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Academic Achievement Gap of ELL Students after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Honors Thesis

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Department: Teacher Education

Advisor: Catherine Lawless Frank, Ph.D.

April 2024

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Abstract

As ELLs continue to be the fastest-growing population of K-12 public school students, it is critical to examine how ELLs were impacted by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. ELL students struggled to transition from in-class to remote learning because many educational materials were not appropriate for their learning style, both before and because of COVID. (Long, 2022). Now, some of these ELL students are approximately 2-3 years behind their English native peers in terms of academic progress. The following research will have a foundation through a literature review as well as a focus qualitative study on ELL students and teachers. The study will give personal accounts of how COVID-19 has impacted the ELL student's life in 2020 and how it continues to impact their lives today. In addition, this study will analyze effective resources to further support the learning of ELL students.

Disclaimer

All student names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.



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Introduction

Background of the Problem

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest-growing student population in U.S. K-12 public schools. In the 2019-2020 school year, approximately 5.12 million ELLs were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools (NCES 2021). As Table 1 demonstrates, the enrollment of ELLs in schools has increased and will continue to increase in the future years. The ELL population has risen from 3.8 million students in 2000 to 5.12 million students in 2019.

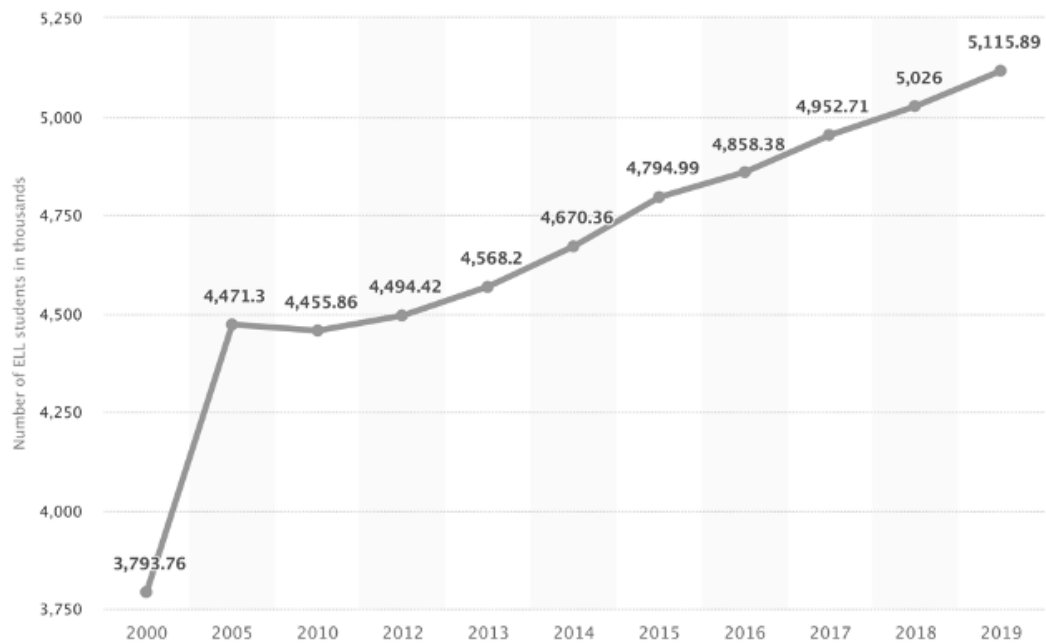


Table 1. NCES. (October 31, 2021). Number of Public-School Students Enrolled as English Language Learners (ELL) in the United States from 2000 to 2019 (in 1,000s) [Graph]. In *Statista*.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, resulting in a shift to online learning, ELLs' opportunity and achievement gap had significantly widened. COVID-19 brought a

variety of obstacles to ELL academics such as, “a lack of access to digital devices [...]; parents’ limited capacity to support home learning; inadequate remote learning resources [...]; and school–family language barriers” (Sugarman and Lazarín 2021). Furthermore, according to Julie Sugarman and Melissa Lazarín in their 2021 article *Educating English Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “EL[L]s face[d] setbacks in their English language development after five or more months without consistent opportunities to listen, speak, write, and read in English.” While the COVID-19 pandemic affected all students, ELLs lost two years of English language development, further widening the academic and achievement gap for ELLs.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to answer three research questions:

1. How has learning loss since COVID-19 affected ELLs as compared to their native-speaking peers?
2. What additional resources support their needs as ELLs?
3. How can educators work to close the academic and achievement gap for ELLs?

