



## LEARN-GROUP-LIMITS (LGL): A FRAMEWORK FOR CREATING A SOCIO-EMOTIONALLY SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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### Abstract:

A substantial part of the teacher's work is focused on creating a safe learning environment. In this research, the purpose was to create a set of tools and a framework for developing a socio-emotionally safe learning environment in the classroom. In this article, we introduce how the model was created, tested, and developed through an action research approach. In three consecutive development cycles, a total of 29 elementary school teachers, 7 special education teachers, 32 subject teachers, and five principals participated. The cycles were implemented in elementary schools, middle schools, and comprehensive schools in two different cities from 2014 to 2021. The data was collected through observations of classroom situations, diaries, as well as survey and interview methods. As the result, the Learn-Group-Limits (LGL) framework with practical methods for creating a socio-emotionally safe learning environment is presented and discussed.

**Keywords:** socio-emotionally safe learning environment, teacher's work, action research, school development

### 1. Introduction

Encountering student restlessness in schools is a common aspect of a teacher's daily work. As restlessness escalates, pupils face difficulties in fully engaging in learning and studying (Beaman *et al.*, 2007). A significant portion of a teacher's responsibilities may be dedicated to maintaining a peaceful learning environment and resolving various difficulties among pupils (Harjunmaa, 2022; Äärelä *et al.*, 2016). The behavior problems and actions of pupils struggling with concentration can impact the entire class, consuming an unreasonable amount of time, diminishing well-being and motivation, and

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impeding the ability of both pupils and teachers to focus on the core matter, namely, learning. This often excessively burdens the daily lives of both pupils and teachers. If the situation persists without adequate intervention, pupils' enthusiasm for attending school diminishes, motivation towards education wanes, and the joy associated with studying can completely vanish (Äärelä *et al.*, 2014). The central challenges and problems that pupils encounter during their school years can negatively influence their academic competence, learning of social and behavioral skills, and understanding of the social dynamics within the classroom (Entwistle, 1995; Lechner *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, early identified adequate academic skills and successes in emotional and interpersonal skills increase the likelihood that pupils will become adults who thrive in life, can function independently, are socially active, use fewer social services, and earn sufficiently for economic well-being (Hyvärinen *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b). Learning such skills happens best in a safe classroom environment. Because in the future classes are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the premises of creating a socio-emotionally balanced learning environment (Rowan *et al.*, 2021). The purpose of this article is to describe the process through which the socio-emotional learning environment of the classroom community was sought to be strengthened. The study was conducted as action research in collaboration with the staff of selected schools. The research resulted in a teacher's model called LGL, stemming from the concepts Learn, Group, and Limits. The article is based on the doctoral dissertation of the first author (Harjunmaa, 2022).

## **2. The socio-emotionally safe learning environment**

One of the essential requirements for positive work in school classrooms is socio-emotional safety (Weare & Grey, 2003). The socio-emotional learning environment of a classroom consists of the interaction and emotional skills of the individuals involved, as well as the ability to build a secure environment (Harjunmaa, 2022). According to Bandura (1986), an individual's behavior in their environment is not solely guided by their own skills or abilities, nor by external factors alone. Instead, human behavior is explained by the systemic structure in which both individual internal factors and environmental characteristics and events together create and guide behavior.

If the environment supports the satisfaction of basic needs, indicators of well-being, such as openness and empathy, thrive, and the individual's need for psychological defense mechanisms diminishes. The environment can be examined through the lens of the self-determination theory and its three psychological basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are essential for development and well-being, forming the foundation of well-being, and together, they explain a significant portion of an individual's satisfaction and positive emotions (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Weare and Grey (2003) identified four characteristics of the environment, namely caring relationships, participation, autonomy, and the requirement for rules and boundaries. The environment can also be examined from the perspective of the concept of safety, where it can be

categorized into emotionally, physically, socially, and cognitively safe environments (Harjunmaa *et al.*, 2023).

