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Stakeholder collaboration and inclusive education: Examining the role of head teachers in public primary schools in Cameroon

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Abstract

Motivated by the inadequate implementation of inclusive education, this study examined the nature and extent of head teachers' collaboration with stakeholders and its influence on the implementation of inclusive education in public primary schools in Mfoundi Division, Cameroon. Data were collected from 344 teachers, of whom 70.6% were female, 41.5% aged 31–40 years, and 55.1% held a CAPIEMP certificate. Only 17.2% had pre-service training in special education. Descriptive results revealed moderate collaboration in basic parental involvement, such as acquiring learning materials (M = 4.01) and homework support (M = 3.95), while more advanced practices, including co-teaching with special needs teachers (M = 1.99) and partnerships with therapists (M = 1.92), were very weak. Implementation of inclusive education remained low, with modest progress in supportive school culture (M = 3.60) and non-discriminatory admissions (M = 3.32), but poor development of IEPs (M = 2.05) and school-level inclusive policies (M = 2.15). Spearman's correlation analysis revealed a moderately strong, statistically significant relationship between collaboration and inclusive education implementation ($\rho = 0.505$, $p < .001$). Group difference tests indicated that female teachers and those with special education training reported higher levels of implementation, while age and longevity shaped perceptions, with younger and mid-career teachers showing stronger engagement. Observations confirmed that collaboration was largely informal, with only 7.1% of practices fully implemented. These findings suggest that while basic home–school partnerships exist, systematic and professionalized collaboration with specialists, NGOs, and health professionals is critically lacking, limiting the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Head Teachers; Stakeholder Collaboration; Primary Schools

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central pillar of global education reform, advocated through frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 and UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016). These frameworks emphasize the need for equitable access to education by addressing exclusion and marginalization. Collaborative leadership, a style that prioritizes shared decision-making and collective problem-solving, is essential to achieving this goal (Ainscow, 2016). In Cameroon, systemic challenges such as diverse classrooms, resource constraints, and cultural barriers, limit the realization of inclusive education, especially for children with special needs. Head teachers are strategically positioned to mobilize resources and coordinate stakeholder partnerships that are vital for creating inclusive learning environments (Douglas et al., 2021).

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1.1. Background and Problem Statement

Despite policy commitments such as Cameroon's Inclusive Education Policy and international conventions like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD (2006), collaboration in inclusive education remains fragmented. Previous studies have largely concentrated on secondary education or teacher attitudes (Mbibeh, 2013; Bechem and Wemba, 2019), leaving a gap in understanding how leadership practices in primary school's influence inclusion. Weak partnerships with parents, NGOs, and external professionals persist, often due to insufficient training and unclear operational guidelines (Sight Savers, 2020). This study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which head teachers' collaborative practices predict the implementation of inclusive education in public primary schools in Mfoundi Division, Cameroon.

Thus, the study is driven by the broad research question: To what extent does head teachers' collaboration with school stakeholders influence the implementation of inclusive education in public primary schools in Mfoundi Division, Cameroon? As specific research question we asked

- What types of collaborations do head teachers engage in with different school stakeholders (parents, teachers, NGOs, specialists, health professionals, etc.)?
- How does the level of collaboration between head teachers and school stakeholders predict or correlate with the implementation of inclusive education practices in public primary schools?
- Which factors determine collaborative school leadership and implementation of inclusive education practices

2. Literature review

Inclusive education requires collective efforts among teachers, parents, specialists, NGOs, and policymakers (Florian and Spratt, 2020). Effective collaboration ensures resource sharing, coordinated interventions, and responsive policies (Hesjedal et al., 2015). Open Systems Theory conceptualizes schools as dynamic entities interacting with their environments (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Head teachers, therefore, play a dual role: managing internal processes and fostering external networks to sustain inclusive practices (Hoy and Miskel, 2013). International evidence indicates that strong collaborative leadership correlates with improved inclusion outcomes (de Boer et al., 2022; Burton and Ainscow, 2022). From the literature review we hypothesized that

- There is a significant positive relationship between head teachers' collaboration with school stakeholders and the implementation of inclusive education in public primary schools.
- Teachers with pre-service training in special education significantly differ from teachers without such training in their perceptions of head teachers' collaborative practices for inclusive education.