Methods

The methodology for this research is a case study consisting of ELL student interviews. In addition, there is a literature review of educational scholars to supplement the interviews. ELL students were asked about their experiences as English learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Importance of Study

English Language Learners (ELLs) in American public schools continue to increase. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), “As of fall

2019, approximately 5.12 million ELL students are enrolled in elementary and secondary public schools across the United States.” This is a 1.79% increase from 2018 to 35% since 2000. ELL students are the fastest-growing group of students in grades K-12. According to the National Educational Association (2020), “By 2025, 1 out of 4 children in classrooms across the nation will be an English language learner (ELL) student.” With a substantial percentage of the school population being ELL students, educators need to connect with, mentor, and inspire these students. As ELLs continue to be the fastest-growing population of K-12 public school students, it is critical to examine how the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted ELLs. It is known that the COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges to ELLs, including a lack of internet access, limited capacity to support online learning, language barriers between school and family, and insufficient teacher training (University of Cincinnati, 2022).

Literature Review

Data

WIDA

World Class Instruction Design and Assessment (WIDA), a consortium of forty-one state education departments, strives to promote academic language development and educational equity for multilingual students through standards, assessments, and research (Sahakyan & Cook, 2021). Sahakyan and Cook examined ELLs' testing, proficiency, and growth in 2019, 2020, and 2021. They used population data administered across the WIDA consortium to students who identified as ELLs. Furthermore, the tests “measure students’ English proficiency in four domains—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and determine if a student will remain in an English-learner program” (Najarro 2021).