In his ecological systems theory, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses the term "developmental environment" to introduce physical, psychological, and social environments in which the student actively participates (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Krebs & Davies, 2009). For an environment to be socio-emotionally safe, it should reinforce students' emotional and social competence (Thapa *et al.*, 2013). Socio-emotional competence can be defined as the ability of community members to maintain functional social relationships (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). This includes good emotional skills, which are crucial for adept emotional processing and effective interaction (De Botton, 2019).

In school, warm, caring, and supportive relationships are crucial factors in creating a positive learning atmosphere. A socio-emotionally safe learning environment promotes school well-being, motivation, learning outcomes, and reduces absenteeism (Battistich *et al.* 1997; Durlak & Wells 1997; Harjunmaa *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Weare and Grey (2003) emphasize the importance of caring relationships, compassion, and communication. Establishing a socio-emotionally safe learning environment also contributes to the well-being of teachers, as they encounter fewer challenging situations in their work, and handling such situations becomes easier (Lester *et al.*, 2020).

### 3. Method

The aim of the research is to develop a method that supports teachers in creating a socio-emotionally safe learning environment in the classroom. Its development was preceded by an action research-based development process involving teachers and principals from several selected schools (Harjunmaa, 2022; Harjunmaa *et al.*, 2023). The framework is named the Learn, Group, and Limits (LGL) framework.

The research was guided by two main research questions:

- 1) How did the LGL framework support the creation of a socio-emotionally safe learning environment in the classroom?
- 2) How did the LGL framework evolve during the cycles of action research?

This research is based on a practical development need observed in the teaching profession. The development work and research progressed cyclically, following the typical approach of action research. The development work was implemented in schools where the first author is a member of the working community, as well as in schools where the first author functions in the role of a researcher and developer. The researcher is involved in the research with the aim of achieving positive changes in the school's operations (Kemmis *et al.*, 2015).

The research represents action research based on the emancipatory and pragmatic paradigms (Cresswell, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Particularly in the early stages of the research, the goal is to collaboratively create a better understanding of the reality

everyone is working with, so the research also exhibits constructivist characteristics in addition to the mentioned paradigms (Cresswell, 2012).

At the beginning of the development and research work, the aim is to progress from specific observations to more general ones and to develop an understanding of the fundamental questions that the educational staff should be able to address in school to make the socio-emotional learning environment as safe as possible. Simultaneously, the pragmatic features of the research paradigm arise from the goal of finding practical and resource-efficient perspectives and answers to examine and solve everyday problems in schools, and by these solutions, concretely build a socio-emotionally safe learning environment. This requires strong participation from those involved in the research in examining their own actions and potentially making changes in the desired direction. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the action model produced by the research and the derived solutions is based on the assessment by the participating teachers regarding their usefulness in their daily lives (Harjunmaa, 2022; Kemmis *et al.*, 2015).

Table 1 illustrates how the cycles and data collection happened during the research process.

**Table 1:** The cycles, participants, and the data collection process in this action research

Cycle	Research Participants	Data Collection	Data Analyzing Method
Cycle I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elementary school teachers (n=19)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observation, discussions with teachers</li> <li>The researcher's diary</li> </ul>	Data-based and theory-led content analyses
Cycle II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principals (n=3)</li> <li>Special education teachers (n=7)</li> <li>Subject teachers (n=17)</li> <li>Elementary school teachers (n=10)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questionnaire</li> <li>Special education teachers' diaries</li> <li>Observation</li> <li>The researcher's diary</li> </ul>	Theory-led content analysis
Cycle III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principals (n=2)</li> <li>Subject teachers (n=15)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questionnaire</li> <li>Themed interviews</li> <li>The researcher's diary</li> </ul>	Theory-led content analysis

The analyses in Cycles I-III followed the principles of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). The observation data were analyzed in a data-based manner in Cycle I to form an initial understanding of the situation in the school. The observed events were discussed with teachers. This was followed by a theory-led content analysis for the diary and observation data as the first practical tools were tested in practice. The theory of basic psychological needs by Ryan and Deci (2017) provided a loose framework for the analysis. In Cycles II and III, the various sets of data were analyzed by using the framework created in Cycle I in a theory-led manner (Cho & Lee, 2014) by using the concepts of Learn, Group, and Limits (LGL).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Creating preliminary support material for the LGL framework

Cycle I of action research originated from the need to explore new solutions to support classroom work for teachers. Specifically, issues related to maintaining a beneficial learning environment were excessively burdensome for both the teacher and students. According to the experiences of the participating teachers in the trial classes, disruptions to the learning environment were more common and severe than average. These issues included classroom disturbances, difficulty in transitions, physical and mental harm to others, challenging the teacher's authority, and low student motivation.

