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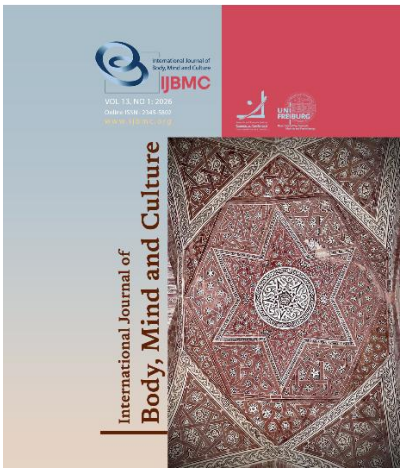

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Within-School Socioeconomic Disparities in Academic Achievement: A Qualitative Case Study of Study-Regulation Supports among Indian Secondary Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explored how students' study strategies are shaped by socioeconomic contexts and how these differences relate to academic achievement within the same school setting.

Methods and Materials: A single-site qualitative case study was conducted in a private, unaided English-medium CBSE school in Bengaluru, India, enrolling students from diverse socioeconomic status (SES) groups. Thirty students in Grades 8–9 (aged 13–15) were selected through purposive sampling across achievement levels and residence types (day scholars and residential/hostel students). SES classification was informed by parental education/occupation and the Modified Kuppuswamy Scale (2019). Data were collected via semi-structured individual interviews, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through iterative line-by-line and focused coding guided by Charmaz's grounded theory approach, leading to theme development.

Findings: Three themes explained within-school achievement disparities: (1) parental engagement and access to cultural/social capital varied by SES, shaping monitoring, subject support, and study regulation at home; (2) hostel routines and mentoring provided compensatory structures resembling middle-class "concerted cultivation," supporting academic regulation for some low-SES residential students; and (3) for low-SES day scholars, teachers and remedial support served as the primary learning resource, often framed in skill-deficit terms rather than culturally responsive pedagogy.

Conclusion: Equal access to school resources does not necessarily produce equal outcomes because study regulation develops within unequal family and institutional support ecologies. Equity-oriented, culturally responsive, and relational school practices—alongside targeted academic mentoring—may help reduce persistent achievement gaps .

Keywords: socioeconomic status, academic achievement, study strategies, qualitative case study, India.

Introduction

Academic achievement is one of the most widely researched constructs in contemporary educational research. Traditionally, an individual's ability to study effectively has been considered a strong predictor of academic success. From this individualistic perspective, study skills or strategies encompass a wide range of tactics that enable students to learn efficiently, organize information, and recall it when needed (DiPerna, 2006). These skills such as time management, planning, intrinsic motivation, need for cognition and academic self-concept, are considered crucial to academic success (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Wang et al., 2023; West & Sadoski, 2011; Zimmerman, 1990). However, students are often expected to acquire these skills "naturally," and those who do not are viewed through a deficit lens, requiring remedial instruction and support (Singh & Choudhary, 2015).

A growing body of research explains that academic achievement cannot be attributed alone to individual cognitive strategies, but is also shaped by a student's broader social and cultural context. For instance, students' educational outcomes are significantly influenced by their access to social capital, which includes familial support, peer networks, and community engagement (Boonk et al., 2018; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Fatimaningrum, 2021; Mishra, 2020). Parental involvement, family income, and parental education levels have been found to influence the educational and social outcomes of children (Boonk et al., 2018; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). High-income families often invest more in educational resources and school-related activities for their children, while families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have restricted capacity to provide the same level of support (Sengonul, 2022).

