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**Windows and Mirrors in Latino Children's Literature: A History and
Analysis of the Latino Cultural Experience**

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Author Note

Priscilla K. Delgado is a doctoral student of Literacy in the School of Education at St. John's University, New York City. Her research and writings focus on culturally relevant literature, diversity in children's literature, and best practices for English Learners with Latino backgrounds. Priscilla earned a Master of Science degree in Information Studies from The University of Texas at Austin and a Bachelor of Science degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a specialization in Bilingual Education from Texas State University.

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2019. She is a 2004 Rockefeller Brothers Fund Fellowship recipient and a 2007 American Library Association Spectrum Scholar.

The author acknowledges that use of the “@” in the third paragraph is intentional.

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Abstract

This article discusses material about children's books that reflect the Latino cultural experience. The need for windows and mirrors in children's literature is addressed, followed by a review of three Latino children's book awards that recognize exemplary literature that provides such windows and mirrors. A content analysis of Latino children's books published in the past decade identifies common themes in Latino children's literature, followed by examples of specific interactions and responses to these books with Latino children, pre-service teachers, and educators. A brief qualitative study is described involving the use of a recently-published Latino children's literature title with university students. This article offers information to K-12 teachers, librarians, and professors in teacher preparation programs in using books with children that align with the Latino cultural experience.

Keywords: Latino, children's literature, cultural experience

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Windows and Mirrors in Latino Children's Literature: A History and Analysis of the Latino Cultural Experience

In recent years, the need for mirrors and windows in children's literature has become increasingly apparent (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). This concept was first brought to light by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, whose 1990 article, "Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors," described the need for children to see themselves, as well as learn about other lived experiences, through the books they read. There has been a slight increase in publication of Latino children's literature, but there are still very few books that reflect the Latino experience. Content analyses of published Latino children's literature highlight the commonalities in these books as well as the trends that publishers are following. The use of Latino children's literature goes beyond Latino children—studies have been conducted involving Latino parents, pre-service teachers, and college students' use of Latino children's literature (Hibbs, 2016; Brown, Gilbert, & Mistry, 2017; Iwai, 2017; Wessels & Trainin, 2014). This examination of the perceptions and impact of Latino children's literature when being used by different groups has made respectable strides in this area of research.

Historically speaking, there has been a gradual increase in the publication of Latino children's literature over the last fifty years, evolving from non-fiction texts about Latino countries to storybooks that reflect authentic cultural experiences (Naidoo, 2011). Today, there is a greater emphasis placed on high-quality Latino children's literature in both small and mainstream publishing companies, but there are few of these books being published. Very few Latino-themed books have won the Caldecott or Newbery Award. There are various book awards specifically for Latino stories, and many of the award-winning books depict the challenges that Latino children, particularly immigrant children, might face at school, at home, or in society in general (Gomm, Heath, & Mora, 2017). Considering that there are so few Latino children's titles being published annually, this is beneficial in that children have access to books that may reflect their personal situations. These books are indeed providing mirrors for Latino children, and windows for other readers.

In hopes of clarifying any ambiguity, the term *Latino* in the phrase *Latino children's literature* refers to the cultural experiences of people who identify as Latino in the United States. *Latino* is a broad term that includes people who are descendants of various Latin American countries including (but not limited to) Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and Ecuador. The term *Latino* has also taken on variations as of late, with spellings designed to be gender-inclusive such as *Latin@* and *Latinx*. For purposes of this article, the term *Latino* will be used, while acknowledging that the aforementioned spellings are also appropriate and are used to refer to the books we are discussing.

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This article will first cover the history of Latino children's literature and will provide an overview of three Latino children's book awards. An analysis of the common themes in Latino children's literature, as well as a summary of interactions various groups have had with these books, will also be discussed. A qualitative study that was conducted in a university class with a recent Latino children's book award winner will be described.

