

## **Translanguaging: A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Translanguaging empowers non-native English speakers in the use and maintenance of their first language. Using their entire linguistic repertoire, English language learners (ELLs) will be able to express themselves better in speech and writing. Support for their home language will increase overall linguistic ability but will also help them maintain connections to their heritage and families and allow them to continue to identify with and be proud of their cultural roots. Opposition and prejudice against the use of languages other than English should be examined and rooted out for the racist ideology it is.

*Keywords: Translanguaging, Assimilation Approach, Subtractive Bilingualism, Deficit-based Approach, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black Vernacular English (BVE)*

Translanguaging is the concept of allowing and even encouraging multilingual students to use their entire linguistic repertoire, not only in the classroom but in life. It is not limited to the use of named languages and would therefore also include African American or Black Vernacular English (AAVE or BVE) (Kinloch, 2010). Translanguaging empowers students by fostering an atmosphere of respect for their language wellsprings and a positive attitude toward their origins. The word translanguaging actually came from the Welsh term “Trawsieithu,” coined by Cen Williams in 1994, which indicated strategic use of two languages for learning, in the bilingual classroom (Williams, 1996; Lewis, et al., 2012, Conteh, 2018). Instead of a narrow focus on a single language, it supports the maintenance of the language that they currently have and builds

on what they already know, meeting students where they are and then giving them the tools to be successful in life.

## **Purpose**

The primary goal of this paper is to explain the evidence that supporting ELLs in their L1 leads to positive educational outcomes and detailing the necessary steps for that support. To understand the issues facing our language learners this research inquired, how can we, as teachers, respect and honor our student's linguistic backgrounds while encouraging the acquisition of Standard American English (SAE)? Using a pluralistic framework and a critical language policy lens in reviewing the literature, I would like to present a culturally responsive manner for support of linguistic minorities in the United States with a goal toward cultivating flourishing lives (Grant, 2012).

## **The Importance of Multilingualism**

As a teacher of world languages, I encourage everyone to be multilingual. So often, when I am talking about being able to speak four languages, and working on a fifth, or even wanting to know more languages, people are amazed at my "abilities." Those conversations only happen in the United States because we have created a monolingual society, one in which some would proclaim that everything in our country should be English-only. Most other countries are multilingual. In Luxembourg, for example, there are 3 national languages (Luxembourgish, German, and French) and then they also learn "foreign languages" in school such as English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

The development of different pluralistic approaches has helped to break the monolingual disposition...either by inviting a plurality of languages and cultures in the classroom, or by encouraging curiosity vis-à-vis other languages and comparison of their similarities

and differences...language awareness starts to be seen as being almost as important as knowledge of a language itself (Piccardo & Payre, 2022, p. 23).

### **Requirements for Teaching ELLs**

It is beneficial to have a bilingual teacher in the classroom who can compare the two languages to initiate metalinguistic awareness. Although some states in the U.S. require teachers to be bilingual, the majority are unable to converse in a language other than English. Due to this deficit, “many teachers lament their inability to teach linguistically diverse students” (Kinloch, 2010, p. 104), but they may just need to reconsider their attitude and pedagogical approach to working with those students. There are many monolingual teachers of ELLs. I am not proposing that they all lose their jobs because they cannot speak another language. I am proposing that all teachers who work with ELLs reevaluate their potential linguistic biases and learn how to better support their students. Teachers in the U.S are predominately White females of the middle-class, a group to which I also belong. Those demographics are significantly different from that of their students, and with their differing social-class, cultural, racial, and even linguistic differences, teachers tend to see their “students through a deficit lens that positions them as less intelligent, talented, qualified, and deserving” (Bartolomé, 2004, p. 265). Teacher education needs to address conscious and unconscious attitudes and beliefs of pre-service teachers toward language caused by the dominant ideologies in our society. In translanguaging, for the teacher “the focus moves from how many languages an individual may have at their disposal to how they use all their language resources to achieve their purposes” (Conteh, 2018, p. 446). For monolingual teachers, that can also include incorporating both body language and Google Translate to their linguistic repertoire to bridge the communication gaps.

