Experiential Knowledge and Project-Based Learning in Bilingual Classrooms

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Introduction

Culturally and linguistically diverse children deserve sophisticated and dynamic biliterate learning opportunities that integrate the children’s life experiences and keen intellects. Dynamic learning in early childhood classrooms, including progressivist pedagogical approaches like project-based learning, has been shown to facilitate academic achievement as well as high-level learning capabilities including critical thinking, agency, problem solving, and negotiation (Adair, 2014; Bell, 2010; Hyson, 2008; Katz & Chard, 2000). Too often, culturally and linguistically diverse children are offered learning opportunities that fall short of helping students achieve their potential or of validating their life experiences (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). Instead these children receive reductionist instruction characterized by limited, dull activities such as drills, isolated tasks, repetition, and memorization of material (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010).

Culturally and linguistically diverse children not only receive low-quality instruction; in addition, integral aspects of their lives such as language, culture, and home experiences are often regarded as lacking and needing to be “fixed” (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; González et al., 2005; Valencia, 1997). These deficit orientations infiltrate and taint curriculum and instruction, harming and suppressing students’ identities and learning opportunities (Delpit, 1995; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Valencia, 1997; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Most problematic is that these deficit orientations can be internalized by students, creating a harmful cycle, especially when it is the children’s own teachers who have lowered expectations for them because of the students’ cultural, familial, or linguistic differences (Delpit, 1995; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; McCollum, 1999; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). Under these circumstances, it is more difficult for teachers to learn about students’ lives outside school and about their families.

Using examples from a bilingual first-grade classroom in Colorado, this article details the ways in which teachers can both offer young children of immigrants opportunities for project-based learning and also attend to the students’ specific linguistic strengths and needs. These examples are meant to show
how project-based learning in bilingual classrooms can be an alternative to reductionist instruction and create a cultural connection between homes and schools.

**Project-Based Learning and Bilingual Education**

Project-based learning is a pedagogical and curricular approach that is guided by students’ inquiries and facilitated by the teacher (Bell, 2010), fostering students’ agency through high academic expectations and rich engagement while providing spaces for creativity and interdisciplinary explorations (Bell, 2010; Hyson, 2008; Katz & Chard, 2000). In contrast with traditional instruction, project-based learning can be a transformative, sustainable praxis that effectively engages teachers, students, and families in bilingual classrooms in meaningful ways. As a result, learning becomes grounded in students’ own experiences and interests (González et al., 2005; Hyson, 2008), creating spaces for possible connections between the classroom and students’ families and communities.

Project-based learning seems ideal for bilingual students because of its ability to provide many opportunities for sophisticated literacy and numeracy experiences as well as to connect communities and schools. Historically, however, progressivist pedagogical approaches have been instituted in bilingual classrooms without attention to already understood effective bilingual instruction practices, including explicit instruction (Genesee & Riches, 2006; Goldenberg, 2013; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Marcelletti, 2013; Tong, Irby, Lara-Alecio, & Mathes, 2008), scaffolded instruction (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010; Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006; Walqui, 2006), and meaningful interactions for developing oral language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee & Riches, 2006; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Marcelletti, 2013). Bilingual education scholars warn that pedagogical approaches developed within monolingual classrooms may leave out pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural considerations for emergent bilingual students, thus instruction in bilingual classrooms must remain authentic to the language of instruction and be tailored for bilingual learners (Escamilla et al., 2014; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Goldenberg, 2013). Consequently, bilingual teachers may feel hesitant to engage in such approaches, like project-based learning, concerned that those instructional choices may not be serving their students adequately. This article shows examples of how project-based learning can provide emergent bilingual students with deep learning opportunities that integrate research-based instructional approaches.

The concept of experiential knowledge (Solórzano, 1997) borrowed from Critical Race Theory (see also Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) offers a way to think about using active learning models, such as project-based learning, to support children’s cultural knowledge and life experiences while strengthening the
early literacy capabilities that bilingual learners need. Experiential knowledge validates the experiences of students of color and views embracing those experiences as critical for understanding the complex societal inequities that affect and surround them (Solórzano, 1997). Experiential knowledge is especially important for children from immigrant communities who face the risk of having their loved ones deported or of witnessing discrimination aimed at their families. It acknowledges and includes those experiences by privileging classroom practices—such as storytelling and having students share family oral histories, testimonios (testimonial narratives), and dichos (popular sayings)—that illuminate the authentic life experiences of those who have been historically marginalized and had the power of their voices silenced (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012; Saavedra, 2011; Sanchez, 2009).

