



Multilingualism in the Canadian Educational Context: Identity, Belonging, and Translanguaging Pedagogies

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2024-10-21	<p>In this study, I examine the nature of multilingual education, which provides cultural, social, and economic affordances yet poses considerable emotional and academic challenges for learners. I explore how dominant languages impact multilingual learners' identity and sense of belonging and identity negotiation, particularly within the Canadian educational context. Through a multiple case study involving four Iranian-Canadian minors and their parents, I use multimodal data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews with children and their parents, children's writings, and multisemiotic representations, to capture the complexities of learners' communicative repertoires. Participants' narratives revealed tensions between their multilingual identities and the monolingual ideologies entrenched in educational systems. However, the study reveals that translanguaging pedagogy, which has emerged as a crucial pedagogical strategy, can enable learners to draw on their unitary communication competence without suppressing part of their linguistic repertoire to enhance understanding and reduce cognitive pressures. This research signals the imperative to operationalise translanguaging as a classroom practice. Dialogic tasks and teacher mediation that affirm multilingual expression can be embedded into everyday instructions. These findings illuminate the imperative for educational reform policies that go beyond classroom practices to address the broader monolingual and neoliberal ideologies, which prioritise the dominant state languages as pathways to prosperity. I argue that such reforms must not be tokenistic and must meaningfully engage with the sociocognitive and cultural challenges multilingual learners face to ensure that their diverse linguistic needs are fully supported.</p> <p>Keywords: Multilingual children, monolingual ideologies, translanguaging, case study</p>
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Introduction

In the contemporary transitional landscape, globalisation can permeate almost every aspect of human life, including education. In this context, multilingualism has taken a prominent role within the education system, enabling learners to explore multiple languages and foster appreciation for local languages (Diaconu, 2022). Several studies have contended that, in comparison to monolingual settings, multilingual learning environments offer a wealth of cognitive and social benefits (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Tan, 2023; Yulduz et al., 2021), yet they often underestimate some of the inherent burdens associated with learning within these demands. Multilingual education requires students to negotiate their evolving identities, navigate their linguistic repertoires, and engage with power dynamics (Bristowe et al., 2014;



Forbes & Rutgers, 2021). These dynamics influence how learners use language in learning and impact, in turn, their academic performance (Meier, 2017). In this work, I explore how these challenges, particularly those posed by dominant languages, may affect learners' identities and their sense of belonging within educational settings.

In this regard, the objectives of this research are twofold. First, I interrogate how multilingual learners conceptualise and negotiate the cognitive and linguistic demands of multiple languages in their academic pursuits. Second, I examine how multilingualism influences student success and their broader sense of self within socio-educational environments. Scholars such as Darwin and Norton (2015) have noted the dynamic interplay between identity, investment in multilingualism, and the construction of students' sense of self and social positioning. In accordance with these insights, I used a phenomenological approach that prioritises individuals' subjective interpretations of their lived experiences (Van Manen, 2018). In this context, phenomenology enabled an in-depth exploration of how multilingual children make sense of themselves, emotional experiences, and social positioning. I also adopted a bottom-up perspective to attend closely to meanings that emerged organically from the participants' voices rather than imposing predetermined categories.

An expansive body of literature has revealed how multilingual individuals resort to translanguaging practices to navigate languages across academic and social contexts fluidly (Duarte, 2020; García & Lin, 2017; Panagiotopoulou & Rosen, 2018). It is well-established that translanguaging, as a pedagogical approach, draws on students' entire linguistic repertoires to foster deeper learning and identity development (García, 2009). However, translanguaging practices have also been met with resistance, as they are not universally embraced in all educational contexts (Marshall & Moore, 2018). There may be implicit and explicit pressures to integrate or isolate certain language practices. I extend this research by exploring how multilingual students engage with translanguaging in their learning experiences. While multilingualism is often praised for its cognitive benefits (Hirosh & Degani, 2017) and its role in enhancing problem-solving abilities (Andleeb et al., 2023), this study focuses on the lived ontologies of multilingual learners who are most impacted by diverse dynamics.

