

Teacher Agency: Bridging Gaps in Elementary Curriculum Implementation

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Abstract. This comparative case study investigates the widespread challenge of curriculum implementation gaps in elementary education by examining teacher experiences across three distinct curricular approaches in the Philippines. The research addressed a critical gap in the literature by simultaneously analyzing foundational (Blocks of Time), revised (K-12), and pilot (MATATAG) curricula to identify systemic barriers and effective adaptive strategies. Utilizing in-depth thematic analysis of interviews with three public school teachers (representing Kindergarten, Grade 3, and Grade 4), the study provided a detailed, triangulated perspective across diverse contexts. Principal results consistently revealed a profound systemic misalignment—characterized by content overload, rigid pacing mandates that conflict with pedagogical goals, and widespread resource deficits. In response, the study determined that Teacher Professional Agency functions as an unrecognized operational safeguard, enabling continuity through strategic content prioritization and peer collaboration (Learning Action Cells). The major conclusion is that these implementation failures fundamentally undermine the success of policy. This necessitates an urgent policy shift that formalizes Teacher Agency as a core strategy for effective, localized curriculum delivery, moving beyond treating it as a simple coping mechanism.

Keywords: Curriculum implementation; Educational reform; Elementary education; Systemic misalignment; Teacher agency.

1.0 Introduction

Curriculum implementation is the essential connection between educational policy and the student experience. Globally, its implementation is a complex process influenced by three core factors: the curriculum design, teachers' preparedness, and resource availability. Across diverse educational systems, the ongoing evolution of curricula underscores the inherent instability in teaching. A pressing global challenge is the accelerating pace of educational reform, coupled with persistent inadequacy in supporting those who implement the reforms (O'Dwyer & Smith, 2021). Despite the intent of policy mandates to update content and improve teaching, implementing these extensive reforms often creates considerable difficulties for elementary teachers. This challenge is intensified by varying student readiness, persistent resource inadequacies, and the requirement for continuous professional adaptation. Consequently, a vital nexus exists between aspirational policy and the practical operational environment (Priestley et al., 2020; Ramos & Estrella, 2024).

The difficulties associated with educational reform are extensively recorded in the Philippine context. The literature frequently highlights problems such as curriculum congestion and content overload, particularly due to the implementation of the K-12 Revised Curriculum (Mendoza & Mendoza, 2021). The K to 12 program was

specifically implemented to align the national system with international standards. However, its spiral progression model dramatically increased content requirements, placing significant pacing pressure on teachers. Furthermore, this local challenge is exacerbated by systemic flaws, including inadequate training and an unavoidable gap between centralized policies and highly varied local conditions (Kilag et al., 2024). Teachers continue to face high workloads and considerable resource limitations (Torres & Manalo, 2023). This systemic fragility means the successful transformation of policy into reliable classroom application is frequently compromised when teachers do not receive prompt logistical assistance, as material shortages and training gaps remain prevalent throughout multiple reform phases (Blasabas & Sumaljag, 2021).

The current environment further exacerbates these systemic tensions by simultaneously introducing and sustaining multiple curricular frameworks, thereby creating a unique, fragmented operational landscape. At the foundational level (Kindergarten), the Blocks of Time method requires an adaptive, play-centered approach that mandates flexible assessment and personalized learning. Meanwhile, most elementary grades (Grades 1-5) continue to struggle with the intensive content and pacing demands of the K-12 Revised Curriculum. Concurrently, the government has begun transitioning to the pilot MATATAG Curriculum, a new reform aimed at decongesting content and improving foundational literacy. Recent findings emphasize that, for the MATATAG implementation to succeed, teachers urgently require increased professional autonomy and collaboration to tackle emerging pedagogical and logistical issues (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2024). This complexity forces elementary teachers at every grade level to handle varying educational demands—from the informal structure of Blocks of Time to the organized, transitional content of the updated K-12 system—often resulting in overlapping demands and conflicting philosophies. The intricacies of managing multiple curricula are heightened because implementation failures are context-dependent and directly affect classroom execution. Studies indicate that educators are often overwhelmed by the pressure to innovate while facing logistical constraints, prompting them to act as compensatory agents for institutional shortcomings (Harris, 2020).

