

From Policy to Classroom Reality: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-methods Study of Inclusive Education Practices in Primary Schools

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Abstract

The expansion of inclusive education in Indonesia has created a persistent gap between national policy expectations and classroom practice, highlighting the need to examine how inclusive education is implemented in primary schools. This study investigates the uneven implementation of six domains of inclusive services including student management, teacher competence, curriculum adaptation, infrastructure, financial support and school environment. The research aims to describe the level of implementation, explain influencing factors and identify pathways to strengthen alignment between policy and classroom practice. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was applied. Quantitative data were collected from 53 officially designated inclusive primary schools using a validated 40 item instrument to measure implementation across service domains. This phase was followed by qualitative interviews with principals, teachers and special education assistants to provide contextual and experiential explanations of quantitative patterns. The results indicate a generally good implementation level with a mean score of 72.3 percent. However, structural weaknesses remain, particularly in infrastructure at 61 percent and financial support at 59 percent. Qualitative findings reveal that inclusive practices are frequently sustained by teachers' moral commitment rather than strong institutional support, reflecting a condition of moral inclusion under material constraints. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening funding mechanisms, continuous professional development, inclusive leadership practices and school level collaboration to ensure sustainable inclusive education implementation.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Mixed-method, Moral Inclusion, Policy-practice Gap, Teacher Agency.

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central commitment in global education reform. International agendas consistently affirm the right of every child, including children with disabilities, to equitable and quality learning opportunities. However, global monitoring continues to reveal a persistent gap between policy commitment and classroom reality. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report notes that although legal frameworks supporting inclusion have expanded worldwide, implementation remains uneven, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (1, 2). Similarly, UNICEF (2021) reports that children with disabilities remain among the most systematically excluded groups despite formal policy adoption (3). The OECD (2022) further identifies school level capacity, funding adequacy, teacher preparation and leadership coherence as key determinants of successful implementation (4). Together, these findings indicate that inclusive education frequently advances normatively at the

regulatory level while facing structural constraints in everyday practice.

Empirical research reinforces this concern. Effective inclusion depends on coherence among policy frameworks, professional competence, material resources and institutional leadership (5, 6). When funding, infrastructure, or professional development are insufficient, implementation becomes fragmented and inconsistent. In such contexts, teachers often compensate for institutional limitations through professional improvisation and ethical commitment (7, 8). Evidence from Southeast Asia similarly suggests that inclusive practices are sustained more by teacher agency than by systemic readiness (9). While this moral dedication reflects strong professional values; it simultaneously exposes a structural imbalance between policy expectations and institutional support. In Indonesia, inclusive education has expanded significantly through regulatory mandates, including Permendiknas No.

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70/2009. Thousands of primary schools have been formally designated as inclusive institutions. Nevertheless, research reveals substantial variation in implementation quality across regions and schools (10, 11). Many schools meet administrative requirements yet struggle to provide adaptive curricula, individualized education planning, adequate teacher training and accessible infrastructure. Structural disparities in funding allocation and resource distribution continue to shape school readiness (12, 13). Broader global analyses likewise confirm that inclusive education in developing contexts remains constrained by limited institutional capacity and unstable financing mechanisms (2, 14).

Although scholarship on inclusive education has grown substantially, structural barriers and teacher commitment are often examined separately. Some studies prioritize teacher attitudes and professional agency (6, 8, 15), whereas others emphasize systemic deficiencies such as infrastructure, governance and funding (2, 8, 16). While these perspectives are valuable, they rarely integrate moral agency and structural capacity within a unified explanatory framework. Consequently, the policy practice gap is frequently described in descriptive or managerial terms without sufficient conceptual integration. The relational dynamics between ethical commitment and institutional readiness remain analytically underdeveloped, particularly in Global South contexts where institutional expansion often outpaces structural consolidation.

