Implementation of Social Emotional Learning in Inclusive Education in Elementary Schools: Pedagogical and Emotional Challenges of Teachers

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Abstract
Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in inclusive elementary classrooms requires educators to possess significant social and emotional readiness beyond basic pedagogy. This qualitative multi-site case study investigates the specific pedagogical obstacles and emotional strains teachers face when executing SEL programs. Data were gathered from eight classroom teachers and four principals across four inclusive schools through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentary analysis. The data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The findings reveal that teachers confront significant hurdles, including managing highly heterogeneous classrooms, navigating students' communication barriers, and experiencing emotional burnout due to intensive behavior management. Furthermore, the study indicates that educators' emotional states directly influence the classroom climate and student engagement. To mitigate these trials, teachers employ adaptive interventions such as positive communication, emotional self-reflection, and personalized small-group instruction. Ultimately, this research highlights the urgent need to strengthen teachers' social-emotional competencies and expand institutional support systems to optimize SEL delivery in inclusive primary education.

1. Introduction

Executing inclusive education at the primary school level introduces multifaceted challenges for educators, especially concerning the management of diverse social, behavioral, and emotional profiles. While the core philosophy ensures equitable opportunities for all learners, including those with special needs, policy formulation alone does not guarantee success; instead, it hinges heavily on the psychological and practical preparedness of teachers (Hidayat et al., 2025). Consequently, educators must expand their professional toolkit beyond traditional pedagogical competencies to incorporate robust social-emotional skills essential for cultivating a secure learning atmosphere. Extant literature underscores that primary school educators often struggle within inclusive environments due to gaps in specialized training and difficulties navigating complex interpersonal classroom dynamics.

To address these systemic hurdles, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emerges as a highly pertinent framework. Fundamentally, SEL represents a developmental process through which individuals learn to identify and regulate emotions, cultivate constructive social bonds, and execute responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011). Empirical evidence demonstrates that integrating SEL into the curriculum yields substantial gains in students' socio-emotional proficiency, psychological wellness, and academic engagement (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Blewitt et al., 2018). These insights reveal that SEL functions as a dual-purpose intervention, concurrently driving emotional maturity and elevating the caliber of daily interactions within the school community.

The imperative to adopt SEL is more pronounced in inclusive settings where the spectrum of socio-emotional needs is markedly broader. For instance, neurodivergent students, particularly those on the autism spectrum, frequently experience obstacles regarding social communication and modulating emotional responses (Lewis & Stojanovik, 2024). Such conditions demand that educators dynamically adjust environments, facilitate empathetic communication, and deliver steady emotional scaffolding (Lewis & Stojanovik, 2024). However, executing SEL within inclusive frameworks is deeply intertwined with the educator's own socio-emotional state, subjecting them to intensified psychological pressures while addressing heterogeneous academic and behavioral demands.

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As highlighted in the "Prosocial Classroom" framework, an educator's own social-emotional competence plays a pivotal role in dictating the quality of teacher-student rapport and classroom management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The internal emotional status of the instructor directly shapes the broader emotional climate and dictates levels of student engagement (Reyes et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers who effectively modulate their emotional responses and model empathetic behavior are better equipped to engineer secure learning domains (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Conversely, those grappling with unchecked occupational distress frequently cultivate a tense ambiance, which inadvertently disrupts student conduct and deters engagement (Reyes et al., 2012).

Existing scholarship indicates that systemic stressors, such as disruptive behaviors and unsupportive institutional cultures, exacerbate teacher distress and erode self-efficacy (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). An educator's affective state directly mediates the quality of the instructional setting and long-term academic attainment (McLean & Connor, 2015). Furthermore, highly supportive and caring educators exert a profound influence on their pupils' self-esteem and subjective well-being (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). Therefore, the successful institutionalization of SEL remains indissolubly linked to the psychological well-being of teachers, who serve as the primary executioners of the curriculum.