In this respect, scholars such as Ortega (2009) and Forbes and Rutgers (2021) acknowledged the intricate dynamics of language learning for individuals negotiating multiple linguistic identities across various sociocultural spaces. Furthermore, research on language hierarchies and the implicit status of certain languages within educational settings have revealed the pervasive social inequities that multilingual students routinely confront (Goswami, 2019; Mehmedbegović, 2017).

Through this study, I illustrate the importance of understanding how multilingual students perceive and practise their roles as learners by examining multiple multilingual children's profiles from various locations. Hence, this research aims to inform educators and

policymakers about the distinct challenges multilingual learners might face. It offers insights for mitigating these constraints in their academic and social development.

Methodology

In this research, I employed a multiple case study design involving four minors and their parents, using the mosaic approach, constituting multimodal data collection methods. This integration of the mosaic approach with the multiple case study design allowed me to capture a world of action while contributing to it (Cohen et al., 2018). The mosaic framework acknowledges the need for flexibility in selecting methods most suitable for a given research context (Clark, 2004; Clark & Moss, 2017). I was able to probe into the practical challenges faced by multilingual learners, such as cognitive overload and social tensions surrounding language use, by gathering a constellation of qualitative data. Combining these data collection tools, I explored the diversity of contexts and perspectives to understand how multilingual education unfolds across different temporal and spatial dimensions and individual circumstances. This enabled an in-depth examination of the intricate intersections between language practices, identity construction, and power dynamics embedded within each participant's lived experience (Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection Tools

I used a constellation of child-friendly data-collecting techniques, i.e. semi-structured interviews, children's illustrations and reflective journals, to explore the lived experiences of multilingual children across various sociocultural contexts. as the primary data collection method. The interviews addressed key challenges from multiple perspectives and provided comprehensive insights where participants could discuss their language learning challenges, successes, and emotions, as per Brinkmann & Kvale (2018). The interviews were designed to elicit responses related to language use, emotional responses to multilingual education, and strategies for constructing multilingual identities.

Reflective journals were also utilised to contextualise these lived experiences. Some children transformed these reflective journals into translanguaging spaces, as per Li (2018) and articulated their identities and experiences while documenting their daily struggles and achievements over time.

Participants

For this multiple case study, four child participants, aged 9 to 16, accompanied by a parent or guardian, were recruited from the social platforms of the Iranian-Canadian community for this study. The participants were from the Canadian cities of Calgary, Laval, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. They were learning English and French at school, while Farsi literacy was maintained and practised as their heritage language within the home environment.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to identify and discern the patterns within the narratives. Thematic analysis was conducted in a manner consistent with phenomenological inquiry to attend to

how minors constructed meaning around their multilingual ontologies. I sought to remain faithful to the essence of participants' descriptions, bracketed preconceived notions, and allowed themes to emerge inductively to echo the study's bottom-up orientation (Saldaña, 2021; Wertz, 2011). In particular, I considered the dimensions of multilingual education as articulated by the participants in the analysis. Through the thematic coding process, prominent themes emerged that illuminated the strategic use of translanguaging and the sociocultural aspects often embedded in multilingual education (Maddamsetti, 2020).

In analysing children's multisemiotic productions, I focused on symbolic representations, such as using colours, forms, and flags. Children's nonverbal productions involved creative pictorial representations, which encompassed multiple modes of communication, including linguistic elements, visual symbols, and gestures, which conveyed their complex experiences (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020). I carefully examined the children's use of colours, composition, and symbolic artefacts such as flags to gain insights into their implicit cognitive processes and perceptions of social and cultural trajectories, including their sense of belonging, marginalisation, positioning, and identity negotiations. I interpreted these visual resources as non-verbal representations of their multilingual identities, affiliations, and the dynamic, multilingual ecologies they were navigating—dimensions not easily accessible through conventional linguistic approaches alone (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020; Stein, 2007).

This approach corresponded to the perspectives of scholars who have emphasised the importance of considering diverse modes of expression, such as drawings, in understanding the lived experiences of multilingual children (Kress & Leeuwen, 2020; Kwon, 2021). Moreover, I incorporated narrative inquiry techniques to further frame participants' individual stories and to gain a richer understanding of their experiences (Clandinin, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and assents were obtained from the children and consents from their parents prior to participation. The confidentiality of participants was ensured by anonymising all names and identifying details. Given the sensitive nature of discussing personal academic struggles and emotional challenges, participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Special care was taken to ensure that students did not feel pressured to share experiences that made them uncomfortable, and interviews were conducted in a safe and supportive virtual environment. In this work, participants' pseudonyms are used to protect their identities.

