



Ethical Leadership and Educational Justice as Predictors of Organizational Effectiveness in Public Secondary Schools in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study examined ethical leadership and educational justice as predictors of organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. Three research questions guided the study. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised 11,011 teachers in public secondary schools across the 25 Local Government Areas of Delta State, from which a sample of 551 teachers was selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using three researcher-developed instruments: the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ), the Educational Justice Questionnaire (EJQ), and the Organizational Effectiveness Questionnaire (OEQ). The instruments were validated by experts in Educational Management, Philosophy of Education, and Measurement and Evaluation. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of 0.85, 0.83, and 0.87 were obtained for the ELQ, EJQ, and OEQ, respectively, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data were analysed using simple and multiple linear regression analyses. The findings revealed that ethical leadership and educational justice each positively predicted organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools. The findings further showed that ethical leadership and educational justice jointly predicted organizational effectiveness, with educational justice making a stronger contribution to the prediction of organizational effectiveness than ethical leadership. The study concluded that promoting ethical leadership and educational justice is essential for enhancing organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools. The study recommended regular training for principals on ethical leadership, the promotion of fairness and equity in school administration, and the integration of ethical leadership and educational justice into the appointment, evaluation, and professional development of school principals.*

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INTRODUCTION

Education remains a fundamental instrument for individual empowerment, social transformation, economic development and sustainable national progress. Beyond knowledge transmission, education promotes ethical values, democratic participation, social responsibility, and human development. The effectiveness of educational systems therefore depends not only on curriculum implementation and resource availability but also on the quality of leadership and administrative practices that guide educational institutions (Bush, 2020; Enomah, 2025b). In contemporary education systems, schools are increasingly expected to develop learners who possess academic competence, moral integrity, critical thinking abilities, respect for diversity and inclusive values (Obizue & Enomah, 2025). Achieving these goals requires school environments characterized by ethical leadership, fairness, transparency, accountability, justice and equitable participation among stakeholders (Manafa et al., 2026).

However, public secondary schools in many developing countries, including Nigeria, continue to experience administrative challenges that undermine organizational effectiveness. These challenges include inadequate accountability, poor communication, declining teacher commitment, unequal distribution of responsibilities and resources, weak stakeholder participation, inconsistent disciplinary practices and ineffective decision-making processes (Hallinger, 2018; Ikegbusi, 2016). Such challenges affect teachers' morale, weaken institutional trust and negatively influence the ability of schools to achieve educational goals. Consequently, increasing attention has been given to leadership approaches that promote ethical conduct, fairness, justice, and accountability as essential conditions for effective school administration (Ikegbusi et al., 2025a).

Ethical leadership has emerged as an important leadership perspective in educational management because of its emphasis on integrity, fairness, accountability, transparency, and responsible decision-making. Ethical leadership involves demonstrating morally appropriate behaviour through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and organizational decisions while encouraging similar conduct among followers (Özdoğru & Sarier, 2024). Ethical leaders serve as moral role models whose behaviours influence employees' attitudes, trust, commitment, and willingness to contribute toward organizational objectives. In school contexts, ethical leadership requires principals to make impartial decisions, uphold professional standards, ensure transparency in administrative processes, protect stakeholder rights, and create environments where teachers feel respected and valued (Obizue et al., 2025).

Recent educational scholarship has emphasized that ethical leadership is particularly important in addressing complex challenges associated with school governance. Principals who demonstrate fairness, honesty, accountability, and concern for others are more likely to establish positive organizational climates characterized by collaboration, trust, and professional commitment (Amir et al., 2024; Ikegbusi et al., 2025a). In Nigeria, studies have shown that ethical leadership and value-based decision-making contribute significantly to effective school administration by promoting responsible governance, teacher empowerment, institutional accountability, and sustainable school improvement (Ikegbusi et al., 2025a; Ikegbusi & Edor, 2025). Furthermore, leadership style has been found to significantly influence school administrative effectiveness, suggesting that ethical leadership provides an important mechanism for strengthening organizational performance (Ikegbusi et al., 2025b).

Closely related to ethical leadership is the concept of educational justice. Educational justice is concerned with fairness, equity, inclusion, and the protection of the rights of all members of the school community. It emphasizes equitable access to educational opportunities, fair distribution of resources and responsibilities, transparent decision-making, and inclusive participation in school governance (Obizue & Enomah, 2025). From a philosophical perspective, educational institutions have a moral responsibility to ensure that administrative practices do not disadvantage particular individuals or groups. Therefore, educational justice provides a foundation for creating school environments where teachers and students experience fairness, dignity, equal opportunities and educational inclusion (Enomah, 2025b).

