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# Development and Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in "Penggerak" Kindergartens: A Case Study of Semarang City

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Independent Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, Curriculum Development, Stakeholder Collaboration, Inclusive Education.

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## Abstract

Implementing the Independent Curriculum in early childhood education presents challenges and opportunities, particularly in aligning curriculum design with local needs and ensuring stakeholder collaboration. This research examines the development and implementation of the Independent Curriculum in three "Penggerak" Kindergartens in Semarang City: TK ABA 54, TK Talenta, and TK Pertiwi 31. The study employs a descriptive qualitative method involving principals, teachers, supervisors, and parents and focuses on institutional readiness and stakeholder collaboration. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that each kindergarten developed a curriculum tailored to its unique institutional characteristics and student needs, with an emphasis on integrating national standards, local values, and religious principles. TK Talenta prioritized inclusive education for special needs children, while TK Pertiwi 31 focused on contextual learning approaches. Collaborative curriculum planning involving key stakeholders was a central strategy in all three institutions. Despite the successes, challenges emerged, particularly in teachers' comprehension of the Independent Curriculum, which necessitated additional support through professional development. The study concludes that a flexible and contextually grounded curriculum fosters inclusivity and adapts to local needs in early childhood education. However, the limited geographic focus and short observation period challenge generalizing the findings. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to evaluate the curriculum's long-term impacts and explore interdisciplinary strategies in curriculum design.

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## Introduction

Education is a constantly evolving field, continuously adapting to meet human needs better (Eka Retnaningsih & Patilima, 2022). Educational development aims to equip individuals with the skills necessary to compete in various areas of life (Suhartono, 2021). Education must begin early, as early childhood education programs are designed to support children from birth to six years of age by providing learning experiences that foster their growth and development, preparing them for future educational pursuits Indrijati et al. in Yunita & Suryana, (2022). As Selaras Ndari and Chandrawaty explain in Afifah and Shofwan (2023), early childhood education offers the correct stimuli to encourage, guide, and organize activities that help children develop skills according to their unique needs.

A quality education system is inseparable from a well-structured curriculum, which is the backbone of any educational institution. Education and curriculum are two sides of the same coin (Addahil, 2019). The curriculum is critical to achieving national educational goals, functioning as a framework for educators and students (Mayanti, 2023). In line with Cholillah et al. (2023) further emphasize that the curriculum is the "heart of education." The significance of the curriculum is that it is an integral part of the early childhood education state; it is the heart of education (Shalehah, 2023). The success of students and educational institutions is often measured by the quality of the curriculum they implement. The curriculum has undergone

several revisions in Indonesia, from the first version in 1947 to the most recent Merdeka Curriculum (Coşkun et al., 2019).

Nadiem Makarim, Indonesia's Minister of Education, introduced the Merdeka (Independent) Curriculum, a model that aims to make learning more enjoyable while promoting innovation and critical thinking (Fathan, 2020). The Merdeka Curriculum allows educational institutions to adapt and develop curricula according to their unique characteristics. According to (Lubis et al., 2023), highlight, this curriculum is designed to provide students with greater autonomy in the learning process. Its introduction was partly due to criticisms that previous curricula were too rigid and unable to keep pace with the changing educational landscape (Marisa, 2021). While the curriculum offers a new approach to education, its implementation has raised concerns, particularly among teachers, and this has led to the creation of the "Sekolah Penggerak" (Driving Schools) program.

The "Sekolah Penggerak" program is a government initiative to help schools enhance their teaching and learning processes by making meaningful, lasting changes. The goal is for schools to improve their performance by one or two levels. Only a few schools have been selected as "Sekolah Penggerak," and becoming one is no small feat. It requires schools to meet several criteria and participate in extensive training. Ongoing training sessions, seminars, and workshops are essential to support the rollout of the Merdeka Curriculum. This program places a strong emphasis on improving the skills and performance of teachers. According to Mulyasa (2020), school principals and teachers are crucial in successfully implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers must not only teach but also inspire and lead. The urgency of curriculum development lies in its ability to support teachers and students in learning by ensuring the content is continuously updated and improved.