3. Methodology

A positivist, cross-sectional survey design was employed to examine relationships between head teachers' collaboration and inclusive education implementation. Data were collected from 344 teachers using stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness across the Mfoundi Division. Instruments included structured 7-point Likert scale questionnaire, classroom observations, and document reviews. Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded 0.70 after adjustments, confirming acceptable reliability (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Data analysis employed descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation, and Mann–Whitney U tests using SPSS version 23. Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent was secured.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis of Results

Majority of respondent were female teachers, accounting for 70.6% (250), were aged between 31 and 40 years (41.5%), and holder of CAPIEMP certificate (55.1%). with 29.4% having an HND in Education and 15.5% a Bachelor's degree. 42.7% had served for 1–5 years, and only 17.2% of respondents reported having pre-service training in special education.

Table 1 below answers our first specific research question, as it describes the nature and extent of collaboration, who is involved, and in what ways. The strongest collaboration was reported in parental involvement, especially in acquiring special learning materials (M = 4.01) and assisting with homework (M = 3.95). These mean values are just above the

midpoint (4.00) on the 7-point scale, indicating neutral to mild agreement and suggesting that basic home-school partnerships are in place, though not deeply embedded.

Table 1 Head Teacher Collaboration with Stakeholders

	M	Me	Mo	S.D.	Var	Skew	K	W	Wp
Parents collaborate in acquiring learning materials.	4.01	4.0	6.00	1.93	3.74	-0.37	-1.34	0.827	<.001
Parents assist learners with their homework	3.95	4.0	6.00	1.75	3.07	-0.30	-1.27	0.880	<.001
Involves teachers in the elaboration of IEPs	3.86	4.0	6.00	1.82	3.30	-0.07	-1.48	0.856	<.001
daily communication book for Parents and staff	3.53	4.0	2.00	1.43	2.04	0.13	-1.23	0.872	<.001
Inclusive Education Awareness Seminars during PTA	2.85	2.0	2.00	1.43	2.03	0.87	-0.3	0.808	<.001
Gathers Input from teachers, parents for School Projects	2.66	2.0	1.00	1.54	2.37	0.57	-0.78	0.853	<.001
Securing Funding from NGOs	2.59	2.0	2.00	1.18	1.39	1.44	1.57	0.713	<.001
Special Needs Teachers Co-Teaching	1.99	2.0	1.00	1.03	1.06	1.26	2.58	0.813	<.001
Collaboration with Therapists for case management	1.92	2.0	1.00	1.10	1.21	1.50	1.93	0.747	<.001
Collaboration with Health Professionals admission process.	1.73	1.0	1.00	1.00	1.01	1.05	-0.26	0.721	<.001

Source: Field Data, 2025.; Legend: M-Mean, Me: Median, Mo- Mode, S.D.- Standard Deviation, Var: Variance, Skew: Skewness. K-Kurtosis-Shapiro-Wilk, Wp-Shapiro-Wilk p (<.001)

Moderate collaboration was perceived in internal school practices such as teacher involvement in lesson planning (M = 3.86) and the use of communication tools like daily books (M = 3.53). These scores show inconsistent or weak collaboration, with some variability across schools. Limited collaboration was evident in areas requiring broader school community involvement: awareness seminars during PTA meetings (M = 2.85) and involving parents and specialists in school-based training (M = 2.66) received lower ratings, indicating these practices are infrequent or lacking.

Very weak collaboration was reported in partnering with district therapists (M = 1.92) and co-teaching with special needs educators (M = 1.99). These scores, near the bottom of the scale, show a critical gap in interdisciplinary collaboration. A lower S.D. and variance around 1.0 suggest that the data points are closely clustered around the mean and not spread out, implying high consistency or agreement with these statements. Based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, we can conclude that none of the datasets are normally distributed.