Within school administration, educational justice is reflected in fair workload distribution, transparent promotion procedures, consistent disciplinary practices, equal access to professional development opportunities, unbiased evaluation, and participation in decision-making processes. When teachers perceive school administration as fair and just, they are more likely to develop trust, organizational commitment, and positive attitudes toward institutional goals (Manafa et al., 2026). Conversely, perceptions of injustice may generate dissatisfaction, conflict, resistance to administrative decisions, and reduced organizational effectiveness (Enomah, 2025a).

Organizational effectiveness represents a central indicator of successful educational administration. In schools, organizational effectiveness refers to the extent to which institutions achieve their educational objectives through the effective utilization of human, financial, physical, technological, and material resources. It encompasses teacher productivity, effective instructional delivery, a positive school climate, stakeholder satisfaction, efficient resource management, accountability, and continuous improvement (Javornik & Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, 2023). Contemporary evidence also suggests that emerging competencies, including ethical governance and technological capabilities, contribute significantly to administrative effectiveness in schools (Ikegbusi et al., 2026). Furthermore, the successful implementation of educational innovations, such as the integration of indigenous knowledge into school curricula, requires effective institutional leadership, collaborative stakeholder engagement, efficient resource coordination, and sound administrative practices, all of which reflect key dimensions of organizational effectiveness (Onyeneto et al., 2026). Unlike business organizations where effectiveness is often assessed through financial outcomes, educational effectiveness involves achieving academic, social, administrative and developmental goals that promote sustainable institutional growth (Onyiorah, 2025; Onyiorah, 2026).

The relationship between ethical leadership, educational justice and organizational effectiveness is particularly important within the Nigerian secondary school context. Public secondary schools in Nigeria operate within challenging environments characterized by increasing enrolment, limited resources, infrastructural constraints, changing educational policies and growing expectations from stakeholders (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). In Delta State, principals are expected to manage these challenges while ensuring fairness, accountability, ethical governance, and effective administration. However, concerns relating to unequal allocation of responsibilities, inconsistent disciplinary procedures, limited teacher involvement in decision-making and perceived administrative unfairness continue to affect teachers' confidence in school leadership (Ikegbusi, 2016; Enomah, 2025a; Ikegbusi et al.,

2025a). These challenges highlight the need to investigate leadership and justice-oriented practices that can strengthen organizational effectiveness.

Theoretically, this study is anchored on Ethical Leadership Theory and John Rawls' Theory of Justice. Ethical Leadership Theory, developed by Brown et al. (2005), explains how leaders influence organizational outcomes through ethical conduct, fairness, integrity, accountability, and moral example. The theory suggests that employees are more likely to demonstrate commitment and positive work behaviours when leaders act ethically and establish trustworthy organizational environments. In this study, the theory provides a basis for explaining how principals' ethical leadership behaviours contribute to school effectiveness. The study is also guided by Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971), which argues that justice is the foundation of fair social institutions. Rawls emphasized that institutions should promote fairness through equitable distribution of opportunities, rights, responsibilities, and resources. Applied to educational administration, the theory explains the importance of fair decision-making, equitable resource allocation, inclusive participation, and impartial treatment of teachers and students. These philosophical assumptions are consistent with contemporary discussions on educational ethics, leadership transformation, and inclusive educational governance in Nigeria (Enomah, 2025b; Obizue & Enomah, 2025). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of how ethical leadership and educational justice may influence organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools.