Several studies have explored the implementation challenges associated with the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in "Sekolah Penggerak." According to (Bahri, 2017), the success of curriculum development is closely tied to institutional support and the ability of teachers to adapt to new teaching methods. Similarly, Mulyasa (2020) stresses the critical role of teacher training and continuous professional development in ensuring effective curriculum implementation. Research also highlights the importance of school leadership, with principals and other leaders playing a pivotal role in supporting teachers during the transition (Baderiah, 2018). However, many educators continue to face difficulties in meeting the demands of the curriculum due to a lack of resources and institutional support, which hampers the program's overall effectiveness (Muslimin et al., 2023)(Mukhlis Anshori, 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on curriculum development and implementation, there remain significant gaps in understanding the specific challenges early childhood education institutions face, particularly kindergartens, in adopting the Merdeka Curriculum. While studies have examined broader aspects of curriculum reform, few have delved into the unique needs and conditions of "Sekolah Penggerak" kindergartens (Fikria, 2023). Additionally, existing research tends to focus on the theoretical aspects of curriculum development, often neglecting practical challenges such as teacher preparedness, resource availability, and stakeholder collaboration in these early education settings (Bahri, 2017; Mukhtar, 2015). This paucity of research highlights the need for further investigation into the real-world application of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education.

This study aims to analyze the development and implementation of the Independent Curriculum (Merdeka Curriculum) in "Sekolah Penggerak" kindergartens in Semarang, focusing on the readiness of institutions and the collaboration of stakeholders. By examining the curriculum planning, organization, and optimization processes within these institutions, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum can be effectively implemented in early childhood education. Furthermore, this study will provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and administrators, offering practical recommendations for enhancing curriculum development and supporting teachers'

professional growth in the Independent Curriculum context. Such findings will be crucial for improving the overall quality of early childhood education in Indonesia.

## Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the development, planning, and organization of the independent curriculum in three "Driving Schools" (Sekolah Penggerak) kindergartens in Semarang City: TK ABA 54 Semarang, TK Talenta, and TK Pertiwi 31 Semarang. The research was conducted between February and March 2024, and these institutions were selected due to their participation in the second and third cohorts of the "Driving Schools" program. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate for providing a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's implementation through detailed descriptions and contextually grounded insights. The research included three primary components: locations (the three kindergartens), individuals (principals, teachers, and supervisors), and documents (curriculum-related documentation from each school). Data were collected through interviews, direct observations, and document analysis.

The purposive sampling method selected 11 informants from each institution, including the principal, teachers, and supervisors. Informants were chosen based on their ability to provide detailed and relevant information about the planning and implementation of the independent curriculum. Semi-structured interviews focused on how the curriculum was organized, the challenges faced, and the strategies used to address them. In parallel, observations were made to assess the practical implementation of the curriculum, including classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, and institutional practices. Document analysis involved reviewing curriculum plans, activity schedules, and instructional materials. Triangulation was applied to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, incorporating information from interviews, observations, and documents to reduce bias and enhance data credibility (Sugiono, 2013).

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). Data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis to capture curriculum development and implementation strategies. Information was transcribed and categorized in the data reduction phase, and key themes were identified. The data display organized findings into tables and summaries, enabling cross-analysis of curriculum practices. Conclusions were drawn by synthesizing recurring patterns and verified through triangulation to ensure accuracy and reliability.

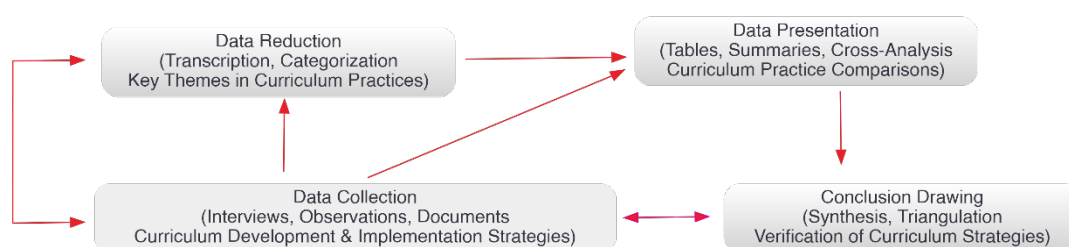


Figure 1. Milles and Huberman data analysis.

