

# Language Education in Multilingual Societies: Sociolinguistic Approaches

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## Abstract

Teaching languages in a multicultural context brings its own set of challenges and rewards as teaching must take into account the language backgrounds of various students. For instance, sociolinguistics which focuses on language and its relation to social factors assists a great deal in these situations especially in coming up with certain educational measures (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Learning about the sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects of language will help the practitioners to create spaces that will allow for language use and language learning along the appreciation of different cultures. Sociolinguistics in Education is concerned with promoting language education that recognizes its sociological significance. Everybody involved in the education process knows the sociocultural, linguocultural, and sociolinguistic contexts of their teaching and respects them in the process. It has been acknowledged that for example code-switching would be encouraged in moderation, their mother tongues would be appreciated, and cultural aspects incorporated in teaching have been effective in teaching language to a diverse group (Garcia, 2009). These strategies assist teachers in providing programs which acknowledge and respond to students' varying language experiences, whilst also meeting the constraints of a standardized curriculum of language instruction. Despite the benefits, using sociolinguistic approaches in teaching languages also brings some problems such as language power relations and the preference or dominance of certain languages at the expense of the others (Holmes, 2013). A sociolinguistic approach to the teaching of languages addresses these matters aims not only at improving language education but also aids students' identity development and sense of belonging. This piece of writing will cover sociolinguistic principles and relevance of such principles in language education for multilingual societies and give teachers suggestions on how they can make education more linguistically inclusive and equitable.



Full Text Article



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**Keywords:** Language Education, Multilingual Societies, Sociolinguistics, Language Acquisition, Linguistic Diversity, Language Hierarchy

## Introduction

Nowadays, in an interconnected world in which globalization and movement of people has become the order of the day, it is almost impossible to exclude multilingualism in any school system. Classrooms today are filled with students from one language or cultural background who speak different languages. These multilingual classrooms present a dual-edged sword to language teaching and learning. Language teaching methodologies, to a large extent, are predicated on language use in a predominantly or homogeneous population, especially where the students are expected to be monolingual. This leads to the reality which places value on sociolinguistics as an aspect that looks into the place of language in the society and within culture. In this way, those who adopt a sociolinguistic perspective on language instruction can improve the quality of such instruction for multilingual learners, bringing about conditions in which diversity in language is regarded positively and learning outcomes improved (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

Sociolinguistic dimensions like code-switching, linguistic hierarchy, and linguistic identity are of great importance in effective learning by multilingual learners. To give an example, code-switching is termed as a practice of a speaker switching languages in a particular social situation for the purpose of communication and interaction, and usually to ease the communication across differences in languages and cultures. Promoting appropriate code-switching helps to make learning easier as students are able to articulate freely (Poplack, 1980). Furthermore, language, the practice of assigning prestige and social value to different languages, is another factor that influences members' relationships in a multilingual class. Otherwise, certain languages may be made to appear unappreciated and these attitudes may lead to students disengaging from activities in class and feeling inferior (Holmes, 2013). Such teachers will be able to promote recognition of all languages without discrimination in all the languages present.

### • Key Sociolinguistic Concepts in Multilingual Language Education

Concept	Definition	Implication in Language Education
Code-switching	Alternating between languages within a conversation or social setting.	Can enhance communication and learning when managed well, allowing students to utilize their full linguistic resources in the classroom.
Language Hierarchy	Social perception that certain languages are more prestigious or valuable than others.	Educators need to promote language equity to avoid marginalizing students who speak "less prestigious" languages.
Linguistic	The role language plays in	By recognizing and valuing linguistic

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14279792>

Zhang, L. (2024). Language Education in Multilingual Societies: Sociolinguistic Approaches. *Journal of Current Social Issues Studies*, 1(1), 62–74.

Identity	expressing cultural identity and social belonging.	identities, educators can help students maintain a positive connection to their cultural backgrounds.
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In addition to these sociolinguistics notions, multilingual education also hinges on linguistic identity. Language is an important aspect of cultural identity as it provides a way to show evidence of one’s culture and where they belong to in the society. In multilingual contexts, learners tend to have a strong attachment to their mother tongue, and the academic strategies that recognize this aspect of identity can enhance involvement as well as emotional health. Eliminatingism in language education suggests that the curriculum should be multilingual and multi-ethnic, and teachers should use culturally relevant materials and languages familiar to the children and their families (Garcia, 2009).

