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## The Impact of Second Step on First Grader Self-Regulation

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**The Impact of Second Step on First Grader Self-Regulation**

A Project Presented to the Graduate Faculty of Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Curriculum and  
Instruction

December 2020

Moorhead, Minnesota

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### **Abstract**

Many studies have been conducted to identify the correlation between self regulation and learning. What has proven to be certain is that higher levels of self regulation yield results of higher levels of learning. The question that remains for many teachers is how do we increase self regulation in children? This study examines the impact of Second Step on first grader self regulation. Second Step is a social and emotional learning curriculum that teaches students self regulation through focusing on working memory, attention, and inhibitory control. The first graders in this study were taught one Second Step lesson a week for 6 weeks. A pre and post assessment was given to measure their understanding of self regulation strategies, while behavior observations were recorded once per week. The results of this study showed that the more that Second Step strategies were taught to first graders, the less off-task behaviors they displayed. This indicates that there could be a correlation between the Second Step curriculum and first graders effectively identifying and implementing self regulation strategies for learning. This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore was impacted by the effects of the pandemic which is further discussed in the conclusion.

*Keywords:* Second Step, self regulation

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **General problem/issue**

At the turn of the 21st century, approximately half of the kindergarten teachers surveyed in a nationally representative United States sample indicated that 50% or more of the children in their classrooms were experiencing problems that substantially limited the ability to benefit from early schooling (Blair, Diamond, 2008) While some teachers noted issues with academics such as letter naming, numbers, etc. most noted problems with self-regulation, particularly focusing attention and following directions, as the main cause of children's lack of school readiness (Blair, Diamond, 2008). Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation. For example, a child might feel very hyper, but instead of acting on impulses, they might think of ways to stay focused and listen to their teacher. They are able to self-regulate to fit the situation. On the other hand, a different child might have the same hyper feeling arise, and yell out, try to play with a friend, or act on impulse regardless of interrupting their own learning. This shows low self-regulation. In first grade, measuring self-regulation can be looked at through on-task behavior, off task behavior, and disruptive behavior.

Self regulation is a social and emotional learning skill. Social and Emotional learning is the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. As an advocate of social-emotional learning in schools, the purpose of my action research is to observe the effects of consistently implementing a Social and Emotional curriculum in my first grade classroom. Specifically, the implementation of the

Second Step social and emotional curriculum. Second Step teaches students self regulation for learning through focusing on working memory, attention, and inhibitory control. My action research would study the impact of Second Step on children's ability to self-regulate during whole group lessons, as well as the ability to identify self-regulation strategies.

### **Need to Study**

This research project is important for two reasons. First, it studies child self-regulation which is proven to be an essential skill for learning. Next, the study helps to provide evidence on whether or not Second Step is a efficacious program for schools to adopt.

### **Hypothesis**

It is hypothesized that explicit teaching and modeling of self regulation language, strategies, and practice through the Second Step program will increase first grader self regulation.

### **Subjects and Setting**

#### **Description of Setting**

The research study took place at an elementary school of a northwest suburb of the Twin Cities. The school serves around 500 students. The student body is made of 51% female and 49% male. Further breakdown of racial demographics follows below.

- 34% Asian
- 30% Black
- 25% Hispanic
- 5% white
- 5% two or more races
- 1% Indegenous

The school is a Title 1 school that serves a population of over 80 percent low income families.

### **Description of Participants and Selection Criteria**

The research participants in this study were 2020 fall first grade students. There were 15 first grade students involved in the study. They were chosen randomly based on the placement in my classroom. There was no further specific selection criteria.

### **Research Ethics**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from both the institutional review board at Minnesota State University, Moorhead, as well as the school district with which the study took place. Protocol from the Review Board at the University and the school district have been strictly followed.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Self Regulation:* the act or condition or an instance of [regulating](#) oneself or itself.