## Result

The research was conducted at three different kindergarten institutions, each with unique characteristics that align with the individual traits of the children. This supports the findings of Nafisa and Fitri (2023), who noted that educational institutions have the autonomy to create and manage curricula that reflect the institution's identity and the needs of the children. This connection enhances the relevance of the learning experience. The areas of development explored in this research include the curriculum's planning and organization, outlined below.

## Curriculum Planning

### *The Planning of the Independent Curriculum Development at TK ABA 54 Semarang*

At TK ABA 54 Semarang, the curriculum planning process begins with a large-scale meeting that includes all key stakeholders—principals, teachers, parents, supervisors, and other educational staff. This broad involvement underscores the institution's commitment to creating a curriculum that reflects the perspectives of all its members. According to observational data, this meeting is a platform for reviewing the existing curriculum, allowing everyone to provide valuable input for its future development. The process starts with evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the previous curriculum, a crucial step that informs how improvements can be made.

The principal and the curriculum development team strongly emphasize ensuring the curriculum remains relevant to the current educational needs. Through this collaborative approach, a well-rounded and adaptable curriculum is created that not only meets the expectations of the various stakeholders but also addresses the specific needs of the children. TK ABA 54 Semarang integrates Muhammadiyah's religious values into its vision and mission, blending them seamlessly with the national curriculum and local content. This balance allows the institution to preserve its unique identity while complying with national educational standards. By doing so, the school can remarkably adapt its curriculum to local relevance and broader educational goals.

The institution prioritizes a comprehensive needs analysis, focusing on understanding the strengths and challenges of each student as the foundation for curriculum planning. The school can tailor learning strategies through detailed individual assessments to match each child's needs, interests, and talents. This personalized approach ensures the curriculum supports academic development and nurtures the child's overall potential. Parents play an active role in this process, providing information through forms and participating in school-based parenting activities. This partnership between parents and teachers enhances the connection between home and school, creating a cohesive support system for the child's educational journey.

However, the implementation of the independent curriculum does present challenges. Some teachers are still struggling to grasp its principles fully. To address this, the principal has established teacher study groups, which allow for ongoing collaboration and mutual learning. This initiative helps teachers better understand the curriculum, ensuring they can effectively implement it while fostering community and teamwork among the staff. In summary, the curriculum development process at TK ABA 54 Semarang is a thoughtful, inclusive, and adaptive effort that draws on the collective insights of all its stakeholders. It blends religious and local values with national standards, ensuring children's holistic and tailored educational experience.

### *The Planning of the Independent Curriculum Development at TK Talenta*

The research conducted at TK Talenta highlights that, as a "Driving School," the institution has long embraced a learning approach emphasizing children's freedom to explore according to their interests. However, developing a formal independent curriculum document is still in progress. TK Talenta is an inclusive school welcoming children with special needs, so inclusivity and tolerance play a vital role in their curriculum planning. The research reveals that the institution profoundly understands the significance of inclusivity in education. The planning process involves various stakeholders, demonstrating a participatory approach to creating a curriculum that meets the needs of all children, including those with special needs. The curriculum document emphasizes the importance of diversity—social, cultural, and religious backgrounds are thoughtfully considered to create a responsive learning environment.

The curriculum planning process has occurred in three stages, underscoring the institution's earnest efforts to develop a comprehensive curriculum aligning with its characteristics and mission. This also demonstrates ongoing coordination among stakeholders, a crucial step to ensure the curriculum can be effectively implemented. However, the process highlights the need for more time and resources during the planning phase.

Observations of the document reveal a particular focus on individualized assessments for children with special needs. These assessments go beyond observation and evaluation,

involving specialists who provide interventions based on the results. This reflects a holistic approach to inclusive education, fostering an inclusive learning environment. Such an approach aligns well with Bronfenbrenner's ecological development theory, which posits that child development is influenced by the interaction of various environmental systems, such as schools, families, and professional experts. Effective coordination in creating a nurturing environment for children is crucial for their development.

