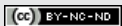




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Research



VOLUME 22 | N° 2

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.36367/ntqr.22.2.2026.e1228>

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Submission date: November, 2024

Review date: October, 2025

Publication date: May, 2026

RESEARCH ETHICS IN DISABILITY: INSIGHTS FROM QUALITATIVE VISUAL IMPAIRMENT STUDY

ABSTRACT

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their studies adhere to established ethical standards. However, compliance with these standards can vary across participants and contexts. This is especially important when studying individuals with disabilities, who may be more sensitive and vulnerable compared to those without disabilities. Ethical considerations become critical in this context, as researchers must carefully navigate the complexities of working with such populations. Drawing from the researchers' case study on inclusive education for students with visual impairments (partial, low vision, or total blindness), this paper highlights the ethical dilemmas that arise when studying people with disabilities. Key concerns include obtaining informed, voluntary consent, maintaining mindfulness throughout the research process, managing participants' expectations, and building trusting relationships with them. Researchers must be especially attentive to these issues, given the vulnerabilities and specific needs of this group. To address these concerns, this paper suggests that researchers practice diplomacy, foster positive relationships, and respect diversity. Building trust with participants is essential, and communication plays a crucial role in this process. Researchers must be sensitive to participants' unique challenges and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure respectful and inclusive interactions. In conclusion, while ethical approaches are generally consistent across research studies, additional care is required when studying individuals with visual impairments due to their physical limitations in seeing. Researchers and all stakeholders involved in the research process bear the responsibility to design disability studies that explicitly address these ethical concerns and incorporate appropriate strategies to mitigate them, thereby ensuring that the research remains both ethically sound and methodologically robust.

Keywords

Ethics of disability studies; People with disabilities; Inclusive education; Visual impairment.

1. Introduction

Research in any field is conducted to broaden knowledge by uncovering issues requiring attention to support evidence-based planning, policy-making, decision-making, program implementation, and monitoring (Jacobs et al., 2018). This holds equally true in disability-related research for identifying issues that need to be addressed by developing policies, evaluating programs and services, and monitoring how those concerns are addressed (Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2022). Since research concerns understanding participants' perspectives, its processes are guided by ethical considerations that permeate all research stages. Therefore, everyone who conducts research is responsible for ensuring research ethics. This issue of ethical consideration is more sensitive in the cases of research on people with disabilities because many people with disabilities are vulnerable and are excluded even within an exclusion (Puigvert & Holford, 2012). Hence, one of the essential components of research is to establish that the whole process was conducted in compliance with accepted research ethical standards (National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities [NESH], 2022). Applying ethical principles in research is essential to any research practice, especially in research involving people with disabilities. By ethics, we mean distinguishing between right and wrong behavior by honoring the dignity of students with visual impairments.

The practice of ethical standards can influence the outcome of the research. There are many ethical considerations that one will have to abide by while conducting research in any field. This becomes even more imperative when undertaking qualitative research through “khalhau” sessions, given our long immersion in the field and our commitment to viewing the world from the participants' perspectives. We use the Newari term “khalhau” to denote informal discussions where both researchers and participants contribute to the agenda and actively participate in the process. This approach goes beyond the conventional “in-depth interview” (Brent & Kaska, 2021), as “khalhau” takes place in everyday settings through informal conversations. In these contexts, ethical considerations become particularly important, especially when working with people with disabilities, as participants are often engaged over extended periods. Here, the researcher's self-determination is critical to the success of the study (Tudzi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, maintaining ethical standards in these settings can pose challenges at times.

Against the above backdrop, this paper discusses the ethical challenges and dilemmas encountered by the first author while studying students with visual impairment in inclusive schools (Shrestha, 2019). The objective of our paper is not to analyze the rules but to reflect on the ethical dilemmas the first author faced when studying students with visual impairments. Therefore, this paper is an analysis based on prior empirical experience, with a primary focus on the ethical and methodological implications of those experiences.

Before presenting the insights from this study, the author met the participants several times to discuss the research agenda. This discussion was essential to building consensus among the authors to present their observations and document their reflections with additional insights.

Some other studies (e.g., Bryen, 2016; Tudzi et al., 2020) have also noted the ethical challenges encountered in research with people with disabilities. However, the strategies that might serve as a roadmap for addressing challenges have hardly been discussed.