Empirical studies have established the importance of ethical leadership and justice-oriented practices in educational organizations. Brown et al. (Ohamobi & Maha, 2026) found that ethical leadership enhances trust, commitment and positive organizational behaviour. Similarly, Kaduma (2024) reported that ethical leadership practices promote accountability, fairness, and effective institutional relationships in educational settings. In Nigeria, Ikegbusi et al. (2025a) demonstrated that ethical leadership and value-based decision-making contribute positively to effective school administration. Likewise, Ikegbusi et al. (2025b) reported that leadership styles significantly influence administrative effectiveness among principals in public secondary schools, while Enomah (2025b) emphasized that educational philosophy provides a foundation for leadership transformation through fairness, moral responsibility, democratic participation, and ethical governance. Ahmed (2025) further argued that ethical leadership and moral decision-making are indispensable for effective educational management and supervision.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to ethical leadership and organizational justice, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the combined predictive roles of ethical leadership and educational justice in explaining organizational effectiveness, particularly in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. Previous studies have largely examined leadership practices, organizational justice, or school effectiveness as separate constructs, with limited attention to educational justice as a distinct philosophical construct involving equity, fairness, inclusion and participatory governance. Furthermore, while recent Nigerian studies have independently examined ethical leadership (Ikegbusi et al., 2025a), leadership styles (Ikegbusi et al., 2025b), educational philosophy (Enomah, 2025b) and ethical decision-making (Obizue et al., 2025), empirical evidence integrating ethical leadership and educational justice as joint predictors of organizational effectiveness remains scarce. Therefore, this study sought to

examine the individual and joint predictive values of ethical leadership and educational justice on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What is the predictive value of ethical leadership on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria?
2. What is the predictive value of educational justice on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria?
3. What is the joint predictive value of ethical leadership and educational justice on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a correlational research design to examine the predictive relationships between ethical leadership, educational justice, and organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. A correlational research design is appropriate for determining the extent to which one or more independent variables predict a dependent variable without manipulating the variables under investigation (Ikegbusi, 2022). The design was considered suitable because it enabled the researchers to examine the individual and joint predictive values of ethical leadership and educational justice on organizational effectiveness as the variables naturally occurred in public secondary schools.

Population and Sample

The population comprised 11,011 teachers in public secondary schools across the 25 Local Government Areas of Delta State (Ministry of Secondary Education, Asaba, 2026). Teachers were selected as respondents because they work directly under the supervision of school principals and are therefore well positioned to provide valid information on principals' ethical leadership practices, the extent to which educational justice is promoted within their schools and the organizational effectiveness of their respective institutions. A sample of 551 teachers, representing approximately 5% of the population, was drawn for the study. The sample size was guided by Obi et al. (2022), who recommended a 5% sample for populations running into several thousands. A multistage sampling procedure was employed. Stratified sampling was used to group schools according to the 25 Local Government Areas, while proportionate stratified random sampling ensured adequate representation of teachers across the strata. Thereafter, simple random sampling technique was used to select the teachers who participated in the study.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using three researcher-developed instruments: the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ), the Educational Justice Questionnaire (EJQ), and the Organizational Effectiveness Questionnaire (OEQ). The Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) was developed to measure ethical leadership among principals in public secondary schools. The instrument consisted of 10 items that assessed leadership practices relating to honesty, integrity, fairness, accountability, transparency, ethical decision-making and respect for

teachers. The items were rated on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1).

The Educational Justice Questionnaire (EJQ) was developed to measure educational justice in public secondary schools. The instrument comprised 10 items that assessed fairness in decision-making, equitable distribution of responsibilities and resources, equal opportunities, participatory decision-making, impartial treatment, respect for teachers' rights and equity in school administration. The items were rated on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1).

The Organizational Effectiveness Questionnaire (OEQ) was developed to measure organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools. The instrument consisted of 10 items that assessed administrative efficiency, teacher commitment, effective resource management, collaboration among staff, achievement of school goals and overall institutional effectiveness. The items were rated on a four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The three instruments were validated by experts in Educational Management, Philosophy of Education and Measurement and Evaluation at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria, to ensure their clarity, content validity and suitability for the study.

Reliability of the Instrument

A pilot test was conducted to determine the reliability of the research instruments using 30 teachers from public secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria, which was outside the study area but shared similar characteristics with the study area. The pilot study was conducted to ascertain the clarity, consistency, and suitability of the instruments before the main study. The internal consistency of the instruments was determined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Ethical Leadership Questionnaire (ELQ) yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.85, the Educational Justice Questionnaire (EJQ) recorded a reliability coefficient of 0.83, while the Organizational Effectiveness Questionnaire (OEQ) had a reliability coefficient of 0.87. Since all the reliability coefficients exceeded the recommended minimum value of 0.70, the instruments were considered to have good internal consistency and were therefore regarded as reliable for the study (Hair et al., 2022).