Curriculum planning also requires institutional readiness, particularly among teachers. The educators at TK Talenta have shown a preparedness to develop an independent curriculum. However, the institution continues offering support through collaborative learning programs and engaging curriculum experts. This demonstrates that the teachers are equipped with theoretical knowledge of the curriculum and aware of their professional development needs. This awareness is essential, especially in the context of the independent curriculum, which requires educators to have a deep understanding and the ability to adapt swiftly to its demands.

#### *The Planning of the Independent Curriculum Development at TK Pertiwi 31 Semarang*

The research shows that the independent curriculum at TK Pertiwi 31 reflects a contextual approach, incorporating both the local environment and religious elements. Situated in a village with an agro-tourism and religious atmosphere, the institution has woven in elements like Quranic lessons, even though it is not a religious school. This approach aligns with the principles of contextual learning, which emphasize making education relevant to the social and cultural environment. Adapting the curriculum to the local culture adds meaning and value to the children's learning experiences.

At TK Pertiwi 31, the independent curriculum centers on a child-centered learning approach, identified through assessments before curriculum planning. This student-centered approach focuses on the needs of the children, ensuring that the curriculum design reflects their unique requirements. Assessments are used to establish learning objectives, followed by selecting appropriate methods and media, ensuring that every curriculum component serves the children's best interests.

Parental involvement is another critical element of the planning process, with regular meetings held to align the perspectives of parents and the institution. Engaging parents in early childhood education has been shown to positively impact children's development and academic achievements. The active collaboration between parents and the institution supports the curriculum development process, ensuring that it not only addresses the needs of the children but also resonates with the parent's expectations.

Analyzing the curriculum development processes at these three institutions reveals that each school has tailored its curriculum to meet its specific needs. While the differences between the institutions are apparent, they should not be viewed as strengths or weaknesses. Instead, these variations reflect the unique characteristics and priorities of each institution. The independent curriculum, by design, allows for flexibility, enabling each educational unit to adapt it according to its particular context. This demonstrates that each institution has effectively implemented an independent curriculum that aligns with its mission and serves the diverse needs of its students.

#### *Organizing the Curriculum at TK ABA 54 Semarang, TK Talenta, TK Pertiwi 31 Semarang*

In organizing the curriculum at TK ABA 54 Semarang, TK Talenta, and TK Pertiwi 31 Semarang, the principal initiates the issuance of an official decree (SK) to form a curriculum development team with designated responsibilities. The principal plays a central role, fully accountable for providing the necessary information during curriculum development and ensuring it reflects classroom and student needs. School supervisors also have a crucial role in observing and guiding the curriculum's progress while encouraging parental involvement in supporting the curriculum. According to the interviews:

*"The curriculum team is formed with specific roles assigned to each member. Once established, we draft the curriculum structure, covering intracurricular, extracurricular,*

*and co-curricular activities. The focus is on managing students' learning load and outlining teaching plans."*

The curriculum organization across these three institutions demonstrates a clear structure, with the principal taking charge of curriculum development. However, collaboration between teachers, supervisors, and parents is essential to strengthen the process. If communication is unclear, there is a potential challenge; it could limit teachers' initiative and flexibility.

The curriculum structure at these institutions covers intracurricular, extracurricular, and co-curricular learning. Based on the interview findings:

*"In our curriculum, intracurricular, extracurricular, and P5 (Pancasila Student Profile) components are integrated, focusing on achievement and assessment. The curriculum developed by the school is unique, tailored to the institution's vision and mission, and built from scratch. It outlines the desired learning outcomes for students when they leave the institution. The principal oversees this process, ensuring comprehensive skills and knowledge development. Both formative and summative assessments are used, emphasizing core learning principles. The P5 project aims to nurture and strengthen students' character in line with the Pancasila student profile, while extracurricular activities are designed around students' interests and talents. Meanwhile, intracurricular activities deepen students' understanding and skills in alignment with their extracurricular interests."*