Challenge	Description	Sociolinguistic Strategy
Code-switching	Students may switch languages mid-conversation, which may disrupt flow but also aids understanding.	Encourage strategic code-switching to support comprehension while setting boundaries for when to use target languages.
Language Hierarchy	Certain languages may be seen as more prestigious, leading to biases or disengagement.	Emphasize equal value of all languages through teaching materials, activities, and language-positive policies.
Cultural Identity in Learning	Students’ cultural backgrounds influence their learning styles and language preferences.	Incorporate cultural elements, such as familiar stories or linguistic traditions, to support engagement and inclusion.

***Sociolinguistic Strategies for Addressing Multilingual Classroom Challenges***

When such sociolinguistic strategies are applied to language teaching, teachers will be able to create a classroom atmosphere that is cognizant of language differences, and is conducive

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to a student's ethnic identity. Such an approach will also be advantageous in enhancing education where it builds self-esteem and belonging in students who speak multiple languages.

## Literature Review

There are various fields that touch on the language education in multilingual societies such as; sociolinguistics, bilingualism and Culture. Language education and research is on the rise owing to the increase in global diversity in languages and its impact in the education system. Disciplinary sociolinguistics, which is concerned with social dimensions of language in use, is useful for understanding what constraints language education faces and what possibilities it has in a multilingual classroom. This article presents historical sociolinguistics, its seminal theories of multilingual education, and how culture, patterns of code-switching, and language hierarchy position oneself for successful educational practices.

### *Sociolinguistic Theories in Multilingual Education*

Multilingual Education systems would be incomplete without the theory of sociolinguistics which is useful in explanation of language in use as fundamental element in learning environments. As stated by Hymes (1974), language is without a doubt a primary means of communication, but it does not exist in vacuum. Hymes' notion of 'singling out communicative competence' urges reformers in language education not to limit the focus to linguistic items such as grammar and vocabulary. This paradigm further affirms that language education especially for the majority in these multilingual classes goes beyond teaching language only.

When it comes to regards with language, it can also be now played useful in determining persons social standing and status as shown by the sociolinguistic work of Labov (1972). Inspired by the vernacular and standard speech of the people, Labov's worked assisted the call for the appreciation of the multilingual context in the classroom. He claimed that these standards should accommodate the usage of local languages in their practical teaching. This has shaped the principles of education which appreciate the speaker's dialect as an advantage and not a hindrance.

### *Managing Code-Switching In A Class Having Multiple Languages*

A practice of code-switching also known as mixing languages in the course of dialogue is highly practiced among multi lingual students and it can also be of educational value. Research has confirmed that code-switching leads to better learning outcomes especially in a multilingual setup where the instructional language is foreign to some learners (Poplack, 1980). Code switching help students to shape and clarify meanings, articulate complicated concepts and fill the blanks between languages. Creese and Blackledge (2010) call this 'translanguaging' which refers to a process where students go in and out of different languages creating inclusion and better learning.

Nonetheless, some teachers remain skeptical in rewarding students who code-switch, worrying that it could inhibit the student's ability to attain the target language completely. García and Wei (2014) affirm this assertion by turning it on its head proposing that habitual practice of translanguaging enriches cognitive constructs and promotes language identity in learners. They maintain instead that educators should assist students in using the existing strategies such as code-switching, which enhances communication and learning in multilingual situations.

### ***Power Relations of Language and Linguistic Discrimination***

Language hierarchies are language social challenges rank language languages in relation to a multilingual education. In several societies, individuals consider some languages to be of higher status than others, usually because of their economic, political, social power (Holmes, 2013). In this rank relations, students' attitudes towards their own languages may also be affected with bilingual students ashamed to speak their minority languages. Phillipson (1992) opines that the spread of languages like English as the global language has perpetuated linguistic imperialism which regards the local and native tongues as inferior in education.