Despite the maturation of SEL research, the bulk of current literature remains heavily skewed toward evaluating student-centered developmental outcomes (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Existing studies frequently conceptualize teachers merely as passive facilitators, largely overlooking the profound internal emotional hurdles they experience mid-instruction (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). There remains a critical scarcity of empirical inquiries that deeply investigate the subjective socio-emotional realities of educators tasked with delivering SEL inside inclusive elementary classrooms. This disconnect underscores the pressing need to critically investigate the subjective experiences and systemic impediments that teachers face throughout the instructional process.

Prompted by these gaps, the present study investigates the execution of SEL within inclusive elementary classrooms, specifically isolating the pedagogical roadblocks and emotional vulnerabilities teachers encounter. Theoretically, this inquiry aims to advance the intersectional discourse between SEL frameworks and inclusive primary education. Practically, it serves as a critical diagnostic tool for educators and administrators aiming to cultivate a more humanistic, adaptive, and highly responsive educational environment capable of comprehensively meeting the diverse social and emotional needs of all learners.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach utilizing a multi-site case study design to investigate the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within inclusive elementary school classrooms. A qualitative paradigm was selected because the primary objective is to acquire a nuanced, granular understanding of educators' subjective experiences, pedagogical hurdles, and underlying emotional dynamics within their daily instructional routines. Furthermore, a multi-site framework was deployed across four public inclusive primary schools located in Sumedang Regency, Bandung Regency, and Karawang Regency, Indonesia. Utilizing multiple research settings allowed the study to capture contextual variations in how SEL programs are administered across different inclusive environments, ultimately yielding a more comprehensive and holistic perspective on social-emotional learning dynamics in elementary education.

The participant pool consisted of 12 key informants, specifically 8 classroom teachers and 4 school principals, who were selected via purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria for the teaching staff dictated that they must actively manage inclusive classrooms, possess firsthand experience educating students with special needs, and be directly involved in executing social-emotional learning strategies during lessons. Meanwhile, school principals were recruited due to their institutional roles in driving policy formulation and fostering an overarching inclusive culture within the school environment.

Data collection was executed through a triad of qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to deeply unpack the specific pedagogical and emotional challenges teachers confront when introducing SEL in inclusive settings. Concurrently, participatory observations focused on examining teacher-student interactions, behavioral management strategies, instructional communication patterns, and the prevailing emotional climate of the classroom during active learning sessions. To complement and enrich these primary sources, document analysis was performed on various school artifacts, including teaching modules, learning assessments, individual student progress reports, and institutional documentation concerning inclusive education and SEL protocols.

The analytical process followed the interactive model formulated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. A thematic analysis was performed across the interview transcripts, observation field notes, and collected documents to isolate recurring patterns regarding the exact instructional and emotional difficulties educator encounter. This analysis was conducted as an iterative, continuous cycle that began during initial

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fieldwork and persisted until the final synthesis, thereby ensuring a highly reflective and deeply contextualized interpretation of the empirical data.

To guarantee data validity and establish trustworthiness, the study integrated source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field. Source triangulation was achieved by cross-examining and comparing the data obtained from teachers with the perspectives shared by school principals. Methodological triangulation involved cross-referencing information synthesized from interviews, direct observations, and document reviews. For member checking, the transcribed interview data were returned to the participants to audit and confirm that the records accurately reflected their authentic experiences. Finally, the researcher maintained a prolonged engagement within the research sites, embedding themselves directly into the school environments to develop an acute, grounded sensitivity to the everyday socio-emotional learning dynamics within inclusive primary classrooms.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

This empirical inquiry was carried out across four public inclusive primary institutions situated within Sumedang Regency, Bandung Regency, and Karawang Regency. The primary analytical objective centered on unpacking the structural and personal impediments educators face while executing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks within these integrated environments, specifically isolating the pedagogical bottlenecks and emotional friction points that manifest mid-instruction. The empirical dataset comprises detailed qualitative evidence compiled from in-depth interviews, direct classroom observations, and relevant educational documentation.

