Meeting the Public Policy Challenge of Diversity & Equity in Early Learning

A White Paper

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NOTES & DISCLAIMER

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Introduction

There is an urgent need for early learning and health systems public policy that addresses the needs of diverse young children effectively. Children from diverse families – families of color, immigrant families, and low-income families - are the fastest growing segments of the young child population in the country. At the same time, K-12 accountability-based education reform that has often failed to meet the needs of diverse learners is fast moving into early learning systems (Stipek 2006), generating pressures that could threaten system effectiveness for these very children.

This is also a significant moment in the history of our scientific understanding and socio-political concern about early childhood development and health (ECDH). Policymakers have access to the building blocks necessary to construct responsive and effective systems: research and existing early learning professional standards, community-based providers and teachers, and children eager to learn. The early learning system as a whole is currently positioned at an important moment of decision, one in which public policy may be used to support rather than detract from the success of diverse young children.

This white paper draws on the collective wisdom of national and local research, innovative policy designs, and promising interventions to address these issues both at the national policy level and through a case study analysis of diversity, equity and early childhood policy in New Mexico. The content presented here weaves together the latest research on racial and ethnic inequities in school readiness and education with policy innovations and recommendations that are grounded within New Mexico’s rich social and cultural fabric as well as its present political reality.

In April 2015, the RWJF Center for Health Policy at the University of New Mexico convened national and local researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to address a series of questions intended to provide insights on how to improve ECDH outcomes in the context of growing inequities related to early childhood health and education. The Symposium brought scholars together across multiple fields to deepen understandings of development and health; to make concrete connections between local, national and global early childhood policy initiatives; and to brainstorm about how to collectively integrate science/scholarship, practice, and policy.

The symposium addressed three critical questions related to issues of equity in early childhood development and health:

- Do current social policies regarding early childhood development, health, and education address issues of diversity, equity and social justice?
• What role can maternal and early childhood social policies play in decreasing poverty and increasing racial and ethnic inequities in all aspects of well-being?

• What role do political and social institutions play in perpetuating or decreasing disparities in health and educational outcomes among families or, in the best case, fostering resilience and flourishing for individuals, families, and communities?

In addition to hosting interdisciplinary research panels among national and local experts, the Symposium also facilitated a series of break out discussion sessions involving New Mexico policymakers, service providers, and community members. Facilitators explored these policy questions with 13 groups of symposium participants. Trained observers collected demographic information on each participant, documented emerging group dynamics, and recorded key topics that emerged during each one-hour session. After the sessions were complete, the research team used standard descriptive coding techniques to generate a thematic analysis of these sessions. A total of 87 individuals participated in this process.

Growing Diversity in the United States

Young children of color and those growing up in immigrant and non-English speaking households are the fastest growing groups in the young child population; they are also disproportionately from low-income households that make up the majority of children eligible for publicly-funded early learning programs. The population of young children in the U.S. has changed dramatically since 2000:

• From 2000 to 2013 the number of young children of color in the U.S. increased by 25 percent, so that children of color now make up 51 percent of the 20 million children under five years of age in the nation.

• From 2000 to 2013 the number of young children living with immigrant parents increased by 31 percent, so that 25 percent of children age five and younger in the U.S. now live with at least one foreign-born parent.

• Children of color make up 70 percent of children under five years of age living in poverty.

This dramatic change in the population of young children in the U.S. makes the dual issues of diversity and equity central in early learning, especially as concerns public programs that focus on serving young children from low-income households, like Head Start, state-funded pre-kindergarten, Child Development Block Grant-funded programs, and federal/state-funded home visiting programs. Children of color and those from immigrant families now make up the majority of the target population of these public early learning programs.
The Importance of Promoting Strong Early Learning Systems

Early learning is different from K-12 education in that it is predominantly voluntary, participants are young children who still spend most of their time at home with their families, and providers of services are often closer to the community. Thus the need for early learning programs to partner with diverse families, providers, and communities, and the opportunity to leverage strengths-based approaches, are much more salient than in the compulsory and often homogenizing K-12 system.