Cycle I was a pragmatic phase that practically examined the problems occurring in the classroom. It involved the identification of problems and the agreement on developing and testing solutions to support the teacher's classroom activities. Additionally, the methods and practices developed during this cycle were compiled as materials intended for use in the subsequent cycle.

The first cycle was divided into two phases. In the initial phase, support material was created, consisting of six components. The goal was to create a description of the actions that each classroom should consider when building a positive atmosphere and reinforcing a favorable learning environment. The support material was named "Aiming for a Safe and Caring Learning Community." The support material focused on the following areas: working strategy, teaching emotional and interactive skills, improving classroom peace, structuring the school day, and providing comprehensive support for the class.

### 4.2 Creating the LGL framework

In the second phase of the cycle, the carefully crafted support material was more systematically implemented. Simultaneously, a meticulous data collection process was initiated. This process was based on observing teaching situations, maintaining a researcher's diary, and conducting interviews with teachers. This marked the beginning of outlining the foundational elements of the LGL framework. The goal was to identify concepts for the framework that would use language familiar to the school, be easy to memorize, and, as names, guide the teacher to remember more precisely what they entailed. These concepts were based on the psychological basic needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

The experience of competence and learning was named *Learn*. The experience of participation and being heard was named *Group*, and the experience of clarity and predictability was named *Limits*. These three letters formed the name for the LGL framework.

*Learn* focuses on how teachers could enforce pupils' experiences in a feeling of learning and competence. This element seeks different ways to address the needs of each pupil's cognitive and socio-emotional learning. Teachers need to find ways to

differentiate teaching and make sure that basic learning skills are mastered on a sufficient level.

*Group* focuses on pupils' experiences in relatedness, autonomy, and participation. It is vital that school does its utmost to ensure that each pupil is an inclusive part of the class. It is important that pupils find their classroom a place that embraces everyone's involvement and is free from segregation and bullying. The teaching of socio-emotional skills is seen as an integral part of this element.

*Limits* focuses on the questions of clarity and predictability. Pupils need to know e.g., what to expect during the lesson and the day, what they are supposed to learn and what are the consequences of an unwanted behavior. Teachers need to establish limits, rules, and routines in a way that reinforces everyone's experience in an emotionally and physically safe environment.

### **4.3 Evaluation of the LGL framework**

The framework developed in Cycle I was tested in Cycle II in another municipality, involving both elementary and middle schools. Cycle III focused specifically on the effectiveness of the LGL framework in middle schools. Below, we briefly present how the participants, i.e., the teachers in the schools, experienced the LGL model in their own work. We categorize the presentation according to the three basic elements: Learn, Group, and Limits. We also examine the construction of a peaceful working environment, as improving it was a key goal in the participating classes.

#### **A. Learn**

In their responses, teachers realized the significance of everyday encounters for students' experiences of their own competence. If a student's experience of Learn was primarily based on exams and tests, it provided both high and low achievers with an unrealistic picture of their competence. Understanding the student and the subsequent skill of engaging with the student became central.

*"An encouraging and positive attitude lays the groundwork for learning experiences. I aim to engage with each student at least once in every lesson. Differentiation occurs both upwards and downwards in every class."* (Subject teacher statement)

#### **B. Group**

From teachers' responses, an understanding emerged about the significance of the experience of strengthened autonomy through choices and participation for learning. This requires trust in students and confidence that choices enhance learning, and students are capable of making suitable decisions for themselves. Teachers reported relatively few actions aimed at strengthening a sense of belonging to the group. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in middle school.