To address this limitation, the present study introduces the concept of Moral Structural Asymmetry. This concept refers to a condition in which inclusive practices are sustained primarily by the ethical commitment and professional agency of educators, while structural systems such as funding mechanisms, infrastructure, governance and professional development remain partially aligned or insufficient. Rather than treating teacher dedication and structural constraints as independent explanatory variables, this study conceptualizes them as interdependent forces that jointly shape observable patterns of implementation. In this perspective, inclusive education progresses not solely because systems are fully prepared, but because educators mobilize

moral responsibility to bridge structural gaps within imperfect institutional environments.

The framework is operationalized through six domains of inclusive education services: student management, teacher competence, curriculum adaptation, infrastructure, financial support and school environment. Mapping these domains enables identification of uneven development across service areas and highlights asymmetrical patterns within inclusive systems. Interpretation is further enriched through qualitative inquiry with principals, teachers and special education assistants, allowing exploration of how practitioners negotiate policy demands under structural limitations. This integrative mixed methods design responds to methodological calls for linking quantitative variation with contextual narratives in sequential explanatory research (17, 18).

The argument is consistent with broader theoretical perspectives while maintaining analytical focus. Institutional theory suggests that formal regulations may achieve symbolic legitimacy without transforming organizational routines or resource allocation (19, 20). The capability approach emphasizes that rights must be supported by material and systemic conditions to become real educational opportunities (21, 22). From the sociology of professions, frontline educators exercise ethical judgment and professional discretion when institutional guidance is incomplete or under resourced (23, 24). These perspectives collectively reinforce the claim that inclusive education implementation is shaped by the dynamic interaction between moral agency and structural capacity.

The study contributes both empirically and conceptually. Empirically, it provides comprehensive domain-based mapping of inclusive education implementation across multiple service areas in primary schools, extending beyond single dimension analyses. Conceptually, it advances Moral Structural Asymmetry as an integrative construct that reframes the policy practice gap not merely as administrative noncompliance, but as a structural ethical imbalance shaping classroom realities in contexts of uneven institutional capacity.

By situating inclusive education within this relational framework, the study strengthens theoretical clarity and practical relevance.

Understanding how moral commitment and structural readiness interact is essential to ensure that inclusive education moves beyond formal designation toward sustainable and equitable practice. In systems where regulatory expansion outpaces institutional preparation, addressing the asymmetry between ethical demands and structural support becomes critical for designing policy refinement, funding mechanisms, professional development and inclusive leadership strategies capable of translating inclusive ideals into durable educational outcomes.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design in which quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted in the first phase, followed by qualitative data collection to explain and deepen the quantitative findings (18, 25). The design was selected because inclusive education implementation involves measurable structural indicators as well as contextual and interpretive dimensions that require narrative exploration. The quantitative phase provided a domain-based mapping of implementation levels, while the qualitative phase offered explanatory insight into the patterns identified statistically. The study followed a sequential logic consisting of five stages:

- (a) Quantitative instrument validation and administration;
- (b) Statistical analysis of implementation scores;
- (c) Purposive selection of contrasting cases;
- (d) Qualitative data collection through semi structured interviews;
- (e) Integration and interpretation of findings.

The study was conducted in Tangerang City, Indonesia, involving all 53 primary schools officially designated as inclusive education providers by the local Education Office. In the quantitative phase, total sampling was applied because the population size was manageable and the study aimed to obtain a comprehensive implementation profile (25).

Inclusion criteria for schools were:

- (a) Officially designated as inclusive primary schools by the local authority;
- (b) Actively enrolling at least one learner with special educational needs during the 2024 academic year;

- (c) Having completed the full implementation questionnaire.

Schools were excluded if:

- (a) They were administratively designated but did not enroll learners with disabilities during the study period;
- (b) The questionnaire was incomplete or returned with more than 10 percent missing responses.

For the qualitative phase, six schools were selected purposively based on quantitative score distribution, representing high, moderate and lower implementation categories. This strategy follows recommendations for explanatory sequential sampling that emphasize contrasting cases to deepen interpretation (17, 18).

Participants in the qualitative phase included principals, classroom teachers and special education teachers. These actors were selected because previous research identifies them as central agents in inclusive practice (7, 26).