History of Latino Children's Literature

While the last 100 years has seen a gradual increase in Latino children's literature in the United States, a strong evolution of this type of book started during the 1960s, with an increase in quantity and quality into the 21st century. The 1920s and 1930s had very few Latino children's books published, and those that were published depicted exotic stories from Latin-American countries and were written by non-Latino authors (Naidoo, 2009). The 1940s and 1950s continued with this trend of sparse books reflecting the Latino culture, and books that did, presented the culture as something foreign, as in a study of the neighbors of the United States. Books published in the 1960s that depicted the Latino culture demonstrated ethnocentrism: Garza de Cortes (2009) identified books that carried plots of young Spanish-speaking children being perceived as *bad* due to their lack of the English language, and their behavior only improved once they learned English. Other books published during this decade demonstrated Latino characters being incapable of solving their own problems, with Caucasian characters providing the solution and salvation. The 1970s and early 1980s continued with a small sample of Latino children's literature being published, most of which was problematic or stereotypical, but a drastic shift took place in the late 1980s (Moore and MacCann, 1987).

The Council on Interracial Books for Children, formed in 1965 in an effort "to promote a literature for children that better reflects the realities of a multicultural society," (Social Justice Books, 2019), conducted several studies on the publishing trends of Latino children's literature and identified Anglo ethnocentrism, gender stereotypes, and historical inaccuracies in these children's books (Nilsson, 2005). Perhaps as a result of these findings, a trend of Latino children's books written by Latino authors emerged, as well as a greater amount of small press publishing companies that specialized in or featured Latino children's books. Although there was an increase in quality, the quantity of Latino children's books remained the same. In an effort to increase the number of books being published, three Latino children's book awards were founded in the 1990s, which will be described in depth in the next section.

The 2000s and 2010s have seen a continued gradual increase in the quantity and quality of books being published, with many major U.S. publishing companies now including books that reflect the Latino culture as well as books that are bilingual and exclusively in Spanish. In looking back over the past 100 years,

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tremendous advancements have been made in this genre of children's literature; however, Latino children's literature still remains a minute percentage of books being published annually.

Latino Children's Literature Book Awards

The 1990s saw a tremendous effort in recognizing exemplary Latino children's literature with the creation of the Américas Award, the Pura Belpré Award and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, which are still annually recognizing outstanding contributions to children's literature.

Américas Award

In 1993, the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP) founded the Américas Award in an effort to recognize authors, illustrators and publishers that have produced quality children's and young adult books that portray Latin America, the Caribbean, and/or Latinos in the United States. They hope that "by linking the Americas, the intent is to reach beyond geographic borders, as well as multicultural-international boundaries, focusing instead upon cultural heritages within the hemisphere" (Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs, n.d.). Criteria for the award include publication the year prior to being considered, the book must be in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or an indigenous language, and the book must have been published in the United States. The award's website includes teaching guides for their winning titles. Up to two titles may be given the award each year.

Pura Belpré Award

Established in 1996, the Pura Belpré Award is given to a Latino/a author and illustrator "whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth" (American Library Association, 2019). The award is named after Pura Belpré, the first Latina librarian employed at the New York Public Library. The Pura Belpré Award is co-sponsored by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), and by the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking (REFORMA), an ALA affiliate. For a book to be considered for this award, it must have been published in the United States during the preceding year, the author/illustrator must be a citizen or resident of the U.S. or Puerto Rico, and may be published in English, Spanish, or be a bilingual/dual-language text. Originally a biennial award, it is now given annually and recognizes award winners and honor recipients.

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Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award

Sponsored by Texas State University, the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award was created in 1995 to recognize authors and illustrators whose works portray the authentic Mexican American experience. Named after distinguished alumnus and educator Dr. Tomás Rivera, the award includes two categories—works for younger readers (ages 0 to 12) and works for older readers (ages 13-18). Criteria for the award focuses specifically on authentic, positive portrayals of the Mexican American experience, and books must have been published no more than two years prior for consideration. Their website asserts that the award has two committees: a regional committee that reviews the initial set of nominated books and narrows down the list, and a national committee that selects the final winners (Texas State University, n.d.)