There are four salient, positive aspects of explicitly drawing on young students’ experiential knowledge via project-based approaches: 1) it appeals to and fulfills children’s desire for agency and for authentic and meaningful learning, 2) it integrates children’s experiences into the classroom that are otherwise excluded from it, 3) it supports family collaboration, and 4) it challenges dominant ideology (Solórzano, 1997).

Biliteracy family projects that have experiential knowledge as a foundational pedagogical principle coupled with effective bilingual instruction intentionally create spaces where children use their own stories—the very parts of their identities that too often marginalize them—in classroom instruction. In addition, it can both provide teachers with a window into their students’ lives and allow children to bring their cultural funds of knowledge and their experiences—even difficult ones—into the classroom to raise critical issues that are at the core of a social justice orientation to learning and teaching. Through the combination of inquiry and agency that project-based learning presents, students and families have the space to explore and co-construct the stories of their choice.

In order to demonstrate what an experiential knowledge-based project might look like in an early childhood bilingual classroom, the remainder of this article details two family projects in a first-grade bilingual classroom in Colorado that used a holistic biliteracy framework for instruction in a paired literacy model, in which students receive literacy instruction in both languages beginning in kindergarten (Escamilla et al., 2014). I provide a description of the projects and offer examples of how they allowed students to receive bilingual instruction while still honoring the children’s agency, life experiences, and desire for sophisticated learning opportunities.
Elisa’s small hand held a bright and shiny yellow pebble; her classmates huddled closer for a peek at a precious piece of the famous statue of el venado (the deer). As part of the first family biliteracy project in Elisa’s classroom, her teacher, Ms. Diaz, had previously guided conversations regarding important events in her students’ lives. For this particular project, children were connecting their classroom literacy activities with their lives at home and in their communities to create a storybook centered on an experience that was special to them. Elisa had decided to focus on her visit to Mexico with her mother, during which she had gone with her godparents to see the colorful and striking statue of el venado in the high sierra of Tuxpan in the state of Jalisco. The statue is artfully made with colorful pebbles to mimic the beads that characterize traditional Huichol craftwork. Elisa had picked up a pebble that had fallen off the statue, and she was very excited to show it to the class. Elisa’s storybook project was not entirely joyful, despite her sharing happy experiences like seeing the statue of el venado, riding the bus, and feeding the chickens. It also revealed the sorrowful experience of traveling to see her dying grandmother, which was the main event that led Elisa to select her trip as the topic for the project and that motivated her inquiry, guided by her agency in deciding which elements of her journey to include in her storybook. Elisa’s sharing both the joyful and difficult aspects of her life was prompted by the biliteracy book project, which included multiple phases.

Phase One

The first element of the project was having students explore possible topics through brainstorming activities that included opportunities for students to dialogue with each other. Children engaged in oracy activities that have been found to be effective with emergent bilingual students (Escamilla et al., 2014; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Tong, Lara-Alecio, Irby, Mathes, & Kwok, 2008). These activities included using sentence structures and collaborative dialogue structures modeled by the teacher and myself to give students adequate language supports and to prompt dialogue. Sufficient time was provided for students working together to change partners as they practiced the language orally that they would then use in writing with their families. Too often, educators give writing assignments without first allowing students the opportunity to process and engage vocally.

As the class engaged in the activities, we followed a gradual release of responsibility approach, beginning with whole-group instruction. These opportunities for authentic interactions alternated between

1 All names are pseudonyms
Spanish and English across sessions. After these initial discussions, students compiled a simple written list of the most important events in their lives, including their rationale for their choices.