This disparity in access to resources and support emphasizes a deeper issue of educational inequality. Although students with the potential for high academic success exist at all economic levels, those from disadvantaged backgrounds often lag behind in achievement (Reardon, 2018). Research on education in Global South often adopts a deficit perspective, portraying marginalized students as lacking the necessary skills and abilities necessary for academic success (Robinson-Pant et al., 2015; Valencia, 2019). This model ignores structural inequalities and attributes low achievement to limited abilities, lack of motivation and 'dysfunctional' backgrounds (Smit, 2012; Valencia, 2019). However, social reproduction theorists (Bourdieu, 2002) argue that access to capital- cultural, social, or economic, is not equally distributed but rather is socially structured and patterned to benefit those already privileged. This unequal transmission of advantageous social, cultural and economic capital across generations along with differences in parental education leads to early and persistent disparities in educational outcomes between children of low and high SES (Sengonul, 2022).

Hence, schools can play a powerful role both in reproducing (Batruch et al., 2019; Bourdieu, 2002) and mitigating these inequalities (Zhang & Hu, 2019). Research suggests that underprivileged children tend to perform better when supported by a cohesive learning community where both adults and children are involved. (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016) When home environments are unable to provide adequate academic support, schools can play a critical role in bridging the linguistic, cultural, and academic gaps by fostering inclusive, collaborative spaces. Creating such environments allows students from disadvantaged backgrounds to build social capital and access supportive networks that bolster their academic progress. While functionalist perspectives within the school reform literature suggests that schools can bridge these gaps in academic achievement with certain interventions like teacher-mediated social support , better resources and positive climates (Zhang & Hu, 2019), Bourdieu's practice theory suggests that academic achievement should be understand as a relational process where individuals who are socially predisposed with internalized habitus to navigate school environments and academic practices in particular ways, they also negotiate these social arrangements in ways that may reconfigure these social relations. Therefore, academic achievement should be understood as a dynamic and relational process, shaped by the interplay of individual capabilities and the social, cultural, and material resources embedded in students' environments. Hence, exploring how students make sense of their study practices within these contexts can offer valuable insights, enabling educational systems to better support and harness the strengths of students from marginalized and low-income communities. The

research question we are exploring is why do academic achievement patterns vary between students of high and low SES within the same school context, despite equal institutional resources?

Conceptual framework

This study draws upon Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological systems theory and Bourdieu (2002) theory of capital and social reproduction and his theory of practice. Bronfenbrenner's theory views human development as taking place inside a nested set of environmental systems, each of which has a different degree of influence on the individual. The immediate contexts where daily interactions take place, like home and school, are referred to as the microsystem. The relationships between different settings, such as the impact of family involvement on school engagement, encompass the mesosystem. The exosystem consists of larger organizations and frameworks that have an indirect impact on the child, including parental employment or educational regulations. Class, educational, and opportunity-related standards are among the broad cultural and societal ideas and values that are represented by the macrosystem. In contrast, Bourdieu (2002) focuses on how social inequality is perpetuated by the unequal distribution and transmission of capital in its economic, social, and cultural forms across generations. Capital exists in different forms and involves access to institutional resources (economic capital), networks and social relationships (social capital), and knowledge of prevailing cultural norms (culture capital), all of which have an impact on educational paths. Our study also incorporates Bourdieu's theory of practice, particularly his concept of habitus, to understand how an individual navigates and responds to his/her social world in meaningful ways. By combining these frameworks, the study places the learner in a multi-layered ecology of development, acknowledging that class-based capital and habitus not just determines how resources are mobilized and accessed within each ecological layer, but also reflects that learners role in actively interpreting and negotiating the conditions within which they are embedded.

Methods and Materials

Research Design and Setting

We used a single-sited qualitative case study design to understand why academic achievement varied among students from diverse SES despite studying in the same school. Case study was used to gather an in-depth analysis about the experiences of the participants. The site for the study was a private, unaided English medium school in Bengaluru which follows the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum and where students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds are admitted. This school was chosen for our study as it offered a mix of students from high and low SES. The high SES students were day scholars who paid the full school fees and stayed with their parents. The school admitted low SES students through two ways, which was unique to it. Day scholars of low SES were admitted to the school through the Right to Education (RTE) act, while the school also housed a residential facility for students from the low SES who studied on scholarships provided by the school. The first author's role as an educator and a researcher in psychology with keen interest in equity and access to schooling shaped the study. With their experience in educational settings, both privileged and underprivileged, the researchers brought awareness about how academic achievement is influenced by structural and social factors and not just individual ability. Reflexivity was maintained through field notes and peer discussions to ensure that personal biases do not affect the goals of the study, especially while interacting with participants of low SES.