It is interesting to note that these three awards have some overlap; certain books have received two or more of these awards over the years.

Common Themes in Latino Children's Literature

In the past two decades, there have been numerous content analyses conducted on Latino children's literature (Barrera & Quira, 2003; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Domke, 2018; Gomm, et al., 2017; Knepp, 2011; Knepp, 2012), many of which have identified resounding themes from the published titles. The following are the two most commonly identified themes, with an explanation of each.

English is Privileged

The first common theme among Latino children's literature is that there are several manifestations of the privileged status of the English language. The word *privilege* is used here to provide emphasis of the significance given to one language over the other. Many of the texts that were analyzed in these studies were written mostly in English, but included some words in Spanish, whereas others were published in bilingual/dual-language format, meaning that the text was in both Spanish and English. In bilingual books, the text in English is nearly always on the left side of and/or at the top of the page, with the Spanish text either underneath the English or on the opposite page in a double-page spread. Considering that we read in English from left to right, top to bottom, this text layout of English first has the potential of sending the message that English is more significant by being presented first (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). Domke (2018) noted that in bilingual/dual-language books, if there were additional text included in the book's illustrations, there were more words in English than in Spanish, further indicating the sense of English privilege.

The use of words also identified a privilege of English over Spanish. If Spanish words were used in English-written Latino children's literature, they were often superficial terms that appear to be added merely to enhance the cultural flavor

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of the text (Barrera & Quira, 2003). Often, kinship terms related to family such as *abuelo* (grandfather) and *mami* (mother) were used, and usually after the words were introduced in the text (Braden & Rodriguez, 2018). Domke (2018) studied bilingual/dual-language books published between 2013 and 2016 and found that 58% of these titles included language-mixing between the two languages, meaning that the Spanish text had English words sprinkled in and vice-versa. Despite this printed version of code-switching, the English text was nearly always in bold print, first, and/or higher on the page, with Spanish below or next to it. Domke's comparison of printing styles among various publishers also revealed that, regardless if the text was mainly English or bilingual/dual-language, texts tended to privilege English.

Immigration

The second theme pertains to immigration, although not all Latino families are immigrants. Many have been in the United States for generations. That being said, there has been a spotlight on Latino immigration, and it is a relevant, timely topic in Latino children's literature and in providing services and education for Latino families. The theme of immigration was prevalent in many of the recently-published titles as well as in the research studies that were reviewed for this article. The findings of the research studies will be explored in this section.

Davila, Nogueron, and Vasquez-Dominguez (2017) implemented a program for families at a local public library that was open to anyone but was geared toward Latino families. Although they were not aiming it specifically for immigrant families, those that participated were predominantly immigrants. This program was designed to provide literacy instruction and strategies for parents to help their children succeed in school and be able to read at home together. A result of the program was that participating families were introduced to other families, as well as the public library and community programs and services available to them. The program fostered a support network for immigrant Latino families in that community.

Osorio (2018a and 2018b) conducted studies using Latino children's books within her second grade bilingual classroom. Although one study focused specifically on stories from the border (Osorio, 2018a) and the other study focused on selecting different types of Latino children's literature for reading culture circles (a humanizing pedagogical approach using the codification of generative themes) (Osorio, 2018b), a resounding theme from both studies centered on the dialogue that came from reading children's books that pertained specifically to crossing the border (Osorio, 2018b). Although most of the students in the participating class were born in the U.S., many of their parents and families had crossed the border. The literature led to various conversations in which students verbalized their fears

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and concerns over immigration and being “sent back to their home country” (Osorio, 2018a, p. 99).