The challenge is to develop and support early learning systems that meet the needs of diverse children and their families on two fronts. First, we must ensure that high quality early learning services are available, accessible, and acceptable so that families will have every opportunity to voluntarily participate. And second, we must ensure that high-quality early learning services produce learning and contribute toward generating educational success for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

An Equity-Based Approach

Diversity and equity are related but distinct concepts. For purposes of this paper, diversity refers to racial/ethnic, language, nativity, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity among the children, families and communities served by the early learning system, as well as the providers who often make up the system. Equity refers to the value and goal we hold of equitable opportunities for all young children to learn and to be successful.

We acknowledge that equitable opportunities to learn have historically been denied to some children and communities and that structural inequities in the distribution of educational opportunities persist in many parts of the country today. Indeed, the majority of symposium participants suggested that structural inequities such as institutional racism, poor living conditions, unemployment, and rural and urban poverty are the leading threat to the long-term health and positive educational outcomes among poor communities of color. According to service providers and community members alike, it is critical to develop an early learning system that recognizes and remediates the historical traumas inflicted upon Native American and Hispanic communities in the Southwest.

The Intersection of School Readiness and Health Status Across the Life Course

Early cognitive development and early education are fundamental determinants of health across the life span (Fiscella and Kitzman, 2009; Cutler and Lleras-Muney, 2006). Less education is associated with earlier onset of chronic disease, disability, and declining functional status (Gottfredson, 2004; Fleishman, 2005). Education affects health by impacting future occupational status, income, neighborhood of residence, and wealth (Cutler and Lleras-Muney, 2006). In addition,
education affects health independently of socioeconomic factors (Backlund, Sorlie, and Johnson, 1999). It is strongly associated with a range of risk behaviors including smoking, diet, physical activity, early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, and crime (Winkleby et al., 1999; Lantz et al., 1998; Lochner, 2004; Lleras-Muney, 2005). Racial gaps in education also contribute to racial disparities in mortality (Lleras-Muney, 2005). Child poverty, low birth weight, and a lack of child health insurance largely explain racial disparities in adult health, and these effects are mediated through disparities in educational achievement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014; Wong et al., 2002; Johnson and Schoeni, 2011).

Racial and Ethnic Gaps in School Readiness

There are significant racial and ethnic disparities in school readiness among young children. School readiness is the state of development upon school entry that enables the child to be ready to learn. It involves the critical experiences provided by nurturing family relationships, the child’s skills at school entry such as reading, math, and language skills; and the child’s social-emotional development (Phillips and Shonkoff, 2000; High, 2008; Duncan et al., 2007; Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005). Research has demonstrated significant gaps in school readiness between Hispanic and white children. For instance, in 2012, New Mexican Hispanic families were 15.8 percent less likely to read to their children ages 0-5 compared to white families. Perhaps even more startling, Black families were 20.6 percent less likely to read to their children compared to white families (author tabulations, National Survey of Children’s Health, 2012).

Attending high quality preschool and pre-kindergarten can in some circumstances raise school performance. High-quality and culturally and linguistically responsive early learning can multiply the effects of later reforms by narrowing early achievement gaps and ensuring that children are fully prepared to learn and thrive academically, physically, socially, and emotionally. Long-term follow-up from randomized control trials and quasi-experimental studies show that high-quality early intervention programs reduce gaps in educational achievement and improve adult outcomes, including teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency, arrest, and earnings (Love et al., 2005; Campbell et al., 2002; Arnold and Doctoroff, 2003; Gray and McCormick, 2005).

Racial and Ethnic Educational Achievement Gaps

Achievement gaps are the systematic differences in academic achievement between groups of students. Research has demonstrated significant and persistent gaps in academic achievement between black and white students and between Hispanic and white students in elementary and middle school as well as in high school graduation rates. Using the most recent account of racial/ethnic achievement gaps from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), black-white gaps in reading and mathematics achievement persist ranging from 9.6 percent-11.7 percent of total
score, and Hispanic-White achievement gaps range from 8.5 percent to 10.9 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a, 2009b). Similar gaps persist in high school graduation rates with 85 percent of white students graduating nationally compared to just 68 percent of black students and 76 percent of Hispanic students (Kena et al., 2015). The increased national and state focus on educational accountability over the past two decades has not closed these gaps (Lee and Wong, 2004; Lee 2006). In fact, by some accounts the accountability movement in education exemplified by the federal No Child Left Behind Act has diminished rather than enhanced the capacity of K-12 educational systems to address persistent racial/ethnic and socioeconomic educational achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