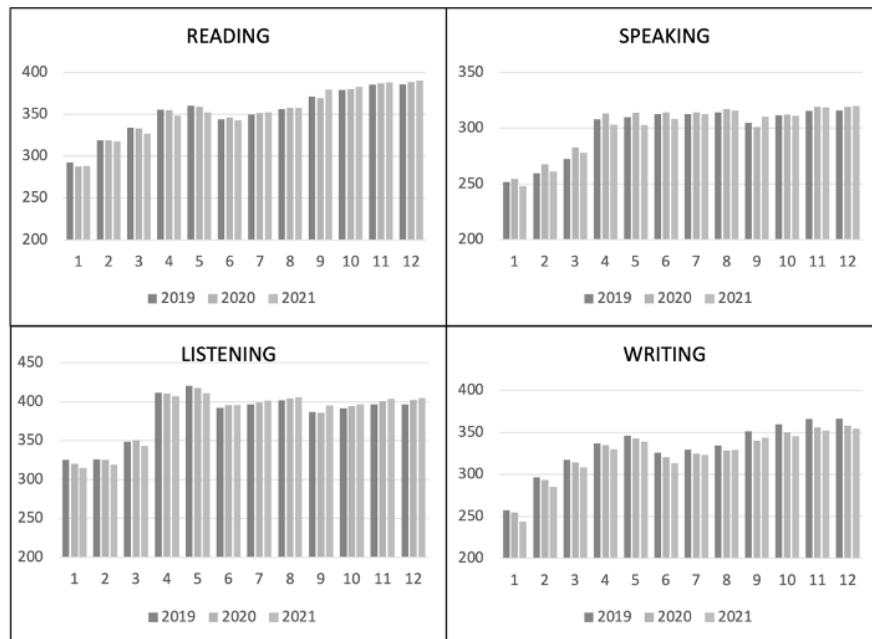


Figure 2. Sahakyan, Narek & Cook, H. Gary. (2021). Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth: Before and Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic. (WIDA) Research Report No. RR-2021-1). Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Figure 2 shows WIDA's results for ELL proficiency in each of the four domains through 41 state departments. WIDA measures proficiency by taking the overall composite scale score and averaging them across the entire population of students by test-taker grade. According to Figure 2, Sahakyan and Cook (2021) found that English proficiency in speaking between the 2020 and 2021 school years decreased in grades 1-8. In addition, writing proficiency for ELL students decreased in all grades from the 2019 to 2021 school years. While the listening proficiency decreased from 2019 to 2020 in grades 1, 4, 5, and 9, it increased in grades 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12. The decline in average proficiency in all four domains was more substantial in the lower and upper grades.

In the 2020-21 academic year, teachers in the virtual environment were 20% more likely to have ELLs experience significant obstacles. For example, middle school teachers were approximately six times more likely to have ELLs who regularly struggled to understand and complete classwork as compared to their peers (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO 2022). According to GAO, "Across all grade levels, these teachers were about three to 18 times more likely than their coworkers to have students who regularly had difficulty getting needed assistance, support, or supervision at their workspace" (2022). ELLs were approximately three times more likely than their peers to arrive late to virtual school and approximately four times more likely to have limited to no participation (GAO, 2022).

Unfinished Learning

McKinsey & Company is an educational organization that provides research across the entire education ecosystem. In 2021, researchers of McKinsey & Company, such as Emma Dorn, conducted research on the lingering effects of unfinished learning

since the COVID-19 pandemic. Dorn and colleagues assessed student learning by analyzing the Curriculum Associates' I-Ready in-school assessment results of more than 1.6 million elementary school students across more than 40 states. According to Dorn, "We compared students' performance in the spring of 2021 with the performance of similar students before the pandemic" (2021). Researchers discovered that, on average, students' results in 2021 were approximately 10 points behind in math and nine points behind in reading (as compared to peers in previous years). Figure 3 displays this information by converting the points to months missed in learning for various groups of students.

By the end of the 2020–21 school year, students were on average five months behind in math and four months behind in reading.

Cumulative months of unfinished learning due to the pandemic by type of school, grades 1 through 6

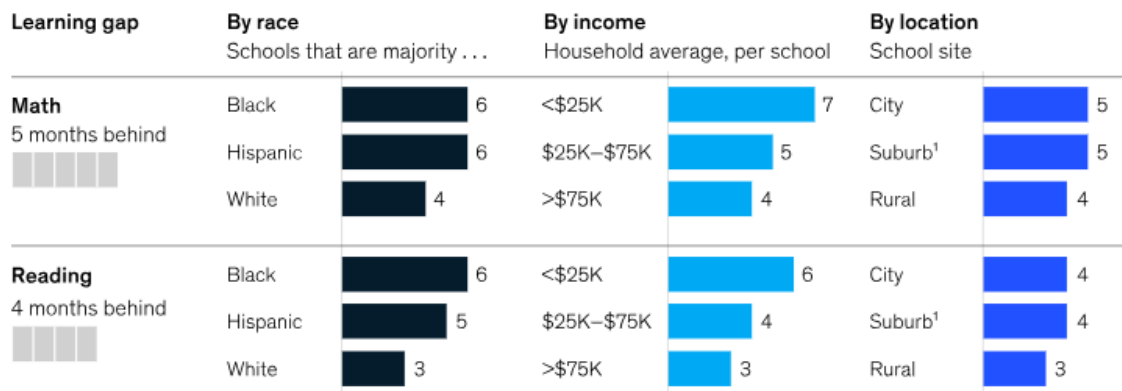


Figure 3. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021, July 27). *COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>.

According to Figure 3, Hispanic students were 6 months behind in math and 5 months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 school year. Their white, native-language peers were 4 months behind in math and only 3 months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 school year. Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics found,

that “ELL students constituted an average of 14.9 percent of total public-school enrollment in cities, 9.8 percent in suburban areas, 6.9 percent in towns, and 4.2 percent in rural areas” (2021). In reference to Figure 3, students in predominantly low-income schools and urban locations lost more learning during the pandemic than their peers in high-income rural and suburban schools.