Intracurricular learning is designed around topics and objectives that resonate with children's emerging interests, adapting to the results of ongoing learning evaluations. The duration of these sessions is flexible, based on the children's needs. On the other hand, extracurricular activities are structured to match children's interests and are voluntary, ensuring no pressure to participate. Co-curricular activities like the P5 are held twice a year to nurture the Pancasila student generation. To fully achieve this goal, the Pancasila values are integrated into the P5 activities and daily intracurricular lessons. As an interviewee pointed out:

*"Relying solely on the P5 project to instill Pancasila values may not be enough. That is why the Pancasila student profile is incorporated into daily intracurricular learning. It is embedded in the entire curriculum, not just limited to P5 activities."*

This aligns with the feedback from teachers regarding effective strategies for instilling Pancasila values:

*"We encourage children to develop spiritually, to know their God, and we also watch films about humanity in class. They learn to help their friends, too. For instance, a child might say, 'Miss, let me boil the noodles, I will prepare the seasoning,' or 'Miss, let me help you.' These actions come naturally; we do not have to tell them. They do it on their own."*

This strategy for instilling Pancasila values is woven into everyday activities, creating a simple yet impactful way for children to engage. The overall organization of the curriculum emphasizes not only Quranic studies but also strategies designed to support the holistic development of the students.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the development and implementation of the Independent Curriculum at "Penggerak" kindergartens in Semarang City, focusing on institutional readiness and stakeholder collaboration. The research is rooted in Indonesia's evolving educational landscape, where the Independent Curriculum emphasizes flexibility and adaptability to local contexts (Gumilar et al., 2023). Prior studies have underscored the need for curriculum development tailored to institutional characteristics and student needs (Najwa & Suciptaningsih, 2023). This is particularly relevant in early childhood education, where aligning curricula with developmental stages and social environments is crucial in Yunita and Suryana (2022). Furthermore, curriculum planning must involve all stakeholders, including teachers,

parents, and the broader community, to ensure alignment with institutional goals (Muslimin, 2023).

The main findings of this study reveal that each kindergarten involved in the research, TK ABA 54 Semarang, TK Talenta, and TK Pertiwi 31 Semarang, developed independent curricula that reflect their unique institutional characteristics. TK ABA 54 integrates religious values into the national and local curricula, while TK Talenta focuses on inclusivity and special needs education. TK Pertiwi 31 adopts a contextual learning approach incorporating local and religious elements. Interestingly, despite differences in focus, all institutions demonstrated high parental involvement in curriculum planning, which has been identified as essential for curriculum success (Angga et al., 2022). The study also found that some teachers, particularly in TK ABA 54, faced challenges understanding the Independent Curriculum but overcame these through collaborative learning groups.

The findings of this research align with previous studies on curriculum development, particularly regarding the importance of stakeholder involvement and institutional adaptation. For instance, Dewi Kartika et al. (2023) emphasized integrating local values and the Pancasila student profile as critical components of curriculum development, consistent with the practices observed at the three kindergartens in this study. The participatory approach to curriculum planning, observed at TK ABA 54 and TK Pertiwi 31, also mirrors findings from Pollitt et al. (2020), who noted the significance of collaborative curriculum design in early childhood education. However, the unique emphasis on religious values at TK ABA 54 highlights a distinct cultural adaptation of the curriculum that contrasts with the more inclusive and secular approach at TK Talenta.

In contrast to previous findings, this study observed a more vital role for parental involvement in the Independent Curriculum's development, particularly in shaping curricular goals. While research by Marjuki and Baidowi (2023) noted the importance of informing parents about curricular changes, this study further indicated that parents actively participated in the planning process, especially in TK Talenta and TK Pertiwi 31. Additionally, while previous studies like those by Jannah & Rasyid (2023) and Lestari (2023) stressed the role of teachers as curriculum developers, the findings here suggest that teacher training and collaboration were critical in overcoming initial challenges, especially in understanding the nuances of the Independent Curriculum.