*"I provide students with more opportunities to influence how they work during the lesson through their own choices. Similarly, I openly ask the class whether, for example, they prefer one approach over another from two different options."* (Subject teacher statement)

### **C. Limits**

Teachers' responses indicated how emphasizing clarity and predictability had influenced the planning of lesson structures and communication with students. Teachers highlighted that they had recognized the impact of setting limits on creating a socio-emotionally safe learning environment. They systematically utilized lesson structure planning and its communication with students. Teachers also understood the impact of setting limits on students' classroom activities and the improvement of the overall classroom atmosphere.

*"Personally, maintaining peace in my work has been assisted by clear procedures and instructions that I follow in classes, and I treat everyone fairly. - I always write the lesson plan visibly on the board; this calms the atmosphere as everyone can see what we are doing and what is still to come during the lesson, and students don't have to shout out loud or ask what still needs to be done."* (Elementary school teacher statement)

Since the classes where the framework was developed in Cycle I were very restless, and there were almost constant disruptions to the work peace in almost every lesson, one key goal of the LGL framework was to improve the class atmosphere. Work peace problems in the research classes were also common in Cycles II and III. Efforts were made to improve the work peace through slow-acting methods, represented by actions aimed at strengthening psychological basic needs and emotional- and interaction skills. However, teachers felt they needed more immediately effective tools to facilitate everyday work. From this demand, the skill of group listening was developed, which focuses on situations where the teacher addresses the whole class. Based on observations, it was seen that this moment represented a critical phase in building peace and in the interaction between the teacher and the student. The skill of group listening was divided into sub-skills, which included cease (inhibition requirement), look (directing attention), and as a result listening became possible (maintaining attention). The teacher supported learning the skill by using the so-called K-sign (which refers to words in the Finnish language that are the sub-skills and start with the letter K), which visually aided the learning of students, especially those who struggled with attention and hyperactivity challenges. The K-sign received strong support from teachers in the research schools.

*"The K-sign has been an excellent, the best tool I have tried for teaching the skill of group listening. The K-sign is like a magic word. The students quickly adopted the principle of the K-sign in my own class, and in other groups I teach, it was adopted as well, albeit a bit*

*more slowly, because not all teachers systematically used it in every class.” (Elementary school teacher statement)*

## 5. Summary of the Development Cycles

The cycles I-III were sequential developmental cycles. The Cycle I focused on creating the framework for the socio-emotional learning environment and developing practical tools for enhancing listening skills in the group. Also, the first version of the teacher’s manual was drafted. After the Cycle I the main developmental questions for Cycle II were how to develop the framework to meet the whole-school developmental goals and whether the practical tools were scalable to the middle school level.

The Cycle II tested the LGL approach in three elementary schools and a middle school providing information about the applicability of the basic framework created in the Cycle I. It also brought up the question of implementing the development process in the school and how to enhance teachers’ participation. The principal’s role appeared significant. These questions led to the development Cycle III.

In the Cycle III, the LGL framework was implemented in a middle school and the focus in the implementation was on enhancing the collaboration and participation of teachers. The principal’s role remained unclear and the researcher-facilitator’s role needed further investigation. After the Cycle III, new insights for creating collaboration were found, resulting in the revised version of LGL which is presented as the outcome of this research.

## 6. Discussion

In the early stages of constructing the LGL framework, attention was initially focused on different aspects than during the testing and further development phases of the framework. Right at the beginning of Cycle I, the focus and initial solutions were directed towards an individual student, who typically represented the disruptive element in the class. Teachers and researchers deliberated on how to support the disruptive student's schooling in a way that would reduce the need for disruptive behavior. As the research progressed, this perspective remained important and central, but its interpretation became more layered. What became significant was the impact of the entire class on the behavior of an individual student and the importance of supporting an individual class and its teacher through whole-school collaboration. Implementing whole-school collaboration, however, is challenging without leadership, highlighting the importance of the principal's role in the development process (Ahtiainen *et al.*, 2024; Raasumaa, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the systemic significance of developmental environments in a student's growth emerged in a multifaceted way when creating the LGL framework (Mahoney & Magnusson, 2001). In the development of a socio-emotional learning environment through whole-school collaboration, the focus is on a comprehensive phenomenon covering the entire school's operational culture. The



