# "'Harder than other lessons but good': The Effect of Colleague Collaboration on Secondary English Pupil Engagement"

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**Abstract**

Research examining the effects of collaborative planning in British secondary schools relates primarily to the effect it has on a teacher's professional development. Researchers seldom focus on the impact it has on the pupils. This study was designed to understand the effect collaboratively planned lessons had on pupil engagement in a British secondary school. Transcripts from lessons observations, reflective diaries and field notes were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One theme was identified: *'Pupils' Engagement with Differentiated Instruction'.* This research concludes that the collaboratively planned lessons allowed some pupils to engage in learning better than individually planned lessons. The professional learning occurring from the planning process allowed teachers to collaboratively plan a lesson that was stronger than an individually planned lesson; the most successful teaching and learning took place when teachers adopted their colleagues' suggestions, thus supporting some of the pupils' engagement with learning. This is significant as the UK's Independent Teacher Workload Review Group promotes collaborative planning as a method of reducing workload (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016). However, collaborative planning is only worth doing if evidence implies that it maintains and improves outcomes for pupils. Authors discuss implications and outline areas for future research.

*Keywords:* GCSE; collaborative planning; English; Secondary School; writing

## Introduction

The introduction of the reformed GCSE (a national qualification for students aged 16+) in 2015 has raised teacher workload (CooperGibson Research, 2018). The amount of work now demanded of UK teachers is the primary reason why experienced practitioners leave the profession (Tickle, 2018). Although some schools offer roles as Lead Practitioners, there is no national system in place to increase retention by providing career structures for the most capable English teachers (Enow & Goodwyn, 2018).

Collaborative planning, the time given to departments to plan work together (Thompson, 2018), has been recommended as a method of tackling excessive teacher workload. A 2016 report concluded that teachers should have access to fully resourced, collaboratively planned schemes of work and stipulates that head teachers should allow departments time to plan lessons together collaboratively (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016).

Literature acknowledges that colleague collaboration and development in schools comes in a number of forms. For example, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become an important part of colleague collaboration in secondary schools (a UK educational institution attended by pupils aged 11-16). They are defined as a group of professional teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in a reflective, collaborative and learning orientated way (Stoll, et al., 2006). PLCs are underpinned by organisation and structure meaning that, to be effective, the right conditions, leadership and protocol need to be in place to ensure that collaborations result in increased student achievement (Saunders, et al., 2009).

Studies acknowledge the effect PLCs have on teachers' professional development, arguing that they have a positive effect on teaching in STEM subjects; professionals went from viewing the idea that they needed to gain and develop subject knowledge as threatening, to something that improved their practice (Fulton & Britton, 2011). Additionally, Doğan et al.

(2016) reported that PLCs had a positive effect in increasing the subject knowledge of science teachers. However, there is very little work that explores the effect of PLC's on English teachers' professional development.

There is also emerging research that examines the effect PLCs have on pupil learning. A meta-analysis established a small but significant relationship between PLCs and student achievement in secondary schools (Lomos, et al., 2011). A quantitative study looked at the effect of PLCs on pupils' achievement in reading and maths. The authors found teacher collaboration to have a positive effect on pupils' achievement. Additionally, they reported that 90% of teacher respondents found collaboration helpful (Ronfeldt, et al., 2015). In schools where collaboration was common practice, pupils achieved higher in maths and reading (Ronfeldt, et al., 2015).Whilst this study highlights how collaboration between colleagues in schools has a positive effect on pupil achievement, it has limitations. It fails to differentiate between the actual impact of collaboration on pupils and the teachers' perceived impact. Additionally, as data were collected through a wide scale survey, the paper fails to explore the intricacies of how collaboration between colleagues applies to a real classroom environment. Subsequently, it is important to look specifically at the impact collaborative planning has on pupils and their engagement with learning in a naturalistic, classroom setting.

In addition to PLCs, Wenger draws on social learning theory contending that professional learning is situated socially and developed through discussion in, what he terms, communities of practice (CoP; Wenger, 1998). Unlike PLCs, organisation is not a prerequisite for the formation of a CoP; they can be an informal group of people who share a common interest about a topic and want to further their knowledge and expertise through social interaction (Wenger, et al., 2002). Literature suggests that the social constrictivist, collaborative elements of communites of practice are effective in the professional development of preservice

teachers (Sutherland, et al., 2005) and in shaping novices' professional identities (Wedege, 2002).