**Phase Two**

During the second phase, students took their list home in order to narrow it down by interviewing their families to get additional information. This began a co-constructive selection process for their project; it became an interesting task because it involved parents sharing important events in their children’s lives of which their children had no recollection. During the interviews, students used the same oracy sentence structures they had already practiced in the classroom. The children used the items on their written list as points for discussion with their families and then recorded the responses by theme on a graphic organizer, following a process that we had already modeled for them. Some students recorded the responses in words, some in sentences, and some in drawings. This tool was then used in the classroom the next day for an additional dialogue activity that provided students with a variety of linguistic structures to support them as they orally shared the information they had gathered from interviewing their families and as they responded to their peers.

**Phase Three**

The third phase of the project was a workshop-style gathering of students and families in the classroom to work on the project. This phase involved selecting two topics and then segmenting them into events to develop into storybooks (one in Spanish and one in English). We again modeled the process, using our own materials. Families and children employed another visual tool as a way to organize their decisions about how to both depict the events and draft their accompanying written descriptions. The students and their families negotiated the selections and the creation process, working mostly in Spanish; they also made an English version of the project based on a different experience. Together, they wrote and illustrated each page and then bound the pages into the finished storybooks.

**Phase Four**

The fourth phase involved students sharing their projects with their own class and reading them individually to children in a bilingual kindergarten class. In preparation for pairing each first grader with a kindergarten student, we once again modeled the process, including the kinds of questions students could use to engage their younger partners to prompt them to develop their own personal connections and insights.
The culminating event was a separate family gathering in the classroom. On that occasion, parents were guest readers of the books and guided brief conversations, adding to the information that the students had already shared through their storybooks.

How Did Children and Parents Respond to the Projects?

Some parents shared that these type of projects or assignments—especially in Spanish—were unusual at the school, and that they therefore felt nervous about the project at first. Elisa’s parents had moved from the town of Bolaños, Jalisco, to the United States about ten years ago. Her father works in construction and her mother in a factory that makes desserts. Only two parents from the 21 families that participated in this study had lived in the United States their entire lives. One family had arrived recently; the rest of the families had lived in the United States for an average of 14 years. Mexico was the country of origin of all the families, but all their children, except one, were born near their school in neighborhoods surrounding the industrial area of the city.

Elisa’s family stayed in close contact with relatives in Mexico, and her mother said that she was not surprised that Elisa chose the trip she made to Mexico when her grandmother became ill as the topic of her project:

Ella [Elisa] quería escribir de México, yo pienso que para ella fue muy importante…Ella quería mucho a mi mamá y mi mamá la quería mucho a ella. Ella estaba muy apegada con mi mamá. Mi mamá tenía muchísimas ganas de verla y pues desafortunadamente no la pudimos alcanzar con vida… Yo creo que todas esas cosas fue lo que la impulsó a ella [Elisa] a hacer el libro de ahí de México. [She [Elisa] wanted to write about Mexico, I think it was so important for her…She loved my mother and my mother loved her. She was very close to my mother. My mother was looking forward to seeing her, but unfortunately, we didn’t arrive in time to see her alive…I believe all these events prompted her [Elisa] to create her book about Mexico.]

Elisa’s mother shared that the factory where she worked did not give her permission to leave when she first learned that her mother was ill. Consequently, when she later received word of the prognosis that her mother had little time left to live, she took Elisa out of school and set out on the long bus trip to Jalisco. It is important to note that families in this community often take their children to Mexico for extended periods of time. However, the school sees this practice as highly problematic; parents confided during interviews that the school often sent intimidating truancy notices to them or called them in to receive a warning from the principal.
Elisa’s agency in selecting the topic for her project is profoundly significant and challenges the perceptions the school might have had about her experiences during her trip. From the school’s perspective, going to Mexico interrupted Elisa’s education by causing her to miss instructional days—instructional days that could be filled with phonics reading drills that include nonsense words and with written exercises using fill-in-the-blank booklets. However, by sharing her powerful experiences in Mexico, Elisa challenged the dominant ideology at the school that viewed families as irresponsible and indifferent to their children missing class time. Elisa’s book project was evidence that, on the contrary, families’ experiences in Mexico were rich in learning and facilitated the cross-generational transmittance of diasporic community knowledge (Urrieta & Martínez, 2011) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Via the family project, Elisa offered a counternarrative to the deficit assumption by using her voice and agency to depict her experiences. Accounts of many other experiences that similarly reflect a challenge to the dominant ideology emerged through the project.