Results

This carefully crafted methodological framework afforded me the investigation of the lived realities of multilingual learners as they negotiated the complexity of multilingualism. This process unveiled rich insights into the cognitive, emotional, and academic dimensions of using multiple languages and illuminated the nuanced ways in which these factors intersected in the learners' lives.

Multisemiotic illustrations produced by children served as a lens into their cognitive and social-emotional landscapes and complemented the insights gained through more conventional linguistic data (García & Li, 2015). The following participants' stories echo the obstacles and affordances encountered by these children in negotiating their identities across various times and spaces. These profiles were obtained through the analysis of interviews and linguistic and non-linguistic productions. They illustrate the children's distinct experiences and varied practices across diverse sociocultural contexts. Moreover, these findings revealed the hybrid and fluid nature of language use, identity construction, and family dynamics across varied sociocultural spaces.

Arina

Arina, a 13-year-old from Calgary, Alberta, exhibits a solid commitment to her heritage language, Farsi, despite the marginalisation and exclusion she has experienced. She notes that her peers often react with suspicion or distance themselves because she is "from somewhere else" and "not like them [i.e. white]" (Arina, February 6, 2022). Nevertheless, Arina takes pride in her multilingual repertoire, especially as Farsi, a language not widely spoken at home, plays a central role in constructing her multilingual identity. This sense of pride is also reflected in her appreciation for her most treasured cultural object, a Termeh, a traditional Iranian handwoven cloth, which strengthens her connection to her heritage culture.

Within Arina's family, her multilingual abilities are regarded as valuable cultural wealth, which reinforces familial bonds and offers potential social and economic opportunities. Arina recognises her proficiency in multiple languages as a symbolic and practical asset. She describes the joy and sense of agency she experiences when engaging with Farsi, explaining that it fills her with pride and happiness. This deep emotional connection to her heritage language highlights language's role in shaping her identity and sense of self-worth. Despite facing discriminatory attitudes at school, Arina's resilience, supported by her family's affirmation of her linguistic abilities, remains crucial in maintaining her attachment to Farsi.

Nava

Nava lives in Laval and attends a francophone school. She regards English as the predominant language, which she subconsciously binds to dreaming, emotional expression, and other complex cognitive processes. For her, French, by contrast, is perceived mainly as the official language of the province of Quebec and the language of her academic environment. Her heritage language, Farsi, retains its status as integral to her selfhood, as she appears particularly passionate about its preservation. Her bond to Farsi anchors her identity, which is deeply tied to her bonds with her relatives in Iran, where Farsi functions as their primary means of communication.

Delphine

Delphine, at the age of 16, affirms the transcendent advantages of multilingualism, particularly in future career prospects. She perceives that her ability to speak multiple languages will significantly amplify her employment potential, as it will afford her the opportunity to engage with a broader spectrum of individuals. Farsi, her heritage language, occupies a deeply cherished place in her heart, as she reiterates it in her narratives. However, Delphine also articulates a sense of discomfort over her perceived diminishing literacy in Farsi, recalling moments at school when she relied on her peers to interpret or understand concepts in English. Her mother, an ardent proponent of multilingual education, places considerable emphasis on the retention of Farsi as a vital means of fostering connections with their extended family. Delphine discloses her desire to enhance her command of Farsi so that she can communicate with her parents and relatives more effectively. Her experiences reveal the central role of multilingualism in negotiating identity and familial bonds while simultaneously echoing the internal struggles associated with Delphine's perceived shortcomings in heritage language literacy.