Participants

The participants were 16 boys and 14 girls of grades 8 and 9 aged between 13 and 15 years identified through purposive sampling. Out of this, 13 were high achievers and 17 were low achievers. They were chosen based on their academic performance in the school examinations in the preceding academic year. The selection was validated with the teachers. Students of grade 10 were excluded because of their academic rigor. All the participants were proficient in English. In this study, SES was operationalized using indicators like parental education and occupation. Students were categorized as high SES if the parents had a college degree or higher and were in professional jobs. Students were categorized as low SES if both parents had attended high school or

below and were employed in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs or unemployed.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the participants based on their grade, SES, type of residence, parent occupation and level of achievement.

Table 1

Details of Student Participants

Name	Grade	SES	Type of residence	Parent occupation	Level of achievement
Akash	9	High	Day scholar	Father: Stock trader Mother: Teacher	High
Tanmitha	9	High	Day Scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Corporate executive	High
Anaya	8	High	Day Scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Home maker	High
Omi	8	High	Day Scholar	Father: Architect Mother: Teacher	High
Vibha	9	High	Day Scholar	Father: Engineer Mother: HR Professional	High
Divya	8	High	Day Scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Entrepreneur	High
Jayashree	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Daily wage labourer Mother: Daily wage labourer	High
Giri	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Labourer Mother: Unemployed	High
Rohit	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Tailor	High
Manisha	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Labourer Mother: House help	High
Vrinda	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Tailor	High
Anil	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Unemployed Mother: Cook	High
Lakshya	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Farmer Mother: Unemployed	High
Aryan	9	High	Day scholar	Father: HR Manager Mother: Dentist	Low
Vrisha	9	High	Day scholar	Father: Businessman Mother: Teacher	Low
Anagha	9	High	Day scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Corporate Executive	Low
Ajay	8	High	Day scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Home maker	Low
Parv	8	High	Day scholar	Father: Pharma executive Mother: Self employed	Low
Chithra	8	High	Day scholar	Father: Teacher Mother: Teacher	Low
Bhumi	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Tailor	Low
Arpana	9	Low	Hostelite	Mother: House maid	Low
Bharat	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Daily wage worker	Low
Amal	8	Low	Hostelite	Father: Driver Mother: House maid	Low
Manas	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Cook Mother: Unemployed	Low
Hari	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Driver	Low
Abhishek	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Driver Mother: Unemployed	Low
Yash	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Auto driver	Low
Mohit	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: weaver Mother: Home maker	Low
Sahas	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Unemployed Mother: Care taker	Low
Vini	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Security Mother: Housekeeping	Low

***Source**: Author's own work*

Data Collection Method

The modified Kuppuswamy Scale, which was updated for the year 2019 (Saleem & Jan, 2019) and is used for urban areas, was used to define SES in this study. The researchers developed a semi-structured interview schedule which was reviewed by two experts, both with research and academic expertise. The interview schedule included questions like " Can you tell me your study routine on an average day?", " How do you usually go preparing for an exam?", " If you have not understood a particular concept, how do you get it clarified". Once the interview questions were validated, the researchers refined the questions and adjusted the probes according to the suggestions given by the experts. A pilot interview was conducted with a student to estimate the duration and understand potential issues. Permission was sought