### **The Path to Linguistic Marginalization**

Although monolingualism has shaped our education system, we have not always been a monolingual-dominant society. In the precolonial land now known as the United States, Native Americans spoke around 300 different languages (McCarty, 2008). Original European Colonists spoke Spanish, French, German, Dutch, and English, as well as several other northern European languages. In 1664, 18 different European languages were still being utilized. Fishman & Garcia (2002) said, “There’s evidence that after 1664, the heterogeneity in language, ethnicity and religion actually increased” (pp. 20-21). By 1900, at least 600,000 children in the United States were receiving part or all of their instruction in German (Ovando, 2003). Public schools in Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, North and South Dakota, and Washington were teaching in Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish. Dutch was used in Michigan, Polish and Italian were used in Wisconsin, and New Mexico was seen as a bilingual society as the majority spoke Spanish. Although “America” has a history of being multilingual (de Jong, 2011), colonization in the United State ultimately produced a Euro-American race and language. The Native Indigenous population was effectively reduced, subjugated, and confined to reservations. They were judged as “lesser” for their speech and way of living. “Repressive Indian language policy was part of a cultural genocide campaign designed to “civilize” Indians and contain them on reservations – part of a military strategy” (Ovando, 2003, pp. 4-5). In the 1868 Report of the Indian Peace Commissioners, they wrote “In the difference of language to-day lies two thirds of our trouble...Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and the English language substituted” (de Jong, 2011, p. 130). Slavery also contributed to language extinction of African natives as families were separated and individuals sold away from their own people so that they could not converse with

other slaves. Segregation, after slavery was abolished, continued to perpetuate the linguistic deficit due to restrictions on education (Mufwene, 2002).

### **Racism in Language Policy**

In her seminal work, “Introducing LangCrit,” Alison Crump (2014) asks us to consider where “race, racism, and racialization intersect with issues of language, belonging, and identity” (pp. 207-208). The United States of America does not have an official language. In 1981 the first proposal to make English the official language of the United States came from California Senator Hayakawa, a Canadian born, English professor of Japanese ancestry. One of his proposals in the amendment was to do away with bilingual education (Marshall, 1986). The 1990s saw the dismantling of bilingual education (de Jong, 2011). Politicians complained about signs in other languages making English monolinguals feel like they weren’t in their “own country.” Legal battles were being fought against discrimination in hiring practices for just having an accent (Crump, 2014). These racist ideologies, implicit biases, and internal colonization within a region by dominant political, economic, social, racial/ethnic, or linguistic groups also affected race and language policy (Wei & Garcia, 2022). Our language policy has been to enforce a homogenized, monolingual society. Refugees, immigrants, or minority groups have been expected to conform to these Anglicized norms.

### **Confronting Societal Racism**

Raciolinguistic ideologies are prevalent in our society and in our schools. These pedagogies include but are not limited to the following. 1) Standard and Academic Language or Standard American English (SAE): Claims one standard for speech and automatically “others” anyone not

following the rules of this language. This is the language of power within the United States, the language of the hegemony. 2) Linguistic Purism: Labels one variety of a language as being “purer” (more perfect) or of an intrinsically higher quality. 3) Language Hierarchies: Similarly, this ideology views certain languages as better than others or, within a language, varying registers contain levels of superiority. 4) Global English: Everyone around the globe knows English, so it is therefore the only language we need to know. 5) Having a Common Language is the Social “Glue” that will hold our nation together: The only way we can become truly “united” is if we all speak English, and one is not truly “American” or “One of Us” if they don’t speak it. 6) Native Speakerism: a neo-racist concept that English teachers must be native English speakers because they are the only ones who can speak it “right” (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). As a teacher of languages other than English (and as a native English speaker) I feel that this racist ideology also presents itself in teaching other languages: a friend from Kazakhstan teaches Japanese, a student from Romania teaches French, an American teaches Spanish...and they are looked on as “lacking” no matter how fluent they are. These racist ideologies and assimilationist rhetoric actually only perpetuate racial discord and reinforce the hegemony. As Crump (2014) said, “the practice of defining languages has had more to do with defining people and creating boundaries and hierarchies than the definition of linguistic facts” (p. 209).