Many educational systems oriented towards the principle of linguistic equality advocate that all languages should be valued. For instance, in South Africa, there are such policies that allow children to learn in their mother's tongue before a second language is introduced, thus encouraging linguistic diversity and self-worth (Heugh, 2000). Such a strategy recognizes the inherent hierarchies that exist in societies in relation to language and attempts to promote equity among all language users in educational settings.

### ***Cultural Identity and Language Learning***

Language is culture and cultural identity. According to Fishman (1977), language is what binds people to their cultures and histories, making it a defining characteristic of an individual's identity. When children's languages and cultures are brought to the classroom, they are likely to respond well to their education and experience belonging. This is very crucial especially in mono-multicultural societies where many cultural identities overlap. Studies reveal that respect for learners' languages and cultures in educational environments increases their positive feelings towards these environments and increases their accomplishments (Duff, 2008).

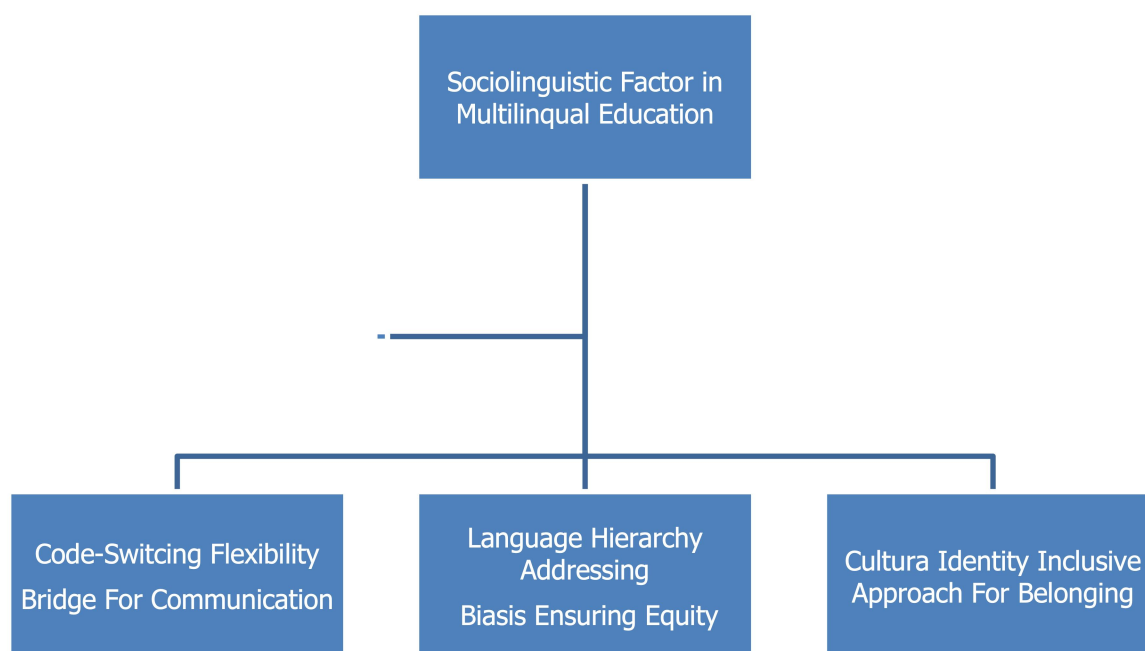
Language and culture intertwine in educational settings, and studies have shown that this combination introduces challenges into these environments, but it is greatly beneficial. García (2009) claims that using students' cultural experiences in teaching language helps to create an environment that enhances students confidence concerning their language skill and cultural identity. This viewpoint has informed the development of multicultural education so that teachers are expected to bring in the language, experiences, and practices of the students into the learning process or curriculum. This kind of integration goes a long way to fast track the

process of cultural assimilation thereby making sure students do not feel the urge to forfeit their cultural beliefs in order to fit in a language that is not their own.

### ***Sociolinguistic Factors in Multilingual Education***

Below is a suggested diagram illustrating key sociolinguistic factors that impact multilingual education. Each factor contributes uniquely to language learning and classroom dynamics in multilingual societies.

#### **Sociolinguistic Factors in Multilingual Education**



This diagram shows how code-switching, language hierarchy, and cultural identity interact to shape multilingual education, each contributing to inclusivity, engagement, and respect for linguistic diversity.