*Social and Emotional Learning (SEL):* the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (Dunham, 2020)

*Second Step:* A widely used K-5 Social and Emotional learning curriculum.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Self Regulation**

##### **Components of Self Regulation**

Self regulation is made up of flexible attention, working memory, and inhibitory control. Flexible attention or cognitive flexibility is an individual's ability to focus on a particular task while simultaneously ignoring environmental distractions. Working memory allows children to remember and follow directions, as well as problem solve. Inhibitory control helps children to stop or control impulse behavior in favor of a more adaptive behavior. Integrating these three aspects of executive function allows children to control their behavior, remember instructions, focus their attention, and complete tasks in classroom settings (Lerner, 2011, p.33).

##### **Importance of Self Regulation for School Success**

A large body of research demonstrates that children who are able to effectively and flexibly manage their thoughts, feelings, and actions have an easier time navigating social and learning environments (Blair, Diamond, 2008). Self regulation assessed by measures of flexible attention, inhibitory control, and working memory is also predictive of academic success and evidence suggests that behavioral aspects of self regulation are key in explaining how early regulation relates to later achievement.(Lerner, 2011, p.33) For example, in studies in elementary schools, strong kindergarten learning related skills (including self-regulation) significantly predicted higher reading and mathematics achievement between kindergarten and 6th grade as well as child IQ (Lerner, 2011, p.33)

### **Building Self Regulation**

One perspective on the development of self regulation concludes that it is a process learned through both nature and nurture, with an individual's state and personal characteristics having impact. Evidence supports the notion that self regulation develops from interactions between individual temperamental characteristics, such as the child's ability to modulate reactivity to stimuli (effortful control) and reciprocal relations between parents and caregivers (Lerner, 2011). With children spending most of their day at school with other students and teachers, these relationships or sense of nurture, will impact the development of self regulation. Others suggest that early self-control is characterized by external (other) regulation, which evolves into internalized self regulation as children develop (Lerner, 2011, p.31). These "Scaffolded" interactions can also be found between an individual's self-regulation and ecological contexts, such as child care settings, formal schooling, cultural influences, peer groups, and throughout the lifespan (Lerner, 2011, p.31).

Researchers have suggested that explicit instruction in self-regulation procedures is critical to effective strategy deployment, production of new metastrategy information, independent strategy use, maintenance, and generalization (Sawyer, et al., 1992, p.341). In a study done by Graham and Harris (1986) regarding teaching self regulation to students with learning disabilities, it was found that there were long lasting effects of direct explicit instruction with self regulation strategies. In successful teachings, each step of the strategy was presented and explained, the goals of instruction and the benefits of learning the strategy were clearly

stated, the steps of the strategy were memorized, and practice was continued until the strategy could be used independently (Sawyer, et al., 1992, p.341).). While short term improvement in self regulation might be found in non-explicit teaching, longer term effects (more than 4 weeks) occur when self regulation is taught explicitly. This is why the study of the Second Step is so valuable. We know that Second Step attempts to teach self regulation strategies explicitly, but is the program actually effective?

### **Social and Emotional Learning**

There are three interrelated components of social and emotional learning. The first component, emotional processes encompasses the skills children need to manage their emotions effectively and recognize the emotions of others (McClelland & Cameron). These skills included, but are not limited to, the ability to recognize and label emotions accurately, manage and regulate emotions, perspective taking, and empathy. The next component, social/interpersonal skills, encompasses the behaviors that help children and adults interact positively and effectively with others. Some examples of this include, recognizing and understanding social cues, correctly interpreting others behaviors, and having positive interactions with others (McClelland & Cameron). The last component of SEL skills is cognitive regulation. This focuses on working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control (McClelland & Cameron). These mental processes help children focus, switch tasks, listen to and remember instructions, and inhibit impulses. A child may use all of these skills interrelatedly.