Difficult Academic Conditions

ELLs also struggled throughout COVID-19 because many schools in the United States need more preparedness to support ELLs. Jessica Fregni states, “Nearly 60 percent of English learners come from low-income families, and many attend schools with underfunded EL programs” (2021). This demonstrates that some ELLs are not receiving as quality an education as their peers, which creates an obstacle for their academic and social-emotional learning. According to Monica Generoso from the Englewood Teachers Association in Englewood, New Jersey, “Fewer than half the states require all teachers to have at least some training in working with ELLs” (Long, 2022). School districts are falling short of providing English language development instruction for students. All educators are responsible for educating ELLs, including the school system. Without the opportunity for professional development in instructing ELLs, educators are unable to provide quality education to their struggling students.

As COVID hit America and schools began to move to virtual settings, many parents of ELL students became worried as they did not have the internet access or support to provide their child to succeed in school. ELL students, among others, were more isolated from their peers and friends, which had been a significant source for practicing their

English skills. Therefore, when schools began to open back up, ELLs needed to catch up in their English skills and were delayed academically due to a lack of practice.

Interviews

As part of this research project, a case study of two high school ELL students was conducted. Student interviews were conducted in person and consent was given by both the student, parents, and the university review board. Each interview lasted about fifteen minutes. Participants were chosen based on recommendations from their ELL teacher in the school district.

Questions used during Interviews

1. Where are you from? How old were you when you came to the States?
2. What language(s) do you speak at home?
3. How old are you? What grade are you in?
4. How old were you during COVID? What grade were you in?
5. How often can you study English outside of school?
6. How has COVID-19 hindered your ability to study English outside of school?
7. Has COVID-19 impacted your social life?
8. Describe any difficulties you have in learning English.
9. Describe any strengths you have in learning English.
10. What resources, if any, have your teachers given to you to help you adjust to in-person learning after COVID-19?

Carlos

Carlos moved to the United States from El Salvador when he was 5. His mom speaks Spanish in the household, though his stepdad can speak English. He is currently a 15-year-old freshman in high school. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he was 12 years old and in the 7th grade. While his stepdad tried to help Carlos study

English when the pandemic hit, Carlos indicated that the pandemic hindered his ability to study English outside of school because he could not communicate with his peers. When asked if the pandemic affected his ability to learn English outside of school, Carlos responded, “Yeah, because I talk to a lot of people [in school] [...] and that was hard for me [to not be able to talk to his peers].” Carlos mentioned that the “main reason why” the pandemic was difficult (concerning school) was because he learns best from having conversations with his peers and teachers. Since the pandemic isolated everyone from each other, he was unable to practice English conversationally. Furthermore, Carlos explained that his biggest difficulty in learning English is writing. While all his classes during quarantine were via Zoom, he could not practice writing skills as he would in the physical classroom. Lastly, Carlos indicated that his ELL teacher would translate his assignments into Spanish which allowed him to adjust to in-person learning because the directions were clearer in his native language.

Diego

Diego is from Guatemala and is currently an 18-year-old senior in high school. At home, his family only speaks Spanish, and his primary use of language at school is English. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Diego was a 15-year-old freshman. Diego said that he needs more time to study English outside of school, especially since he can only practice speaking English during school hours. He believes that the pandemic significantly hindered his ability to study English outside of school because Zoom classes were extremely difficult for him to comprehend. He says that “studying English outside of school is not the same as receiving classes in school.” In school, he can communicate with his peers and teachers to practice his English skills. However, when the pandemic isolated him, Diego did not have the resources available to continue improving his