This study is grounded in three interconnected areas of educational scholarship: curriculum change theory, the concept of teacher professional agency, and the empirical evidence of policy-to-practice gaps in the Philippine setting.

Curriculum Change and Implementation Theory

Classical models of curriculum change, notably Fullan's (2007), emphasize that implementation success depends on two key dimensions: the quality of the policy itself and the quality of the implementation process. Fullan's framework highlights the critical importance of resources, time, and, crucially, the participation of implementers (teachers). When policy-makers fail to account for the material and professional capacity-building required for new curricula, a phenomenon known as "implementation fatigue" occurs (O'Dwyer & Smith, 2021). This fatigue is not merely burnout; it represents a systemic inefficiency in which high-stakes demands outpace available support, leading to a shallow or ritualistic application of the policy rather than genuine pedagogical change (Harris, 2020). Furthermore, the structural demands of the curriculum, such as the spiral progression model observed in K-12, are a frequent source of implementation difficulty. Research consistently demonstrates that when content density is high and time is rigid, the core pedagogical goal of mastery is often compromised in favor of coverage (Mendoza & Mendoza, 2021).

The Construct of Teacher Professional Agency

The concept of Teacher Professional Agency moves beyond simple teacher compliance to examine educators' intentional and reflective decision-making in response to external policy demands (Priestley et al., 2020). Agency is understood as the capacity to influence one's work and its conditions, often exercised across three critical dimensions: the iterative (experience), the practical-evaluative (current judgment), and the projective (future-oriented goals). When teachers face structural gaps—such as a conflict between a play-based philosophy (Blocks of Time) and administrative demands—they utilize their professional agency to make crucial "localized adjustments" (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2024). This often takes the form of compensatory actions, such as prioritizing core competencies, developing peer-support networks (like Learning Action Cells), and improvising materials due to logistical failures. While these actions are essential for maintaining educational continuity, scholarly analysis reframes them not as virtues but as evidence of a systemic delegation of responsibility, shifting the cost of policy failure onto the unpaid labor of the teaching staff (Ramos & Estrella, 2024).

Policy-to-Practice Gaps in the Philippine Educational Context

Empirical studies within the Philippines consistently confirm that the most significant friction point in educational reform lies in the transition from policy intent to classroom practice. Challenges are frequently categorized into logistical inadequacies (such as the scarcity of official guides, textbooks, and training) and structural flaws (including content overload and pacing issues) (Kilag et al., 2024). Moreover, the success of any curriculum is heavily reliant on the exosystem—the external environment and community support structures, as described by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. When centralized policy fails to clearly communicate changes to parents and the community (the exosystem), the burden of interpretation and gaining community buy-in falls entirely on the teacher, diverting time and energy from core instructional tasks (Ramos & Estrella, 2024). This body of work highlights that implementation is a multi-level social process that requires coordinated support, rather than just top-down mandates.

Despite extensive research on these individual reforms, a significant and critical research gap persists regarding the actual, comparative operational experiences of teachers who oversee multiple distinct curricular approaches simultaneously within one educational environment across the entire elementary spectrum (Kindergarten to Grade 6). Current studies often concentrate on a specific reform or grade level, overlooking the distinct challenges of managing multiple, sometimes contradictory, curricula within the same school.