The quantitative instrument consisted of 40 items distributed across six domains: student management, teacher competence, curriculum adaptation, infrastructure, financial support and school environment. Items were developed based on international inclusive education indicators (2, 3, 15) and adapted to the Indonesian primary school context.

Content validity was evaluated through expert judgment involving three specialists in inclusive education. Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with a minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 as recommended in educational measurement literature.

Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 indicating very low implementation to 5 indicating very high implementation.

The qualitative instrument consisted of a semi structured interview protocol covering four dimensions:

- (a) Interpretation of inclusive education;
- (b) Adaptive pedagogical strategies;
- (c) Perceived structural support;
- (d) Ethical and professional experiences in serving learners with disabilities.

The interview guide was developed with narrative sensitivity principles to capture experiential meaning structures (27).

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered both

onsite and online. Completed instruments were screened for completeness and data entry accuracy.

Qualitative data were collected through in depth interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. Descriptive statistics including mean scores, standard deviations and percentage distributions were calculated for each domain. Domain contrast analysis was conducted to identify relative strengths and weaknesses across implementation areas.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2023) (28). The analysis involved:

- (a) familiarization with transcripts;
- (b) initial coding;
- (c) development of thematic categories;
- (d) cross case comparison;
- (e) refinement and definition of themes.

Data extraction involved identifying meaningful units related to structural conditions, moral commitment and adaptive practices. Data synthesis was conducted through thematic clustering and interpretive integration, linking qualitative themes with quantitative domain scores using connecting and explaining strategies (18).

Integration occurred at the interpretation stage. Quantitative results guided qualitative case selection and qualitative findings were used to explain statistical patterns. Joint interpretation was conducted through a narrative weaving approach in which domain level statistics were interpreted alongside thematic insights (17). This integrative process allowed the study to interpret inclusive education implementation within the analytical frame of Moral Structural Asymmetry, identifying areas where moral agency compensates for structural constraints.

This study is grounded in the conceptual frame of Moral Structural Asymmetry, which interprets inclusive education implementation as the outcome of interaction between moral agency and structural readiness. Drawing from inclusive education theory, effective implementation requires coherence among policy, material resources, professional competence and

institutional leadership (5, 6). However, research in developing contexts indicates that structural components such as funding and infrastructure often lag behind policy mandates (2, 14). At the same time, teacher commitment and ethical responsibility frequently function as compensatory forces sustaining inclusive practices (7, 8).

Based on this theoretical foundation, the study formulates three analytical expectations. First, structural domains including infrastructure and financial support are expected to show lower levels of implementation compared to pedagogical and relational domains. Second, domains closely associated with educator agency, such as student management and school environment, are expected to demonstrate relatively stronger performance. Third, significant variation across domains would indicate the presence of Moral Structural Asymmetry, where moral capacity compensates for systemic limitations.

This framework guides the interpretation of quantitative and qualitative findings. Rather than treating domain variation as isolated performance differences, the analysis interprets disparities as relational indicators of imbalance between ethical commitment and structural preparedness. Through this lens, implementation is understood not merely as compliance with policy indicators but as a dynamic negotiation between moral demands and institutional capacity.

Results

Descriptive statistical analysis indicates that the overall mean implementation score of inclusive education across 53 designated primary schools is 72.3 percent. Implementation levels vary across domains, with scores ranging from 59 percent to 78 percent. This variation suggests that inclusive education development is uneven rather than uniformly distributed across service areas.

The distribution of implementation categories is presented in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, 52.8 percent of schools fall within the good category, 28.3 percent are classified as Fair and 18.9 percent reach the Very Good category. The distribution demonstrates that while inclusion is institutionally recognized, a considerable proportion of schools still experience moderate implementation levels.