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from the school authorities after discussing the plan of the study. Once permission was obtained from the school, consent was taken from all the participants. The first author conducted one to one interviews with each participant after ensuring that they were informed about the purpose of the study. Since the participants were proficient in English, all the interviews were conducted in English. Each interview, lasting for about 30 minutes, were audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim and verified for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were coded line by line using NVivo 12 informed by the research question, guided by the framework of (Charmaz, 2006) grounded theory approach. In this study, coding was done at two levels. In the initial coding, words, lines, segments and incidents were closely studied to identify the in-vivo codes. Once the initial codes emerged, a focussed coding was done by selecting the most useful codes and examining them against the data. Analytical memos were written to document the emerging insights and reflections throughout the coding process. The second author, who is an expert in the field, reviewed the codes to ensure reliability. These codes were then reorganized into themes, and we selected excerpts from the data that illustrate these themes for further contextual analysis in the paper.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Ethics committee of the University (RCEC/00263). Assent was obtained from children and they were also informed of their right to not answer any specific question. Consent was also taken from parents to include their wards in the study. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Confidentiality was assured to the participants and pseudonyms were used for their identifying details.

Findings and Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of participants across different SES based on their academic scores.

Table 2

Distribution of participants based on academic scores

Group	High SES (Day scholars) (n=12)	Low SES(n=18) Residential	RTE
High achievers	6	6	1
Low achievers	6	6	5

Despite attending the same school and accessing the same teaching and learning resources, the students from lower SES backgrounds showed lower academic achievement. This disparity is further explained through relevant themes that emerged from the data.

Parental engagement influenced by Socioeconomic status (SES)

Parental engagement in students' academics was found to be highly stratified by socioeconomic status (SES). Interviews revealed that the quality and nature of parental involvement was shaped by parental education, availability of time and resources. This involvement was viewed in two different ways: cognitive support (help with subjects) and emotional support/ monitoring.

High-achieving day scholars often had access to both forms of support, made possible by their parents' educational levels and availability. Akash, a high SES high achieving day scholar shared about his layered support system:

"It's like I have tuition at home because my dad helps me with physics and math, my aunt with chemistry and biology and my grandmother with Hindi. My dad is my biggest help. He sits by me when I am studying and ensures that I do. He monitors me when I am studying. "

This reflects Lareau's notion of concerted cultivation, where middle-class families actively organize and structure their children's academic environment, mirroring institutional expectations (Matsuoka, 2019).

In contrast, students from low SES background, particularly those enrolled under the RTE Act described minimal parental involvement due to financial constraints and low education levels. Yash, an RTE student, shared:

"After school, I go to either my grandfather's house or my elder brother's house because there will be no one at home… My father comes home at night after his work. On weekends, my sister and I stay at my brother's house because there will be no one at home".

This clearly suggests that students, whose parents are better positioned in terms of money and education, access and mobilize the resources necessary for the educational success of their children, highlighting the social reproductive nature of learning. In contrast students from working class families, many who are first-generation learners, struggle to convert action into intent and are at a disadvantage. Drawing on Bourdieu (2002) theory of social reproduction, it becomes evident that the transmission of cultural capital is unevenly distributed, leading to cumulative (dis) advantages for students depending on their position in the socioeconomic spectrum.

Hostel support mirroring middle-class parenting practices

Residential students identified hostel life as a key contributor to their academic success. This was similar to the informal support systems available to high SES day scholars at home. Rather than just merely being a space for residence, the hostel replicated the structure, discipline and encouragement, often seen in middle class homes. Rohit, a high-achieving residential student, stated:

"I usually approach the hostel home room teacher. If I get stuck, she gives me extra sums to practice."

Student narratives emphasized the hostel's strict time-table and consistent mentoring as essential for academic regulation. Manisha, a high achieving residential student explained:

"The hostel environment kind of helps me. We have a fixed and tight schedule, and we have to follow it. There is no other way. There is always someone to motivate and monitor you. This helps me progress".

Jayashree, another residential high achieving student said,

"My hostel time table helps me progress. It gives me enough time to study and plan, outside school hours; we actually get 6 hours to study in the hostel too. That helps me a lot. This does not happen for day scholar kids".