development of the LGL framework demonstrated that building a socio-emotionally safe learning environment solely as an individual teacher's action does not provide broad enough support for the student's experience. Previous research has also shown that comprehensive school development methods are more effective in enhancing socio-emotional well-being than narrower methods focusing on specific areas of the school (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner *et al.*, 2015; Korpershoek, 2014; Weare & Green, 2003). A school atmosphere that supports the strengthening of socio-emotional well-being fosters a sense of belonging for both students and teachers, making them feel valued and respected members of the school community (Leskisenoja & Uusiautti, 2017; Millings *et al.*, 2012). In schools and classrooms that consciously reinforce the sense of belonging, there are fewer disruptions to peace and behavioral disorders. Moreover, they promote respectful interaction and social problem-solving, providing support and warmth to individual students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012).

The evaluation of the reliability of the LGL framework can be based on four criteria (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Firstly, there is the creation of new knowledge, which involves dialogical validity and process validity. Dialogical validity refers to the overall acceptance and approval of the research within the community being studied (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Shenton, 2004). In the development of the LGL framework, these criteria of reliability were strengthened by numerous relevant lectures and internal discussions within the work community. Experiments and development work conducted in around 90 different school classes aimed to answer the question of how practical and beneficial the models used in the research and designed for it were (Andersson & Shattuck, 2012). Process validity was strengthened through extensive data collection and the prolonged duration of the research (Mertler, 2014). Process validity also involves examining the researcher's role and related subjectivity (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003; Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Secondly, there are action-oriented results and the related concept of result validity. The quality of action research depends on whether the research succeeds in solving the stated problems or if the research has made discoveries that lead to new alternatives and perspectives (Anderson *et al.*, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2015). The development of the LGL framework produced several methods and tools that collectively formed the LGL framework. Additionally, the significance of collaboration and the role of the principal in building a socio-emotional environment became crucial. Perhaps the clearest evidence of the result validity of the research is that it resulted in a new perspective on the discussion of maintaining peace in the classroom.

The third criterion is the development of the researcher and participants as part of the assessment of catalytic validity. According to Ivankova (2015), this refers to how and to what extent the research process enables participants to begin changing their own daily lives. During the research, it was clearly evident how teachers reflected on how the LGL framework had helped them learn to perceive the school's reality in a new way. However, the research result does not indicate how permanent this change was in the participating schools and their teachers.

The fourth criterion is relevant results for the researched community and democratic validity. Herr and Anderson (2015, 69) refer to how much the community where the research is conducted has been able to influence the research and to what extent their thoughts and perspectives have been considered in the research. In Cycle I, when the framework for building a socio-emotional environment was formed, almost all development arose from the needs of the researched community. The same need for development and perspective was repeated in the third cycle.