### **Second Step**

One of the most widely disseminated SEL curricula in schools is the Second Step program, which was developed by Committee for Children (CfC), a non-profit organization in Seattle (Low et al., 2015, p.464). Second step is a skills-focused SEL curriculum that emphasizes directly teaching students' skills that strengthen their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems (Low et al., 2015, p.464). At each grade level the second step program begins with a focus on what they call Skills for Learning, which is where self regulation for learning is taught. The three aspects of self regulation that are focused on include: working memory, attention, and inhibitory control. Working memory involves the ability to remember and use information, such as a teacher's directions or the instructions for an activity (Low et al., 2015, p.464). Attention refers to the ability to direct, focus, and shift attention while managing or screening out distractions. Inhibitory control helps children stop automatic but inappropriate responses or actions and engage with appropriate behaviors such as raising their hand (Low et al., 2015, p.464). These skills are all assumed to contribute to successful learning. The Second Step program is differentiated and tailored to each grade level to meet the developmental needs of the students. The program includes scripted, teacher-friendly lesson cards; posters that outline learned skills; DVDs that illustrate particular skills; brain builder games designed to increase retention and use of skills; and a material binder that includes lessons for teaching and reinforcing skills, skills for learning cards, and home links for families (Low et al., 2015, p.464).

## **Second Step Studies**

In 2013 there was a study conducted to evaluate the main effects of Second Step on primary aged children's social competencies. The study focused on kindergarten - second grade aged students in 6 school districts throughout Arizona and Washington State. It took place over the course of a school year. The teachers used self assessments to rate their levels of fidelity with the program, while also using the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment—Second Step Edition, and behavior observations to monitor student data. Students in schools that implemented Second Step showed greater improvements in DESSA-SSE skills learning as compared to students in control schools, and greater reductions in SDQ emotional problems (Low et al., 2015). The study showed the internal validity of the program but also showed Second Step specifically produces larger differences between conditions among students with initially higher levels of problem behavior versus lower levels of problem behaviors. Second Step was generally producing larger effects on students who were in the lower half (50th) percentile of a social skills deficit compared to peers (Low et al., 2015, p.474). Specifically, positive effects were found for conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, prosocial skills, SEL skills, skills for learning, emotion management and problem solving—as reported by teachers (Low et al., 2015, p.474). All of these skills fall under the umbrella of different forms of self regulation. Although showing the strongest effect on students with higher social and emotional needs, overall the study reported between 15% and 60% of students benefited from the Second Step curriculum.

Another study examined the impact of the implementation of Second Step over the course of two years. The goal was to examine effectiveness as well as examine potential

differential response to Second Step based on pretest data, student sex, and grade level. The study included students in kindergarten through third grade in six school districts from a variety of rural to urban settings. The most growth in SEL skills was from students who began with a skill deficit, which indicated that Second Step may be more effective as an intervention tool than a prevention program (Low, et al., 2019, p.431). The study also did find that in a few instances, sex modified trajectories; only boys improved in conduct and peer problems, and both boys and girls showed improvements in hyperactivity, but boys more so (Low, et al., 2019, p.429). Again, these statistics are important because these behaviors and skills fall under the umbrella of forms of self-regulation.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Data Collection**

#### **Research Question**

How does the implementation of the Second Step curriculum impact self regulation in first grade students?

#### **Research instruments**

Second Step is a skills-focused social-emotional learning curriculum that emphasizes directly teaching students' skills that strengthen their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. During the duration of this research study, I taught one Second Step lesson each week. In conjunction with the Second Step lesson I modeled the strategies used in the curriculum as authentic self regulation learning experiences came up. I also used common Second Step vocabulary to reinforce self regulation strategies and redirect non-regulated behaviors. This provided the students with scaffolded experiences using Second Step self regulation strategies. Throughout this study I taught Second Step lessons 1-6. Lesson 1 focused on listening skills and strategies. Lesson 2's objective was focusing attention and ignoring distractions. Lesson 3 taught strategies and skills for following directions. Lesson 4 taught students how to use self-talk for learning and self regulating. Lesson 5 focused on being assertive. Lastly, lesson 6 began discussing feelings.

#### **Research Process**

The research study began in October 2020. The students began by taking a Second Step pre-assessment that measured their understanding and knowledge of Second Step skills and

strategies. The pre-assessment can be found in Appendix A. This gave a baseline percentage of the students knowledge prior to Second Step instruction.