Based on field observations, it is evident that the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning within these primary inclusive classrooms has initiated foundational activities such as affective reflection exercises, prosocial communication modeling, positive behavioral reinforcements, collaborative group dynamics, and individualized instructional models. However, the execution remains fragmented and suboptimal because teachers continue to battle an overlapping matrix of pedagogical and psychological stressors that hinder the learning process.

Through a systematic qualitative analysis of the data, four distinct thematic dimensions emerged regarding the current state of SEL execution. These findings encompass the institutional and structural hurdles encountered when supervising highly heterogeneous inclusive student bodies, as well as the psychological and affective vulnerabilities experienced by instructors during SEL facilitation. Furthermore, the analysis identified significant structural deficits and a lack of formalized administrative backing for SEL integration, alongside various tactical modifications deployed by educators to foster an equitable and nurturing classroom ecology. Each of these themes is explored in detail in the following subsections.

3.1.1. Heterogeneity and Classroom Management Challenges

Exploring the first thematic framework reveals that educators face pronounced difficulties maintaining equilibrium in classrooms characterized by steep demographic and cognitive diversity. Facilitators are forced to balance neurotypical students alongside peers possessing complex, specialized developmental needs within a single space, frequently making an equitable allocation of instructional attention difficult to sustain. Furthermore, modifying standard SEL interventions to match highly disparate student communication levels and self-regulation capacities presents a recurrent operational bottleneck.

This dynamic was explicitly highlighted by an educator from the Bandung Regency cohort:

> "During class, I have to manage students who are very active, while others have trouble focusing, and still others need to keep up with the lesson. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed trying to divide my attention." (W/GK/Bdg1/12)

Field observations corroborated this finding, noting that instructors frequently had to suspend scheduled learning tasks to de-escalate emotional crises among dysregulated students. Consequently, the intended delivery of the SEL curriculum was frequently compromised because substantial instructional time was redirected toward immediate behavior modification and crisis intervention. Despite these interruptions, observations also demonstrated proactive efforts by educators to stabilize the environment through visual emotion-regulation charts, the co-creation of positive group norms, and highly empathetic communication channels.

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3.1.2. Psychological and Emotional Demands on Educators

Beyond the pedagogical mechanics, the data underscore that educators navigate intense psychological distress when managing these inclusive settings. Respondents described a state of chronic emotional fatigue caused by the unrelenting demands for hyper-vigilance, continuous patience, and rigid self-regulation. To preserve an effective learning atmosphere, teachers must continuously project emotional stability, even when confronting volatile and taxing classroom dynamics.

An educator operating within Karawang Regency noted:

> "Emotionally, it's quite draining because every day we have to be patient in dealing with various student behaviors. Sometimes, after a day of teaching, I feel completely exhausted." (W/GK/Krw/08)

This narrative underscores that the persistent psychological demands inherent to inclusive pedagogy can systematically jeopardize the professional and personal well-being of the instructional staff.

Observational indicators of this exhaustion were highly visible, with educators frequently demonstrating physical and mental fatigue following the resolution of peer conflicts or when specialized students struggled to comprehend social directives during collaborative activities. Interestingly, instead of reverting to punitive discipline, teachers frequently favored individualized, low-stimulus interventions to soothe agitated learners.

3.1.3. Institutional Barriers and Deficits in School Support

The interview data further reveal that institutional deficits act as a major structural bottleneck to optimal SEL execution. Teachers observed that their respective academic institutions generally lack formalized, system-wide frameworks designed to support social-emotional development. Consequently, SEL practices remain informal, rudimentary, and highly dependent on the personal motivation of individual classroom facilitators.

An administrator from a Sumedang Regency school observed:

> "There is no specific written SEL program at our school yet. Teachers usually implement it through daily routines and approaches." (W/KS/Smd/05)

Furthermore, educators cited compounding variables such as restricted instructional hours, high student-to-teacher ratios, and an acute deficit of pragmatic professional development workshops focused on inclusive SEL. The consensus among the staff was that previous professional training remained excessively theoretical, failing to provide actionable strategies for navigating complex, real-world classroom configurations.