Despite these positives, communites of practice have limitations. Professionals often find it difficult to find the time to engage in discussion that will aid their professional development and the informal nature of some communities of practice often means that they do not fit in to the preexisting organisational structures of workplaces (Kerno, 2008).

Despite these drawbacks, PLCs and CoPs are now embedded in the UK's education system, with colleague collaboration being promoted as a method of reducing teacher workload (Independent Teacher Workload Review Group, 2016). However, to the authors' knowledge, there are no studies that examine the effect of this collaboration on pupil engagement in the UK, in the teaching of English Language or the new GCSE specification. Planning lessons collaboratively is only worth continuing with if we can understand whether it produces sustained improvements in pupils' outcomes. This is a knowledge gap this study intends to fill.

The authors of this paper set out to further the body of research that examines collaborative planning and collaboration between colleagues. The authors aimed to uncover whether collaboratively planned lessons affected the levels of engagement in year seven pupils in the delivery of writing skills for the AQA English Language Paper 1, Section B. This asks students to either write a description suggested by a picture or a section of a narrative (AQA, 2018).

This paper adopts Skinner and Belmont's (1993) definition of student engagement which explains that students who are engaged in lessons react positively to learning activities, take responsibility for their own learning and are striving to stretch themselves academically.

This research was undertaken at Oakvale Academy, a pseudonym. A 2019 inspection by Ofsted (a UK Government body responsible for inspecting educational institutions) rated the school as 'good' in all areas. Oakvale Academy is non-selective. However, it is based in a selective local authority. As a consequence, there are less high-attaining pupils on roll than the average secondary school. Oakvale Academy dedicates time for collaborative planning to departments.

## Materials and Methods

### *Design*

This qualitative study examined the effect collaborative planning had on pupil engagement when teaching the writing skills required for the English Language GCSE (AQA, 2018). Classroom-based observations across four one-hour lessons were observed across two year seven classes; Class A and Class B. The first lesson observed was planned individually by the class teacher and the second was a lesson planned collaboratively by Oakvale Academy's English Department. The data were transcribed verbatim and interpreted using the principles of thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Three of the researchers were also members of the English Department at Oakvale Academy and, as such, contributed to the collaborative planning process. The lead researcher observed the lessons.

### *Participants*

This research observed two year seven classes with an average class size of 30. Class A were a top set with predicted GCSE grades ranging from level five to level eight. Teachers have commented that the children "*have a real hunger for learning*." Class B was a second set with predicted GCSE grades ranging between level three and level five. Both the teacher and

the teaching assistant commented that the class was "*quite weak"* and needed *"a lot of encouragement"* to work.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through field notes and recordings. All lessons were recorded and transcribed verbatim whilst field notes were written throughout planning meetings, detailing teacher planning dialogue, and throughout the lessons as they were taking place. All observations took place within both Class A and Class B's usual classroom. With both classes, the first and second observations took place on the same day and at the same time, one week apart. Unstructured observations were used as researchers believed that their flexibility (Given, 2008) tallied with the interpretive nature of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### *Lesson Content*

The lesson was designed for pupils to develop the descriptive writing skills prescribed by the AQA English Language Paper 2 Section B. This asks candidates to write a description suggested by a picture.

The first task involved a picture being broken up in to a 'jigsaw.' Each group had a section of this picture and had to annotate it with language they would use to describe it. This was followed by a whole class discussion.

The next task involved the class examining the entire picture in their groups. The class was then asked to write a description suggested by the picture which was followed by a peer assessment.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained from the school's head teacher. As this project involved working with young people under the age of 18, the pupils and their parents and carers were

asked to give informed consent before any observation took place. This was achieved using an opt-out form that was sent home to all parents and carers of the pupils taking part. This adhered to BERA's ethical guidelines in which they advise that the best interests of the child must be taken in to account using informed consent (BERA, 2018). All data collected was kept anonymous and pseudonyms were used. All data will be destroyed at the end of the 2018-2019 academic year.