Thus, the hostel, rather than just merely being a space for residence, replicated the structure and discipline, often seen in middle class homes. Research shows that middle-class families mobilize economic, social, and cultural capital to navigate their children's challenges, positively influencing educational outcomes (Antony-Newman et al., 2024). The hostel system paralleled what middle-class parents typically provide—regular study schedules, academic monitoring, and motivational support. Hari's interview illustrates this "emulated parental support" of hostel staff:

"My home room teacher, Nitesh sir, he does not speak like a teacher. If it is studies, he teaches you like a teacher. But if it is something personal, he speaks to you like your father. Sir constantly encourages me in everything I do".

These findings emphasize the role of institutional practices in compensating for the lack of home-based academic resources. Research indicates that educational achievement is shaped not just by socioeconomic status but also by an environment fostering community cohesion among adults and children (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016).

School as primary learning resource for day scholars

Across SES categories, day scholars cited their school teachers as primary sources of academic support. However, for low SES day scholars, the support from school compensated for the lack of academic assistance at home. Avi, a low SES day scholar shared a typical coping strategy:

"I go to the subject teacher. Sometimes I go to Deepthi Ma'am, my old teacher."

Sahas, another low SES day scholar described persistence in seeking clarity:

"If I don't understand, I won't be able to study. So, I approach the particular subject teacher during the lunch break. If I still don't understand, I go to Deepthi Ma'am and ask her."

Yash described his exam preparation strategy, which reveals the structured support he receives from a dedicated teacher, who is also a special educator:

"I start 15 days before the exams. Deepthi Ma'am helps me out. Every day, she teaches one chapter from one subject and once I go home, I revise that chapter again. I do math sums every day, and along with that, I revise whatever Deepthi mam taught. I study Kannada also mostly every day. During exams, I do Kannada and math every day and one subject that Deepthi Ma'am teaches that day".

However, the role of the special educator was found to be more remedial in nature, focusing on subject-

specific support rather than engaging with students' lived realities. This approach reflected a deficit orientation, framing student struggles as lack of skills, overlooking the social and cultural influences on learning. Such framing,while common in institutional discourse, risks overlooking the need for systemic change.

In contrast, Vibha, a high SES day scholar student, also sought help from teachers but in the context of time lost to extracurricular activities:

"I have lost classes because of participating in MUN this year. At times like this, I approach my teachers. They really help us out. They give us extra time to complete work."

The comparative framing of Vibha and Yash illustrates how similar teacher dependence operates differently for each of them- for one, it supplements an already resource-rich environment; for the other, it replaces an absent one.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the study strategies of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, to explain that despite access to similar school resources, educational disparities persist. We challenge the deficit approach, suggesting that study skills cannot be viewed as isolated, decontextualized technical competencies that some learners fail to acquire and internalize due to their contextual limitations. Instead, we argue that such skills are deeply embedded within and shaped by one's sociocultural milieu.

Parental engagement emerged as a significant determinant of academic success, particularly for high-achieving day scholars from high SES families. This finding signifies the transmission of advantageous cultural capital across generations, which manifests in everyday practices like providing academic support at home, understanding school expectations, and placing a high-value on educational success (Lareau, 2018). This is also consistent with prior research indicating that home-based parental involvement influences children's academic success (Boonk et al., 2018; Fatimaningrum, 2021; Kantova, 2024; Park & Holloway, 2017). Furthermore, parental education was found to be a stronger predictor of academic outcomes than income (Sengonul, 2022), as it influences parental access to information related capital (Rodríguez et al., 2017). Also, parental social and cultural capital was associated with increased academic effort and better educational outcomes in children (Tan & Fang, 2023). In contrast, students from low SES backgrounds encountered financial and educational constraints that limited access to material resources. This suggests that access to capital- economic, social and cultural, shape the educational trajectories of children (Bourdieu, 2002).