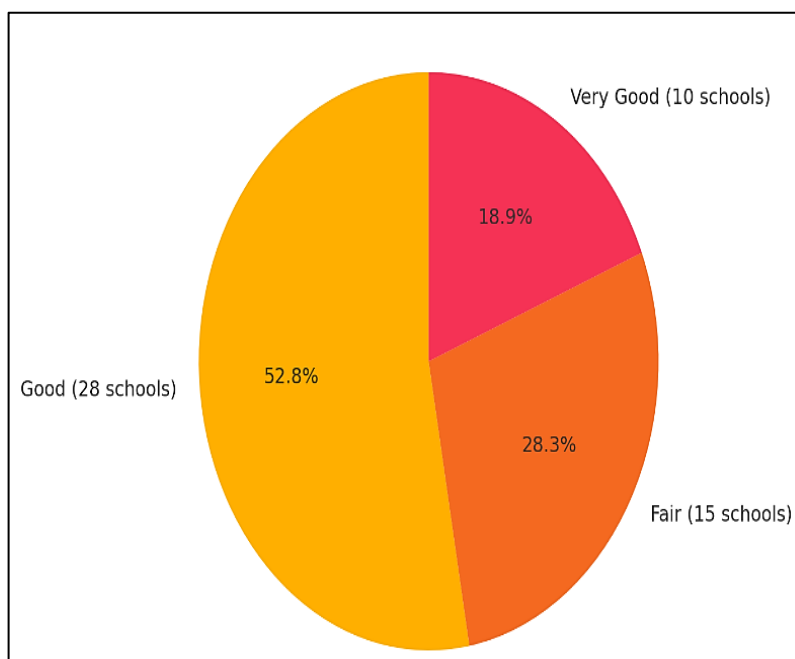


Figure 1: Distribution of Inclusive Education Implementation Categories

The graphical distribution supports the conclusion that inclusive education is operational but not yet consolidated structurally. Although most schools meet minimum standards, the spread across categories reflects underlying disparities in implementation strength.

A more detailed pattern emerges when implementation is examined across the six domains of inclusive services. The summary of

domain level findings is presented in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, student management records the highest implementation score at 78 percent, followed by school environment and collaboration at 76 percent and teacher competence at 73 percent. Curriculum adaptation shows a moderate score at 70 percent, while infrastructure and financial support record lower scores at 61 percent and 59 percent respectively.

Table 1: Summary of Quantitative Findings by Domain

Domain	Indicators	Mean Implementation (%)	Category	Remarks
Student Management	6 items	78%	Very Good	Enrolment procedures inclusive, yet identification of special needs uneven.
Teacher Competence	4 items	73%	Good	Teachers show commitment, but lack structured training on inclusive pedagogy.
Curriculum Adaptation	13 items	70%	Good	Implementation steady, but individualized curriculum (PPI) still limited.
Infrastructure and Facilities	6 items	61%	Fair	Accessibility and physical adjustments remain major issues.
Financial Support	4 items	59%	Fair	Funding mechanisms for inclusion not yet institutionalized.
School Environment and Collaboration	7 items	76%	Good	Parental and community involvement active, though inconsistent.

The contrast across domains is systematic rather than incidental. The difference between the highest and lowest domain reaches 19 percentage points, indicating substantial imbalance. Domains that rely primarily on educator practice and relational dynamics demonstrate higher performance compared to domains requiring institutionalized material and financial support. Student management, which includes inclusive enrolment and procedural access, appears to be well institutionalized. However, qualitative evidence indicates that systematic identification of

special needs and individualized planning remain inconsistent. This suggests that procedural compliance does not automatically translate into pedagogical depth.

Infrastructure and financial support emerge as the weakest domains. Physical accessibility, assistive devices and specialized learning facilities remain limited in many schools. Similarly, funding mechanisms for inclusive programs are not yet fully institutionalized, resulting in dependency on local improvisation.

When domains are analytically grouped into relational pedagogical domains and structural institutional domains, a clearer asymmetrical pattern becomes visible. Relational domains include student management, teacher competence, and school environment. Structural domains include infrastructure and financial support, while curriculum adaptation occupies an intermediate position.