English skills. Another obstacle that Diego mentioned was the masks during COVID-19. When he was finally able to meet up with his friends from school, everyone had to wear masks. Later in the interview, Diego said that “listening” was his strength in learning English. Therefore, the masks made it more difficult for Diego to overcome the language barrier due to muffled sounds and the inability to lip read. Also, similar to Carlos, his biggest difficulty in learning English is writing. He experienced the same difficulties in his writing skills as Carlos did during the transition back to in-person learning. Lastly, Diego said that his teachers gave him many resources to help him adjust to in-person learning after the pandemic. For example, he said, “videos, applications such as Duolingo, among other projects to continue learning little by little [was very helpful].” He appreciated that his teachers were patient and provided multimodal resources to best support his needs. Overall, these interviews provided first-hand evidence of the struggles ELL students faced during the pandemic and the larger impact on their overall language development. Both students indicated a weakness in writing and a strength in listening. These skills were impacted by a lack of opportunities during the pandemic for ELL students to practice their English language skills in the school environment.

Closing the Gap

Even though the pandemic posed significant challenges and language loss to ELL students, there are resources to help overcome these barriers. Multiple resources can be provided to English Language Learners to help close the academic achievement gap brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic such as online platforms, family engagement, and professional development.

Language Learning Software

Two of the most popular language-learning software are Duolingo and Rosetta Stone. Duolingo is an American educational technology company that produces language learning apps in over 40 languages. Duolingo provides a free platform for educators to use the site in their classrooms: Duolingo for Schools. Duolingo for Schools provides a standards-aligned curriculum, personalized assignments, and student progress insights. The platform applies both “ACTFL [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages] and CEFR [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages] learning standards to Duolingo’s extensive curriculum, allowing [educators] to find content that meets [their] teaching needs” (Duolingo). Assignments that ‘Duolingo for Schools’ provide are adapted to the right level and pace for each student. Lastly, the student progress insights allow educators to “see how [their] students are progressing with in-depth insights like accuracy and time spent learning” (Duolingo). Overall, Duolingo for Schools is a free layer of management that is an addition to the Duolingo language learning application.

Rosetta Stone Language Learning, a division of IXL Learning, is a computer-assisted language learning software that uses images, text, and sound to teach words and

grammar by spaced repetition, without translation. While Rosetta Stone for Schools is not a free platform, it does provide many benefits for language learning solutions: powerful reports to personalize learning, guided classroom learning, and integration for greater flexibility and ease. The platform provides “detailed data [for] teachers to tailor instruction accordingly to close specific knowledge gaps” (Rosetta Stone LLC) and allows educators to “build a personalized curriculum to target [their] students’ specific learning needs” (Rosetta Stone LLC). Educators can choose reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities to build their students’ language skills further. Rosetta Stone is highly compatible with common classroom technology such as Clever, Blackboard, Classlink, or Moodle, allowing students to easily access the platform.

Translation and Captioning Applications

Educators can use translation and captioning applications in the classroom to meet the needs of their ELL students. Google Translate contains three features that are effective in the classroom environment: Conversation, Translation, and Upload (available online only). The conversation aspect of the application allows the educator to translate their speech into another language aloud. According to science teacher, Diedre Rumph, from a middle school in South Carolina, “This is astounding because it allows for a more seamless conversation between you and your student in real-time” (2020). The ability to have a conversation with ELL students allows them to build a positive relationship with their educator. The translation aspect of the application allows educators to translate any text into over 100 languages. Rumph uses this feature “when posting in Google Classroom [to] construct directions or compose...vocabulary lists” (2020). In addition, this feature allows educators to translate communication between parents of ELLs to keep

the parents updated on their student's academic life. Lastly, the creation features of Google Translate allows educators and students to upload documents (PDFs, PowerPoint, Word, or spreadsheets) for translation (Rumph 2020). This feature allows for accessible differentiation of work until ELL students feel more confident with their English language skills. Overall, these features allow educators to use a student's primary language within a classroom setting. This helps to build trust and rapport within the classroom which increases a student's level of academic achievement.