Mehrnaz

Mehrnaz artfully depicts her multilingual roadmap through her multimodal representations of the different languages and her learning trajectories in her life (figure 1). She connects German with her interest in German cuisine, which she developed during her family's few years of residence in Germany before moving to Canada, English with academic pursuits, and Farsi with her heritage language development. She mirrors the distinct contexts where she frequently uses these languages. Interestingly, despite her exposure to French at her Swiss daycare, Mehrnaz does not include it in her representations. Mehrnaz's mother, Tala, who holds a Master's degree in Social Communication Sciences, explains the substantial resources she uses to support her daughter's multilingual education, including digital platforms and an online tutor from Iran. Tala, Mehrnaz's mother, places great emphasis on Mehrnaz's heritage language maintenance as she believes that it fosters a robust familial connection between them. She expresses her concern that if Mehrnaz stops using Farsi, their bond will weaken, which she finds profoundly distressing. However, external factors, such as bullying, negatively impact Mehrnaz's language-learning journey. In addition, Mehrnaz notes the influence of family support and social interactions on her multilingual development.

Multisemiotic Illustration of Language Roadmap (Mehrnaz, Age 9, 2022)

Discussion

The narratives of the research participants provide a reflexive and layered perspective and reveal the advantages and complexities inherent in navigating multilingualism. This is particularly significant in diasporic contexts, where heritage languages and the dominant language of the host society are negotiated, often in ways that reflect broader social, political, and cultural power dynamics. In the forthcoming sub-sections, I critically discuss various dimensions of investment in multilingual education, address some challenges of maintaining heritage languages, and attempt to foreground the limitations inherent in current multilingual educational frameworks.

The Pros and Pride of Multilingual Education

The research participants echoed that multilingual education, which includes their heritage language, facilitates maintaining transgenerational connections to Iran, their homeland. For instance, Arina experienced a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in preserving and using her heritage language, even given the intricacies of its orthography, which is distinguished by an entirely distinct and unique writing system. This suggests that preserving heritage languages may carry profound symbolic and cultural importance and significantly contribute to strengthening children's sense of identity, identity negotiation and assertion. In a similar vein, Nava exhibited an unwavering and commendable dedication to safeguarding Farsi and recognised its crucial role in shaping her identity and in the transmission of linguistic and cultural heritage across generations, thereby preserving a deep connection to Iran. Additionally, Delphine's integration of Farsi into her pictorial

representation brought to the fore the emotional significance of her heritage language despite her apprehensions regarding her heritage language loss.

Overall, the narratives demonstrate that investment in multilingual education, which encompasses the preservation of heritage languages and the acquisition of the country's dominant language, constitutes a cornerstone of the ethnolinguistic identities of children and cultivates a profound sense of belonging. Their experiences support the notion that heritage languages are crucial in cultural identity, functioning as more than a means of communication. Furthermore, parents strongly aligned with this perspective—Cheryl, Delphine's mother, and Arina's father emphasised the importance of enacting family language practices to uphold sociolinguistic legacies. From their vantage points, maintaining heritage languages is viewed as a strategic investment that would offer prospective symbolic and material affordances. Consequently, parents invest in their children's future social and economic opportunities by positioning them to engage with diverse imagined communities in a globalised world through cultivating their heritage linguistic resources. This investment would foster a sense of belonging and strengthen their identity assertion across various cultural and linguistic contexts. From the perspective of these Iranian-Canadian diasporic families, proficiency in heritage languages serves as a form of cultural and symbolic capital that enhances familial cohesion and prepares their children for future success. In this way, these families strengthen their ties to Iran while developing the skills to succeed in a multicultural global environment.

Challenges of Multilingual Education

While the advantages of multilingual education are evident, it also poses considerable challenges. According to Aronin (2019), although multilingualism presents certain benefits, effectively harnessing its educational potential can be a significant challenge. While multilingual individuals resort to their unitary language repertoire encompassing the knowledge of languages to communicate (García & Li, 2015; Lange & Polat, 2024), the participants consistently reflected on the various challenges with monolingual ideologies present across educational spaces. Notably, Arina voiced the constraints imposed by monolingual ideologies entrenched in her educational context and noted how it could lead to overwhelming feelings. In a related vein, her mother mentioned that the simultaneous learning of French and English might overwhelm children, calling attention to the significant cognitive burden linked to multilingual education and conforming to monoglossic policies. This cognitive burden seems to stem from the fact that monolingual ideologies fail to acknowledge the learners' unitary linguistic repertoire. Instead, they demand that students compartmentalise and switch between distinct, named languages across various times and spaces rather than engaging in the fluid, dynamic process of translanguaging, as noted by García and Li (2015). This expectation places undue pressure on learners, as it ignores the natural, holistic way in which multilingual individuals draw on their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning.