### **Methodology**

This particular research investigates the role and effectiveness of sociolinguistic approaches in language education in multilingual subject classrooms using qualitative research approach. Sociolinguistic issues such as code-switching, language hierarchy and cultural identity are complicated and context-specific. Thus, qualitative research permits one to probe deeper into the beliefs and practices of the students and the teachers. This section explains the research design, data collection techniques, sampling strategy, and data analysis procedures.

### **Research Design**

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The research focuses on multilingual classrooms in big cities with varying ethnicities and language peoples using case study research design. Given the research aim, a case study approach is appropriate for such research since it enables sociolinguistic practices to be studied within the context of actual educational institutions. The study is centered around specific classrooms, aiming to describe sociolinguistic dynamics comprehensively and how the multilingualism of the students affects the teaching approach, level of interaction, and pedagogic outcomes.

### ***Sampling Strategy***

The sample is made up of teachers and pupils from multilingual resources centers based in urban schools with a varied range of languages. Those specific respondents were purposefully selected as they were able to sufficiently contribute to the research topic of interest. Such teachers were multicultural classroom teachers and those pupils who were multilingual; this was done to make sure that there was representation of sociolinguistic practices in language acquisition theories and their application in the educational context. In this way the research strives to be concerned only with cases that conform to those features of interest one such as the attitude and practices of code-switching and the management of language hierarchies in classrooms.

### ***Data Collection***

A study is said to utilize three major primary data collection methods namely; interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. The rationale behind these strategies was to obtain both participant's perspectives and actual classroom situations hence enhancing the understanding on how sociolinguistic approaches are implemented in multilingual education.

1. ***Interviews:*** The team held semi-structured interviews with both students and educators. The interviews with educators aimed at discussing their teaching approaches, language use in the classroom and their understanding of sociolinguistics as a social science. The students particularly focused on the different multilingual classrooms that they would have experienced and how the different languages contributed to their learning and their self-identification. The semi-structured approach was helpful in that it allowed the researcher to deviate from the questions while still keeping in mind the purpose of the research.
2. ***Classroom Observations:*** Furthermore, observations were carried out in the designated classrooms in order to depict the spontaneous interaction among students, and between students and teachers as well where applicable. The focus of observational data included language use, code switching, and cultural identity portrayals in class. This particular aspect of the research was important in understanding how the theoretical aspects of sociolinguistics are put into practice and how students react to such practices.

3. ***Document Analysis:*** The analysis of these materials such as teaching materials or language policies has been carried out in order to understand how sociolinguistic policies are incorporated into teaching classroom approaches. Materials such as the classroom rules and the learning materials provided insights concerning the overt and covert messages concerning the language use and as such how language diversity is encouraged or even inhibited within the learning environment.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis was implemented in two phases, depending on the information collected: thematic analysis and, content analysis. This combination of methods allowed for extensive exploration of sociolinguistic strategies and their influence on the multilingual language education.

- ***Thematic Analysis:*** Before enumerating the salient features or characteristics of policy payoff, it is apparent that there is a thematic analysis. This is an approach to analysis which finds, evaluates and narrates the stories within data. First of all, this involved a process of coding around some issues or themes that were apparent and reoccurring such as ‘acceptance of code switching’, ‘hierarchy of languages’ or ‘acknowledgment of cultural identity’. Later, these themes were distilled into broader sub-divisions, which were illustrative of major pieces of sociolinguistic activities within the multilingual education sphere. For instance, there were such responses from the educators on how they would address the issues of language diversity alongside inclusivity and these were placed under such themes as ‘promoting linguistic justice’ and ‘nurturing culture’.
- ***Content Analysis:*** This refers to the part of the analysis which involved the techniques of observation of classroom practices and through analysis of some documents. Here, observational data was coded in accordance with the following behaviors: occurrences of code-switching within the activities, reinforcement of the language used, and presentation of culture in the activities of the classroom. Under documents analysis, actual teaching aids and language used in the classroom implementation were analyzed to check for compliance with sociolinguistic tenets. This method was useful in putting a numerical value to the presence of certain sociolinguistic aspects in the classroom which in turn gave empirical evidence on how often a particular type of language use that was encouraged by the teacher was appropriate.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Throughout the course of the research ethics were also given due consideration. Consent was sought and received from all the participants which include educators, students as well as parents (where applicable). Participant’s details were kept confidential by withholding



identifying information and participants were briefed on how they could exit the study at any point without any negative repercussions. In the same vein, all the observations as well as interview sessions were held following the tenets of the school policies to the effect that the research did not interfere with the normal classes.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