In addition to translation applications, educators can utilize captioning applications for their ELL students. For example, Descript is an online application that allows individuals to transcribe audio, documents, and video in 22 languages, including Spanish, French, Italian, and English. Educators and students would be able to create a Descript account and receive one hour of transcription services per month for free (Descript.com). Another captioning application is TurboScribe. Powered by AI, TurboScribe is an online application that converts audio and video files into text. For free, educators and students can create an account to transcribe three files per day for thirty minutes per file (TurboScribe.ai). Overall, captioning resources give educators a resource to add closed captions in an ELL's native language to a video or teach an online lesson and then transcribe that lesson for an ELL. This further builds trust and rapport within the classroom which can increase academic achievement in the student.

Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities are effective resources for students, especially ELL students, to build a community in their academic environment. According to Austin Donroe in his research "Increasing ELL Inclusion by Developing a Community of

Practice that Creates Equitable Opportunities for ELLs within the School Community,” “One of the most consistent and meaningful theories...involves Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice, or CoP, which is defined as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (2020). School extracurricular activities act as CoP for students to engage in shared interests and opportunities. The collaboration in extracurricular activities between ELLs, their native-speaking peers, teachers, administration, and parents benefits the entire learning community.

The goal of creating plans and materials during [extracurriculars] exists to help ELLs overcome their marginalized school experiences and promote equity and greater achievement regarding both their linguistic and socio-emotional needs. If ELLs continue to feel marginalized from their peers, they could experience a plateauing of their English language development. Students who can achieve higher academic targets or have a higher perception of their own academic capabilities and learning outcomes, see a positive impact on their self-esteem (2020).

ELL students often learn English most effectively through conversation and observation of their peers, teachers, and community. By encouraging ELL students to participate in extracurricular activities, they will have an increased opportunity to close the academic achievement gap through the opportunity to further practice their English language development.

Family Engagement

According to Learning for Justice (2023), “ELL students have the greatest opportunity to succeed when the lines of communication between family and school are nurtured at both the classroom and building levels.” Educators should communicate with the families of all students to build a positive relationship and rapport with families.

Educators need to remember that many guardians of ELL students do not speak English,

so there is an extra language barrier limiting the ability to communicate. Therefore, communication between educators and ELL families is substantial as it builds that academic relationship. When communicating with families of ELL students, “the nuance and detail necessary to convey how adult family members might best engage in the student’s education should be communicated in the family’s primary language” (Learning for Justice 2023). Educators should be given the resources to translate communication sent home to families to best support their needs. This will help their ELLs have the greatest opportunity to succeed in the classroom and their home environments.

Professional Development

As previously mentioned, few teachers have the training to support ELLs in the classroom. In order to support English language learners, there needs to be a district-wide level of understanding among educators, which is achieved through meaningful professional development (Elia 2023). Sarah Elia teaches at Saugerties Central School District in Saugerties, New York. She is a past president of New York State Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages and teaches part-time at Bard College, the State University of New York at New Paltz, and Chongqing University of Education in China. To help teachers better understand and help ELLs, Elia gives an example of what professional development may look like to support teaching ELLs: “Educators explore themed stations to gain background information about English language learners (ELLs), experience what it might feel like to be an ELL and explore methodologies to support this population” (2023). These stations are designed to provide tips and suggestions to educators to meet the needs of ELLs in classrooms. Without this mutual understanding among educators, ELLs are not given the opportunity of a quality education that can

support their academic needs in the classroom. While the pandemic posed significant challenges and language loss to ELL students, these resources can help overcome these barriers to further close the academic achievement gap.

Limitations

There are two major limitations in this study that could be addressed in the future. First, the study was supposed to focus on multiple ELL student interviews to gather information on their learning loss since the pandemic. This study only contained two student interviews due to challenges in recruiting ELL students. Therefore, the sample size was minimal which can affect the reliability of a survey's results because it can lead to bias. Second, due to challenges in recruiting ELL teachers, the measure used to collect the data was limited. This study hoped to examine student work, along with the interviews, from before and after the pandemic. This would have provided more quantitative data to better support the research. In conclusion, these limitations leave the possibility for individuals to continue this research in the future.

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