Iwai (2017) conducted a study derived from a multicultural children's literature unit with pre-service teachers in an upper-level education class at a university. Throughout the semester, students read and critically analyzed various multicultural texts (including, but not limited to, Latino children's books). Among the pre-service teachers in Iwai's class, the theme of immigration was not lost on them. Some of the multicultural titles used in this course reflected Latino immigration issues, which provided insight to the pre-service teachers, who recognized these are topics they would likely encounter with future students once they entered the teaching profession (Iwai, 2017).

As of this writing, the topic of *crossing the border* into the U.S. is something heard daily in the news and seen regularly on social media. The U.S. is made up of immigrants, and this issue will likely not go away anytime soon. Being cognizant of the population being served in outreach and literacy programs will strengthen those programs and build deeper relationships between Latino families and educators.

Interactions with Latino Children's Literature

The following examples illustrate the usage and impact of Latino children's literature with different groups: elementary school students, university students and pre-service teachers, and parents and families of elementary school students. This section concludes with an analysis of the understanding of cultural identity among these groups after having interacted with Latino children's books.

Elementary School Students

Although there is minimal research on the use of Latino children's literature with elementary school children (possibly due in part to the general lack of this type of literature), studies do indicate the positive response children and educators have when using these books (Davila, Nogueron, & Vasquez-Dominguez, 2017; Osorio 2018a; Osorio 2018b; Wessels & Trainin, 2014). Many Latino children and their families face issues with poverty, immigration, language barriers, and perceptions of inferiority in being part of an underrepresented group. Use of Latino children's literature in the classroom allowed students to tackle and discuss issues that are typically reserved for adults. The books provided mirrors into their lived experiences (Osorio, 2018a). Moreover, culturally relevant literature allowed students and the teacher to learn and grow together. In Osorio's classroom, use of culture circles and Latino children's books led to meaningful conversations and lessons. Blurring the lines between teacher and student roles, including literature that reflected students' lives, and promotion of critical consciousness were among the findings. Interactions in culture circles differed from discussion of stories in

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basal anthologies, which more often than not *do not* reflect diverse characters (Osorio, 2018b).

Pre-Service Teachers

Learning about Latino culture and engaging with Latino children's literature go beyond the K-12 classroom. Iwai (2017) provided insight on the use of multicultural children's literature, including Latino children's literature, among pre-service teachers. Increased diversity in children's literature would yield more representation and understanding, and this type of pre-service educator preparation is necessary since teachers are very likely to work with multicultural students throughout their careers. Although data from this study revealed positive attitudes and eagerness toward multicultural children's literature, these pre-service teachers did not engage with Latino children during the course of this study, so it may be presumptuous to make those assertions considering that they had not yet put their learning into practice.

University Students Studying Spanish

Even collegians taking a Spanish course learned to recognize and appreciate the cultural identity in Latino children's literature. Sophomore and junior level students read two Spanish books in their class with themes of cultural identity and went on to write a paper analyzing the books and their perceptions of Latino children's literature (Hibbs, 2016). The students' essays indicated that they recognized similarities between the books they read and their own upbringing and experiences. This semester-long study revealed that many coming-of-age occurrences are not exclusive to any one culture or ethnicity, and that there is a deep sense of pride in one's culture, a pride that was evident in the texts and was recognized within the college students themselves based on their own life experiences.

Parents and Families

A large amount of research on Latino children's literature focuses on family literacies, which is a resounding theme in the Latino cultural experience. The Family Literacy Project (Wessels & Trainin, 2014) underscored the importance of strong reading skills and gave parents the opportunity to learn and understand the teaching methods being used with their children in the classroom, utilizing culturally relevant books. Brown's (2016) Story Nights study involved the researcher taking book baskets to one family's house for literacy-based activities, and sought to find how families connected with and constructed knowledge from Latino children's bilingual books. A bilingual family literacy program (Davila, Nogueron, & Vasquez-Dominguez, 2017) noted the limited amount of culturally relevant Latino children's literature in publication, which could eventually bring these types of programs to a stand-still; what happens when all the books have been read? The aforementioned studies' data indicated new learning and positive

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reactions to the activities used *during* the study, but did not provide follow-up data, so it is difficult to understand the full effects of these projects as well as any long-term impact the literature and teachings had on the participants.