This exclusion is crucial because the difficulties of implementation are heavily influenced by context: how do the distinct challenges faced by a Kindergarten teacher utilizing the Blocks of Time method—requiring adaptable, informal assessment—contrast with the implementation hurdles met by a Grade 4 teacher applying the new MATATAG Curriculum, which necessitates significant changes in content structure and evaluation? This comparative case study, therefore, successfully fills this gap. It examines the simultaneous application of three different curriculum implementations—K to 12 Revised, Blocks of Time, and MATATAG—across various elementary grade levels, offering a detailed, triangulated perspective on the challenges and adaptive methods within a single system (Priestley et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study aims to examine, compare, and evaluate the challenges, techniques, and viewpoints of elementary teachers concurrently implementing diverse curricular strategies. The findings are essential, offering real-world insights for school administrators and curriculum developers. This research contributes directly to policy and practice by promoting teaching methods that are adaptive, resource-rich, and shaped by the educators who apply them, ultimately ensuring a cohesive, high-quality learning journey for all elementary pupils.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a Qualitative Case Study Method. This design fosters a comprehensive, contextual understanding of curriculum management by examining its limitations and context within a specific framework, with a focus on the daily experiences of elementary teachers at a particular school site (Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach is crucial for grasping the nuanced "how" and "why" of the challenges and the creative professional responses—the strategies and viewpoints—that surveys cannot adequately assess. The comparison across three distinct curricular approaches (Blocks of Time, K to 12 Revised, and MATATAG) clearly emphasizes the systemic nature of implementation challenges.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted at Southern Mindanao Elementary School (SMES), a public educational institution identified by a pseudonym. SMES is situated in a rural, primarily agricultural area of Region XI (Davao Region), the Philippines, which represents a characteristic local environment. SMES was purposefully selected for its critical role in ongoing curriculum implementation efforts. Operating as a rural school while concurrently implementing the Blocks of Time strategy, the K-12 Revised Curriculum, and the transitional MATATAG Curriculum, it provides a robust case for analyzing execution under typical resource and administrative constraints. The school's full elementary roster also facilitated the purposeful selection of participants from the required grades (Kindergarten, Grade 3, and Grade 4) to capture varied experiences with the instructional strategies under assessment.

2.3 Research Participants

The participants consisted of three public elementary school teachers from SMES, selected via Purposive Sampling

to represent diverse curricular contexts across the elementary level. This selection ensured that each participant provided a unique and critical perspective on the specified curricular approaches: the Kindergarten Teacher (Blocks of Time); the Grade 3 Teacher (K to 12 Revised Curriculum, focusing on foundational skills); and the Grade 4 Teacher (implementing or transitioning to the pilot MATATAG Curriculum). The small sample size was intentional, aligning with the qualitative case study method, which prioritizes depth of information over breadth, thereby allowing for the collection of rich, contextual data for each distinct curricular experience.

2.4 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured Interview protocol developed by the researcher. The protocol contained open-ended questions categorized into three areas aligned with the research objectives: (1) Implementation Challenges/Issues, (2) Strategies and Responses, and (3) Professional Insights and Recommendations. The instrument underwent content validation by two educational experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research questions. A pilot test was not conducted due to the limited number of specialized participants; however, the questions were refined based on the expert feedback.

2.5 Data Gathering and Analysis Procedure

Data were collected via one-on-one, face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted at SMES during non-teaching periods. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved six systematic phases: (1) Familiarization with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing and refining themes; (5) Defining and naming themes; and (6) Producing the report.

To ensure the rigor and quality required for a case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the principles of trustworthiness were applied. Credibility (truth value) was established through Member Checking, in which emergent themes were presented to participants for verification. Dependability (consistency) was ensured through a detailed audit trail that meticulously documented all coding decisions and thematic developments for analytical transparency.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

To uphold the integrity of the research and protect participants, a strict ethical protocol was followed. All participants provided written informed consent after being thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and the nature of the interviews, thereby guaranteeing that their decision to participate was entirely voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by referring to the school by the pseudonym Southern Mindanao Elementary School (SMES) and replacing teacher names with generic identifiers (e.g., Kindergarten Teacher) in all reporting. Furthermore, participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. All interview data and records are stored securely on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher, ensuring data security and privacy.

To address potential bias and enhance the study's rigor, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher consciously noted pre-existing assumptions about the challenges of curriculum reform in the Philippines in a dedicated journal. This process helped ensure that the derived codes and themes emerged directly from the participants' voices, minimizing the influence of the researcher's perspective and upholding the principle of Confirmability (objectivity).