In “Me and White Supremacy,” Saad (2020) speaks about tone policing as “a tactic used by those who have white privilege to silence those who do not, by focusing on the *tone* of what is being said rather than the actual *content*. Tone policing does not only have to be spoken out loud publicly. People with white privilege often tone police BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) in their thoughts or behind closed doors” (p. 229). I would propose that “Language Policing,” which Saad does not address, is similarly toxic. Judging BIPOC to be inferior based

on their ability, or inability, to use SAE is harmful. Dismissing what they say because it was not in an “appropriate register” minimalizes the input from that person. Stein et al. (2018) stated, “Most students of color continue to be treated as receptors of information, as opposed to co-constructors of knowledge through pedagogies that value their beliefs and experiences” (p. 104). Virginia Lea (2010), in her chapter on “Empowering preservice teachers, students, and families through critical multiculturalism” said,

Critical multicultural literacy helps us to focus on the multiple ways in which we inhabit hegemonic narratives of culture, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, language, sexual orientation, and ability, and how these narratives inhabit us. It asks us to look for ways of contesting power and oppression as they play out in current society” (p.37).

All of these narratives feed linguistic marginalization. It can also cause internalized racism, when the marginalized group cannot see the source of a stereotype that has been imposed upon them by a white majority but begins to believe the narrative, that whites are superior and the BIPOC student will always be inferior (Huber, et al., 2006). “White supremacy is arguably the most complex social system of the last several hundred years” (Saad, 2020).

### **The Benefits of Bilingualism**

Since the 1980s, researchers have shown that English Language Learners (ELLs) are more successful in school when they have a strong background in their home language. Maintaining their home language will not only help support their cultural identity, but literacy in the L1 has academic benefits along with increasing the students’ self-concept and metalinguistic abilities (Halle, et al., 2012). Schools and communities should support students’ bilingualism, supporting translanguaging. Vaish’s (2019) research in Singapore studied native speaking Chinese and Malay students who were learning English. The school system in Singapore has become English

dominant, using English as the medium of instruction, but English is not spoken at home and children just starting school do not come into the system with a background in English. In his conceptual paper Vaish found that translanguaging promoted metalinguistic awareness of grammar in both languages that had previously gone unnoticed.

### **Advocating for Change**

One of the first steps in ameliorating the classroom situation is to focus on early intervention within the students' homes. Oracy and literacy at home should be encouraged. Many parents, especially those that are not fluent in SAE, feel that they are not educated enough to help their child be successful in school, but talking with a child and reading with them in their L1 on a regular basis is one of the most effective ways to help a child in their educational achievement. Those parents, who feel that they have so little to give, are actually endowed with "funds of knowledge" (González, et al., 2006) that will benefit their child's cognitive development and provide a strong base for them to build on. Many parents of emergent bilinguals also discourage their child from using their L1 at home, knowing that English is the language of power in the United States, but "teaching a child to read in a language in which the child already has a knowledge base of sounds (phonemic awareness) and word meanings (vocabulary) is more efficient than attempting to teach that child to read in a language she does not know and has no knowledge base to call on" (Gándara, 2010, p. 3).

Teachers and preservice teachers, communities, and parents should be educated in the importance of sustaining and improving first languages (L1) while a student is learning a second language (L2). Within schools in the U.S., use of languages other than English is still seen as problematic. "Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel



as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings (Bernal, 2002).

Lea (2010) begins her chapter with

The primary goals of public schools have been to socialize students through an organizational process Gramsci termed “hegemony” into becoming docile, patriotic citizens who would serve the nation-state, and to prepare young people to fit in to the corporate global economy (p.33).

This hegemony encourages us to follow the dominant ideas, values, or beliefs of our society, but Ladson-Billings (1995) would remind us, following the philosophy of Paulo Freire’s conscientização, that “If school is about preparing students for active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society” (p. 162)?