Certain participants encountered distinct challenges associated with specific languages. Delphine and Nava encountered challenges with the pronunciation and grammatical rules of French, which resulted in a sense of frustration and self-consciousness. Delphine experienced challenges with French accents and silent letters, which contributed to her confusion. Meanwhile, Nava's apprehension about being ridiculed for her French accent prevented her from participating in class. The emotional distress arising from fears of making errors or facing ridicule accentuates the emotional and social burdens that frequently coexist with the cognitive requirements of multilingualism. Mehrnaz's experience with math illuminates the challenges encountered when studying subjects in a language that is not one's mother tongue. Although she asserted a robust multilingual identity, she encountered difficulties in comprehending and articulating mathematical concepts in English, her fourth language. Tala, her mother, also observed that this frequently caused challenges for her daughter in understanding and conveying information during exams and homework tasks. These academic setbacks illustrate the broader consequences of multilingual education in areas beyond language acquisition and demonstrate how pedagogical limitations rooted in outdated frameworks impact overall academic achievement. This situation reflects the constraints of instructional models that still operate within narrow, monolingual assumptions. These models do not fully embrace pedagogical approaches that allow students such as Mehrnaz to utilise their complete linguistic repertoire across subjects. As a result, her cognitive and linguistic strengths in her heritage languages remain undervalued, contributing to unnecessary academic difficulties.

Emotional and Social Implications

The emotional impact of multilingual education cannot be overstated. Notably, the fear of ridicule and the embarrassment children feel about their linguistic abilities compared to their peers were significant themes in the children's narratives. For instance, Delphine's sense of embarrassment over needing explanations in Farsi and Nava's fear of being laughed at for her accent point to the emotional toll that multilingualism can take, particularly when minors are expected to perform in additional languages they do not feel fully confident in. Therefore, the results illuminate the significance of promoting secure educational settings that recognise and adapt to the obstacles confronted by students who speak multiple languages instead of exacerbating their anxieties.

Conversely, the emotional connection to heritage language, as evidenced by Arina's pride in her Farsi literacy and Yasy and Nava's desire to communicate with their relatives in Iran, illustrates how language can be a powerful source of identity and belonging. The emotional stakes of multilingualism extend beyond academic performance and influence how children perceive themselves and their place within their familial and cultural community.

Translanguaging as a Coping Mechanism

In light of the challenges associated with multilingual education in Canada, learners in this study frequently resorted to translanguaging practices to address the formidable linguistic demands placed upon them. Translanguaging, defined as the practice of using multiple languages fluidly to aid understanding and communication, has emerged as a crucial strategy for mitigating sociocognitive demands in academic contexts (Garcia & Lin, 2017). For instance, Delphine and Nava, whose first languages differ from the primary languages of instruction in Canada, described translanguaging to bridge the gap between their home languages and the new languages they are learning as they use their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate with various individuals across different spaces. Delphine, for example, combined Farsi explanations with French vocabulary practice, while Nava alternated languages when completing assignments to maintain comprehension.

These issues warrant a theme I identified as strategic repertoire mobilisation, referring to the mobilisation of all available linguistic resources to overcome cognitive and communicative challenges. These issues warrant the adoption of more progressive pedagogical approaches, such as pedagogical designs that affirm and encourage the fluid, agentive deployment of all semiotic and linguistic resources available to learners. This is in accordance with pedagogical orientations that transcend monoglossic ideologies and legitimise the strategic, agentive deployment of learners' full linguistic repertoires as central to meaning-making and knowledge construction (García & Li, 2013; Garcia & Lin, 2017).

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the dual-edged nature of multilingual education. While conducting this research, I observed that multilingual education affords clear cultural, social, and economic advantages. It also presents significant cognitive, emotional, and academic impediments for children, largely due to the deficiencies of current multilingual pedagogies. The participants' experiences indicated a critical need for educational systems to support multilingual learners more adequately by recognising the sociocognitive realities of multilingual education and providing learners with resources that accommodate their diverse needs. In my analysis, translanguaging emerged as a potent pedagogical practice to address these impediments. It enabled learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to enhance comprehension and reduce the pressures associated with language compartmentalisation (García, 2009).