***Data Analysis***

Data were analysed in line with the analytic stages of thematic analysis, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This was an appropriate method of analysis as this study deals with detailed, qualitative data sets. Throughout the analytic process, meetings were scheduled during which the researchers discussed ideas collaboratively. During phase one, lesson recordings were transcribed and then both transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly by the researchers, identifying meanings and patterns. In phase two, the researchers developed preliminary codes for short pieces of data which were collated in to a list. Throughout phase three, researchers sorted codes in to potential themes and discussed how these may form overarching themes. During phase four, these potential themes were revised and a thematic map was created. Finally, during phase five, themes were named and defined before the final report was produced. Furthermore, throughout the process of data analysis, the lead researcher kept a handwritten reflexivity journal, detailing the outcomes of these data analysis meetings and the thought processes behind the generation of codes and themes.

## Results

### *Theme: Pupils' Engagement with Differentiated Instruction*

Researchers identified *"Pupils' Engagement with Differentiated Instruction"* as a prominent theme. It outlines the dialogue that took place during planning meetings around the inclusion of both challenge and support activities and how pupils responded to this in both individually and collaboratively planned lessons.

### *Sub-theme 1: Pupils' Engagement with Academic Challenge*

*Individually Planned Lessons*

With Class A and Class B, teachers wove challenge in to the individually planned lessons. In initial meetings with researchers and class teachers, the importance of embedding academic challenge in to all of the lessons observed as part of this research was stressed. During a planning meeting *"teachers discussed how they must have autonomy to include challenge in their individually planned lesson."* It was made clear that *"The level of challenge and type of challenging activities will be decided by the class teacher."*

In the individually planned lessons, the pupils' reception of this challenge was not always positive. In Class B, challenge was viewed as intimidating; five heads went *"down on the desk when the word 'challenge' was used."* Whilst this could be a reaction to the word *'challenge'* itself, data collected during the lesson indicates that this is a response to the prospect of stretching themselves academically. When asked why he placed his head on the desk, Steven said *"I just don't like thinking hard."* Whilst John claimed, *"I don't do hard things."* These responses suggest that the immediate disengagement when the word '*challenge'* was used was actually a reaction to the prospect of academically challenging activities, rather than the word '*challenge'* itself. Furthermore, during an activity in which students had 10 minutes to individually write a paragraph describing a mansion, John had

*"written 6 words."* When questioned about his lack of work he said, *"I tried but it was tricky so I stopped"* indicating that the challenging nature of the task had been a factor in John's disengagement. In this instance, the conscious decision of the teacher to embed challenging activities has not spurred some pupils on to engage with learning. It had, in fact, been an element contributing towards their disengagement.

Class A appeared to have the opposite problem. Rather than disengaging when challenge was presented, some pupils embraced it. This became an issue as confident pupils started to control the lesson. During a task where pupils had to give constructive feedback, using and recalling grammatical terms learned in a previous lesson, many pupils were happy to offer genuine constructive feedback such as Jack who advised another pupil to use *"he and she"* instead of repeating their characters' name. However, as this task progressed, this level of engagement became an issue as some criticism strayed from being constructive and, in some cases, came across as demotivating. Ella, a high achieving pupil told John that *"Some of your sentences just didn't make sense."* Rather than attempting to moderate this comment with a suggestion for improvement, Ella just offers criticism rather than constructive criticism. This comment resulted in the teacher having to mitigate this critique saying that *"it was good. I really liked it, I thought it was impressive."* The teacher has acknowledged the demotivating nature of Ella's comment. They have had to intervene to encourage and motivate the pupil whose work had just been critiqued, saving them face. Field notes corroborate this as *"Keen students do have a tendency to override the quieter ones. Some are quite domineering in their eagerness to demonstrate their intellect."*

*Collaboratively Planned Lessons*

When planning the lesson, Oakvale Academy's English Department discussed how they might embed academic challenge in to the collaboratively planned lesson. Practitioners

acknowledged that by planning a lesson together they were in fact creating a *"base lesson"* that was not targeted specifically at either class involved in this research. As a result, it was stressed that teachers needed the autonomy and freedom to alter the *"base lesson"* in order to make it appropriate for their group. One teacher suggested that these alterations did not need to be drastic and that *"just changing the vocabulary you use in delivery could be fine"* whilst another teacher contended that you can achieve "*academic stretch through targeted and tiered questioning."*