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of Preschool Teachers

This chapter presents the findings from the in-depth interviews, analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process yielded four major, interrelated themes that address the study's aim: To examine the challenges, strategies, and insights of elementary teachers managing multiple curricular approaches (Blocks of Time, K to 12 Revised, and MATATAG).

Three public school teachers, representing diverse curricular contexts (Kindergarten, Grade 3, and Grade 4), participated in this comparative case study. The collective analysis focused on how these educators experience and respond to challenges in curriculum implementation across these three distinct, simultaneously deployed frameworks. This approach provides a detailed, triangulated perspective on curriculum management across the complete elementary spectrum.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Core Ideas

Major Theme	Core Ideas	Illustrative Examples Across Contexts
3.1 Curriculum Design Gaps	Systemic mismatch between philosophical intent and institutional administrative demands (e.g., rigid scheduling).	Blocks of Time (Kindergarten): Play-focused curriculum conflicts with rigid assessment. K to 12 Revised (Grade 3): Content overload leads to pacing failure and "learning gaps."
3.2 Logistical and Capacity Gaps	Chronic resource deficiency, lack of current materials, and insufficient, non-specific training prior to rollout.	Grades 3/4: Scarcity of official texts and teacher guides for K to 12 and MATATAG. Teachers often resort to constant improvisation and reuse of materials.
3.3 Teacher Professional Agency	Teacher-initiated actions (judgment and peer support) function as an operational safeguard to bridge systemic failures.	Grade 3: Strategic content prioritization (core competencies over full coverage). Grade 4: Use of internal Learning Action Cells (LACs) for resource synthesis and technical guidance.
3.4 Stakeholder Communication	Systemic breakdowns in policy-to-public communication undermine teacher efforts and create non-instructional burdens.	Grade 4 (MATATAG): Parental confusion over new assessment methods forces the teacher to act as the sole interpreter of policy, diverting instructional time and resources.

3.1 Curriculum Design Gaps: Policy–Practice Disjunction in Implementation

The initial and most fundamental challenge revealed in the data is a systemic mismatch between the curriculum's philosophical intent and the non-negotiable demands of institutional administration. Teachers consistently reported that rigid administrative requirements conflict with the curriculum's intended pedagogy. This tension is most acute in the kindergarten context, where the adaptable, play-focused philosophy of the Blocks of Time method conflicts with rigid scheduling and assessment demands. The Grade 3 context faced a different yet related issue: an excessive volume of content and the resulting pacing failure in the K to 12 Revised Curriculum. The Grade 3 Teacher stated that there was "too much to learn in a limited time," which forces students to move through material regardless of their understanding, leading to "learning gaps" where students "struggle with basic tasks due to missing earlier lessons."

This structural misalignment reveals a profound disconnect between centralized policy design intentions and the diverse realities of classrooms. As noted by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2020), when external demands prioritize consistency and formal measurement, they inadvertently undermine core educational values, such as flexibility and mastery. The findings across both the play-based (Kindergarten) and content-heavy (Grade 3) contexts highlight that both are susceptible to failure when design decisions ignore the principle of pedagogical space—the time and autonomy needed for teachers to assess, adapt, and reinforce learning. In the Philippine context, the issue of content overload in the K to 12 structure aligns with established critiques regarding the demanding amount and arrangement of the spiral progression model (Mendoza & Mendoza, 2021). The resulting haste compromises vital formative practices, corroborating that structural design shortcomings directly diminish the quality of instructional delivery (Kilag et al., 2024). This disjunction creates a system in which teachers are administratively compelled to cover material superficially rather than ensure genuine mastery, reinforcing the need for a design policy that is context-sensitive and resource-aware.

3.2 Logistical and Capacity Gaps: Constraints on Effective Delivery

The second central theme identifies persistent and widespread logistical shortcomings and failures in capacity building that undermine effective curriculum delivery across all three sub-cases. The instruction methods were significantly affected by Resource Deficiency, including the scarcity of suitable learning materials and the lack of current teacher manuals and official texts for curriculum updates (affecting Grades 3 and 4). Furthermore, the required training was found to be either insufficient or non-specific (Kindergarten) or unavailable before rollout (Grade 4 MATATAG). Facing the pilot MATATAG rollout, the Grade 4 Teacher reported difficulty adapting due to "not having the latest teacher guides and books to use in class." Similarly, the Kindergarten Teacher reported constantly "making up new or reusing existing teaching materials on the spot."