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Often, teachers in childcare programs do not have the preparation they need to work with children from non-English speaking families, because we have trained them for the “majority” of the students. Most research on how to best serve students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) focuses on school-aged children, and predominately those from Spanish-speaking migrant families. This doesn’t help those serving refugee communities, pre-school aged children, or other linguistic minorities. Children who are CLD have statistically been less successful in school and are labeled “at risk” (Hurley, et al., 2011). Training for teaching linguistically diverse populations has consisted of “best practical strategies to ensure the academic and linguistic development” of those students without first examining their own values, beliefs, and assumptions (Bartolomé, 2004, p. 263). That “linguistic development” only applied to English. Like racism, language prejudices are so enmeshed in our society that they go unnoticed. It is only

after one has examined one's own implicit biases that they can begin to develop a culturally sensitive classroom approach to languages and provide the language resources the students need for success on exams and other assessments. Ladson-Billings (2021) studied the classrooms of exemplary teachers of African-American students and noticed that each of the teachers had 5 philosophies in common. 1) They believed all students capable of academic success, 2) believed that teaching was an art, 3) considered themselves as part of the student's community, 4) felt that teaching was a way to give back to the community, and 5) followed the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire's idea of teaching, such as pulling knowledge out of students. The most important resource in any classroom in any school is the teacher. They must recognize how important translanguaging is to building relationships with their students. Unconscious negative attitudes toward a student's home language will have a negative effect on student learning (Kinloch, 2010). Teachers also need to be recruited from the students' communities, so they are more likely to be willing to stay in the school corporation and so they have a similar linguistic background to the student base (Gándara, 2010).

Garcia and Kleifgen's (2019) design for translanguaging classrooms situates the teacher as a co-learner, requiring them to be "open to multiple ways of knowing, languaging, and experiencing" (p. 566). Teachers provide "extended" resources, including translanguaged texts written not only by authors, but by families and communities too. They encourage collaborative work making sure everyone has a voice. They encourage and use speech, writing, gestures, etc. to leverage translanguaging. They redesign assessments, encouraging students to express their knowledge with whatever semiotic means they have at their disposal. Their design also incorporates critical multilingual awareness, so the students can reflect on their biliteracy or bilingualism.

“The doing of language is intricately intertwined with the performativity of identity” (Crump, 2014, p. 210). ELL students want to maintain their roots, culturally and linguistically. They need to preserve them to retain their cultural identity. According to Crump it is important to emphasize individual experiences and counter stories to expose the mythoi in the dominant narrative (2014). One individual’s experience as an English language learner is found in the book, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. In this memoir, Bich Nguyen (2007), a Vietnamese refugee, wanted to be able to communicate with the grandmother who had helped raise her.

I didn't know what kinds of questions I could ask her, and with no formal training in Vietnamese to bolster what I learned at home, my grasp of the language began slipping away. Large chunks of syntax dissolved overnight. It was as though the more English I read and took in from the TV and radio, the less space I had for Vietnamese. By third grade, I could actually feel the words hovering out of reach. I hoped I could learn from Noi by being near her. That if I had an affinity for Buddhism it would happen here... So I watched and followed and jotted notes as she murmured the prayer songs and bowed to the floor (p. 226).

The assimilationist, subtractive bilingualism, or deficit approaches, that for decades dominated classrooms in the United States, viewed foreign language as a problem. Paris (2012) noted a change in the 1970s and 80s where

*difference approaches* marked a progression to viewing the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of students and communities of color as equal to, but different from, the ways demanded and legitimated in school teaching and learning. Still, the goal here was to bridge toward the dominant with little attention to maintaining the heritage and community practices of students and families” (p. 94).

Through “false generosity,” teachers believed and therefore perpetuated that students from low-income families, who are of color, who are indigenous or immigrant, whose first language is not English, or who speak a dialect of English, have no cultural knowledge and practices of value, and are therefore best served by being taught to replace their existing norms and values with those of the white middle class” (Lea, 2010, p. 36).