Descriptive statistics from table 2 below indicate the presence of individual education plans (Mean=2.05) and school-level inclusive education policies (Mean=2.15) reflect very low implementation levels. Moderate Scores on supportive school culture (Mean=3.60) and non-discriminatory admission policies (Mean=3.32) show slightly higher means, suggesting these practices are more established but still below the midpoint, indicating room for improvement.

Table 2 Implementation of inclusive education

Items or Indicator	M	Me	Mo	S. D	Var	Skew	Kurt	W	W p
School culture is supportive and values diversity	3.60	4.00	4.00	1.24	1.53	0.0265	-0.913	0.878	<.001
Admission policy is non-discriminatory	3.32	4.00	4.00	1.86	3.47	0.0611	-1.43	0.857	<.001
Infrastructure modification is prioritized	3.16	2.00	2.00	1.54	2.36	1.03	0.473	0.804	<.001
Head teacher practices inclusive leadership	3.14	3.00	3.00	1.81	3.28	0.521	-0.689	0.886	<.001

Inclusive education training development program	2.95	2.00	4.00	1.71	2.93	0.786	0.0191	0.867	<.001
Updated data on all disability categories.	2.49	2.00	1.00	1.50	2.26	0.399	-1.42	0.813	<.001
Secondary liaise with primary school teachers for transition	2.35	2.00	1.00	1.69	2.84	1.64	1.96	0.738	<.001
School -level policy for inclusive education	2.15	2.00	1.00[a]	1.15	1.32	0.636	-1.04	0.783	<.001
Well-structured partnership with NGOs	2.07	2.00	2.00	0.901	0.811	0.989	2.00	0.828	<.001
sample IEPs for pupils with special needs	2.05	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.01	0.965	0.952	0.821	<.001

Source: Field Data, 2025.

Standard deviations ranging from 0.901 to 1.86 indicate varying levels of dispersion in responses, suggesting differing opinions or experiences regarding inclusive education implementation. Skewness values indicate that most variables have positively skewed distributions, suggesting that respondents tend to rate most aspects of inclusive education implementation lower, with a few higher ratings.

4.2. Correlation Findings.

To examine the relationship between head teachers' collaboration with school stakeholders and the implementation of inclusive education, we used Spearman's rank-order correlation tests the direction and strength of the relationship statistically. This non-parametric test was appropriate because the data were not normally distributed, as confirmed by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.950$, $p < 0.001$) in table 1 and 2 above.

Table 3 Collaboration with School Stakeholders and Implementation of Inclusive Education

		Collaboration School Stakeholders	**Implementation Inclusive Education**
Collaboration with School Stakeholder	Spearman's rho	—	
	df	—	
	p-value	—	
Implementation of Inclusive Education	Spearman's rho	0.505***	—
	df	352	—
	p-value	<.001	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 Source: Field Data, 2025.

Table 3, revealed a moderately strong and statistically significant positive correlation (Spearman's rho = 0.505, p < .001), indicating that better collaboration with parents, teachers, community members, and external professionals is associated with more effective implementation of inclusive education practices in schools. Based on these results, we reject the null hypotheses and accepted the alternative Hypothesis that there is a significant positive correlation between head teachers' collaboration with stakeholders and the implementation of inclusive education.

4.3. Group differences

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine the influence of teachers' prior training on special education on their perceptions of head teachers' collaboration practices. This non-parametric test was chosen because the data did not meet the assumption of normality required for parametric tests.

4.3.1. Influence of Sex

A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether collaboration with school stakeholders and the implementation of inclusive education differed significantly by gender. Table 4a: descriptive statistics of gender on collaborative Leadership Competences

Table 4: Group Descriptives on influence of sex

Group Descriptives						
	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Collaboration With School Stakeholders	Male	104	2.85	2.80	0.503	0.0493
	Female	250	2.93	2.90	0.709	0.0448
Implementation Of Inclusive Education	Male	104	2.36	2.20	0.827	0.0810
	Female	250	2.88	2.50	1.089	0.0688

Source: Field Data, 2025.