The impact of this suggestion was seen with Class A. During a task when pupils had to use sensory imagery to describe a section of a picture, instead of asking the class to describe what they could see, hear, feel, touch and smell, as was outlined in the lesson plan for the collaboratively planned lesson, the teacher introduced the pupils to more challenging, higher level vocabulary using *"visual, aural, olfactory and tactile"* to describe sight, smell, sound and touch. Some pupils responded to this, applying the more challenging vocabulary to their own work. Field notes revealed that:

> *Simon labelled his language choices with the terms outlined at the beginning of the lesson. On the picture of the city, he has identified 'diesel fumes' as part of the olfactory system.*

The teacher's choice to alter the collaboratively planned lesson has impacted the pupils' engagement with learning. Simon has taken the challenging, more advanced vocabulary from the beginning of the lesson and used it to engage with his own work. Discussions with two pupils during the extended writing portion of the lesson demonstrated that they really enjoyed some challenging aspects of the lesson. Ewan commented that, *"I'm finding this quite hard but I'm doing it anyway."* Furthermore, Jessie said, *"This has been harder than other lessons but it's good."*

Similarly, a change occurred in Class B's collaboratively planned lesson. Rather than disengaging with challenging activities, pupils embraced them. This appeared to be a direct result of the teachers' decision to adopt their colleagues' advice to stretch their pupils through tiered questioning.

> T: *What was your sentence, Freya?*
>
> Freya: *An army of clouds stormed towards the city*
>
> T: *What device have you used there?*
>
> Freya: *The thing where you like give something a human form […] personification!*
>
> T: *Excellent, well done. And what effect did you want to create?*
>
> Freya: *That the clouds were scary.*

Here, Freya has demonstrated a willingness and eagerness to use linguistic terminology and rhetorical devices in her own work. Throughout a similar line of tiered questioning, Josh stated that by describing the sun as a *"monstrous beaming sun"* he had used a metaphor because *"the sun isn't actually a monster"* because he wanted to show *"how hot it was."* Furthermore, when Freya was asked if she liked being questioned and sharing her work with the class, she said *"Yeah, I like showing that I can get hard things right"* suggesting that the opportunity, provided by tiered questioning, to publicly demonstrate her own complex cognitive processes has given her confidence and enabled her to engage in learning.

### ***Subtheme 2: Pupil's Engagement with Academic Support***

*Individually Planned Lessons*

Throughout the planning process, teachers agreed unanimously that "*downwards differentiation"* needed to be present throughout all the lessons whether individually or collaboratively planned. However, the effectiveness of this differentiation was limited. In

Class A, academic support was achieved through seating. High achieving and lower achieving pupils were paired together in an activity. Each pair was given a sentence of a paragraph that they needed to rewrite using more effective vocabulary. During whole class feedback *"very few pupils have improved"* their initial sentence. One pair said that they *"just didn't know what to write"* whilst another pair said *"between us, we just couldn't work it out so we just added 'really' in to the sentence"* suggesting that some of the pairing were ineffective and detrimental to their engagement with the task.

Furthermore in Class B, to support the learning of the pupils throughout an extended writing portion of the lesson, the teacher and the class collaboratively constructed a paragraph on the whiteboard to act as a model answer for the pupils to use in their own writing. However, in the cases of some pupils, this was an ineffective method of support. One pupil claimed that they *"can't make the paragraph on the board work"* for them. Another child noted that *"it's hard because I don't want to copy the one up there [on the board]."* These comments suggest that, although the model paragraph was constructed by the class, it did inhibit some pupils' learning; they appeared to find the inability to take ownership over it, a barrier to their engagement. This did, however, benefit the engagement of the minority of pupils who contributed to model paragraph, one of whom said *"I used the bits of the paragraph that I said."*

*Collaboratively Planned Lessons*

Throughout the planning process, the subject of differentiation arose. When the potential of including an extended written activity arose, the teacher of Class B said *"I'm not sure how my lot will cope with that."* In response, another teacher suggested that they include some sentence stems to aid Class B's engagement with the task to *"give some of them a hand in*

*getting started."* With Class B, the teacher introduced sentence stems in to their altered version of the original, collaboratively planned lesson.