These raciolinguistic ideologies made students feel ashamed of their roots and punished them for speaking in any language other than English in school (Wei & Garcia, 2022). It marginalized any non-White, non-English-speaking students by devaluing and almost criminalizing their home languages. Gándara & Contreras (2009) tell us that “Such negative perceptions and stereotypes can be highly detrimental for Latina/o youth, and others’ perceptions of what it means to be a Latina/o may lead Latina/o youth to reject their ethnic identities or academic achievement, either of which could negatively affect their overall well-being” (Stein et al., 2018, p. 104). Many times, bilingual students are judged based on what they are able to do in just one language or the other and deemed to have an incomplete linguistic system. When we look at the students’ abilities through a translanguaging lens, across both languages, we can get a more complete view of their abilities and knowledge. They need to be given opportunities to read and write, drawing from their own experience, knowledge base, and family histories (Hornberger & Link, 2012). English language learners don’t just come from other countries. In the movie CODA, which stands for Child of Deaf Adults, a girl who can hear, Ruby, is growing up in a family that cannot. Ruby joins the high school choir and, in a discussion with the choir director, Señor Villalobos, she is asked why she wants to sing. “How do you feel when you sing?” he wants to know. To express herself, Ruby signs. It is the language she has used to express herself since infancy. It

was the one she needed to draw upon to best convey what she wanted to say, when English words failed her. Did the teacher know sign language? No. But did he understand what she was trying to say? Absolutely. So, he didn't stop her and ask her to now put what she had signed into English; he instead immediately offered to coach and train her for auditioning to get into the prestigious Berklee College of Music (Heder, 2021).

Stein, et al. (2018) said, "the primary responsibility of educators is to ensure that all students are treated equitably" (p. 103). Nguyen (2007), in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, again talks about her "Americanization." She says, "In a way it makes sense that I would become enamored with a literature so symbolic of manifest destiny and white entitlement. I didn't have any nonwhite literature, anyway, to know what else I could become" (p. 196). The absence of reading materials that depicted Vietnamese children shaped who Bich would become. Her classroom lacked equity. Some believe that the American "melting pot" means we should all become homogenized (Rumbaut, 2015; Berray, 2019), but is that really what ends up happening when a child loses their cultural roots? In reality they just lose themselves as they try to fit the white mold into which they are being forced. Ladson-Billings (1995) stated that "Culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence" (p. 160).

### **The Education System**

Educational achievement in the U.S. focuses on standardized test scores. Teachers, out of pressure from administration and community, are spending too much time focusing on test taking instead of creating effective Tier 1, researched-based, core instruction. Best practice in an effective translinguaging classroom would include general instruction, modeling, group work,

and reading, writing, and oracy in both languages. Abedi (2010) also proposes that English language learners should be tested for proficiency in their first language to assess if it would be better for them to be tested in school in their native language or in English.

Low performance of ELL students on content-based assessments may be due to a lack of understanding of the language of the test rather than a lack of content knowledge.

Researchers focusing on the assessment of ELLs believe that performance outcomes in content-based areas such as math and science are confounded with students' proficiency in English. Standardized achievement tests that have been constructed for mainstream students, but do not take into account the special needs of English learners, can present a further challenge for these students and may not provide a good indication of what they know and can accomplish (p. 50).

When visiting relatives in Vietnam as a young adult, Nguyen (2007) also says,

She and my aunt knew almost no English and I knew only rudimentary Vietnamese so we couldn't say much... I could not have prepared myself for the feeling of being a tourist in the country where I was supposed to have grown up, of being a foreigner among people who were supposed to be mine. Every girl I passed on the street was my theoretical double, a person I might have been, a life I might have had. Sitting with my aunt and grandmother, I did not feel a rush of love. I felt regret, exhaustion. I felt like an outsider, and I knew I would always be just that... I walked away from their house feeling a profound sense of failure" (p. 297).

When a student leaves a language classroom no longer proficient in their native tongue, it is not the child who has failed. It is the system who has failed them. Becoming monolingual didn't

make her more accepted in American society and, stripped of her culture, she could now no longer connect with family she ought to have been able to love.

### **Making Improvements in Policy**

These rules of assimilation did not stem from individual school policy but from state and national legislatures, and common sentiment. Despite efforts of school desegregation, minority rights, and support of more multicultural societies (partially due to increases in global mobility and migration), we are still expecting people to give up their L1 and cultural traditions just to please a demographic that seems unable to respect those who are different from them and that cause negative self-perception in connection to their L1 (Kinloch, 2010).