Each kindergarten's distinct contextual needs and institutional values can explain the variations in curriculum development across the three institutions. For example, integrating Muhammadiyah values at TK ABA 54 illustrates the institution's commitment to maintaining religious identity while aligning with national educational standards. Similarly, TK Talenta's focus on inclusivity and special needs education reflects broader trends in inclusive education, which emphasize personalized learning experiences (Aprilia, 2020; Jamila, 2023). The differences observed in curriculum development highlight the flexibility of the Independent Curriculum in accommodating diverse educational contexts (Yudha et al., 2023). However, caution is needed when generalizing these findings to other contexts, as institutional characteristics may vary significantly.

Parents play a crucial role in the educational process of their children and have the right to be informed about their children's learning progress (Marjuki & Baidowi, 2023). With the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, institutions must address the challenge of reassuring parents about these changes, making parent meetings essential for socializing the curriculum and avoiding misunderstandings. Research findings indicate that parents at all three institutions responded positively, with socialization typically conducted during report card distribution and through school activities. Parental involvement is critical in identifying children's needs, aligning with studies emphasizing the importance of preparation among principals and teachers in implementing the Independent Curriculum (Angga et al., 2022; Ira Fatmawati, 2023). Furthermore, understanding how policies influence child development and the support needed through workshops and mentoring helps align standards, curriculum, and

assessments (Whitaker et al., 2022). Teacher evaluations are conducted post-lessons, while curriculum evaluations are done through supervision, ensuring the effective organization and delivery of curriculum materials (Healey et al., 2022).

Another significant finding is the role of teacher professional development in successfully implementing the Independent Curriculum. The collaborative teacher-learning groups observed in this study are consistent with the literature, highlighting the importance of teacher training in curriculum mastery (Nyoman, 2022). As Yudha et al. (2023) noted, continuous professional development and institutional support are critical for enhancing teacher competence and curriculum understanding. However, the findings also indicate that teacher perceptions of the Independent Curriculum can vary, suggesting a need for ongoing support to ensure uniformity in curriculum implementation across different institutions.

The implications of these findings are significant for the broader implementation of the Independent Curriculum in early childhood education. The successful integration of local values, parental involvement, and teacher collaboration provides a model for other institutions aiming to adopt this curriculum. However, the challenges related to teacher understanding and institutional readiness suggest that additional support from policymakers, including training and resources, may be necessary to ensure effective implementation. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of the Independent Curriculum on student outcomes, particularly about inclusivity and religious education, as well as the role of interdisciplinary approaches in curriculum development (Heikka et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to analyze the development and implementation of the Independent Curriculum in "Penggerak" Kindergartens in Semarang City, focusing on institutional readiness and stakeholder collaboration. The findings revealed that each institution developed a curriculum that reflected its unique characteristics and the specific needs of its students, as demonstrated in TK ABA 54 Semarang, TK Talenta, and TK Pertiwi 31 Semarang. Collaborative curriculum planning involving stakeholders, such as school leaders, teachers, parents, and supervisors, was vital in ensuring the curriculum aligned with national and local standards. Furthermore, institutions integrated religious and local values, inclusivity, and child-centered approaches, as evidenced by TK Talenta and TK Pertiwi 31 practices. These findings underscore the importance of flexible curricula that respond to local contexts, inclusivity, and character education, as seen in the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile Project (P5). However, the limitations of this study include its narrow geographic focus and short-term observation, which hinder a complete understanding of the impact of long-term curricula. Challenges in teachers' comprehension of the Independent Curriculum also point to the need for ongoing professional development. Future research should employ longitudinal studies to observe curriculum evolution and explore interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum planning for early childhood education.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

The researcher expresses gratitude to the principals, teachers, and supervisors of the dynamic kindergarten (TK) who served as subjects of this study for their assistance in the data collection process. Additionally, the researcher thanks their family, especially their parents, for motivation and the professors offering advice and input for this research. It is hoped that this study will be beneficial.

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### Data availability statement

Data supporting the reported findings in the published article are available upon request. <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1UJMD8Rwvt-jbtekMqIk-D3jIJdutvJE>.

### Declaration of Interests Statement

The author declares no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

### Additional information

Additional information in a narrative form.

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