In order to enhance the validity as well as the reliability of the findings, several measures were taken. One of the measures was triangulation, which is the use of different approaches to collect data to validate data collected through interviews, observation and analyzing documents. This method bettered the strength of this study's conclusions by finding consistent data patterns across diverse types of data. In addition, participants in the interviews and observations were educators that also engaged in member checking in order to verify that the understandings formed after the interviews and observations were accurate. Researcher bias was also minimized by using peer debriefing when trained colleagues reviewed the research process and findings to ascertain that the analysis was based on the evidence and not influenced by the researcher's views.

### ***Limitations***

Although this method contributes to the knowledge base regarding sociolinguistic interactions in a multilingual educational context, some limitations must be acknowledged. The purposive sampling may be a factor compromising the external validity of the study, since the research is concerned with only a particular group of multilingual classrooms within an urban context. Additionally, there is a qualitative aspect that makes the study context-specific such that the findings may not be used in other educational contexts.

## **Discussion**

The overall results of this study provide useful insights into the understanding of language education as it is practiced in societies with more than one language. For instance, it stresses the merits of sociolinguistic methods that acknowledge different languages, cultural identities, and practical adjustments of languages. When looking closely at the educators' and learners' views as well as observations of practices within classrooms, a number of issues were identified that conform to well-known sociolinguistic principles and offer possibilities of employing them within a multilingual education context. These themes are discussed in relation to the current literature, shedding light on the potential of language education policies and practices in meeting the needs of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

### ***Utilizing Code-Switching and Translanguaging as Concepts that Facilitate Learning***

A notable point emerging from the classroom observations and interview data was the high prevalence of code-switching and translanguaging by both the teachers and the learners. These forms of practice do not only mirror normal language usage in the multilingual environment as it is employed for didactic purposes as well. The practice allows students to overcome barriers in understanding, access and articulate sophisticated content without any limitations, or complete an idea. This concurs with Poplack's (1980) observations on the use of code-switching as a communicative strategy, and also with García and Wei's (2014) exposition where translanguaging focuses on the advantages of multiple languages during learning.

Despite the beneficial effects of translanguaging, some teachers remained concerned about code-switching affecting the teacher's language, which is usually the target language for instruction. This viewpoint shows the ambivalence present in the literature: Whereas translanguaging encourages inclusiveness and cognitive flexibility, there are some concerns about its impact on immersion and proficiency in the majority language (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). The results indicate that there is a need for strategies and teaching aids for teachers in order to apply translanguaging in a way that does not ignore multilingual students' linguistic identities while ensuring goal orientation towards the language of instruction.

### ***The addressing of language hierarchies and the promotion of equitable linguistics.***

Imperatives associated with language hierarchies, or rather the perception that certain languages have higher status than others, became one of the challenges in multi-lingual classes. Out of these, a number of students mentioned that their mother-tongue was regarded as inferior to the primary medium of instruction, resulting in low self-esteem and unwillingness to speak in their native language. This is consistent with Phillipson's (1992) argument of linguistic imperialism which suggests that languages such as English that dominate the world contribute to inequalities within societies, including the education system.

In order to tackle these inequalities, the educators in the research who challenged linguistic hierarchies by affirming students' home languages and adding them in the school curricula noticed the pupils' engagement as well as their self-worth improve. This implies that affirmative language policies and practices, for instance, engaging pupils in their mother tongue for some instructional purpose or including materials that represent multiple languages, can mitigate the effect of language hierarchy. These encourage students and help them understand that no matter the language spoken, the student is valued and respected (Cummins, 2000). However, as much as these practices are encouraged, it is unjust for the practitioners without the information from the educational systems which should be capable to support the teachers to function effectively in the promotion of language equity.