The recognition that the gaps in educational achievement are outcomes that are the result in gaps in the input of educational opportunity, along with widespread dissemination of early brain development research, has fueled attention on early learning as a potential remedy to the seemingly intractable achievement gaps experienced by children of color and those from low-income households. Research confirms that gaps in learning opportunities do indeed begin to show well before kindergarten. Early learning research bears out the potential of high-quality early childhood education to make progress toward closing opportunity gaps experienced by children of color, and children from immigrant and low-income households (Burchinal et al., 2000).

Paradoxically, even while young children of color and those from immigrant families are among those at greatest need for high-quality childcare and early learning services, they often experience lower levels of access and variation in access. Among families eligible for low-income childcare subsidies, the most disadvantaged families are the least likely to participate – including black families and those in which the mother is non-English speaking (Johnson, Martin, and Broks-Gunn, 2011). For young children in immigrant families, barriers to childcare and early education are both structural (related to poverty) and related to parental status as immigrants, including language obstacles, bureaucratic complexity, and distrust of government programs (Karoly and Gonzalez, 2007).
For example, according to Mexican-immigrant parents that reside in a semi-rural community in New Mexico, utilizing high quality childcare involves much more than increasing the number of high quality childcare centers in low income areas in both rural and urban settings. According to these immigrants, the solution to improving access and high quality childcare is two-fold. First, Latino parents suggest that it is essential to build a childcare system that supports positive child-rearing traditions that already exist among Latino families. Second, immigrant communities suggest that local policy makers leverage existing local community networks to build trust and uptake in center-based childcare.

Public policy can be an effective tool to ameliorate some observed disparities in access to childcare and early education for special populations. For example, childcare subsidies increase the likelihood that young children with low-income parents will access non-parental care overall, and center-based care specifically (Greenberg, 2010; Ertas and Shields, 2012). Statewide universal pre-K programming as a policy approach appears to benefit Hispanic and black children the most (Gormley et al., 2005). And many states have implemented dedicated funding to greatly expand early childhood home visitation (Wasserman 2006).

Ecocultural Perspective

In this paper we argue for an ecocultural perspective in early learning (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2004) to build an early learning system that is responsive to both the needs and capacities of diverse children, families and communities. An ecocultural framework emphasizes the responsibility of the system, and of privileged individuals within the system, to prepare children for school success. Central to that responsibility is understanding, valuing, and instituting concrete methods for building on the capacities for learning that all children bring with them. An ecocultural perspective rejects deficit assumptions that underlie many of the current policies and practices aimed at addressing opportunity and achievement gaps experienced by children of color, non-English speaking children, and children living in poverty.
In pointing toward an early learning system that might better reflect the responsiveness inherent in an ecocultural perspective, we leverage two concepts prevalent in current early learning discourse: strengths-based approaches and resilience. The seeds of an early learning system that is more responsive to and ultimately more effective for diverse children, families, and communities may be found in these concepts.

**Strengths-Based Approach**

A strengths-based approach recognizes that no matter what risks or barriers children have experienced, they possess assets and strengths that can be leveraged to promote success. It cultivates a focus on “the personal strengths of individuals, the developmental supports and opportunities, and the environmental conditions and characteristics of families, schools, communities, and peer groups that mitigate and buffer adversity and promote healthy development and successful learning” (Truebridge, 2015). Strengths-based programs and practices intentionally seek out and mobilize child, family, and community strengths to create successful outcomes (Green, McAllister, and Tarte, 2004; Saint-Jacques, Turcotte, and Poulitot, 2009).

A strengths-based approach stands in stark contrast to a deficit approach, which locates the problem of low educational achievement in deficiencies among children and families. “Deficit ideology is a worldview that explains and justifies outcome inequalities – standardized test scores or levels of educational achievement, for example - by pointing to supposed deficiencies within disenfranchised individuals and communities” (Gorski, 2012).

