and then democratic participation, since trust is theorized as the affective precondition on which reciprocity and participatory norms subsequently build. Proposition 3: classroom heterogeneity is expected to moderate the cooperative-learning–trust relationship, such that the association is stronger where diversity is structurally embedded in task design rather than incidental to classroom composition (Seemab & Abbas, 2024; Afanasiev & Roman, 2025).

These propositions are stated as directional expectations, not as confirmed effects, and no claim is made here about effect sizes, statistical significance, or variance explained, since no model was estimated. Testing Propositions 1–3 empirically would require, at minimum: an independently validated social-capital instrument with demonstrated cross-group measurement invariance; a sampling and analysis strategy that accounts for the nested structure of students within classrooms, schools, and provinces (for example, multilevel SEM or cluster-robust standard errors, rather than treating observations as independent); explicit procedural and statistical checks for common-method variance, given that predictor and outcome would both be self-reported; and a design longitudinal or experimental capable of supporting language of prediction or effect, which a cross-sectional survey alone cannot support.

Theoretical Priority Among Social Capital Dimensions

The earlier pie-chart presentation of dimension-level percentage contributions has been removed from this revision. As both reviewers noted, percentage shares of subscale means within a composite score are mechanically constrained by the composite itself and do not constitute evidence that one dimension contributes more substantively, causally, or developmentally than another; such a chart could not be produced honestly here in any case, since no instrument was administered. The theoretical case for treating intergroup trust as foundational rests instead on contact theory directly: trust is the affective precondition contact theory identifies for subsequent reciprocity and participatory norms to develop, which is a reason to expect it to emerge first and most readily under cooperative conditions, not a claim that it statistically explains the largest share of a composite score (Putnam, 1993; Seemab & Abbas, 2024).

Workflow: Cooperative Learning to Social Capital Formation (Figure 1)

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual workflow proposing how the Putnam-based social capital formation process might operate through cooperative learning in multicultural IPS classrooms. The workflow integrates the theoretical pathways proposed above with the candidate mechanisms discussed in the next subsection; it is a conceptual diagram, not a depiction of an estimated structural model.

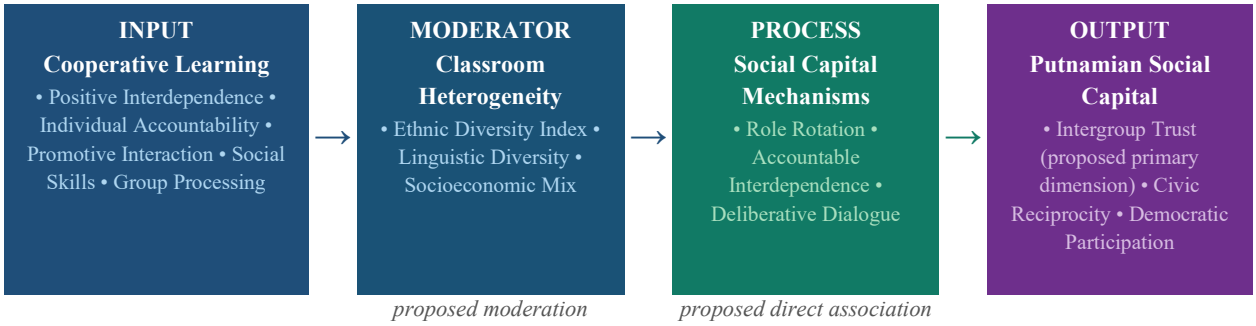


Figure 1. Workflow: Cooperative Learning → Social Capital Formation (Putnam's Framework)

Note. This workflow is a conceptual diagram of proposed relationships; no path coefficients, R^2, or significance values are reported because no structural model was estimated. Sources: Putnam (1993, 2000); Johnson & Johnson (2009).