Their parents often lacked the economic capital to invest in private educational support and the cultural capital to effectively engage with school structures. While this observation is not new, most studies recommend greater parental involvement in education, which is not feasible for the parents of lower SES. Moreover, from a Bourdieusian perspective, we argue that it is not a failure of the parents but a failure of the school as it continues to reproduce unequal social relations in contrast to the modernist promise of transforming these relations. The findings reveal that the school's approach of remedial education facilitated by a special educator to low SES RTE students was framed from a deficit lens, emphasizing their shortcomings rather than adapting pedagogical strategies to be inclusive and empowering. This deficit-based approach focused on perceived shortcomings within students, often ignoring the cultural experiences they bring to the learning environment. Such a view can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and hinder inclusivity (Lareau, 2018). Incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum enhances their academic performance and sense of belongingness while also validating their identities.

Residential students, despite being from a low SES background, demonstrated relatively better academic performance, attributable to the structured supervision and routine of the hostel environment. This was similar to the "concerted cultivation" practices typical of middle-class parenting (Matsuoka, 2019), suggesting that institutional settings can serve as alternative sites for the development of cultural capital. Furthermore, consistent with existing literature (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016), the residential facility fostered a cohesive learning community where both adults and peers were involved in enhancing students' academic engagement and sense of belonging. Our goal in highlighting this difference in

approach and outcome is not to suggest that schools mimic middle-class parenting practices. Rather, we want to highlight that students' academic achievement is shaped by the cultural practices in the micro- and meso-systems where schools can play a significant role. The hostel's practices suggest a cultural shift, yet not one that problematizes the unequal social relations but borrows from middle-class cultural practices. In that sense, the hostel's approach is a colonial practice that can be harmful in culturally alienating children from their families. Hence, we want to use these findings to point out that while the academic achievement gap between children of different SES can be attributed to children's differential study practices, these practices are cultural and embedded within unequal social relations. Hence, attempts to bridge the gap would require culturally-responsive pedagogies and whole-school practices. At the same time, we do not argue for a 'culture-as-panacea' approach and argue for a critical understanding of culture as shaped by unequal power relations between groups.

The dual role of the researcher, as an interviewer and an analyst may have introduced interpretive bias, influencing both the framing of the questions and the analysis of responses. Also, the absence of triangulation, such as including interviews of parents, teachers or school administrators limits generalizability of the findings. Future research can look into intersectionality, that is, how SES interacts with gender, race, class and religion and expand participant demographics, including geographical location. A longitudinal approach could help understand how access to capital influence academic trajectories over time. Further studies could also explore different types of school environments to compare and understand how they mitigate or amplify educational inequalities.

This study highlights that students' academic progression is not solely determined by access to similar school resources, but largely shaped by their ability to navigate and mobilize resources available in their sociocultural networks. The findings explain how parental engagement, family background and institutional support systems shape the educational pathways of students, revealing the limitations of a deficit-based educational model. Although equitable access is enabled by policies like the Right to Education and residential scholarships, structural inequalities persist, particularly in secondary education of students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Research says that simply enrolling students from the vulnerable and marginalized population into private schools does not enable increased access to equitable educational opportunities for them (Gowda, 2020). Structural barriers like lack of social and cultural capital in families impact access to resources and the learning of children (Das, 2020). This often leads to feeling of alienation and hinders their academic progress (Das, 2020).

To address these challenges, schools can develop teaching strategies and pedagogies that recognize the diverse forms of knowledge that students bring from their sociocultural backgrounds to the formal school environment. Furthermore, highlighting the success stories and lived experiences of students from minority background who overcame the systemic barriers can serve as powerful examples for informed educational practices. . Schools can also enhance home school collaboration by actively involving parents in their children's educational journey, thus fostering a supportive ecosystem that bridges home and school learning environments. Structured environments like the residential hostel in this study, demonstrate the potential to act as compensatory spaces for the inculcating academic discipline and belongingness. Such approaches and practices should be strengthened as a part of equity-driven interventions. The psychosocial challenge faced by minority students in India requires more holistic approaches that go beyond access to resources to create more inclusive cultures. This requires sustained attention to everyday practices and relational approaches that shape student learning.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines

for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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