Before Second Step instruction began, I observed and tracked levels of student self regulation during one whole group reading lesson. Self regulation during the group lesson were identified and tracked as either showing on task behavior, off task/non-disruptive behavior, or off task-disruptive behavior. After the first week of baseline observations, I began my Second Step instruction and continued to track self regulation during one whole group reading lesson per week.

### **Data Analysis**

After the six weeks of instruction, I administered The Second Step assessment once again. This provided data on whether or not students are able to identify self-regulation strategies after the 6 lessons. This data allowed me to analyze whether or not students made growth in their ability to identify strategies for self regulation. It also allowed me to see which students are able to identify self regulation strategies but are not using them consistently.

I also compiled the whole group behavioral observational data. This data paired with the Second Step assessment allowed me analyze the correlation between student self regulation behaviors and their knowledge and understanding of Second Step regulation strategies.

### **Ethical Issues**

Participation in this study posed no greater risk than that of a normal school day. It involved normal educational practices that did not impact the opportunity to learn or cause harm to students. The research studied the effects of a school mandated social-emotional learning curriculum called Second Step. Second Step was already implemented in all K-5 classrooms, so

the research was based on regular instructional strategies and curriculum. The assessment methods including the Second Step assessment and teacher observations are all also a part of our regular collection of student data. Data was stored in password protected files, and in locked school files. No identifying information about participants including school and student name, was shared in the study, but rather kept confidential through a code that only the researcher had access to.

### **Researcher Bias**

Researcher bias that I was worried about at the beginning of this study would be the want to portray positive results of the curriculum. This is because a teacher might link the results of this study to their instructional skills. However, researcher bias was mitigated in this study because I analyzed the Second Step curriculum and not my own instruction. I followed the curriculum strictly with fidelity and knew that the outcome of this research did not reflect my teaching practices but rather the Second Step program.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of my research was to analyze the impact of Second Step; a social and emotional learning curriculum; on first grader self-regulation. Self regulation allows children to control their behavior, remember instructions, focus their attention, and complete tasks in classroom settings. In researching the impact, I am able to inform my own instruction as well as share my results with others.

#### **Description of Data**

The students began by taking a Second Step pre-assessment, seen in Appendix 1, to quantify their baseline knowledge of the curriculum and self - regulation strategies that would be taught throughout the research. This pre-assessment was given during week one before any Second Step lessons were taught. The post test was given during week seven after the sixth Second Step lesson was taught.

Each week of research also consisted of collecting observational data during one whole group reading lesson. This data tracked the number of times a student was off task displaying disruptive behavior or off task displaying non disruptive behaviors. These specific behaviors were chosen to be observed because they are a common example of poor self regulation in the classroom and a common disruption to one's learning. Off task disruptive behaviors were considered any behavior that stopped the learning in the classroom. This includes any behaviors where I would have to stop instruction to address. Off task non-disruptive behaviors were considered any behavior that was off task yet didn't disrupt the learning in the classroom. This

often included behaviors that were able to be addressed and redirected quickly without interrupting instruction. Data below may be labeled as “A group” students or “B group” students. This is reflective of the hybrid model that our school was following due to the covid-19 pandemic. Our A day students attended school in person on Monday and Wednesday. Our “B day” students attended school in person on Tuesday and Thursday. When students would display off task behaviors they were given a reminder of an appropriate matching Second Step to help self regulate. The observational data includes behaviors of students who were off task but were able to be redirected and self regulated after one reminder, as well as students who would become off task multiple times throughout the reading lessons. Therefore the number of off task behaviors observed could be from one or multiple students in a given reading lesson.

Week one displays baseline data behaviors before any second step lessons were taught. During week two, students learned about listening skills. During week three, students learned about following directions. During week four, students learned about self talk for learning. During week five, students learned about being assertive. During weeks 6, students learned about identifying feelings.