For Elisa’s mother, it was equally important that her daughter embraced her culture and traditions, an important counterweight to the district’s history of discriminatory practices:

> Para mí es muy importante que a la niña le interesa mi país. Que le llame la atención convivir en México, estar con mi familia, y compartir cosas que pues para mí son muy importantes. Pienso que esa es una de las cosas más importantes para mí, que mis hijos convivan con las tradiciones que se tienen también en México. [For me it is very important to see my daughter’s interest in my country. To see that she likes to be in Mexico, to be with my family, and share things that are important to me. I think this is one of the most important things for me that my children also coexist with the traditions from Mexico.]

In this sense, family projects not only integrated children’s native language into their schooling but also fostered the children’s cultural simultaneity (Alvarez, 2017). Parents perceived their responsibility to transmit their own culture within an adverse environment and understood their role as facilitators of the development of their children’s evolving bicultural tapestry. These efforts by parents drew upon multiple forms of community cultural wealth in order to succeed in promoting their children’s well-being in both daily and long-term endeavors (Yosso, 2005). The collaboration between parents and children around topics that were dear to them and reflected experiences that were not often integrated into classroom instruction was a salient aspect of the family project. Embracing experiential knowledge is an assertion that these very experiences must be validated and perceived as a strength to be cultivated during the teaching and learning process.
Using experiential knowledge and a project-based approach facilitated a unique collaboration between parents, children, and the teacher. Observing interactions unfold among parents and children during the process of creating the storybooks was fascinating. A linguistic analysis resulted in the following findings: 1) parents were concerned with fostering their children’s agency and transferring responsibility to them during the creation process, 2) parents and children engaged in co-constructions from oral to written descriptions that followed a pattern of gradually increasing complexity, and 3) parents seized opportunities to embed life lessons in interactions during the children’s projects (Alvarez, 2017). For example, Elisa’s mother explained:

Yo le di a escoger y ella quería escribir de cuando fue a México. Le dije—bueno, ¿qué quieres escribir? Y ya ella me dijo que quería escribir de su madrina, de cuando fuimos a México que falleció su abuelita. En eso nos basamos para hacer el libro. Ya le iba yo más o menos escribiendo, yo escribí en una hoja, bice como el borrador. Yo fui acomodando abi de cómo va a escribirlo y ella lo hizo. [I gave her the choice and she wanted to write about her trip to Mexico. I told her—well, what do you want to write about? And she told me she wanted to write about her godmother, when we went to Mexico when her grandmother passed away. We focused on that to make the book. And so, I would write on a paper, I made like a draft. I organized on there what she wanted to write about and she created it.]

This description is representative of the cases analyzed; parents very naturally gave children choices about what they wanted to write and co-constructed written descriptions from the children’s ideas—opportunities that are often absent in traditional instruction dynamics in classrooms that serve culturally and linguistically diverse students. Parents continuously transferred the responsibility for the project to the child in subtle ways, as can be seen, for example, when Elisa’s mother said “y ella lo hizo” [and she created it]. It was important for parents that the storybooks were created by the children with their help, rather than the other way around.

The possibilities are extraordinary when classrooms facilitate choice, agency, and inquiry for children, just as their parents very genuinely did during the process of creating the books. There were also many rich conversations and much facilitation of the students’ agency as parents and children collaborated on the projects. Figure 1 displays a few pages from Elisa’s book about her trip to Mexico as well as a photo of Elisa showing her valued keepsake from statue of *el venado*, the pebble she brought to share with the class when she presented her project. The first page describes the reason for her trip to Mexico and is illustrated with a picture of the bus that took her there. The second page describes her day trip to the statue of *el venado* and includes an illustration of Elisa visiting the statue on the hill.
Why Were the Projects Important for the Children and Families?