The paper begins by presenting our research on disability studies, focusing on visual impairment. It further sheds light on the ethical dilemmas encountered in studying people with visual impairment and on possible strategies to address them. The paper particularly reflects on the dilemmas a researcher can face when researching students with visual impairments, highlighting issues and challenges that can make the research smoother if we know how to overcome them. Further insights into this have been reflected in theoretical references from Communicative Action theory, which postulates that we can communicate in technical terms that our audience can understand. Contractarian theory emphasizes several local ethical issues in everyday communication. Finally, the paper's conclusions are presented.

2. Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the first author's experience conducting research with students with visual impairments, this paper discusses the ethical challenges and dilemmas encountered in researching school students with visual impairments. These challenges included difficulties obtaining written voluntary consent and managing participants' expectations, particularly given that many were studying under scholarship schemes. The study's primary aim was to explore how inclusive education is practiced for girls and boys with visual impairments, whether partial, low vision, or total blindness, and to examine the limiting or enabling structural contexts of their access to education. The research investigated the school experiences of students with visual disabilities studying in integrated schools to address two central research questions: (a) How do various social and institutional layers influence the experiences of visually impaired students? (b) How do these layers contribute to integrating or segregating the school experiences of students with visual impairments? This study was conducted at integrated schools in the Kathmandu Valley, the national capital. The participants were visually impaired schoolgirls.

Any research connected to beliefs or ideologies based on the inferiority of persons with disabilities or abilities, or any rejection of their human rights, would be of ethical concern (Jenkin et al, 2020). The ethical concern emphasizes the importance of special consideration to vulnerable research participants, including individuals with disabilities. This concern is important because many of these individuals experience high levels of stigma, limited power, lower educational attainment, increased poverty, restricted access to resources, residence in conflict zones, and a lack of physical strength or other necessary attributes to safeguard and advocate for their interests (Heijden et al., 2019). The contractarian theory of ethics emphasizes the importance of local contextual factors, recognizing that virtues may vary from place to place (Bhattarai, 2013). The theory further postulates that right actions do not violate the free, rational agreement made between the parties to the contract.

The contract may differ depending on the context of the person involved. In the case of research on people with disabilities, there are two aspects in a contract, i.e., (a) willingness to participate in interviews by people with disabilities, and (b) being sensitive to researchers of people with disabilities who are mostly vulnerable. Therefore, a researcher practices ethics that are contextually relevant to people with disabilities, considering the various forms of disability and the differentiated needs of individuals. In our case, it was a contract between the participants and “the author,” the researcher, in which we did not obtain written consent but did obtain voluntary informed consent.

Another ethical theory relevant to this study is Jürgen Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action, which addresses performative action by emphasizing that vocabulary, colloquialisms, and word choices must be mutually understood by both parties in communication (Hugh, 2011). The theory further asserts that communicators can choose between using technical language or language accessible to their audience, in this case, participants with visual impairments. It underscores that ethical communication should occur without distortion or domination, highlighting the need to recognize power asymmetries between researchers and participants (Habermas, 1984).

3. Methodology

This study employs a case study methodology informed by the works of Merriam and Stake, and is situated within an interpretive paradigm. Given the nature of girls with disabilities’ experiences, the study adopts a subjective and exploratory approach. The research process followed a six-stage case study framework, further enriched by integrating additional methodological guidance from the broader literature (Baškarada, 2014). These six stages include: (a) planning, (b) design, (c) preparation, (d) data collection, (e) analysis, and (f) dissemination.

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure depth and triangulation. These included in-depth interviews and informal discussions with the girls; interviews with their parents and teachers; classroom and out-of-classroom observations; and a review of both published and unpublished documents. Throughout the study, careful attention was given to ensuring credibility and trustworthiness. The research process was conducted transparently and systematically, with a strong commitment to methodological rigor and evidence-based inquiry.

The first author began her field work by meeting with our research participants. She met at least five times with each of them and more than that in a few cases to seek their experiences in accessing their education, until we were satisfied that the discussion provided us with adequate information to answer our research question (Bawden & Robinson, 2020). To gain a deeper understanding of the background, she also discussed the context with parents and teachers of visually impaired students. She took her diary to take notes during the first interaction sessions with visually impaired students. However, she started using electronic recorders after one or two sessions, when the students began to feel more comfortable with her and had given their approval for recording.