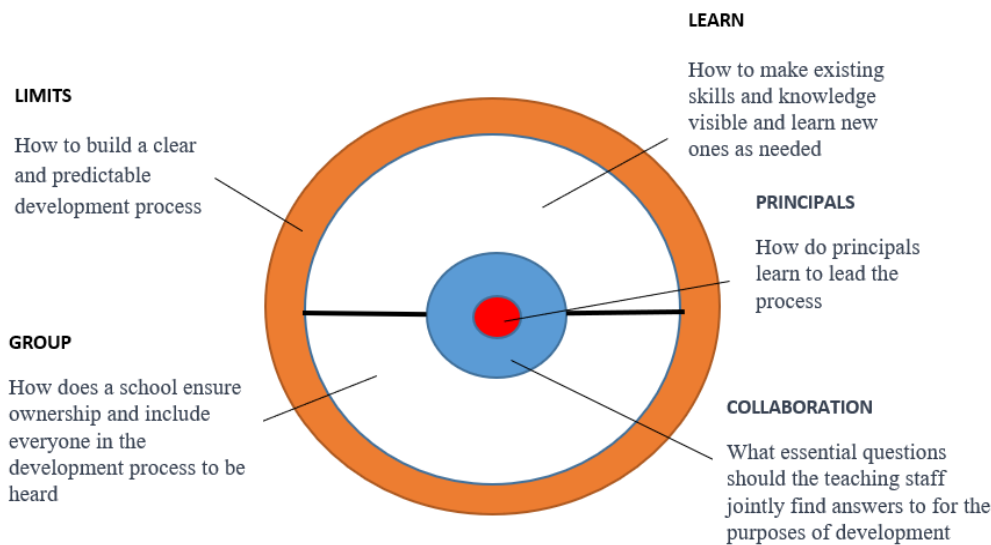
## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on this study, it can be concluded that the LGL framework is most effective during the development and change phase of new schools. It enables the theoretical and methodological background for the development of various concrete practices in the everyday life of schools. In schools where an established culture already exists, the key is the internal need for development and the involvement of the entire community in change from the very beginning. In addition, special attention must be paid to change management (see also Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Collaboration seems to be crucial for the development of secondary education. However, there is still much work to be done in strengthening collaboration in middle schools. The Finnish education system also does not sufficiently address the age-related challenges of the student's growth and development, placing the transition to middle school in a challenging stage of adolescence (Rautiainen *et al.*, 2017). During the development process of the LGL framework, it became apparent through the research subjects that the transition to middle school can be influenced positively if the school can provide a clear, predictable and caring environment where the student can safely test boundaries.

School leadership and management proved to be central in the development of the LGL framework and the formation of a socio-emotionally safe learning community (see also Mencl *et al.*, 2016; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013). A leader with a positive authority (Wenström, 2020) can, through their own example, provide a model for a way of interacting with others that is likely to strengthen everyone's experience of the realization of the three core elements of Learn, Group, and Limits, first in these interactions and then throughout the entire school (see also Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). The framework introduced by the LGL framework can be one model for a principal as they build their own leadership theory.

The basic elements for developing a socio-emotionally safe learning environment in school can be described according to Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Framework for school development after Cycle II

The framework for school development, as presented in Figure 1, is based on taking care of psychological basic needs in the development process and on the ecological systems theory's consideration of the importance of collaboration in strengthening community activities. The progression of development should be made as clear as possible for everyone, and it needs to be thoroughly justified (Limits). However, careful planning should not diminish the community's participation in the development. The community itself must identify its development goals and feel that the development work addresses the needs it perceives. The developer should design their methods to be flexible and responsive to the community's requirements. Nevertheless, this should not compromise the scientific nature of development; instead, development should be based on research knowledge that helps understand the community's identified needs from a research or theoretical perspective (Group). Since development inevitably raises questions about expertise, especially when an external developer or researcher is involved, attention must be given to the community's experience of expertise. Efforts should be made to avoid the community members feeling incompetent or inferior. This can be achieved, among other things, by continuously highlighting the community's own solutions to challenges throughout the development process. The developer's task is to connect these solutions to a broader framework of development (Learn).

The role of the principal is crucial for the development of the school. Raasumaa (2010) uses the concept of comprehensive pedagogical leadership, which encompasses various areas of leadership, such as planning and organizing teaching, as well as the qualitative development of competence and learning. Competence management involves identifying subject matter content and ensuring the realization of teacher development goals (Raasumaa, 2010).

The development of the LGL framework should be critically examined. It did not involve the parents of the students, although their support for their child's schooling is

significant. Additionally, students and their experiences with the LGL framework were not studied, even though they are the most important target of all school development. Teachers also expressed critical views, especially regarding the use of the K-sign, as they considered it too authoritarian or limiting the teacher's ability to find their own solutions to the issue. It is also worth considering whether the LGL framework is too extensive as it seeks to examine the development of classroom activities broadly from the perspective of socio-emotional strengthening. On the other hand, research supports a whole-school approach to development instead of targeted methods (Goldberg *et al.*, 2019).

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors have no conflicts of interest that would affect the research or writing and, consequently, the objectivity or honesty of the study.

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