Descriptive statistics showed that females reported slightly higher levels of collaboration (M = 2.93, SD = 0.71) compared to males (M = 2.85, SD = 0.50), and substantially higher levels of inclusive education implementation (M = 2.88, SD = 1.09) compared to males (M = 2.36, SD = 0.83).

Table 5: Mann-Whitney U test on gender on collaborative Leadership Competences

Independent Samples T-Test					
		Statistic	p		Effect Size
Collaboration_ School Stakeholders	Mann-Whitney U	12581	0.631	Rank biserial correlation	0.0323
Implementation_ Inclusive Education	Mann-Whitney U	8410	<.001	Rank biserial correlation	0.3531
Note. H_a male ≠ female					

Source: Field Data, 2025.

The Mann–Whitney U test confirmed no statistically significant difference in collaboration with school stakeholders between males and females (U = 12,581, p = .631, r = .03). However, a statistically significant difference was found in the implementation of inclusive education (U = 8,410, p < .001, r = .35), indicating that female respondents reported higher levels of inclusive education practices with a moderate effect size.

4.3.2. Influence of training

Similarly, A Mann–Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether collaboration with school stakeholders and the implementation of inclusive education differed significantly between trained and untrained teachers in special education. Teachers with training had higher average ratings (M = 3.07, SD = 0.33) compared to those without training (M = 2.88, SD = 0.70) for collaboration with stakeholders. The results revealed a significant difference in collaboration with school stakeholders (U = 6767, p = .003, r = –.24) and in the implementation of inclusive education (U = 6373, p < .001, r = –.29). These findings indicate training in Inclusive special education significantly influences both collaborative engagement with stakeholders and the degree to which inclusive education practices are implemented, with the observed effect sizes suggesting small-to-moderate practical importance. Thus, professional development enhances awareness and recognition of inclusive leadership practices. These findings support the argument that both collaborative leadership and teacher capacity-building are essential for advancing inclusive education in public primary schools.

4.3.3. Influence of Age Group

Table 6 Group Descriptive of Age Group

One-Way ANOVA (Welch's)				
	F	df1	df2	p
Collaboration With School Stakeholders	18.9	2	201	<.001
Implementation Of Inclusive Education	43.1	2	234	<.001

Source: Field Data, 2025.

One-Way ANOVA (Welch's) test results suggest that age plays a meaningful role in shaping both collaborative engagement and inclusive education practices. The two constructs show significant p-values ($p < .001$), indicating that there are significant differences between the means of the age groups. The F-statistics range from 18.9 to 43.1, indicating varying magnitudes of differences between the age groups. The findings suggest that there are significant differences in perceptions between the age groups, which may be related to factors such as experience, training, or generational differences.

Mid-career educators (31–40 years) appear to be most active in fostering stakeholder collaboration, potentially reflecting accumulated professional experience combined with active involvement in institutional networks. In contrast, educators above 40 years reported lower levels of both collaboration and inclusive education implementation, possibly indicating reduced exposure to recent educational reforms or diminished institutional incentives for professional engagement. Notably, the youngest group (20–30 years) demonstrated the strongest commitment to inclusive education practices, aligning with contemporary teacher preparation programs that increasingly emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). These patterns highlight the importance of continuous professional development to maintain inclusive practices throughout an educator's career span, and to leverage the collaborative capacities of mid-career teachers for mentoring and system-wide improvement.

4.3.4. Influence of longevity

Table 7 Group Descriptive of longevity

One-Way ANOVA (Welch's)				
	F	df1	df2	p
Collaboration With School Stakeholders	8.71	2	191	<.001
Implementation Of Inclusive Education	43.92	2	218	<.001

Source: Field Data, 2025.

In a like manner, A Welch's ANOVA was conducted to examine the influence of professional longevity on collaboration with school stakeholders and the implementation of inclusive education. Significant differences were observed for collaboration, $F(2, 191) = 8.71$, $p < .001$, and for inclusive education implementation, $F(2, 218) = 43.92$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc inspection indicated that respondents with 6–10 years of experience reported the highest levels of collaboration ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.77$) and inclusive education implementation ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.33$), whereas those with over 10 years of experience reported the lowest scores in collaboration ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.65$) and implementation ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 0.53$). Respondents with 1–5 years of experience scored moderately on both measures.