During the interviews, the first author guided herself by ethical considerations. While in the field, she felt that those ethical issues substantially impacted her field research. So, the authors of this article decided to focus this paper on ethical issues in disability research. Hence, this paper summarizes our reflections on ethical considerations and dilemmas encountered while researching disability. By this, ethical issues to be considered in disability studies could be widely disseminated to the researchers interested in the field. Before discussing this issue, we first discuss how we proceeded with data processing and analysis.

Before commencing data processing and analysis, the three authors first discussed and prepared a plan for carrying out these activities. The underlying principles guiding the development of such a plan were to adopt an entirely ethical approach and to amplify the voices of our visually impaired participants. Accordingly, the first author carried out the initial levels of data processing and analysis, while the other two authors continuously assessed and discussed the whole process.

The first author began the data processing while she was still in the field. Every time she met with the students, she would begin by discussing the previous sessions. This approach served two purposes: reconnecting the student participants with previous discussions so that further discussion could continue along the earlier flow, and allowing students to affirm or correct the opinions they shared in previous meetings. After data collection was completed, the first author transcribed all interviews thoroughly and systematically. She then began coding, identifying keywords and grouping them into different categories. The codes were chosen mainly by drawing words from the interview excerpts. With the same process, themes were then developed from the categories. This process of coding and developing themes was first carried out separately for each respondent, and then amalgamated to create the final themes. All the themes were thus field-based or generated from what the visually impaired students shared with us. While carrying out each task, the first author worked under the guidance of the second and third authors. The second and third authors were also actively involved in cross-checking and validating the entire process.

As indicated, all authors primarily followed a thematic analysis, which involved analyzing unique cases while simultaneously developing patterns and insights. The authors jointly gained insights into the meanings behind our participants' statements to understand the findings within the broader sociocultural context in which they lived and studied. This process was basically to find answers to the research questions.

To ensure quality standards and establish trustworthiness, the study involved prolonged field engagement. Recognizing that qualitative research requires intensive and sustained interaction, the first author immersed herself in the participants' context to gain a deeper understanding of underlying meanings and to minimize potential distortions arising from the researcher's presence in the school setting. Data collection involved multiple interactions; interviews and discussions were conducted three to four times with participants, including additional sessions with two more introverted individuals. The initial meetings with the visually impaired participants primarily focused on building rapport.

Furthermore, teachers and parents of the visually impaired girls were interviewed to provide complementary perspectives, as they constituted important secondary participants in the study.

Thick description was employed to enhance the study's rigor, involving a comprehensive account of the research process, including data collection procedures, the study context, and the development of the final report (Anney, 2014). Detailed explanations were provided regarding participant selection, data collection methods, analytical procedures, and the progression toward the final draft. Such a rich description enhances transferability, enabling other researchers to consider replication under similar conditions in different contexts.

Dependability was ensured by closely aligning the findings, interpretations, and recommendations with data generated from participants (Anney, 2014). To further strengthen credibility, member checking was conducted: after completing the initial draft, the findings were shared with participants to identify any inaccuracies or misinterpretations. Based on their feedback, certain information was corrected, and additional insights were incorporated, thereby contributing to the refinement and finalization of the study.

In the study, we adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA), (2018), Kathmandu University's ethical guidelines, and Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2006). One limitation of the study is its focus on integrated schools within the Kathmandu Valley and its concentration on school-aged girls, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

4. Empirical Analysis/ Illustration

Based on in-depth interviews with visually impaired participants, the study found that they preferred to learn independently, without relying on external support. Within this group, language assumes heightened significance, functioning as a critical medium for compensating for the absence of visual input. Consequently, auditory modes of learning become central to how these students conceptualize and process information. Importantly, parents' experiences of financial insecurity, shaped by their socio-economic conditions, influenced the educational experiences of visually impaired students. The participants expressed a strong sense of responsibility to pursue higher education, both to alleviate their families' economic hardships and to overcome the social stigma associated with visual impairment.