Understanding of Cultural Identity in Usage of Latino Children's Literature

A resounding theme in Latino children's literature is the celebration of cultural identity. Family programming designed specifically for Latino, Spanish-speaking families included heavy use of books that reflected the Latino experience; those stories often fueled the learning that was the focal point of the family programming. In the Family Literacy Project implemented by Wessels and Trainin (2014), the inclusion of culturally relevant books had multiple results. The book choices provided families with connections to their culture; the books provided more opportunities to support their children academically and experience a sense of pride in their cultural identity reflected in the books. In addition, when given the choice, books that reflect the Latino experience were preferred over translated versions of classic English texts (Davila et al., 2017). Although many classic children's books originally published in English have been translated into Spanish, they still do not provide the cultural relevance that books with Latino characters and themes have. The selection and use of Latino literature were found to make more meaningful connections with parents and children in family programming.

Osorio (2018b) conducted a quasi-experimental, qualitative study on the use of culture circles in the classroom: students were allowed to select a culturally relevant book of their choice and took part in culture circle meetings and whole class discussions. Among the books they could select from were Latino legends and folktales, stories that have been passed down for generations. These books proved to be popular among the students, but other students selected realistic fiction instead. Despite the distinct differences between the two genres, the books all pertained to the Latino experience and led the students into deeper conversation and learning.

The understanding and familiarity of cultural identity is an important theme for pre-service teachers. According to Iwai (2017), the pre-service teachers who took part in the children's literature course gained insight to the Latino culture. Most of them were Caucasian and were previously unfamiliar with Latino culture, experiences and traditions. Several expressed understanding, appreciation and greater awareness at the end of this course. One would hope that upon graduation and obtaining that first teaching job, that these teachers will be cognizant of the needs of their students and will make available culturally relevant materials for students to peruse. This sign of understanding and respect of cultural identity can make tremendous connections for a child.

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In light of the previously-described interactions with Latino children's literature, the next section will describe a brief qualitative study conducted using a recently-published title.

Reading and Writing about *Dreamers*: A Brief Qualitative Study

In September 2018, the book *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales was published, which tells the story of the author's immigration from Mexico to the United States with her young son. The aforementioned themes of *English is privileged* and *immigration* were both prevalent in this work. Almost immediately, the book began receiving recognition and was rumored to be a contender for some of the top children's book awards. In 2019, *Dreamers* won the Pura Belpré Award for illustration and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award.

A brief qualitative study was conducted in an undergraduate reading education class using this book, with the focus being on gaining students' thoughts on their reading and response activity. The class consisted of 32 junior and senior-level students (30 female, 2 male); all were elementary education majors. The majority of the class (over 68%) identified as Caucasian, 25% as Latino/Hispanic, and 6% as African-American. The researcher was invited to visit the class, speak about the book and lead a follow-up response activity. The researcher read the book aloud to the class and facilitated a discussion about the book and the significance of the title *Dreamers*, with students sharing their thoughts and interpretation of the meaning of the title. Afterward, students were asked to write their own response to the book by sharing their own dreams. This was an independent, silent, quick-write task, and students were allotted approximately 20 minutes to compose their response. Once their time was up, students were asked to share in their table groups about their writings. The researcher followed up with a convenience sample after class of five students who were willing to speak for a few minutes about their thoughts on the book and activity.

The writing samples were indicative of students giving considerable thought to their dreams and of articulating them on paper. A few students went above and beyond the quick-write instructions and composed poems and illustrated their writings. While a handful of students created an outline or list to begin with, most jumped right into composing their response. Several themes emerged from the writing samples: the top three included becoming a teacher, being happy in their careers and lives, and making their loved ones proud. Two students wrote that their parents have been there for them throughout their lives and their dream is to reciprocate that support. Nearly half of the female students wrote that one of their dreams is to get married. The two male students both included "making a difference" in their compositions.