> T: *So if you're really, really struggling, put your hand up if you think you are because it's good to be honest about where we are […]. So, if you are struggling here are some sentence starters that you could use for your paragraphs.*

Rather than stretching and challenging, the focus of this alteration was to support the learning of the pupils in the class by giving them a scaffold to structure their writing around. However, in using this scaffold, the teacher has encouraged the pupils to challenge themselves at a level proportionate to their skill set. By asking the pupils to raise their hand, the teacher has encouraged a degree of self-efficacy in the class, making them consciously aware of their limitations, providing them with strategies to aid their learning. The awareness and responsibility for their own learning that this deviation away from the original, collaboratively planned lesson has encouraged was also evident in discussions with the pupils. Laura said that *"The sentence starters weren't good for what I wanted to say so I changed them a little bit."* Laura is taking responsibility for her own learning. She is acknowledging that the scaffold provided by the teacher will help her engage with the task, but she is also aware that failure to alter this scaffold will negatively affect her work. By emphasising that the pupils *"could"* choose to use the sentence starters if they are *"struggling",* the teacher has differentiated this task without drawing attention to any particular individual, further deviating away from the original collaboratively planned lesson. This element of choice was successful in engaging the pupils. Megan said *"using the sentence starters helped me come up with my own ideas"* while Liam said *"I'm not using them. If I'm in an exam I won't have sentence starters then."* This evidences that some pupils embraced the element of choice that the teacher embedded in the lesson, with Megan opting

to take the support on offer while Liam chose to write his own creative piece, unsupported by the teacher's scaffold. The teacher's decision to take their colleagues' advice and embed an element of choice in the lesson allowed all pupils to be challenged at a level commensurate with their ability, thus supporting their engagement with learning activities. Furthermore, Class B's teacher's statement that they did not know how their class would cope with extended writing implies that they would not have included the ultimately successful writing portion of the lesson without the suggestions from colleagues and the collaborative planning process having taken place.

**Discussion**

This study provides an insight in to the effect collaborative planning has on the engagement of some year seven students at Oakvale Academy and how the process of collaborative planning was a key factor in making the lessons successful. To the authors' knowledge, it is the first time the impact of collaboratively planned lessons have been examined using qualitative measures in the teaching of English Language writing skills. Thematic analysis has allowed for a detailed understanding of the dialogue behind colleague collaboration and how this has effected the engagement of some year seven pupils. All observations indicated that there was a difference between the ways pupils engaged with learning in collaboratively planned lessons as opposed to individually planned lessons.

In individually planned lessons, pupils' attitudes towards challenge proved detrimental to their own learning and, in some cases, to the learning and self-esteem of others. In Class A, pupils fought to outdo each other regardless of the expense to other pupils' self-esteem. With Class B, a number of pupils disengaged with learning once challenge or activities they found challenging were introduced to the lesson. However, in the collaboratively planned lesson, with both classes, pupils adopted a much more positive attitude towards challenging

activities. This was a direct result of the planning process and the conversations between colleagues that occurred throughout it. In Class A, the teacher adopted their colleagues' advice to make the lesson vocabulary more challenging by including references to the aural, olfactory, visual and tactile systems. This directly impacted the learning of some of the pupils in the room, with many choosing to incorporate this more challenging vocabulary in to their work. As the lesson progressed, pupils expressed gratitude for the more challenging nature of the lesson's content, indicating that this facilitated their engagement. Additionally, in Class B's collaboratively planned lesson, the teacher adopted their colleagues' suggestion to achieve academic challenge through tiered questioning. In doing this, the teacher allowed some pupils to use and apply literary terminology and demonstrate an awareness of the impact their language choices were having.

The second sub-theme, *"Pupils' Engagement with Academic Support",* demonstrated how pupils engaged with scaffolds the teacher had put in place. In the individually planned lessons, attempts at offering support were ineffective and detrimental to the learning of some pupils. However, in Class B's collaboratively planned lesson, the teacher chose to deviate away from the *"base lesson"* based on their colleagues' advice to include sentence starters to aid an extended writing activity. This resulted in Class B taking responsibility for their own learning as they either used the sentence starters provided by the teacher, altered them to meet their own needs or disregarded them entirely.