Appropriately involving people with disabilities and respecting them as active participants in the research process is crucial for meaningfully shaping and informing the research. However, researchers may encounter various ethical challenges when conducting research with people with disabilities. Despite this, we faced several ethical dilemmas, which we discuss in the following sections. We also reflect on how we addressed and navigated these challenges in practice.

4.1 Informed Voluntary Consent

The first author held preliminary meetings with school authorities and potential participants to gather their views on the research topic's relevance and co-develop the guiding themes. Specifically, the first author met with three participants to confirm their suitability and willingness to participate in the study. It is essential that participants understand the reasons behind the request for their involvement, the types of information being collected, how the data are used, who uses it, and for what purposes (NESH, 2022). Furthermore, participants can be informed of the potential consequences of their participation, and researchers must ensure they fully understand what is required to provide informed consent for a specific study (Cook & Inglis, 2009).

During these meetings, after explaining the purpose of the research, verbal voluntary consent was obtained for their informed participation (Aguinaldo, 2022; Salwoska, 2018). No incentives or promises of rewards were offered to secure participation. It was explicitly communicated that those participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time or to decline to answer any question. If a participant chose not to answer a question, it was not repeated, and there were no negative consequences for non-participation (NESH, 2022). Additionally, a formal letter from the university to the study schools requesting permission to conduct "khalhau" sessions with the target participants facilitated the process.

Since our participants were non-sighted, getting their consent at the first meeting was not easy. For them, it was the first time anyone had approached them for this purpose, except for one male participant in this study. In such situations, we can also remember that we are also seeking personal information from the participants. Therefore, the participants need to be confident about whom they are relating their individual stories to (Sandnes, 2021). Hence, the first author took all necessary steps by explaining the process verbally to ensure that all participants in the research understood the process they were to engage in, including how their participation would be helpful. Since our participants were visually impaired, the author could not obtain written consent and lacked the skills to write in Braille or to understand it. We ensured that participants had sufficient information to give informed, voluntary consent.

Each time the first author met with the participants, she clearly explained the purpose of the research and the significance of their participation. She also informed them of their right to withdraw from the interviews at any time without needing to provide a reason. Additionally, the first author was attentive to obtaining informed and voluntary consent at various stages of interaction, following the principles outlined by Cocks (2006): (1) information presentation, (2) comprehension, and (3) reaction. After receiving all relevant information, participants had the right to either consent to participate or decline. This decision depended not only on the content of the information but also on how clearly and accessibly it was presented, as well as on the participants' ability to understand and respond to it.

The first author regularly checked with participants throughout the process to ensure they felt comfortable and willing to continue the research.

Due to their visual impairments, the author exercised additional caution to ensure their willingness to participate, paying close attention to non-verbal cues, such as physical gestures, which could signal discomfort. The first author remained alert to signs of distress, disengagement, or a desire to withdraw from the conversation. After the Khalhau sessions, six participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to share their experiences, noting that they appreciated being heard and valued. This positive response reflected their comfort and trust in the research process. One participant even remarked that this was the first time he had cried while sharing his personal story, recounting how his father had mistreated his mother for giving birth to a visually impaired son. He thanked the author for listening to his story. Such moments went beyond the formal process of obtaining informed consent; they reflected the deeper human connection and respect that remained with the participants beyond the research itself.

4.2 Being Mindful

Being mindful is one of the researcher's responsibilities, as stated in BERA (2018). The author was mindful of the inequalities that might exist for people with disabilities (Bradley, 2015) in society and their vulnerability. The study was for visually impaired students with limited ability to see the world through their own eyes, so the author had to be extra mindful. The first author was aware of the limitations of the research participants and remained attentive and sensitive throughout the research process. She was also aware of the daily vulnerability that school students with visual impairment faced. Nevertheless, she was sensitive to the chosen topic's importance to the participants and its relevance to advancing academic understanding.

When deciding to research a vulnerable social group, such as students with visual impairment, we presumed that the results might affect participants' lives (Salkowska, 2018). Therefore, the researcher repeatedly reminded participants of the research's sole purpose and obtained their verbal consent, stating that they did not have to respond if they felt awkward during the interview. Our participants were all from low socio-economic classes and were studying with scholarships available to them till Grade 10. They had expectations of support through any channel after they passed Grade 10. Although they did not explicitly state this, the first author understood it was implied in their responses. This expectation was one of the ethical issues we faced. So, the author did not give up hope but was mindful to convince them of the research's potential policy implications.