### **How will teaching Second Step impact self regulation in first grade students?**

#### **Data Set One.**

Table 1 shows the Second Step assessment percentage scores. The Second Step assessment can be found in Appendix A for reference. The students were given the Second Step assessment two times throughout the duration of the study. Once at the beginning and once at the end. The pretest class average score was 75.5%. The post test average score was 81.5 %. Some students were not able to complete the post assessment due to reasons outlined later

Table 1

*Second Step Assessment*

Student #	Pretest Score	Post test Score
1	44%	N/A
2	89%	89%
3	89%	100%
4	89%	N/A
5	89%	N/A
6	89%	89%
7	89%	100%
8	89%	78%
9	56%	67%
10	78%	89%
11	0%	89%
12	67%	89%
13	67%	78%
14	100%	100 %
15	100%	100%

Note: This table shows student percentile scores on the Second Step assessment

**Data Set Two.**

Data set two shows off-task disruptive and non-disruptive behavior decreasing over time.

Table 2

*Off Task Disruptive Behaviors*

Students	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
Group A	2	3	2	0	1	1	1
Group B	2	4	3	2	2	2	1

Note: This table shows off task disruptive behaviors observed during one whole group reading lesson per week.

Table 3

*Off Task Non - Disruptive Behaviors*

Students	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
Group A	5	8	7	5	4	4	2
Group B	7	9	8	6	6	4	3

Note: This table shows off task non- disruptive behaviors observed during one whole group reading lesson per week.

**Conclusion**

The Second Step pre-assessment and post-assessment data shows that the class average score went from 75.5 % to 81.5 % . This means that at least 46% of the first grade students made

growth in identifying and understanding Second Step language and self regulation strategies. I say at least, because not all students were able to complete the post-assessment which I will explain below.

An exception to this trend is seen in Week 1. Week one disruptive behaviors were lower than the following weeks. I believe that this is because week one was the first time that the students were in the classroom in over 6 months due to the COVID 19 pandemic. After being out of school for so long and the context of our situation, many students returned to school scared, nervous, shy, and quiet. As time passed and students became more comfortable with social distancing, wearing masks, and school routines, they began to come out of their shell. Looking at data from week 2, off task disruptive behaviors decreased for both A & B groups by 1-2 occurrences per reading lesson. Off-task non disruptive behavior decreased by 3-4 occurrences per lesson. Non-self regulated behaviors gradually decreased over the course of the duration of the study.

A combination of increased knowledge of self-regulation strategies and less off-task behaviors over time shows that students were not only able to identify these strategies but use them during whole group learning time. I expected these results, as researchers have suggested that explicit instruction in self-regulation procedures is critical to effective strategy deployment, production of new metastrategy information, independent strategy use, maintenance, and generalization (Sawyer, et al., 1992, p.341). In each grade level of the Second Step curriculum the first unit begins with something called skills for learning. Specifically, the lessons in the first unit address three facets of self-regulation: attention, working memory, and inhibitory control (Low et al., 2015). Each of these lessons provided opportunities for teacher modeling,

discussions, and student practice. Throughout the day there were also opportunities to reinforce the Second Step strategies. For example, when students were displaying off-task behaviors, I was able to redirect them by modeling or reminding them of a Second Step self-regulation strategy. They would then try the strategy themselves. After the reminder, most were able to stay regulated for the remainder of the reading lesson, while a few students struggled to stay on task multiple times. This was also expected as all students self-regulation skills vary.

### **COVID 19 Impact**

While the research tools I used were adequate, I believe that the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic greatly effected this research. Due to the district following the hybrid model, I was only able to see the students in person two days a week. This means that I was only given two days a week to model and reinforce Second Step regulation skills in authentic situations. During a school year without a pandemic, I would have 5 days a week to reinforce Second Step self-regulation skills. If I had 5 days a week in-person with the students, I believe there would have been a greater opportunity for modeling, growth, and impact.