### ***The Importance of Language in Broadening One's Cultural Scope***

There was a clear observable link with how students were proud or not of their languages and their ability to contribute during class. Almost all these students take pride in their languages

as a part of their cultural heritage and teachers who see this can promote students' inclusion in such activities enhancing their self esteem. This correlates with Fishman's (1977) claim: it is language that bonds one to their society and culture.

The findings of the study further highlight the need for an approach to teaching that acknowledges the diverse cultures represented in a multilingual classroom and values those cultures. Teachers using culturally relevant material allowing for any student's background resulted in students being more engaged and participatory. These practices correspond with García's (2009) position on the need for multicultural education in the classroom. She suggests that integrating cultural histories and traditions of the students of different backgrounds with the education process is the right approach. Therefore, the role of cultural knowledge in education is important in that it affirms diversity and promotes tolerance among students of different cultural backgrounds.

### ***The Role of Teacher Training and Institutional Support***

Another important point that emerged when educators spoke to us is the need for some degree of specialized training and institutional support in order to navigate the challenges faced in multilingual classes. Many educators in this study argued that although they appreciated the utility of sociolinguistic approaches, they often had no means or preparation to apply them in practice. The findings of this research show that there is a need for further enhancement of professional development programs in terms that they teach how to facilitate code-switching and translanguaging while promoting linguistic justice. Weary of the challenges presented by such duality, teachers may either avoid the use of such assessments altogether or disregard fulfilling the effective needs of the multilingual students within the curriculum.

Similar to the findings of Duff (2008), who highlighted the importance of teacher preparedness for the effectiveness of multilingual education programs, the present findings show that, teacher preparedness influence the utilization of multilingual education programs in schools. Moreover, with respect to professional development opportunities, it is also important to equip educators with sociolinguistic skills in addition to language skills, to help them cope with the challenges posed by multicultural classrooms. In addition, the environment must allow for sociolinguistics to thrive and for that, policies promoting the essence of sociolinguistics such as the appreciation of language and culture must be in place.

### **Conclusion**

All of the above content highlights the importance of the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning and teaching in a multilingual context. If students' languages are included, teachers are more likely to create a better learning atmosphere where all the languages in the classroom are welcomed and appreciated. Code-switching, translanguaging, and culturally responsive teaching are some best practices that help overcome language barriers and encourage students more actively. These practices foster not only the learning of language but also the learner's culture, which helps boost their self-esteem and participation in learning contexts.

The results suggest that aside from these obstacles, sociolinguistic approaches have a great deal more to offer although this remains a problem- language hierarchies, and people's attitudes towards minor languages. For most students, certain languages, typically the ones used within official schooling contexts, are imposed as the highest status over others, which serves to exclude their languages and cultures. This hierarchy is important to tackle as communities who's educational systems have no discrimination made towards any language in particular, but rather regard them all, have been reported to give rise to the students' self pride and lower language anxiety. This should be supported at the level of the institution, which may include changing the language policies to recognize the coexistence of many languages and the right of teachers to adopt a multilingual approach that does not undermine pupils' learning of the primary language or the language of instruction.

In light of the above, It is important for educators' professional development programs organized by educational institutions to include training on the management of multilingual classes. This way, the teachers would be better prepared for the realities of their working environments. The requirements of such programs ought to include the development of sociolinguistic competence by the teachers. This would enable them to appreciate the dynamics of power, culture and language and deal with them appropriately. Empirical studies could be conducted on the effects of sociolinguistic strategies on academic and social success, which would explain the influence of language policy on the promotion of multilingualism.

To sum up, applying sociolinguistic methodologies in multi-language education is a step towards creating more equitable and culturally diverse educational spaces. Such a stance appreciates the rich interface of language and culture, themes and experiences, and treats multilingualism as an educational resource instead of a hindrance, which with the right policies and practices in place, will improve and enhance the learning experience of all students all over the globe.

## **Acknowledgment**

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the educators, students, and colleagues who contributed their insights and experiences, enriching the study. Special thanks go to the institutions that supported the data collection and research process. Furthermore, appreciation is extended to the reviewers and mentors whose feedback significantly enhanced the quality of this work.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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