The reason similar findings did not emerge from the collaboratively planned and individually planned lessons could lie primarily in the planning dialogue that took place. By taking part in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), the teachers in this study learned from one another. By sharing their collective experience and knowledge in the collaborative planning of the lesson, the teachers involved in this study produced a lesson that was better planned than the individually planned lessons and made stronger by the dialogue that took place throughout

the planning process. This dialogue was fundamental in encouraging teachers to adopt their colleagues' suggestions which, in turn, positively impacted the engagement with learning of the pupils in their groups. Additionally, this collective planning experience could have impacted teacher confidence and, as a result, the quality of teaching. By collectively sharing their expertise in the planning process, the teachers were delivering a lesson that was unanimously agreed upon as suitable by their colleagues, allowing them to adopt a variety of teaching styles and deliver the lesson with confidence.

Saunders, et al. (2009) suggests that this difference in pupil engagement is a result of the leadership of collaborative planning across the school. As mentioned in the literature review, they found that the correct leadership and protocol need to be in place to ensure that collaboratively planned lessons improve engagement and achievement. As the department who planned these lessons were experienced in the collaborative planning process as it was a part of weekly department time at Oakvale Academy, they were in a prime position to plan pupil centred, effective lessons.

## Implications

This study suggests that collaboratively planned lessons can impact the way year seven pupils engage with learning in the teaching of English Language writing skills. However, we need to be circumspect when considering these results. This research was conducted in a single secondary school in the UK, meaning that its findings are unrepresentative. Other pupils in other parts of the country may react differently to the content of collaboratively planned lessons. Additionally, this study only examined the creative writing skills for GCSE English Language, meaning that these findings may not apply to other parts of the English Language specification. Nevertheless, it does raise important questions which can be addressed in future research.

Findings do seem to show that the underlying, social constructivist elements of collaborative planning do positively impact the way teachers in this study taught and, subsequently, the way some pupils engage in learning. As the professional learning that occurred as a result of collaborative planning was instrumental in the success of the collaboratively planned lesson, the authors recommend that as part of the collaborative planning process, schools and individual departments should devise their own guidelines for good practice when it comes to collaborative planning.

The findings also relate to Ofsted's new draft framework which indicates a move away from lessons which are extensively and unnecessarily differentiated by content (Ofsted, 2019). The fact that such successful teaching and learning was observed when teachers adopted their colleagues' advice to differentiate by *"altering vocabulary"* and *"tiered questioning"* suggests that discussing simple methods of differentiation during collaborative planning will allow teachers to take on these ideas as part of their own practice.

A future study could ask pupils to complete a questionnaire about their engagement and perceptions of the lessons to ensure that the teacher and researchers' perceived impact correlates with the pupils' perceptions of learning in the lessons. A longitudinal study could examine the effect of collaboratively planned lessons on pupil engagement and achievement over the course of an academic year or a key stage, looking at two equally set groups where one teacher had planned lessons individually and another has planned collaboratively. Furthermore, another piece of future research may examine how teachers feel about the process of collaboration and whether their perceived impact of collaboration correlates with the actual impact of the collaborative planning.

**Conclusion**

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that examines the effect collaboratively planned lessons have on pupil engagement in the teaching of GCSE English Language writing skills. The use of thematic analysis has allowed a detailed analysis of qualitative data. Findings show that collaboratively planned lessons positively impacted the engagement of some pupils, allowing them to engage positively with both academic challenge and support. This positive engagement was a result of the planning process where teachers suggested and borrowed ideas from one another and subsequently altered the *"base lesson"* to meet the needs of their group. Although, in comparison to the rest of the UK, these findings reflect only how a small group of pupils engaged with learning, this report highlights the importance of developing the small body of research that examines how pupils engage with learning in collaboratively planned lessons and how collaborative planning impacts the teaching of English as a core subject.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank Nicole Oldfield, Sarah Ackland, Cath Connolly, Mark Guest, Holly Harris, Jenny Mullowney and Marie Weston.

## Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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