3.1.4. Teacher-Led Adaptive Strategies

Despite navigating these structural and emotional hurdles, practitioners actively design and deploy adaptive methodologies to sustain SEL principles in their inclusive classrooms. The most pervasive tactics documented include personalized student tracking, the intentional use of affirming communication, localized small-group instruction, positive behavioral targeting, and structured emotional check-ins.

An educator from the Bandung Regency sample shared their routine:

> "I usually start the lesson by asking the students about their feelings first so they can calm down and be ready to learn." (W/GK/Bdg2/14)

Observational field notes confirm that integrating brief, low-stakes routines—such as morning check-in circles, structured introductory greetings, high-fives, and collective emotional reflection activities—significantly improves the classroom climate. When greeted with an affectionate, emotionally responsive teaching style, students exhibited higher levels of prosocial interaction and felt noticeably more secure expressing their thoughts.

To provide a clearer comparative overview of the unique challenges and corresponding SEL strategies utilized across the various institutions, the empirical findings recorded at each of the four participating elementary schools are synthesized and presented in Table 1. This summary highlights the specific pedagogical hurdles and the tactical adaptations implemented by teachers in each location.

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Table 1. Summary of SEL Implementation Challenges and Strategies

School Location	Pedagogical Challenges	Emotional Challenges	Teacher Strategies
Talun Sumedang Public Elementary School	Challenges with differentiated instruction	Exhaustion from dealing with student behavior	Use of small groups
Cipeundeuy Public Elementary School Bandung	Managing a heterogeneous classroom	Administrative and emotional pressures	Circle time and emotional reflection
Kamasan 01 Elementary School, Bandung	Students' social communication challenges	Difficulty maintaining classroom focus	Visual instructions and positive reinforcement
Public Elementary School in Karawang	Student Behavior Regulations	Stress in Dealing with Student Conflicts	Individualized Approach

Based on the synthesis presented in Table 1, it is evident that educators across the surveyed institutions confront disparate pedagogical and affective challenges, dictated primarily by distinct student profiles and localized institutional climates. Undeterred by these constraints, practitioners uniformly endeavor to design adaptive interventions as summarized in the table aimed at establishing a more receptive, equitable, and socio-emotionally responsive learning framework.

Synthesizing these observational insights demonstrates that the successful delivery of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in inclusive primary settings is not merely a function of technical pedagogical dexterity. Rather, it represents a multifaceted phenomenon mediated by the instructor's psychological state, organizational backing, classroom micro-cultures, and the overall structural preparedness of the inclusive environment itself. Within this ecosystem, the teacher serves as the critical linchpin for engineering a psychological haven that accommodates both neurotypical learners and students with special educational needs.

Furthermore, interview metrics substantiate that micro-interventions including circle time, structured emotional checks, and positive classroom guidelines substantially enhance the affective ambiance of the classroom while catalyzing students' interpersonal engagement. In sum, while the baseline integration of SEL has emerged organically through grassroots instructional practices, its systemic execution remains bottlenecked by intricate dilemmas involving teacher psychological readiness, emotional self-regulation capacities, infrastructural deficiencies, and a lack of formalized institutional reinforcement.

3.2. Discussion

The empirical outcomes of this study indicate that the institutionalization of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within inclusive primary classrooms remains highly fragmented due to interlocking pedagogical and psychological impediments. This reality suggests that implementing SEL in highly integrated environments extends far beyond the mechanical transmission of socio-emotional skills; it is intimately bound up with the educator's internal psychological resilience, the operational demands of supervising highly diversified student cohorts, and the broader structural architecture of school support. Consequently, maximizing the efficacy of SEL requires a holistic paradigm shift that acknowledges classroom relational dynamics as an inseparable component of inclusive education.