In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed the Students' Right to Their Own Language resolution which affirmed not only students' home language, but also home dialects. (Kinloch, 2010). In that same year, the Supreme Court case *Lau vs. Nichols*, a class action suit against the school system in California, began a rebirth of bilingual education, but because it did not specify the changes that needed to be made to meet the needs of the Chinese students that were being underserved, some saw it as a call to assimilate the students as quickly as possible (Ovando, 2003). With the Indigenous Languages Act (1990) and the more recent Declaration of Indigenous Language Rights (2008), Indigenous language speakers are formally, legally supported in maintaining their native language (Hornberger, 1998). These positive steps seemed to show that we were making progress. During the Obama administration, the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act's Reauthorization allotted grants for high-quality language programs including dual-language programs and ELL support programs. Obama's focus was on aiding multilingualism. Dual-language programs provide instruction on all content areas, as the new language is taught to English speakers and native speakers of the L2

are learning English. There are currently over 3,600 Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs in the U.S., again cause to give one hope, but a concept originally created and promoted to meet the needs of minorities has now become a function of “white property.” Schools that should have a demographic of native speakers have instead “mainstreamed” the concept, pushed out the English Learners, and now cater to a wealthy, White, majority (Valdez, et al., 2016).

### **Language and Identity**

Language is an integral part of one’s identity, whether that language is imposed, assumed, or negotiated. Language gives us cultural ties, familial ties, and facilitates communication.

Kinloch (2010) said “one’s choice in language use, conscious or unconscious, can either allow or restrict entrance into certain conversations and communities” (p. 106). As educators we should not be making those decisions for children that will ultimately alienate them from their home culture, but we *are* responsible to teach them the language that will allow them entrance into “certain conversations and communities.” In *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, Bich takes that responsibility upon herself. “It occurred to me that I had always had choices: to go to parties or not. To call my friend Loan or not. To keep up my Vietnamese or not.” ((Nguyen, 2007, p. 144) In reality, a child is not capable of understanding the ramifications of losing their native tongue, or deciding not to learn English in a monolingual country. They cannot easily negotiate their self-identity, especially in a society who is very eager to tell them who they are or who they should become.

### **Conclusion**

I had a conversation recently with a graduate student from Sweden. She asked me what my area of study was and when I told her “World Language Education” she asked me to explain what that means. After telling her that it was to educate future teachers of world languages, she



clarified. “But what does “world languages” mean, and why do you call it that?” What it means is any language other than English. We also refer to them as “foreign” languages, but it is thought that the more politically correct version should not include the word “foreign.” She told me that in Sweden they just call them “languages,” and I realized once more how English-centric we still are by “othering” any language that is not English, no matter what we call it.

English is the only language of power in our country (Thomas, 1996); that is an unfortunate reality. Being able to use it effectively might help marginalized minorities navigate our white supremacist landscape but that should not happen at the expense of losing their native tongue. Racism is an “institutional force that maintains and perpetuates racist ideologies rooted in white supremacy” (Huber, et al., 2006, p. 185). Raciolinguistic ideologies are also part of the White hegemony. Encouraging translanguaging is encouraging multilingualism. In my opinion, all citizens of the United States should be (at least) bilingual. Students who could have the opportunity to be fully bilingual because they have a home language other than English, should not be inhibited by governmental legislation, administrative policy, or classroom suppression. Students who have a home language of English should not be inhibited from becoming fully bilingual by not offering opportunities for language learning in the classroom (but not to the extent that those linguistic opportunities are appropriated to only benefit the White majority). If we are going to be responsive to the needs of our students, we must encourage, even fight for, the valuing of our multiethnic, multilingual society.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Melinda White** has an affinity for learning languages, teaching, and working with children. After benefitting from White privilege, she feels it is important to serve and advocate for marginalized populations and for those in need. A veteran teacher of Spanish and French, for

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### **Author's Note**

No known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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