The average score of relational domains is 75.7 percent, while structural domains average 60 percent. This 15.7-point gap indicates that inclusive education performance is stronger in areas supported by educator agency and school culture than in areas dependent on systemic investment. Such contrast provides empirical indication of imbalance between moral capacity and structural readiness.

This quantitative contrast establishes the empirical foundation for deeper qualitative exploration. Rather than reflecting isolated weaknesses, the pattern suggests a consistent configuration of strengths and constraints across implementation domains.

Qualitative findings provide explanatory depth to the statistical contrast. Thematic analysis identifies four dominant themes that clarify the mechanisms underlying domain variation.

First, teacher moral commitment functions as the central driver of inclusive practice. Educators consistently describe inclusion as an ethical obligation and report independently adapting instructional methods to accommodate diverse learners. This commitment explains why relational domains demonstrate relatively higher implementation scores.

Second, infrastructure limitations constrain pedagogical consistency. Schools lack disability friendly facilities, assistive learning materials and specialized spaces. Teachers frequently compensate for these gaps through personal initiative, but such compensation cannot fully replace systemic provision.

Third, funding instability produces structural fragility. Participants report limited dedicated budget allocations for inclusive programs. As a result, inclusive initiatives often depend on temporary solutions rather than sustainable financial planning.

Fourth, special education teachers operate as bridging agents between learner needs and

institutional constraints. However, their limited numbers and unstable employment conditions restrict the longterm stability of inclusive services. When quantitative and qualitative findings are interpreted together, a consistent empirical configuration emerges. Higher performance is concentrated in domains sustained by educator agency and school culture, while lower performance appears in domains requiring institutionalized structural support. The contrast is not episodic but patterned across schools.

This integrated pattern supports the analytical proposition of Moral Structural Asymmetry. Inclusive education in Tangerang primary schools appears to be maintained through professional commitment under material constraints rather than through fully aligned systemic readiness. The imbalance between moral capacity and structural provision provides a coherent explanation for domain level variation observed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that inclusive education implementation operates within a systemic tension between educator moral agency and institutional structural readiness. This pattern resonates with global analyses indicating that inclusive reform frequently advances normatively at the policy level while structural capacity remains uneven in practice (2, 3, 14). However, the present study moves beyond descriptive alignment by empirically demonstrating how this imbalance materializes across differentiated implementation domains within primary schools. Rather than observing the policy practice gap as a general condition, the results reveal patterned asymmetry between relational and structural dimensions of service delivery. These findings challenge the implicit assumption that regulatory expansion necessarily signals systemic maturation, suggesting instead that policy growth may coexist with structural stagnation within the same institutional setting.

Domains associated with relational and pedagogical interaction, including student management, teacher competence and school environment, demonstrate relatively higher performance. This finding supports prior scholarship emphasizing the central role of teacher agency in sustaining inclusive practice under

limited systemic support (7, 8). Yet while Li and Ruppert (2021) conceptualize teacher agency primarily as a mediator between policy expectations and classroom adaptation, the present findings indicate that agency functions more fundamentally as a compensatory mechanism for structural deficiencies (7). Teachers do not merely interpret policy; they absorb systemic gaps through moral labor. This extends existing research by showing that agency in structurally constrained contexts may shift from facilitative mediation to institutional substitution. In contrast, domains dependent on institutional investment, particularly infrastructure and financial support, demonstrate significantly lower implementation levels. This quantitative disparity provides empirical support for arguments that inclusive education cannot be sustained through regulatory mandates without material reinforcement (5, 6). Whereas previous studies identify infrastructure and funding as enabling conditions, the present findings illustrate the consequences of their absence within the same institutional ecology. The coexistence of relatively strong relational domains and weak structural domains suggests not uniform underdevelopment, but internal inequality within inclusive systems. Such unevenness confirms global concerns that inclusive policy expansion without fiscal and infrastructural alignment produces fragile implementation (2).