4.3 Relationship Building Between Researcher and Participants

To better understand participants' communication styles, establish rapport, and foster trust, it is crucial for researchers to build relationships by scheduling multiple meetings before the study (BERA, 2018). In our case, the first author also had many prior meetings with all participants to understand their needs and behavior, as they had vision limitations.

The process helped her and me understand each other personally. Initially, the research participants did not open up to the author. The “khalhau” sessions were conducted more than 5 times with each participant. The multiple visits with the participants helped the author build positive relationships. Then they started relating their stories to the author. However, the author was also consistently on guard and watching the participants during the “khalhau” sessions. When an emotionally taxing situation was about to arise, the author would make a quick decision and divert the topic. The first author had to be responsive, either by choosing between following the script and considering the participant’s emotional health (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021). Additionally, the first author is equally cautious in deciding the limits that cannot be breached during each “khalhau” to avoid upsetting the subjects. Therefore, the author was careful not to cross those boundaries (Satkowska, 2018).

Building relationships between participants and the researcher was initially challenging, especially because they could not see the researcher clearly. It took many meetings to get familiar with the participants. To familiarise themselves with the participants, the first author also spoke with caregivers or family members to better understand each participant’s context. Explaining and building relationships with those close to the research participants was very time-consuming. Building such a relationship can aid in consent assessment by helping interpret facial expressions and behavioral clues as signs of involvement or disengagement. The author had to be extra cautious because the participants were schoolchildren, a young population. We had to ensure they understood the risks and benefits of participating in the research.

4.4 Choosing an Accessible Location for Interviews

One must bear in mind the importance of the place for in-depth interviews (Rutakumwa et al., 2020), especially in research with people with disabilities. The location should be disability-friendly, with easy access for people with disabilities, so they do not face any obstacles during the interview. The location must be safe as well. An accessible location becomes essential, especially for wheelchair users and those with visual disabilities. However, in our research, the first author interacted with the primary participants with visual impairment. During the study, the author conducted “khalhau” sessions on the ground floor of the school building, where the participants did not have to climb stairs. It was in an open area, with no people around, and the author conducted interviews only after school was over, when there would be fewer students and fewer school authorities present, allowing participants to share their inside stories in privacy. The author also ensured she was accessible to participants in case they needed to contact her.

In addition, people with disabilities may have many stories to share, some of which may be private and sensitive. Therefore, relationship-building between researchers and participants is very important, and choosing a safe place for the interview facilitates the “khalhau” sessions. During the discussions, the author was mindful of her behavior and conduct toward the participants (MacNeill et al., 2021), recognizing that they could potentially disrupt the participants’ context and sentiments.

4.5 Avoiding Creating False Expectations

As academic researchers, we all know that the knowledge produced by research takes a long time to inform and impact policy and to change public attitudes. The concern could be hard for the visually impaired participants to understand, especially when the learners with visual impairment are from a school-age population. Since our participants were also high school students, the author had to ensure that the communication during the interviews did not create unrealistic expectations that would violate research ethics. One of the challenges the first author faced was managing the participants' expectations, which required careful diplomacy. Although the research participants did not explicitly ask about the benefits they would receive for participating, their indirect questions about the possibility of a scholarship after they graduate from Grade 10 suggested some expectation on their part. To minimize expectations, she cautiously informed participants about the potential societal benefits of the research when relevant, while also being sensitive to providing accurate information and avoiding unrealistic expectations. Where appropriate, the first author also clarified that participating in research does not influence how easily people may access public services or how cases and applications in which they are involved turn out. (NESH, 2022).

Every time the first author met the participants, she also clarified how the research would help highlight the issues faced by people with disabilities, including the constraints and barriers, especially in the context of visual impairment when accessing education. The author ensured repeatedly that it was the research for them, who believed in the statement "Nothing about them without them" (Bryen, 2016).