3.2.1. Classroom Heterogeneity and Instructional Adaptations

The primary operational hurdle identified by educator centers on the management of classrooms characterized by profound cognitive, behavioral, and developmental diversity. Instructors are forced to simultaneously accommodate highly disparate academic capabilities, uneven emotional regulation skills, and distinct social communication proficiencies. This excessive cognitive load complicates the equitable distribution of instructional attention and hinders the fluid modification of teaching strategies necessary to sustain universal student engagement.

This finding strongly resonates with the scholarship of Philippa Lewis and Vesna Stojanovik (2024**)**, who argue that practitioners in inclusive spaces regularly face structural barriers when facilitating the social communication of autistic learners a challenge severely compounded by inflated student-to-teacher ratios and deficient administrative scaffolding. To mitigate these disruptions, educators require highly malleable pedagogical toolkits, transparent communicative protocols, and individualized instructional pathways that lower the barriers to peer-to-peer classroom socialization.

3.2.2. Occupational Distress and Instructor Burnout

Beyond technical classroom management, this inquiry brings to light the severe psychological tax levied on educators tasked with running SEL programs in inclusive frameworks. Participants reported experiencing

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profound emotional exhaustion stemming from the relentless demand for hyper-patience, constant affective monitoring, and the daily calibration of responses to volatile student behaviors.

The psychological tax reported by participants is manifested through several interconnected dimensions. It primarily begins with the systemic pressures arising from intense daily behavioral interventions, which subsequently lead to a state of profound affective exhaustion characterized by the chronic depletion of personal emotional reserves. Ultimately, this sustained emotional drain results in efficacy attrition, where educators experience a diminished capability to manage complex classroom dynamics effectively over extended periods.

These insights corroborate the conceptual models of Collie (2021), which link intensified professional pressures and high emotional expenditure to escalating levels of teacher distress and vocational burnout. Crucially, within the parameter of this study, teacher exhaustion is not merely an artifact of administrative overhead or standardized testing mandates; instead, it is directly driven by the sheer intensity of the affective interactions required in an inclusive matrix, which demands far greater psychological investment than a conventional, homogeneous classroom.

3.2.3. Affective Regulation and Classroom Ecosystems

The empirical data show that an instructor's psychological state serves as a primary determinant of the broader classroom emotional climate. Educators who exhibit robust emotional regulation and sustain warm, validating communication channels consistently foster secure, prosocial learning environments. Conversely, when an instructor succumbs to emotional burnout, the classroom equilibrium deteriorates, leading to fragmented peer-to-peer social dynamics.

This correlation closely mirrors the classroom emotional climate frameworks articulated by Maria R. Reyes et al. (2012), which demonstrate that the affective tone of a learning environment directly dictates student engagement metrics and subsequent academic attainment. The current study confirms that micro-routines such as collective emotional reflection, morning circle times, and asset-based communication can substantially buffer these vulnerabilities and elevate engagement, particularly among learners navigating acute socio-emotional difficulties.

3.2.4. Role Strain and Teacher Socio-Emotional Competence

Furthermore, these findings reinforce the theoretical assertions of Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl's (2017) view that the viability of any SEL framework is contingent upon the underlying social-emotional competencies of the teaching staff. In an inclusive classroom, teachers must transcend their traditional role as conduits of academic curricula; they must simultaneously function as primary exemplars of emotional regulation, facilitators of peer relationships, and architects of psychologically insulated spaces. In daily practice, this requires instructors to manage complex role strain, concurrently acting as behavioral mediators, emotional anchors, and micro-sociological coordinators. This reality implies that executing SEL in integrated classrooms demands a significantly broader and more sophisticated professional skillset than conventional instructional delivery.

3.2.5. Systemic Fragmentation vs. Individualized Initiatives

The data also indicate that current SEL practices in primary schools are highly atomized, relying heavily on localized, individual initiative rather than systemic incorporation into institutional cultures. The majority of facilitators execute SEL protocols based on personal conviction, utilizing informal positive reinforcements and situational emotional approaches.