Data Collection Procedure

Before data collection, approval was obtained from the Delta State Ministry of Secondary Education, Asaba, and the principals of the selected public secondary schools. Thereafter, informed consent was obtained from the respondents. Two research assistants were engaged for the study, one with a background in Educational Management and the other in Philosophy of Education. They were trained on the objectives of the study, time management and the ethical procedures for administering the research instruments. The researchers and the research assistants personally administered 551 copies of the questionnaires to the respondents and ensured their proper completion and retrieval. Out of the 551 copies distributed, 538 were successfully retrieved, while 13 were not retrieved, representing a retrieval rate of 97.6%, which was considered adequate for the study.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using simple and multiple linear regression analyses to determine the predictive values of ethical leadership and educational justice on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. Specifically, simple linear regression analysis was used to determine the individual predictive value of each predictor variable (ethical leadership and educational justice) on organizational effectiveness, while multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine their joint predictive value. The statistical significance of the regression models and their associated coefficients was determined using the corresponding p-values at the 0.05 level of significance. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Research Question 1: What is the predictive value of ethical leadership on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria?

Table 1.
Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis with Ethical Leadership as Predictor of Organizational Effectiveness

Variables	Unstandardized β	Std. Dev. β	Standardize d β
Constant	15.734	3.286	
Ethical Leadership	0.712	0.145	0.694
R	0.694		
R ²	0.482		
Adjusted R ²	0.480		

The result in Table 1 revealed that ethical leadership had a positive and strong predictive value on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria ($R = 0.694$; $R^2 = 0.482$). This indicates that ethical leadership accounted for approximately 48.2% of the variation in organizational effectiveness. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.480 showed that about 48.0% of the variance in organizational effectiveness remained after adjusting for sample size. Furthermore, the standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.694$) showed a strong positive prediction, suggesting that improvements in principals' ethical leadership are associated with corresponding improvements in organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools.

Research Question 2: What is the predictive value of educational justice on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria?

Table 2.
Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis with Educational Justice as Predictor of Organizational Effectiveness

Variables	Unstandardized β	Std. Dev. β	Standardize d β
Constant	14.286	3.418	
Educational Justice	0.748	0.137	0.731
R	0.731		
R ²	0.534		
Adjusted R ²	0.532		

The result in Table 2 showed that educational justice had a positive and strong predictive value on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria ($R = 0.731$; $R^2 = 0.534$). This implies that educational justice accounted for approximately 53.4% of the variation in organizational effectiveness. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.532 indicates that about 53.2% of the variance remained after adjusting for sample size. In addition, the standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.731$) demonstrates a strong positive prediction, indicating that higher levels of educational justice are associated with greater organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools.

Research Question 3: What is the joint predictive value of ethical leadership and educational justice on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria?

Table 3.
Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis with Ethical Leadership and Educational Justice as Joint Predictors of Organizational Effectiveness

Variables	Unstandardized β	Std. Dev. β	Standardize d β
Constant	12.418	3.104	
Ethical Leadership	0.394	0.112	0.361
Educational Justice	0.537	0.118	0.482
R	0.824		
R ²	0.679		
Adjusted R ²	0.677		

The result in Table 3 revealed that ethical leadership and educational justice jointly had a positive and strong predictive value on organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria ($R = 0.824$; $R^2 = 0.679$). This shows that the two predictor variables jointly accounted for approximately 67.9% of the variation in organizational effectiveness. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.677 showed that about 67.7% of the variance

remained after adjusting for sample size. Furthermore, the standardized beta coefficients indicate that both ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.361$) and educational justice ($\beta = 0.482$) made positive contributions to the prediction of organizational effectiveness. However, educational justice made a stronger unique contribution than ethical leadership, suggesting that while both variables are important determinants of organizational effectiveness, educational justice is the more influential predictor in the regression model.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that ethical leadership positively predicts organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. This suggests that when principals demonstrate honesty, fairness, integrity, accountability, and transparency in their leadership practices, schools are more likely to function effectively. Ethical leadership encourages trust, cooperation and commitment among teachers, which contributes to improved school administration and the achievement of educational goals. This finding supports the Social Learning Theory of Brown et al. (2005), which explains that leaders influence the behaviour of others by serving as positive role models. When principals consistently display ethical behaviour, teachers are more likely to adopt similar values in carrying out their responsibilities. The finding also agrees with Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), who maintained that ethical decision-making is essential for effective educational leadership. Similarly, Ohamobi and Maha (2026) reported that ethical leadership promotes trust, collaboration, and improved organizational performance in schools. However, the finding differs from Ikegbusi et al. (2025b), who argued that leadership alone may not produce effective schools where there are serious challenges such as inadequate funding and poor infrastructure.