Unfortunately, much of the public policy movement towards accountability and testing in K-12 education in the last two decades have perpetuated, either explicitly or implicitly, a deficit view of children and families of color, those living in poverty, and those who do not yet speak English. Scholars have documented the pervasiveness of the deficit ideology in education driven by the increase in testing and accountability (Truebridge, 2015; Dudley-Marling and Lucas, 2009), and find it is now reaching into the classrooms of kindergarten children (Yoon, 2014).

Professional early childhood educators have a strong tradition of acknowledging
and implementing strengths-based approaches to working with families. This approach likely originated in the subfield of early intervention for special needs children (Dunst et al., 1991), and is evident in contemporary early learning program standards and professional competencies (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). The challenge will be to support the systemic institutionalization of a strengths-based approach across early learning systems in the face of increased accountability and performance pressures.

**The Case of Language**

The approach to language for non-English speaking students may be seen as a case in point illustrating how a deficit approach may become institutionalized and contribute to persistent achievement gaps. Research has been clear for quite some time that dual-language instructional approaches that support development of language and literacy skills in a child’s home language while at the same time developing English-language skills are most effective at developing academic English skills, supporting long-term academic achievement, and maintaining a child’s protective connection to their parents (Collier and Thomas, 2004; Winsler et al., 2014). However, the increased move toward standardized testing and accountability in K-12 education, even in the early grades, wrought by No Child Left Behind and accountability-based state education reform efforts have pushed many districts to move away from dual-language instructional practices in favor of English immersion practices (Gandara and Baca, 2008; Menken, 2009). This seems rational if short-sighted. The need for children to demonstrate academic skills in third and fourth grade on English-language tests in order for schools and districts (and increasingly teachers) to demonstrate success creates clear incentives to move children to English quickly to improve their third and fourth grade test scores.

We see evidence of this same move beginning to reach into early learning, with states often assessing the early kindergarten language and literacy skills of non-English speaking children in English. Assessing language and literacy skills in English among non-English speaking students fails to assess a strength – the beginning home language and literacy skills that all children bring with them to early learning experiences. The inevitable low scores that result from this practice label children as deficient from the beginning of their educational career, and drive institutionalization of an educational practice (English immersion) that has been found to produce the least-desirable long-term academic results for English-language-learning students. Further, assessing non-English speaking students in English reveals a structural failure in K-12 education: the failure to build an educational system that actually meets the educational needs of these diverse learners.

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Promising Practices that Increase Parental Involvement and Advocacy in the Preschool Years

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors offers a viable solution that empowers Latino parents to utilize their cultural strengths to develop tangible strategies to reduce achievement gaps among Latino children. The national program has reached more than 22,000 families in 31 states and Puerto Rico. Abriendo Puertas includes a parenting skills and advocacy program developed by and for Latino parents of children ages 0-5. The model is flexible enough to allow local implementing agencies to tailor it to local needs and priorities. Based on its belief that a peer-based model is most effective and sustainable, the local New Mexico agency is implementing Abriendo Puertas as a peer-based training model to train community facilitators, parents receive a small stipend to facilitate parental training sessions. The program not only draws upon cultural strengths to improve parental involvement in the social emotional development of their children, but its principal aim is to harness parents’ self-understanding as change agents to improve the lives of their children.

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Program evaluations demonstrate that parental knowledge not only increases in the domains of language, health, and social emotional development of their children, but parents report more confidence in advocating on behalf of their children and understanding their rights as parents. According to Adrian Pedroza, Commissioner of President Obama’s Advisory Committee on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, and Executive Director of the Partnership for Community Action in New Mexico:

"Transformative is often used by families to describe their experience in the Abriendo Puertas classes we implement in New Mexico. The curriculum not only helps families gain knowledge around children’s early development, but it is also a tool for organizing and developing leaders in communities."