4.4. Observation

Observations in seven public primary schools in Mound show weak collaboration in inclusive education. All head teachers discuss inclusion in PTA meetings, but parent involvement varies. No co-teaching or joint planning of individual education plans occurs due to lack of special education teachers and communication tools. Only 22% of teachers have special education experience, often underused due to limited resources. Paraprofessionals visit only two schools, and NGO partnerships exist in one. Overall, 7.1% of collaboration practices were fully implemented, 60.7% partial, and 32.1% absent, indicating mostly informal and unstructured collaboration that limits learner support

5. Discussion of findings

The findings reveal that parental involvement, especially in acquiring learning materials (M = 4.01) and assisting with homework (M = 3.95), represents the strongest form of collaboration. This aligns with Carter et al., 2021; Epstein, 2020 who denote that family has a critical role and engagement in supporting inclusive education outcomes. However, the moderate collaboration observed in teacher involvement in lesson planning and the use of communication tools reflects ongoing challenges in establishing consistent, structured home-school communication, a concern echoed by Alnahdi (2020), who highlights the need for more systematic parent-teacher partnerships in inclusive settings.

The extremely weak collaboration with external specialists such as district therapists and absence of co-teaching practices highlight a significant barrier in inclusive education implementation. This aligns with Florian and Spratt (2020), who argue that interdisciplinary teamwork and co-teaching are foundational to providing equitable support for learners with special needs. The lack of these collaborative structures, as observed in this study, mirrors findings by Liasidou (2019) who stressed that without formal collaboration, inclusion efforts often remain superficial and less effective.

The moderately strong positive correlation between collaboration and inclusive education implementation (Spearman's rho = 0.505, $p < .001$) confirms the vital role of collaborative leadership. Leadership fostering inclusive partnerships significantly improves inclusion outcomes (de Boer et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2020). Notably, teachers with special education training perceived collaboration more favorably, supporting the view that professional development enhances teachers' awareness and recognition of inclusive leadership efforts (Burton and Ainscow, 2022). While there are some positive aspects regarding school culture and admission policies, many key inclusive practices are not effectively carried out. The variability in responses and inconsistent implementation across schools highlight the need for targeted interventions and support to enhance the implementation of inclusive education.

These conclusions align with previous studies that have found low levels of implementation and inconsistent practices in inclusive education. For instance, a study by Shiwani (2021) found that head teachers' partnerships and collaboration were crucial for effective implementation of inclusive education, but these were often lacking. Similarly, a study by Gatumu (2021) highlighted the importance of head teachers' support for teachers' professional development in implementing inclusive education, but noted that many lacked specialized skills in key areas.

The finding that teachers with special education training perceive head teachers' collaboration with school stakeholders more positively is consistent with existing research emphasizing the importance of professional development in shaping teacher attitudes and perceptions. Training in special education equips teachers with better understanding and awareness of inclusive practices, enabling them to recognize and appreciate effective leadership efforts in fostering collaboration (Florian and Spratt, 2020; Burton and Ainscow, 2022).

Studies by Forlin and Sin (2022) highlight that well-trained teacher are more likely to value and engage in collaborative activities, as they better understand the roles and contributions of various stakeholders such as parents, specialists, and community members in inclusive education. This increased awareness can lead to greater sensitivity to head teachers' efforts to build partnerships and promote shared responsibility. Furthermore, the moderate effect size suggests that training not only influences statistical outcomes but also has practical relevance in improving school culture and teamwork. This aligns with findings by Sharma et al. (2023), who argue that ongoing teacher education fosters a collaborative mindset, which is crucial for sustaining inclusive practices.

Overall, the result underscores the need for continuous, targeted training in special education, not just to improve teaching skills but also to enhance the perception and effectiveness of collaborative leadership essential for successful inclusive education implementation.