Much of the discussion of the book was positive, with remarks about the "beautiful illustrations" and "timely message". During the sharing portion of the

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study (at the students' tables), some comments were made about this being yet another immigration story, and questions arose about how many books like these were going to be published. One student commented that although it was great that *Dreamers* won the Belpré and Rivera Book Awards, it has not yet received recognition from non-culture-specific awards. Additional commentary described what it might take for a book similar to *Dreamers* to one day win the Caldecott or Newbery Awards, the importance of holding on to individual dreams, and what this writing assignment might mean for elementary-age children.

With further focus on the writing assignment, students shared that elementary-age students might need additional supports such as a word wall or word bank to compose their responses, that an illustration should be required, and that more time would be needed for children to polish their work and share with their classmates. A few students also mentioned that in the spirit of the story, of the description of the author not understanding English when they first moved, that ELLs should be given the option of writing their response in their native language. Students stated that allowing elementary-age students to write in their native language first about their dreams, then translate or re-write it in English, may be a more validating experience than struggling to write in English at first. Other students felt that it would be a practical opportunity for ELLs to write in English, as the topic of dreams may be something personal and meaningful that could lead to motivation and success in writing it in English. All students indicated that they considered this book to be culturally relevant and several students elaborated on what the book meant to them. One student even described how this book was a window for her to gain insight into what it's like immigrating to a new country.

Among the convenience sample, four of the five students said they could see themselves using this book for a lesson or activity with their students. When asked about the writing process, all five students said they enjoyed writing about their dreams, that it gave them feelings of hope, joy, and motivation. Three of the five indicated that they saw value in the book and activity. The two that said they did not find value in the book and activity stated that it was not a reflection of their lives and that it politicized the concept of dreams.

This study is a small step toward action research with students using Latino children's literature, but it provided much insight for the researcher on future teachers' thoughts and perceptions with a recently-published award-winning title.

Conclusion and Future Study

The rise of Latino children's literature in the United States has been gradual but meaningful. The history of these types of books and their place in the children's book world gained more attention in the last 30 years. Book awards have been created and sustained to recognize outstanding Latino children's literature. Although there is not a particular formula for a Latino children's book, the themes

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of English as a privilege and immigration have been identified through numerous content analyses. The reflection of Latino experiences, language and history fosters meaningful connections among Latino children and families when interacting with Latino children's books. The impact of studying and utilizing authentic Latino children's literature is felt in numerous ways: it assists students in opening up and partaking in purposeful talk in their classrooms, it fosters an awareness and comparison of cultures among university students studying Spanish, and it provides a window for pre-service teachers to understand the experiences of Latino students. Original stories with Latino characters and themes (written in Spanish, English, or bilingual/dual-language) encourage deep, meaningful text connections as opposed to Spanish translations of already-existing English texts.

Further research studies should be conducted with young adult Latino literature as well as with Latino young adults (between ages 13 and 18). Much of what has been done so far pertains to picture books and middle-grade novels. Content analyses of young adult Latino-themed novels published in the 1990s and early 2000s may shed light on the emerging trends within Latino children's literature. Moreover, the groups referenced in this literature review are children under age 12 and adults over age 18. Learning more about Latino young adults, their perceptions of cultural identity and Latino young adult literature would close a gap in this research. With regard to the qualitative study conducted with university students, future action research should include lengthier studies, more in-depth conversations with students, and studies with children, not just university students.

One may argue that there is an abundance of children's books readily available that provide mirrors and windows into numerous cultures, and that general statement may be true. However, out of the 3,644 children's books published in 2018, only 249 reflected the Latino experience (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2019). Culturally relevant, authentic books provide Latino readers with the opportunity to identify themselves within those stories, which in turn may lead to greater self-esteem, validation and academic and societal achievement.

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