4.6 Understanding and Avoiding Stigma and Prejudice

It is of paramount importance for researchers to understand the social, cultural, and historical realities of persons with disabilities, including exclusion and stigma that many of them face (Tammeleht et al., 2022). Since the majority of people with disabilities face stigma and isolation, overlooking prejudices might occur in research practices by the researchers (Bryen, 2016). In response to this problem, any research connected to beliefs or ideologies based on the inferiority of people with disabilities, or any rejection of their human rights, would be a matter of serious ethical shortcomings. We were aware of the prejudice that people with disabilities commonly encounter in their lives. Therefore, while discussing with the participants, the first author was mindful not to lead the probing questions, which could perpetuate stigma or emphasize their vulnerability. She provided positive examples and role models to boost the confidence of people with visual impairments.

Sometimes during the "khalhau" sessions, participants expressed their grief, hardships, and painful stories. The first author, in a position as a non-disabled researcher, unable to help them contribute physically to their hardship, felt obliged. To ease the discussion, the first author sometimes shared her own stories of challenges she faced in school, particularly in her studies.

The sharing helped strengthen our bond and build trust, and we felt genuinely welcome each time we returned to them. At the same time, it is essential to consider the “respect for diversity.” Respecting diversity means respecting diverse learners with differentiated needs (Ginja & Chen, 2020). People with disability are a diverse group of learners. Given the vulnerability of people with disabilities, respect for diversity becomes even more of a sensitive issue. One of the traits we observed in the participants was their greater sensitivity to how people behaved toward them. This was also a concern shared by one participant with the first author. With the same in mind, participants were treated with respect and assured they could withdraw from the research if they chose to.

5. Methodological Reflection

Research involving learners with disabilities requires acknowledging that expectations should be realistic, as changing public attitudes based on research findings often takes considerable time. According to Habermas’s theory, this reality necessitates ongoing communication and interaction to foster a more profound understanding (Habermas, 1990). In our research with participants with visual impairment, we carefully communicated to avoid creating false expectations, an ethical practice that goes beyond formal consent. When the ethics of care for participants support this form of communication (Botes, 2000), it facilitates daily consensus between individuals with disabilities and researchers (Pezdek & Dolinski, 2017), making communication more contextual and comfortable. This concern is very important to the participants with visual impairment.

Researchers employing qualitative methodologies must maintain a high level of self-awareness to remain alert against the risks of inadvertent manipulation and the complex interpersonal dynamics that can arise throughout the research process. Awareness of ethical concerns and the ability to apply appropriate strategies to address them are crucial for ensuring the quality and integrity of research outcomes. While general ethical principles apply to all research involving people with disabilities, additional care and sensitivity are required when working with individuals with visual impairments, given their specific challenges in perceiving their environment. Although disability research is an emerging field, it presents numerous challenges that require careful attention. Effectively addressing these challenges helps to ensure a smoother research process and more ethically sound outcomes.

6. Final Considerations

Adherence to ethical principles becomes especially important in research involving people with disabilities, as many already face exclusion from public life. If researchers are not cautious, their work may inadvertently reinforce stigma or deepen marginalization. Even carefully adhering to ethical guidelines, dilemmas and challenges often arise when working with this population.

Responding to these challenges requires diplomacy, sensitivity to participants' lived experiences, and the cultivation of positive relationships built on trust and respect for diversity. Strategies such as fostering confidence and trust, practicing relational ethics, and demonstrating attentiveness, politeness, and flexibility can help researchers navigate these ethical complexities. Ultimately, researchers and all others involved ensure that research design thoughtfully integrates these ethical considerations and applies appropriate strategies to address them. Moreover, qualitative research involving people with disabilities can recognize the importance of setting realistic expectations, as research findings often take time to influence public understanding or societal attitudes.

Clear and respectful communication, grounded in ethical principles, helps participants understand the research's purpose and limitations. Studies involving individuals with visual impairments may require more frequent and careful communication due to their specific sensory challenges. Effective communication is further strengthened when adapted to participants' diverse socio-economic backgrounds and individual needs. Researchers can obtain deeper, more meaningful insights that strengthen the credibility and relevance of their findings by applying care and contextualizing their communication.

Ethical Approval: *Ethical approval was obtained from the Kathmandu University School of Education Research Committee (KUSOED-RC-210126).*

Informed Consent: *Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study, ensuring respect for the principles of confidentiality and voluntariness.*

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: *The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.*

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): *An artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) was used solely for language editing of certain sections of the article and not for any other purposes.*

Funding: *The authors declare that they have not received financial support for conducting this research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.*

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