The study also found that educational justice positively predicts organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. This means that schools where teachers are treated fairly, given equal opportunities, and involved in decision-making are more likely to achieve their goals. Fair administrative practices help teachers feel respected and valued, which can improve their commitment to the school and encourage them to contribute more effectively to school development. This finding supports Rawls' (1971) Theory of Justice, which emphasizes that fairness and equity are fundamental principles for the effective functioning of institutions. The finding is also consistent with Enomah (2025b), who argued that educational leadership grounded in justice, fairness and democratic participation promotes effective institutional governance and organizational transformation. Similarly, Obizue et al. (2025) maintained that ethical leadership and moral decision-making foster fairness, accountability and responsible administrative practices, thereby enhancing institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, Ikegbusi et al. (2025a) reported that ethical leadership and value-based decision-making significantly contribute to effective school administration by promoting transparency, accountability, and equitable treatment of stakeholders. However, the finding differs from studies suggesting that fairness alone may not be sufficient to improve school performance where schools continue to experience shortages of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and weak administrative support, as organizational effectiveness depends not only on equitable leadership practices but also on the availability of institutional resources and administrative capacity (UNESCO, 2021; Ikegbusi et al., 2026).

Finally, the study found that ethical leadership and educational justice jointly predict organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. This indicates that schools are likely to perform better when principals demonstrate ethical leadership while also ensuring fairness and equity in school administration. Ethical leadership provides the moral direction for school management, whereas educational justice ensures that school policies and decisions are implemented fairly. Together, these practices create a supportive school environment that encourages trust, teamwork, teacher commitment, and effective achievement of school goals. This finding supports both the Social Learning Theory of Brown et al. (2005) and Rawls' (1971) Theory of Justice, which emphasize that ethical behaviour and fairness are essential for improving organizational outcomes. The finding also agrees with Bush (2020), who noted that effective school leadership depends on combining sound leadership practices with fair and inclusive administrative processes. The present study therefore suggests that ethical leadership and educational justice complement each other in promoting organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

This study examined ethical leadership and educational justice as predictors of organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that ethical leadership and educational justice individually and jointly positively predicted organizational effectiveness. The study therefore concluded that promoting ethical leadership practices and strengthening educational justice in school administration are essential for enhancing organizational effectiveness. Principals who demonstrate ethical conduct and ensure fairness, equity, transparency, and inclusive decision-making are more likely to create school environments that promote teacher commitment, collaboration and effective achievement of educational goals.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for educational management and the philosophy of education. The positive predictive values of ethical leadership and educational justice on organizational effectiveness suggest that school administrators should promote ethical values, fairness, accountability and equity in the administration of public secondary schools. These practices are likely to strengthen organizational effectiveness by improving teacher commitment, trust, collaboration and administrative efficiency.

The findings also imply that educational policymakers, the Delta State Ministry of Secondary Education and other relevant stakeholders should formulate policies and organize regular leadership development programmes that emphasize ethical leadership and educational justice. Such initiatives would equip school principals with the knowledge and competencies required to promote fairness, ethical decision-making and effective school administration, thereby enhancing organizational effectiveness across public secondary schools.

Limitations

This study was limited to public secondary schools in Delta State, Nigeria. Consequently, the findings may not be generalized to private secondary schools, primary schools, tertiary

institutions, or schools in other states or countries. Furthermore, the study relied on data obtained through questionnaires, which reflected the perceptions of teachers and may have been influenced by personal opinions and response bias. Future studies should consider including other categories of educational institutions, employing larger and more diverse samples and adopting mixed-methods approaches to provide deeper perceptions into the relationships among ethical leadership, educational justice and organizational effectiveness.

Recommendations

1. The Delta State Ministry of Secondary Education should institutionalize periodic professional development programmes on ethical leadership for principals, with emphasis on integrity, accountability, transparency and fairness in school administration.
2. Principals should adopt transparent and participatory management practices by involving teachers in key decisions, ensuring equitable distribution of responsibilities and applying school policies consistently to strengthen educational justice and organizational effectiveness.
3. The Delta State Government should incorporate measurable ethical leadership and educational justice indicators into the recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal and reappointment of principals to improve leadership quality and improve organizational effectiveness in public secondary schools.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria. Permission was also obtained from the Delta State Ministry of Secondary Education and the principals of the selected public secondary schools before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary and respondents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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