Elisa’s school is in an urban district that serves an immigrant community living in mostly low-income neighborhoods that encircle an industrial area of a city in Colorado. The district had eliminated bilingual education programs eight years earlier and had recently begun implementing bilingual education programs again. That was an important development in light of the effect that the restrictive and oppressive district policies had on families and students in this community. In addition, there had been multiple complaints of this district as a hostile environment toward Latinx students and families, as reported and investigated by the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education. The final report concluded that there were several hostile and discriminatory practices by the district directed at this community, including opposing the use of Spanish in school.

Elisa’s mother was glad to hear of the district’s recent reinstatement of bilingual programs and recalled how Elisa attempted to read in Spanish at home during her kindergarten year, undeterred by the English-only instruction she received at school. As a first grader, Elisa was finally receiving instruction in her own language. Undertaking a biliteracy family project that authentically combined family participation, children’s agency, and families’ experiences to produce an artifact that honored their language and lives became a process of validation and healing in Elisa’s classroom.

The books that were produced highlighted the potential of project-based instruction to provide insights about families’ daily engagement with their children, children’s home knowledge, various aspects of children’s identities, and parental strategies to navigate the school environment. For example, Elisa’s mother shared stories about her job at the factory to teach Elisa about unjust situations; she boldly voiced criticisms, including of the time that she was not given leave to visit her ailing mother in Mexico, preventing her from arriving before her mother’s death.
Some educators and institutions are unaware of how parents prepare their children for the challenges and inequities that the parents themselves have faced and anticipate their children will confront as well. Educators may also avoid discussions of children’s experiences with immigration and border-crossing, for fear those topics may be too sensitive or controversial (Gallo & Link, 2016; Mangual Figueroa, 2016). It was quite significant that the family projects opened a space for children and families of immigrant backgrounds to voice the experiences, knowledge, and community capital used to survive and navigate these daily realities. This is of utmost importance, given the many negative views educational institutions hold of immigrant families and of their parenting skills, often trying to “educate” parents (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; López, 2001; Valdés, 1996). The artifacts created had a visible and symbolic space in the classroom and in instruction, in many ways challenging the dominant ideology and promoting a social justice orientation in this adverse environment.

Parents often expressed their happiness with the shift back to bilingual education in their children’s district. They also noted that biliteracy family projects were uncommon, but welcomed. When asked about her daughter’s experience creating the storybook about her trip to Mexico, Elisa’s mother said:

_ella nunca ha escrito oraciones, había copiado cosas pero nunca se había puesto a pensar cómo hacer un libro para platicar mi historia. Se me hizo como muy interesante el hecho de que le dejaran esa responsabilidad a un niño de pensar cómo hacer un libro de cosas que a los niños les interesan y les llaman la atención... Yo creo que a la niña le ayudó a desarrollar un tema como persona. Le digo, a ella nunca le habían dejado una tarea así, ni contar una historia o algo de su vida entonces a mí me gustó mucho. Yo veo la emoción de ella por hacer su libro. Lo que más me gustó fue ver su cara de emocionada. [She had never written in sentences, she had copied stuff but she had never had to think how to create a book to tell her story. It was interesting to me that they would leave this responsibility to a child to create a book about things they are interested in and that captivate them…. I think this is helpful for her to develop a topic as a person. I’m telling you, she had never been assigned a homework like this, or asked to tell her story or something about her life, so I like it a lot. I saw her excitement to create her book. What I enjoyed the most was seeing the excitement in her face.]

Elisa’s mother offered a critical insight when she mentioned that Elisa’s writing opportunities had been limited to copying material and that Elisa’s own life experiences had not been taken into consideration before. This is an example of another salient aspect of integrating experiential knowledge in a project-based approach, noted earlier: it appeals to and fulfills children’s desire for agency and authentic and meaningful learning.
The Next Project: *Les presento mi vida*

Biliteracy family projects are meant to have a prolonged use in the classroom, so that projects children create based on their experiences continue to be incorporated in learning and instruction throughout the school year. For the next project, families and children developed two timelines: one of the child’s life, depicting major milestones or events, and another of the child’s envisioned future, showing the major goals the child hopes to accomplish. The timeline project followed phases similar to the storybook projects, which included many opportunities for dialogue and exploration.