This diagnostic outcome aligns with the critiques leveled by Stephanie M. Jones and Suzanne M. Bouffard (2012), who argued that SEL is frequently marginalized as an exogenous, "add-on" programmatic requirement rather than being embedded as a core pillar of the institutional identity. This study finds that the structural absence of explicit policy directives, contextual professional development, and formalized school-wide support mechanisms inevitably results in erratic, highly uneven SEL implementation across different classrooms and institutions.

3.2.6. Adaptive Pedagogical Responses

Conversely, the study highlights the resilience of front-line educators who continuously innovate to build supportive, inclusive micro-climates. The deployment of tactile visual aids, peer-assisted small-group configurations, positive behavioral interventions, and personalized tracking strategies illustrates how teachers actively tailor their practices to accommodate student diversity. These findings validate the observations of Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman (2015), who assert that the ultimate trajectory of SEL efficacy is determined by immediate classroom-level mechanisms, particularly the qualitative depth of teacher-student rapport and the immediate emotional experiences of learner mid-instruction.

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3.3. Implications

These conditions carry substantial implications for the evolution of primary education, specifically regarding the formulation of inclusive school policies and holistic socio-emotional curricula. To address these imperatives, the educational ecosystem must prioritize professional development programs that pivot away from abstract theories toward pragmatic, contextually grounded strategies tailored to the complex realities of inclusive classrooms. In addition to strengthening individual teacher capacity, administrative bodies must proactively establish institutionalized psychological safety nets for their staff through enhanced inter-departmental collaboration and the cultivation of an asset-based, humanistic school ethos. Ultimately, the responsibility for executing SEL in inclusive cohorts can no longer be outsourced entirely to individual classroom teachers; it demands the coordinated mobilization of the entire educational ecosystem to truly realize a secure, equitable, and student-centered environment that honors the emotional needs of every learner.

3.4. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in only four public inclusive elementary schools within three regencies in West Java, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the participant pool consisted solely of teachers and school principals, excluding the perspectives of students and parents who may offer additional insights into SEL implementation. Third, the study focused on naturally occurring SEL practices rather than examining the effectiveness of a specific SEL intervention program. Future research may involve a larger sample, include multiple stakeholder perspectives, and investigate the impact of structured SEL interventions within inclusive educational settings.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is emerging through grassroots practices in inclusive primary schools, its systemic optimization is significantly hindered by an overlapping matrix of pedagogical hurdles and psychological stressors. The findings reveal that educators face intense challenges in managing highly heterogeneous cohorts and navigating acute student communication barriers, which often result in profound emotional burnout and diminished instructional self-efficacy. Crucially, the research confirms that an instructor's own social-emotional competence serves as a vital mediator for the overall classroom climate and student engagement; however, current execution remains largely ad-hoc and dependent on individual teacher initiative rather than formalized school-wide protocols. Therefore, to ensure the long-term sustainability of SEL in inclusive settings, the educational ecosystem must transition from isolated classroom improvisation toward a holistic, institutionally supported framework. This shift requires the provision of pragmatic, contextually grounded training and the establishment of robust psychological safety nets for educators, ultimately ensuring a nurturing learning environment that effectively honors the diverse socio-emotional needs of every student.

Author Contributions

All authors conceived the study, designed the methodology, conducted field data collection through interviews and observations across the inclusive elementary schools, and drafted the initial manuscript. J and P, serving as academic supervisors, provided theoretical guidance on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), performed critical intellectual reviews of the data analysis, and supervised the final revision and editing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version for submission.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

During the drafting of this paper, generative AI technologies were employed exclusively for proofreading, polishing the language, and correcting grammatical structures. AI intervention was limited to the final editing stage to improve readability and ensure precise English expression. The fundamental conceptualization, experimental design, field investigations, qualitative data processing, and analytical conclusions remain entirely

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the manual work of the research team. Consequently, the authors bear complete responsibility for the accuracy, novelty, and authenticity of the manuscript.

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