This chronic lack of prompt and adequate logistical backing transforms curriculum implementation into a test of ingenuity (Blasabas & Sumaljak, 2021). The reliance on creative improvisation by teachers to invent or repurpose resources supports research suggesting that the education system frequently depends on the individual creativity

of teachers as an unrecognized operational cost (Torres & Manalo, 2023). This issue extends to intellectual resources; the apparent demand for continuous, specialized training (Kilag et al., 2024) underscores that professional development offered by the central office is often too generic or disconnected from educators' detailed, context-specific teaching needs. This finding directly supports Fullan's (2007) model of implementation, which emphasizes that material and professional capacity building must occur before and during implementation, rather than after. The continuous cycle of making do and creating local materials across all three grade levels suggests that the system operates under a false assumption of resource parity, which disproportionately impacts rural schools like the research locale. Consequently, the quality of curriculum delivery becomes less a function of national policy and more a reflection of the individual teacher's personal expenditure of time and resources.

3.3 Teacher Professional Agency: Adaptive and Safeguarding Role in Practice

While Themes 3.1 and 3.2 established the systemic failures (design and logistics), this theme confirms that teacher-initiated actions—professional judgment and peer support—are essential for bridging these gaps. Teacher professional agency functions as an unrecognized operational safeguard. Educators exercised considerable instructional authority to manage structural deficiencies and student failure. The primary strategies were strategic content prioritization, differentiated instruction, and peer collaboration (Learning Action Cells). In response to the K to 12 content volume, the Grade 3 Teacher reported: "Reviewing the curriculum with a focus on core competencies" instead of striving for comprehensive coverage. Facing the MATATAG rollout, the Grade 4 Teacher utilized internal Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions for technical guidance and resource synthesis.

This exercise of agency exemplifies the notion of localized adjustment, wherein educators apply their professional judgment to enhance the organization of the curriculum (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2024). The reliance on peer collaboration demonstrates that when centralized professional development is insufficient, teachers will independently establish a local, distributed knowledge base (Torres & Manalo, 2023). However, this compensatory strategy shifts the responsibility for training and resource development onto the teaching staff, effectively increasing the unpaid workload and masking deeper structural flaws in policy implementation (Ramos & Estrella, 2024). This finding aligns with the concept of teacher resilience but critically reframes it: resilience in this context is not merely persistence, but an unmandated labor of compensation that prevents systemic failure from reaching students. The implication is that policy-makers must shift from viewing agency as an *optional benefit* to seeing it as a *core mechanism* to be formally supported and integrated, following the principles of distributed leadership, in which local expertise is valued and used to inform the central system rather than simply patching its flaws.

3.4 Stakeholder Communication: Systemic Weaknesses and Coordination Breakdown

While teacher agency compensates for internal failures, this final theme reveals that these efforts can be undermined by external coordination gaps, specifically with parents and the community. Systemic failure to clearly communicate policy changes before or during implementation led to significant parental confusion about the pilot MATATAG Curriculum (changes to the language of instruction and new assessment methods). This lack of external clarity compelled the teacher to serve as the sole interpreter of policy. The Grade 4 teacher reported that parents struggled to comprehend the MATATAG modifications. In contrast, the kindergarten teacher noted that "robust cooperation between home and school" was essential for the Blocks of Time approach to succeed.

The comparison between the two contexts suggests that when schools actively cultivate and formalize parent partnerships, as seen in the successful Kindergarten case, implementation is smoother. When the curriculum's structure and goals are unclear to parents, the home environment cannot effectively support student learning, thereby undermining the curriculum's objectives (Ramos & Estrella, 2024). The Grade 4 teacher's experience during the MATATAG pilot highlights the high cost of this oversight: the teacher's time is diverted from instruction to serving as a communication intermediary, leading to professional fatigue and a reduced instructional focus. This evidence leads to a clear policy mandate: institutional efforts must establish formal and clear communication pathways to inform the public before execution, preventing the non-instructional burden from falling entirely on the teacher. Furthermore, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the lack of clear community-level communication represents a failure in the exosystem (external structures) to support the microsystem (the classroom), confirming that curriculum success is deeply embedded in the social and administrative contexts surrounding the school.