Furthermore, participants' narratives illustrate the tensions learners face between their desire to utilise their unitary communicative competence without suppressing parts of their identity and language repertoire and the demands of conforming to monolingual ideologies. These ideologies manifest in various forms across educational trajectories, such as peer pressure and monolingual mindsets within schools. It appears that the current educational practices in Canada reflect nation-state ideologies, as noted by Anderson (2016) and May

(2011), which might lead to policies promoting a monolingual standard prioritising the language of power or governance across various Canadian jurisdictions.

These challenges become particularly apparent in diverse sociolinguistic spaces for multilingual learners. This research reveals that while multilingualism is often celebrated for its sociocultural and intellectual benefits, the lived realities of multilingual children and their parents indicate that it is not without its burdens. Based on these findings, I contend there is a clear need for educational reform policies at the macro level, extending beyond classroom practices, to combat entrenched monolingual and neoliberal ideologies. These ideologies tend to prioritise the education of dominant state languages as the sole pathway to prosperity and access to the imagined communities of immigrants. Such reforms must not be tokenistic but should meaningfully address the sociocognitive and cultural challenges caused by neoliberalism to ensure that the educational system truly supports the diverse linguistic needs of multilingual learners.

In conclusion, this study signals the imperative of operationalising translanguaging as a principled pedagogical approach within everyday classroom praxis. Concrete illustrations—such as dialogic tasks in which learners strategically mobilise their full linguistic repertoires to co-construct knowledge or teacher mediation that legitimises diverse expressions—would enrich instructional methodologies and affirm learners' dynamic languaging practices. Thus, teachers must secure appropriate training, well-delineated pedagogical protocols, and resources to embed translanguaging meaningfully in daily instruction.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Given Canada's decentralised educational governance, where curriculum and policy fall under provincial rather than federal jurisdiction (Cummins, 2014; Marshall & Moore, 2018), implementing translanguaging practices requires targeted action at the provincial, school board, and classroom levels. Recognising the dominance of English and French and the monolingual ideologies embedded in immersion and francophone school structures in Canada (Årman, 2023; Heller, 2007). This study calls for a pragmatic, context-sensitive set of policy steps that support multilingual learners without challenging existing language-of-instruction mandates.

In this respect, provincial ministries of education ought to recalibrate curriculum documents to acknowledge further the pedagogical value of home languages as learning resources, following existing models in early childhood education (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Subsequently, school boards can develop local guidelines that encourage flexible language use within instructional time, especially in content areas such as science or math, where cognitive exigencies are high (García & Li, 2015). In addition, boards can concomitantly offer bespoke professional development that familiarises teachers with translanguaging strategies adapted to their program contexts. Ultimately, at the classroom level, teachers can adopt low-threshold practices—such as bilingual glossaries, multilingual brainstorming, and

culturally responsive materials—to validate students’ linguistic repertoires while safeguarding official language goals.

Limitations

This qualitative inquiry, although empirically robust, remains circumscribed by a modest sample drawn from upper-socioeconomic families; thus, generalisability to other strata and regions of Canada warrants caution. The demographic profile—minors residing in anglophone and francophone provinces—introduced variation across contexts that may have informed their stances on multilingual identity and school language policies. Working with young participants required tailored interview methods (e.g., puppetry, story-mapping) to support communication; nevertheless, inconsistent engagement at times limited the depth of responses, and incomplete assent forms or pictorial artefacts reduced the dataset. Nonetheless, to minimise distress, I refrained from follow-up questions when children described racism or discrimination. While this decision protected participants, it may have constrained the interpretive continuity across narratives. In addition, my dual role as an Iranian academic and cultural insider enhanced trust and posed the risk of bias, which I addressed through ongoing reflexive practice. These constraints bring to the fore the transferability rather than universal applicability of the findings and suggest directions for future research with larger, more socioeconomically diverse cohorts and refined, child-responsive methods to improve validity and rigour.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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