The concept of Moral Structural Asymmetry offers an integrative explanation for this configuration. Prior literature often treats teacher commitment and systemic weakness as parallel explanatory variables (8, 15). In contrast, the present study conceptualizes their interaction as a patterned relational imbalance. Inclusion persists not because structural readiness is adequate, but because moral agency compensates for institutional insufficiency. This reframing contributes conceptually by transforming the policy practice gap from a managerial deficit into a structural ethical configuration. Moral Structural Asymmetry may therefore function as a transferable analytical lens for examining inclusive reform in other resource constrained education systems where institutional expansion outpaces structural consolidation.

From a systemic perspective, continued reliance on moral labor without structural reinforcement

risks professional strain and uneven institutional quality. Frontline professionals exercise discretion under resource constraints; however, when discretion becomes a substitute for institutional provision, sustainability becomes precarious (24). The present findings suggest that inclusive systems characterized by moral structural asymmetry may function in the short term yet remain vulnerable to personnel turnover or shifting policy priorities. Strengthening inclusive education therefore requires not only cultivating ethical commitment but also institutionalizing structural support mechanisms. Policy strategies such as disability indexed funding allocation, earmarked infrastructure investment and structured professional development pathways are essential to reduce asymmetry and stabilize inclusive practice across schools.

Practical Implications

The findings indicate four strategic priorities for strengthening inclusive education systems. First, dedicated funding mechanisms should be institutionalized to ensure that inclusive programs are financially sustainable rather than dependent on discretionary school budgets. Second, structured professional development focused on differentiated instruction and individualized education planning should be expanded to reduce reliance on informal adaptation. Third, infrastructure development should prioritize accessibility and assistive learning resources to support consistent classroom implementation. Fourth, the professional status and stability of special education teachers should be reinforced to ensure continuity of support services.

These interventions aim to realign moral agency and structural readiness. When ethical commitment is supported by stable institutional structures, inclusive education can move from survival-based practice toward sustainable systemic development.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that inclusive education implementation in primary schools is characterized by a patterned imbalance between moral agency and structural readiness. Quantitative findings show stronger performance in relational domains such as student management and school environment, while infrastructure and financial support remain comparatively weak.

Qualitative findings confirm that inclusive practice is frequently sustained through educator commitment rather than institutionalized structural support.

The concept of Moral Structural Asymmetry provides a theoretical lens for understanding this configuration. It explains how inclusion may progress in moral and procedural terms while remaining structurally fragile. By integrating quantitative domain analysis with qualitative narratives, this study contributes to global discussions on the policy practice gap in developing education systems.

However, this study is limited to one municipal context and relies primarily on descriptive and thematic analysis. Future research may employ longitudinal designs, comparative regional analysis, or multilevel modeling to examine how structural reinforcement influences inclusive sustainability over time. Strengthening inclusive education requires aligning ethical commitment with systemic provision. When moral capacity and structural readiness develop concurrently, inclusive education can become stable, equitable and sustainable.

Abbreviations

GEM: Global Education Monitoring, IE: Inclusive Education, ILP: Individual Learning Plan, LSN: Learners with Special Needs, OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, PPI: Program Pembelajaran Individual, SET: Special Education Teacher; UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund.

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Author Contributions

Indina Tarjiah: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research activities, resource provision, methodology, project administration, software analysis, supervision, validation, visualization, data presentation, review, editing,

final manuscript preparation, Asep Supena: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research activities, resource provision, project administration, writing- original draft, review, editing, final manuscript preparation, Dinda Aprilia: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research activities, resource provision, methodology, visualization, data presentation, writing- original draft, review, editing, final manuscript preparation. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly accessible due to ethical considerations and institutional restrictions related to participant confidentiality and school-level data protection.

Declaration Of Generative AI And AI Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used for data collection, data analysis, or the automated generation of research findings. AI-assisted tools were not used in a manner that influenced the intellectual content, interpretation, or scientific conclusions of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, integrity and accuracy of the work presented.

Ethics Approval

This study involved survey and interview data collected from educators in their professional capacity. No vulnerable populations were involved. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained and confidentiality of participants and institutions was ensured. The study adhered to institutional research ethics standards. Formal ethical clearance was not required according to institutional guidelines applicable at the time of data collection.

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