Perhaps most critically, and as a result of the initiative in New Mexico, an immigrant parent advocacy movement has emerged. This group is currently institutionalizing a formal cooperative that serves as an advocacy and advisory group to a number of federal, state, and private early intervention initiatives in New Mexico.
Resilience

Resilience is characterized as the adaptive ability to overcome adversity. In the early learning literature resilience has most often been discussed as describing behaviors or characteristics of the child and family, but increasingly scholars of early childhood development are recognizing that resilience is also a characteristic of the child’s developmental environment (Masten, and Obradovic, 2006), or perhaps more appropriately a characteristic of the relationship between the child and their context (Lerner, 2006). Some scholars contend that it is the quality of the larger context or systems with which the child interacts that accounts for the majority of child resilience (Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter, 2013).

Social environments that are inclusive and respectful of the racial/ethnic, cultural, and language background of child and family promote resilience. Among children of color, strong racial/ethnic identity, teachers who are culturally aware and trained to foster intercultural respect, and learning environments characterized by care, respect, and support are associated with better educational outcomes (Ungar, 2014). Additionally, among children from immigrant families, maintenance of home language while developing early English language ability is associated with resilience and positive social-emotional development (Oades-Sese and Esquivel, 2006; Espinosa, 2007). Taken together, this literature suggests that for children of color and those from immigrant and non-English speaking families, learning environments that value and respect a family’s home culture and language, and promote strong and positive racial/ethnic identities among children, contribute to the development of a child’s resilience, healthy social-emotional development, and learning success.

Strategies that promote two-generation programs for low-education, low-income families also bolster resilience-promoting social environments by improving the economic conditions of low income families (Shonkoff and Fisher, 2013; Hernandez and Napeirala, 2013). Two generation programs include policy interventions that support strategies such as high-quality home visitation and pre-K to third grade education in conjunction with job training for credentials that lead to high-wage high demand jobs for parents, and wrap-around family and peer support services that enable parents to access the benefits of early education and job training. Sector based workforce development for parents includes supporting economic development policies that build industries with well-paid jobs, well-defined pathways for improved income, and strategies that involve employers to ensure that participant’s skills meet hiring needs. Wrap-around services include adult education, peer-community building, cash transfers and access to health, nutrition, food and housing.
Federal policy strategies that potentially create the conditions for this integrated approach include blending federal funding streams to ensure intersectoral policy coordination and creating state and local agencies with authority over a range of funding streams to foster community-wide resilience. This movement towards enhanced service coordination broadens the scope of conventional, child focused programs to include the needs of caregivers, but the bigger challenge is to create a fully hybridized system that is focused on improving both the lives of children and adults (Shonkoff and Fisher, 2013).

Promising Practices that Create Pathways for Community Resiliency

At least at the micro level, there are instances in which local community-based organizations have partnered with the local business community, a variety of social service agencies, the criminal justice system, and early intervention strategies to improve the well-being of parents and their children. For instance, Fathers Building Futures is an economic development initiative in New Mexico that connects formerly incarcerated fathers “with their professional and civic promise” through a number of strategies. First, the initiative has worked with the local business community to employ and train formerly incarcerated fathers in a variety of businesses including woodworking, auto detailing and graffiti removal while simultaneously offering participants high quality home visitation services, case management, counseling and access to a therapeutic preschool for their young children. The promise of Fathers Building Futures is that this community-based organization is working to foster resiliency among vulnerable families by providing the structural supports necessary to help families overcome adversity related to poor economic prospects, substance abuse, and the stigma associated with incarceration.
Providers

Early learning providers and teachers that are close to the communities they serve represent a resource in building high quality early learning systems to meet the needs of diverse learners. Supporting community-based providers and teachers is one important and necessary component to producing early learning environments respectful of diversity of culture and language. Because families are more likely to access early learning opportunities that reflect the child’s home cultural beliefs and practices (Poureslami et al., 2013), families are more likely to trust and access providers in their own communities. However, it is often these very providers who are vulnerable to being pushed out of providing services as the pressure of accountability moves from K-12 into early learning.

Because early learning providers, teachers and staff serving marginalized families – families of color, those from immigrant backgrounds, and those living in poverty – are from the very communities they serve, they often have experienced or are experiencing many of the same challenges confronting the families they serve. These may include poverty, lack of English skills, and low levels of formal education.