Collectively, these four themes underscore that the success of curriculum reform depends not only on effective policy design but also on recognizing teacher professional agency as a stabilizing factor in contexts of logistical

and structural misalignment. Teacher adaptability, while vital for resilience, masks profound systemic weaknesses in resource provision and centralized support.

4.0 Conclusion

The thorough, comparative case study of curriculum implementation across the elementary grades provided critical insights by filling a notable void in the literature: the concurrent and differing challenges of applying various curricular frameworks—Blocks of Time, K to 12 Revised, and MATATAG—within a single educational environment. This study demonstrates that curriculum success in elementary education does not depend solely on policy innovation but rather on teachers' dynamic capacity to interpret, adapt, and sustain curriculum delivery amid persistent systemic constraints. A comparative examination across three curricular frameworks revealed that without empowering teacher agency, even well-intentioned reforms face structural and logistical challenges.

The results consistently indicated a systemic misalignment marked by resource shortages, unrealistic pacing, and a widening gap between policy intent and classroom realities. Notably, the research determined that Teacher Professional Agency is not merely a sought-after trait but rather a crucial compensatory factor that enables the curriculum to operate effectively, acting as a vital safeguard against systemic collapse and maintaining learning continuity when centralized support systems fail. This conclusion redirects attention from simply assessing policy design to grasping the adaptive efforts necessary at the implementation stage.

The research has significant consequences for policy and educational practices, demanding a critical review of centralized implementation models. The data necessitates an urgent transition from top-down approaches to an emphasis on implementation details:

- **Resource Provision:** Forthcoming requirements should be paired with the prompt and specific provision of revised materials (guides, texts) ahead of deadlines (Kilag et al., 2024).
- **Localized Flexibility:** Policy must go beyond strict standardization to accommodate localized adjustments, recognizing that curriculum implementation must vary by context.
- **Stakeholder Communication:** Institutional communication plans need to be revamped to clearly inform all stakeholders, particularly parents, to avoid community opposition and foster collaboration between home and school. This ensures the community is an active participant in reform, not a passive recipient.

The results highlight the crucial need to formalize peer cooperation and capacity building at the school level. Given that educators effectively utilize Learning Action Cells (LACs) and peer networks to address knowledge deficiencies (Torres & Manalo, 2023), it is essential to formally incorporate and acknowledge these efforts as fundamental rather than additional methods of capacity development. Formalizing peer collaboration through LACs ensures that capacity-building becomes sustainable and context-driven, ultimately improving instructional quality and teacher morale.

Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for numerous opportunities in future research related to this topic. Considering the critical importance of teacher agency, subsequent quantitative research should assess the long-term effects and costs of teacher improvisation, exploring how continuous dependence on personal resources influences teacher retention and the quality of instruction. Studies may also focus on developing and evaluating decentralized support frameworks that specifically enable local groups to oversee resource distribution and curriculum adaptation, thereby offering a more sustainable alternative to existing centralized methods (Ramos & Estrella, 2024). Ultimately, this study calls for a paradigm shift in curriculum governance—from compliance-oriented reforms to empowerment-centered implementation. Building on teacher professional agency as the cornerstone of reform ensures that every curriculum change is not only designed for classrooms but with classrooms in mind, guaranteeing a cohesive and high-quality educational experience for every elementary pupil.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The Author: Conceptualization, study design, methodology, data gathering, data analysis, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, and final submission approval.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

In the spirit of transparency and adherence to ethical research standards, all authors of this paper declare that they have no conflicts of interest or ties that could compromise the objectivity of their findings. This disclaimer guarantees that the study described here is free of any financial, personal, or professional biases that could influence the interpretation of the findings.

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