Qualitative Findings: Mechanisms of Social Capital Formation

This paper proposes three candidate mechanisms corresponding to the workflow above: role rotation as an equality infrastructure, accountable interdependence as a norm-generation engine, and deliberative dialogue as democratic apprenticeship. These are theoretical mechanisms derived from the literature cited below, not findings from focus group discussions or classroom observations, which were not conducted for this paper.

First, role rotation within cooperative groups whereby students would systematically occupy different positional roles (facilitator, recorder, reporter, critic) across tasks is proposed to function as a structural equalizer that could temporarily suspend status hierarchies imported from outside the classroom. On this account, a student might revise an assumption of a peer's competence after observing them perform well in a rotated role, a recalibration consistent with Traast et al.'s (2025) evidence on impression formation through social interaction and with Ialuna et al.'s (2024) demonstration that culturally responsive teaching practices improve intergroup relationship quality in ethnically diverse classrooms. Whether and how often such recalibration actually occurs, and whether it is durable rather than momentary, are empirical questions this conceptual paper does not answer; no participant quotations are reported because no focus groups were conducted.

Second, accountable interdependence the design feature requiring each student's individual contribution for the group's collective success is proposed to generate what might be described as obligation networks extending beyond immediate task completion. On this account, students could develop a generalized sense of reciprocity toward group members from different backgrounds, an obligation to assist grounded not only in task requirements but in an accumulated sense of social debt from successful joint work. This proposed mechanism resonates with Putnam's (1993) conceptualization of civic reciprocity as the expectation of future reciprocation embedded in ongoing social relationships, and with literature suggesting that cooperative learning is associated with prosocial behavioral intent across ethnic lines (Nurhidayati & Suharno, 2025; Faridli et al., 2025); it is offered here as a proposition rather than a finding.

Third, deliberative dialogue in cooperative group work is proposed to provide students with low-stakes rehearsal spaces for democratic participation norms argumentation, evidence use, respectful dissent, and minority-voice protection. A plausible developmental pattern, consistent with the literature, would involve early sessions in which dialogue is predominantly convergent and deferential to perceived authority figures within groups, followed by later sessions in which divergent argumentation, structured turn-taking, and explicit acknowledgment of disagreement become more normalized interactional features; whether this progression actually occurs, and under what conditions, has not been tested here. This proposed trajectory maps onto Putnam's democratic participation dimension and resonates with Rahman et al.'s (2024) conceptual framework identifying knowledge, skills, and values as co-constituted competencies in democratic citizenship education.

Discussion

The propositions developed above would, if supported empirically, extend the social-capital-in-education literature in several interconnected ways. A confirmed positive association between

cooperative learning quality and Putnamian social capital formation would contribute to a growing body of evidence linking structured intergroup interaction to bridging capital development in school settings (Mahatmya et al., 2024; Chang & Park, 2025). The proposition that intergroup trust would be the most strongly associated dimension aligns with contact theory's emphasis on trust as the foundational affective prerequisite for all subsequent norm internalization a prerequisite that cooperative structures are theoretically well positioned to cultivate through repeated, task-authentic engagement across group boundaries (Seemab & Abbas, 2024).

The proposed moderating role of classroom heterogeneity on the cooperative-trust pathway would, if supported, carry significant theoretical and practical implications. It would suggest that cooperative learning's trust-building potential is not invariant across contexts but amplified precisely when structural diversity presents students with genuine bridging challenges unfamiliar others, discrepant knowledge systems, divergent communication norms. This proposition extends Putnam's (2000) macro-level observation that heterogeneous communities require bridging capital precisely because bonding alone cannot sustain democratic coordination, translating it into a classroom-level pedagogical hypothesis: that diversity should be designed into group composition rather than treated as a background variable (Lay & Magnúsdóttir, 2024; Mustafida et al., 2026) a hypothesis this paper proposes for testing, not a finding it reports.