Observational data indicate that only 7.1% of collaboration practices were fully implemented, with the majority being partial or absent. This finding resonates with Ekins and Porteous (2023), who point out that many schools struggle to move beyond informal, ad hoc collaboration towards structured, strategic partnerships necessary for effective inclusion. The limited presence of paraprofessionals and NGO partnerships further echoes calls by Mittler (2021) for stronger community and specialist involvement to support schools in inclusive education.

In summary, the triangulated findings reinforce contemporary consensus that effective collaboration, supported by ongoing teacher training and formal partnership structures, is essential for inclusive education success. These insights align with global best practices that emphasize collaborative leadership, capacity-building, and systemic support to achieve meaningful inclusion (UNESCO, 2020; Forlin and Sin, 2022).

These findings align with Open Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), which emphasizes that schools thrive when they interact dynamically with their external. The poor connection with external actors such as parents, specialists, therapists and NGOs suggest that schools are not fully leveraging their open system potential. For inclusive education to be fully realized, head teachers must actively facilitate stakeholder input, foster cross-sector collaboration, and build networks that transcend the school walls (Hoy and Miskel, 2013; Lunenburg, 2010).

5.1. Practical implications for Schools

Head teachers should build strong partnerships with parents, community groups, and local authorities by encouraging regular communication and sharing of resources. Training for head teachers and staff on stakeholder engagement can improve collaboration. Schools should establish PTAs with special needs representatives and partner with local NGOs and health services for extra support. Co-teaching, simple communication tools, and seeing the school as part of the community help strengthen inclusion. Teachers with specialized training better appreciate collaboration, so ongoing learning and mentoring are important. Head teachers must actively promote these partnerships to support learners with special needs. Overall, a collaborative environment is key to improving inclusive education.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the type of collaborations head teachers engage with school stakeholders, and to what extent they influence the implementation of inclusive education in public primary schools in Mfoundi Division, Centre Region, Cameroon. The findings revealed that collaboration between head teachers and school stakeholders plays a crucial role in successfully implementing inclusive education in public primary schools. Parental involvement, especially in providing learning materials and supporting homework, is the strongest form of collaboration but remains only moderate. Internal collaboration among teachers and communication with parents are inconsistent, while cooperation with external specialists and co-teaching practices are critically lacking. The significant positive correlation between collaboration and inclusive education implementation highlights the importance of strong, ongoing partnerships. Furthermore, teachers with special education training perceive collaboration efforts more positively, emphasizing the value of professional development.

Teachers with special education training have more positive perceptions of head teachers' collaboration with school stakeholders. This highlights how important professional development is not only for improving teaching skills but also for helping teachers appreciate and support collaborative leadership efforts in inclusive education.

However, observational data reveal that most collaboration practices are informal and only partially implemented, limiting support for learners with special needs. These findings point to the urgent need for structured, formalized collaboration frameworks, enhanced training, and stronger community and specialist involvement to improve inclusive education outcomes. Aligning with Open Systems Theory, schools must actively engage with external stakeholders to create a dynamic, supportive environment that fosters true inclusion.

Recommendations

Schools should create formal collaboration structures that bring together teachers, head teachers, parents, specialists, paraprofessionals, and community stakeholders. By holding regular meetings, joint planning sessions, and maintaining open communication, they can foster shared responsibility and coordinated support for learners. Wherever possible, co-teaching and team teaching should also be encouraged to enhance inclusive practices.

In addition, schools must actively engage parents, local NGOs, health professionals, and community leaders through awareness campaigns, workshops, and support groups. Strengthening these partnerships will expand resources, improve support networks, and help promote an inclusive culture beyond the classroom.

Moreover, providing continuous, practical pre-service and In-service training on inclusive education strategies, classroom management, and assistive technologies is essential for both teachers and head teachers. Including mentoring and peer support in this training will help build confidence and improve skills.

Finally, close cooperation with district therapists, counselors, and occupational therapists is vital to support both learners and staff well-being. These specialists can assist in managing teacher burnout and offer expertise in learner assessment, while paraprofessionals can play a key role by conducting aptitude testing during student enrollment to ensure accurate placement.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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