Towards the end of my research, when it was time to finish my data collection, I had anywhere from three to five kids out of school each day. Again, due to the pandemic there were many kids who had to quarantine anywhere from 14+ days. With many students out, my data regarding the number of disruptive behaviors could have been impacted or skewed. With less kids in the room, there might be less off-task behaviors. Although the number could be unaffected, we can't know for sure. The Second Step post-assessment data also reflects a chunk of students missing. These students were quarantined and unable to take their post assessment before my research ended. I chose not to try to give this assessment online, because the students

were not in a controlled environment where I could assure they were taking the assessment with fidelity. While the COVID 19 pandemic made my research challenging, overall my data still provides strong evidence that shows the Second Step SEL curriculum teaches students skills for self-regulation. This is seen through an increase in average assessment scores and a steady decrease in off task behaviors.

## Chapter Five

### Action Plan and Plan for Sharing

#### Plan for Taking Action

Through this research I have learned that Second Step increases self-regulation skills in first graders. Specifically, I have learned that explicit modeling of self-regulation strategies is effective in increasing self-regulation in first graders. This pushes me to continue with my Second Step instruction and dig deeper into my practices. When I first began teaching Second Step, it was easy for me to put it to the side when things got too busy, now that I see how impactful it can be - I plan to teach it with fidelity.

During the COVID 19 pandemic, there is much uncertainty of whether school will be in-person or in the distance learning model, and for how long. In order to be proactive I am going to focus on the implementation of Second Step in a virtual learning environment. This is a subject that might easily be thrown to the side during difficult times like this, but I know that this is when the kids will need it the most. My goal is to create ways to incorporate Second Step and self-regulation into virtual learning spaces. Beginning with identifying what self-regulation looks like online and figuring out the best way to teach Second Step online. I will first begin with familiarizing myself with the Second Step online resources, and then create lessons that are adapted to the virtual classroom.

My other action step I would like to take is to dig into the curriculum to ensure that all lessons are culturally responsive. I believe that it is important to examine even the most successful curriculum to ensure that it is meeting the needs of all students. There is a team in the

district who is currently working through analyzing the Second Step curriculum so I might be able to join them.

### **Plan for Sharing**

The first step in my plan for sharing is to set up a meeting with my school counselor. She is the person who introduced and coached me in Second Step, and so I believe that my research will be very impactful to share with her. The counselor and I will then work together to find the best way to present the study to my principal and leadership team.

Being on the school leadership teams gives me the opportunity to present my study to administrators, specialists, and grade level school leaders. I will share my research question, my methodology and findings through a presentation to the leadership team. We will be able to have a discussion surrounding the successes, challenges, and questions we still have about Second Step. Then, I will ask the team to start to ponder the idea of Second Step in a virtual environment. What does it look like? With many voices on the team, we will be able to discuss strategies and ideas that we can take back to our grade level teams, specialist teams, or present at a future staff development session.

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## Appendix A

1. When you need to focus your attention on your teacher, you can use your \_\_\_\_\_ \*

- a. Attentoscope



- b. Telescope



- c. Goggles



2. Click the picture that is NOT a listening rule: \*\*\* \*

- a. Voice Quiet



- b. Nose Smelling



- c. Body Calm



d. Eyes watching



e. Ears listening



3. When I use self-talk, I am talking to \_\_\_\_\_ \*

a. Myself



b. My friend



4. When you ask for something in an assertive way, you look like this: \*

- a. Heads up and shoulders back



- b. Head down



- c. Yelling at someone and squeezing your fists



5. When you understand how someone is feeling you use \_\_\_\_\_ \*

- a. Self-talk



- b. Empathy



6. Click the picture that shows the safe and respectful way to calm down when you have strong \* feelings.

a. Yelling



b. Hitting



c. Belly breathing



7. Dayveyon is so mad that Yengkong took his toy. He needs to clam down. Click the picture that \* shows the first thing he should do to calm down.

a. Say "I feel mad"



b. Put your hands on your tummy and say "Stop"



8. Click the picture that shows the fair way to play. \*

- a. Sharing the ball



- b. Taking the ball and playing by myself



9. You feel frustrated because you don't know how to do the art project. Click the solution to your problem that is safe and respectful. \*

- a. Tear up your paper



- b. Ask a friend for help