These issues are especially acute for family home childcare providers, who are increasingly required to participate in state early learning quality improvements systems. Driven largely federal authorizing legislation, states have almost universally adopted tiered quality rating and improvement systems for family home childcare providers (QRIS Network, 2015). Early evidence indicates that the stress associated with changes being required as a result of the move to tiered quality rating may be driving providers serving disadvantaged communities out of the field, exacerbating access issues.

Often service to their communities is among the motivations that draws women into the work of family home childcare (Tuominen, 1998). However, family childcare workers are generally low-paid workers operating their childcare services as a small business, they often work in relative isolation from similar workers, and they experience substantial work-related stress and high rates of turnover (Whitebook, 1991; Rusby et al., 2013; Mueller and Orimoto, 1995). They have a need for training that is supportive, low-cost and accessible to them in the evening and on weekends (Rusby, 2002). Even in the face of such challenges however, research has found that those who experience support to develop a professional identity as early learning educators are more likely to provide quality care and less likely to exit the industry (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014).

The need to recruit and retain early learning providers and teachers from communities of color, immigrant communities and low-income communities is quickly becoming a central issue in implementing state and federal policies calling
for expansion of early learning systems across the nation to address the opportunity gap for children from these communities. In order to support the provision of resilience-promoting early learning environments then, we must support these providers, teachers, and staff who serve families of color and immigrant families.

**Promising Practices to Recruit and Train Early Learning Providers in Childcare**

In New Mexico, state policy makers have recognized this challenge. In order to improve the workforce quality and support the needs of family home childcare workers, the state is piloting a home visitation support program for home childcare providers. The state is contracting private, evidence-based home-visitation programs that typically serve parents to modify their interventions to work intensively with childcare workers. The program is designed to support and increase home-based childcare provider’s knowledge and support of children’s social and emotional development, to promote positive interactions between childcare workers and children, and to assist home childcare workers when challenging behaviors arise. In short, this initiative modifies successful early prevention strategies with parents to support and bolster the local community’s desire to utilize home-based childcare.

**Recommendations**

Overall, what is needed is public policy that supports the development of early learning systems that are at once responsive to families and communities of color and accountable for narrowing achievement gaps experienced by children of color, children from immigrant families,
and those from low-income families. Policymakers have access to the building blocks necessary to construct responsive and effective systems: research and existing early learning professional practices, community-based providers and teachers, and children eager to learn.

To this end, recommendations include:

1. Develop and implement early education accountability and quality standards and practices that explicitly incorporate strengths-based, resilience-promoting partnership approaches to working with children, families, providers and communities.

2. Develop and implement assessment systems that assess child strengths, consistent with current standards for professional early childhood practice, including assessing literacy and language skills in young children’s primary language.

3. Develop and implement systems of professional development opportunities for community-based early learning providers and teachers that are consistent, available and accessible, in terms of geography, scheduling, and language.

4. Build support systems for community-based early learning providers and teachers that both promote development of a professional identity and support provision of quality early learning as well as recruitment to and retention in the early learning field.

5. Develop implementation system capacity to critically examine evidenced-based early learning practices to determine if they have been tested with and are appropriate for young children in their jurisdiction, including young children of color and from immigrant families, those who do not yet speak English, and those from low-income families.

6. Develop implementation system capacity to support scale up and spread of evidence-based and best practices found effective with specific subgroups of young children of color and those from immigrant families (for example dual-language programming for children who do not yet speak English).

7. Develop data systems for service delivery, family satisfaction, and outcome metrics that disaggregate, monitor and are demonstrate accountability for outcomes related to communities of color, immigrant communities, children who do not yet speak English, and low-income children.

In addition, there is a need to develop and implement systems-level accountability metrics that reflect these priorities:

1. Small area, geography-based service penetration rates to measure access to early childhood development services for young children who are eligible for public services.

2. State plans for accessible, acceptable early learning services that include identification of high-need service areas - the most under-served communities of young children eligible for public services.

3. Recruitment and retention of community-based providers and teachers by race/ethnicity, languages provided, and location in identified high-need service areas.
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For this paper Dr. Ybarra reviewed and synthesized the literature, and crafted the arguments and recommendations.

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References


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