Elisa continued to share the importance of her family as she worked on her projects. She exhibited a deep-seated desire to maintain her connection to Mexico and her relatives there; for example, she included her longing to travel to Mexico to visit her grandparents as an event in her timeline of her envisioned future, as shown in the larger images of that timeline in Figure 2. Figure 2 also depicts the Spanish version of Elisa’s project and the entry in her future timeline in which she expresses her aspiration to become a veterinarian and open her own pet clinic.

![Figure 2. Elisa’s timelines.](image)

Better and more nuanced understandings of immigrant families and their life experiences can yield
meaningful relationships between schools and homes and increase reciprocal learning opportunities (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). The use of biliteracy family projects is a promising practical approach that integrates family engagement at the classroom level without compromising the quality of instruction; indeed, it enhances pedagogy. Additionally, such projects give students the opportunity to share their lives with each other in the classroom, contributing to a sense of community (see Figure 3). Elisa noted:

*Siento que los niños van a escuchar muy bien mis libros. Esas historias son mis favoritas y yo creo que a los que van a México también conocerán ese lugar del venado y yo quiero compartir el lugar del venado con todos. Cuando voy a ver el venado puedo ver todo México.* [I feel that children will listen very well to my books. These are my favorite stories and I think that those who go to Mexico will know the place of the venado and I want to share this with everyone. When I go to see the venado I can see all of Mexico.]

Elisa predicts her classmates will enjoy her projects, and she is particularly excited to share her visit to the statute of *el venado*. She also acknowledges that some of her classmates, like her, travel to Mexico and suggests they visit *el venado*, expressing her knowledge about the shared border-crossing experiences of her classmates and extending her solidarity. This exemplifies the communal knowledge that children share regarding immigration, which is commonly excluded from the classroom. Through her project, Elisa reclaimed and integrated this important and much needed conversation.

Elisa was already planning her next project on the topic of *Día de los Muertos* to honor her late grandmother and the many supernatural stories she learned from her, including the legend of *la Nahuala*. It is evident that when children are given the opportunity to explore their experiences and use their intellect, guided by their agency, the outcomes are fascinating.

*Figure 3. Sharing the projects.*
The Key Place for Experiential Knowledge and Project-based Learning in Bilingual Classrooms

Immigrant children’s lives are complex and comprised of experiences that are not confined by linguistic or cultural borders. Insisting on artificially separating the various aspects of children’s worlds or crafting prescriptive curricula that treat children’s experiences as peripheral to the classroom defeats the purpose of strength-based pedagogical approaches and a social justice orientation. Such educational equity efforts must begin with the children’s experiences and be driven by their agency and self-directed engagement with their own learning. Project-based learning that draws on children’s experiential knowledge and integrates quality biliteracy instruction is a powerful and promising pedagogical approach in bilingual classrooms.

In addition, as noted earlier, biliteracy family projects can offer analytical opportunities for educators to gain knowledge of the families they serve. There is a dire need to help teachers gauge such understandings in order to link strength-based pedagogical theories and inclusive family engagement perspectives to instructional practices. It is through transformative practices that educators can resolutely disrupt deficit views of Latinx immigrant families; project-based learning that involves families opens pathways to such opportunities.

To summarize, educators in bilingual classrooms should work to:

1) Create a dynamic process between the classroom and homes that involves children, families, and the teacher. View the creation process as a co-construction across settings and among participants.

2) Include plenty of opportunities for children to engage in discussions and express their ideas during all phases of a project. Plan effective approaches that focus on explicit language instruction and oracy development in both languages (see Escamilla et al., 2014).

3) Plan variations of a project in each language without duplicating. Think of ways to extend a project across languages that complement each other.

4) Take the opportunity to learn from and about students and families. Engage in thoughtful analyses of the experiences depicted in projects to guide future instruction and planning.

As I investigated the artifacts produced through these projects as bridges to integrate strength-based pedagogy and family engagement, I assumed a position of utmost respect and admiration for the families who participated, most of whom have endured restrictive language policies, hostility, and
adversities. My commitment to improve the educational experiences of immigrant children is deeply rooted in advocacy for educational equity and social justice for students and families from diverse backgrounds. In the current political climate that demeans diversity, the imperative to restore morale and embrace bilingualism and asset-based orientations is greater than ever.
References


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