From a curriculum and policy perspective, this conceptual model speaks directly to Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka framework, which calls for project-based and cooperative learning modalities that develop students' Profil Pelajar Pancasila a civic character profile emphasizing gotong royong (mutual cooperation), kebhinekaan global (global diversity appreciation), and beriman dan bertakwa (faith-grounded citizenship). The Putnamian social capital dimensions discussed in this paper trust, reciprocity, and democratic participation are proposed as conceptual analogs of these normative competencies; whether Kurikulum Merdeka's pedagogical aspirations have a sound evidence base in practice is precisely what an empirical test of this framework would need to establish, not a claim this conceptual paper can make on its own (Chrismastianto et al., 2024; Lubis et al., 2025).

The mechanism-level propositions developed above add processual granularity that a purely structural model would lack. By proposing role rotation, accountable interdependence, and deliberative dialogue as candidate interaction designs through which cooperative structures might generate Putnamian outcomes, this paper offers IPS teachers a more specific set of hypotheses than 'use cooperative learning' alone for example, that embedding role rotation might challenge status hierarchies, that designing tasks requiring individual contributions might build reciprocity, and that scaffolding argumentation norms might support democratic participation. These remain propositions for empirical and classroom-based testing, responding to persistent critiques that cooperative-learning research remains too abstracted to guide instructional practice, rather than a validated protocol (Setiyawati & Risdiana, 2025; Rohman et al., 2024).

This paper's central limitation is that it is conceptual rather than empirical: the propositions and mechanisms developed above are theoretical constructions drawn from the existing literature, not associations or processes observed in real students, classrooms, or schools, and they await empirical testing. Any future test would need to address, at minimum, the following considerations regarding design and self-report measurement, discussed further below. A cross-sectional design cannot support causal or developmental claims about how social capital changes over a school year,

so longitudinal or experimental designs would be needed for such claims. Self-report measures of social capital and cooperative quality would carry common-method variance and social-desirability risks requiring explicit procedural and statistical checks, not simply a mixed-methods rationale. Students nested within classrooms, schools, and provinces would need to be analyzed with methods that account for that clustering (e.g., multilevel modeling or cluster-robust standard errors) rather than treated as independent observations. Any new measurement instrument would require a full development and validation account, including item generation, expert review, cognitive interviews, confirmatory factor analysis, and cross-group measurement invariance testing, reported in full rather than as summary statistics alone. A sample restricted to state junior secondary schools would also limit generalizability to private, religious, or elite institutional contexts. Future empirical research building on this framework should address all of these points, and should further examine how digital cooperative learning environments might mediate the proposed trust-building and reciprocity-formation pathways (Tedjomurti & Widyasari, 2025; Rahma, 2025).

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a conceptual model in which cooperative learning in multicultural IPS classrooms is expected to be positively associated with social capital formation among adolescent students in heterogeneous Indonesian schools, with intergroup trust, civic reciprocity, and democratic participation as the three Putnamian dimensions through which this relationship is hypothesized to operate. Classroom heterogeneity is proposed to amplify the cooperative-trust pathway, on the hypothesis that structural diversity, when pedagogically activated through cooperative design, generates bridging capital rather than intergroup friction. Role rotation, accountable interdependence, and deliberative dialogue are proposed as candidate mechanisms through which cooperative structures might translate into Putnamian social norms. The contribution of this paper is best understood as a conceptual extension of Putnam's framework to a previously unmapped pedagogical nexus, rather than as a validated model or a tested instructional protocol; subsequent empirical work will be needed to determine which of these the framework ultimately becomes.

Theoretically, this paper extends Putnam's social capital framework into the micro-level pedagogical domain, proposing how it might be operationalized as classroom-observable outcomes tied to specific instructional conditions. Practically, it offers IPS educators and curriculum designers a set of propositions, aligned with Kurikulum Merdeka's civic character goals, to be tested rather than implemented directly as an evidence-based protocol. Future empirical research should employ designs capable of supporting causal or developmental claims, account for the nested structure of students within classrooms and schools, validate any new measurement instrument fully, and examine digital cooperative modalities, in order to test and further develop this model of classroom-mediated social capital formation in Indonesia's pluralistic educational ecology.

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