

Original Research Article

Proposing a model and solutions to implementation of autonomy in general education institutions in Vietnam

ABSTRACT

In recent years, autonomy in preschool and general education known as an educational renovation trend, has been stated in guidance documents and implemented in some preschools and general schools. However, the theoretical and practical aspects still need to be further studied. The study focuses on exploring the concepts and models of autonomy in preschool and general education in the world and Vietnam's current context. Therefore, we propose an autonomy model in preschool and general education and some solutions to effectively implement this issue, contributing to renovation and improving the quality of education and training.

Keywords: Autonomy, autonomy model, implementation of autonomy, general education institutions, autonomy in general schools.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current context, it is necessary for the public administrative units to renovate the organization and operation towards autonomy and self-responsibility to improve their efficiency and operation quality. Overall granting autonomy and self-responsibility are regulated quite specifically on governments' policy documents, including Decree No. 43/2006/ND-CP and Decree No. 16/2015/ND-CP [7;8]. The latest document, Decree No. 24/2021/ND-CP, clearly regulated the management of educational activities, the implementation of democratic regulations and accountability, and the participation of social forces in managing educational activities in preschool and general education institutions [9]. However, the implementation of autonomy still faces many shortcomings because of no specific guidelines on how to implement it. It is essential to further research to provide more scientific bases. Therefore, exploring theoretical and practical bases and proposing measures for the implementation of autonomous contents and the completion policies on autonomy in preschool and general education is essential in the educational renovation context so as to improve its performance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Autonomy in preschool and general education institutions

Nowadays, the concept of autonomy is used commonly. According to the Vietnamese Great Dictionary, autonomy is self-mastery without dependence or domination: "Autonomy is self-management of one's affairs without domination of anyone" or "Autonomy is the level of self-control and independence that an employee is allowed to determine how to do a task" [14]. Therefore, autonomy is understood as having the right and being able to control one's affairs.

Autonomy in education institutions is an open concept with various connotations depending on the contexts. In simple terms, *"the autonomy of an education and training institution is the right to self-organize and self-manage actively and creatively its activities to perform its functions, duties, and mission. The leader of education and training institution is the subject carrying out the autonomy"*[4]. Because education is a system and belongs to a vertical management system, education activities are affected by factors both inside and outside the school (regions, related social forces). Therefore, it is necessary to specifically clarify the content of autonomy to unify the understanding of what the school "is entitled to decision-making" and "not being dominated" when mentioning "autonomy" in educational institutions".

The concept of "autonomy in schools" emphasizes the role of school management. Therefore, an autonomous educational institution is an educational institution with power to make decisions in activities in the fields of organization and personnel, finance and assets, organization of educational activities, international cooperation, and education quality assurance. The level of autonomy depends on the capacity and results of their education quality accreditation. Compared with "traditional institutions", "autonomy institutions" will have many changes in the management model to improve the quality of education and meet the educational socialization.

Autonomy in preschool and general education - a trend of educational renovation, was stated in guidance documents. One of the tasks and solutions identified in Resolution No. 19/NQ-TW dated October 25th 2017 of the 6th Conference of the 12th Central Committee of Vietnam Communist Party on continuing to renovate the organization and management system and improve the quality and effectiveness of the public administrative units is that: *"Having a pilot renewal policy towards the route, promoting the socialization of preschool and general education institutions in regions with high socialization capacity to expand the scale, improve the quality of training, and meet the demand of society, especially in big cities with a rapidly increasing population due to immigration"*[6]. Enhancing the autonomy of educational institutions is the right policy, in line with current requirements. If implemented well, this policy will have a high impact on creating motivation, promoting the development of the provision of public products and services, and satisfying the more needs of the people.

The Thu Do Law (2012) has determined to *build some high-quality preschool and general education institutions in the Capital towards the criteria of facilities, teachers, programs, teaching methods, and educational services. Enrollment at high-quality educational institutions bases on a voluntary principle*[10].

Therefore, renovating the operation of educational institutions toward autonomy is a trend, meeting the development needs of the country's education in fact. Some preschool and general education institutions (in Hanoi City, Ho Chi Minh City, and some provinces) have initially implemented this policy. However, in the implementation process, there has not yet had a necessary "legal corridor" to guide schools to implement autonomous contents with a unified implementation process to achieve the expected results. This fact shows that it is essential to have specific solutions to support educational institutions which conditions can implement formally and unified autonomous contents by the needs and abilities of schools and the needs of society.

2.2 International experience on autonomy in preschool and general education institutions

2.2.1 School based management

School-based management (SBM) is a strategy to improve educational quality by decentralizing decision-making power from state and district offices to every school. This model gives greater control to principals, teachers, parents, and students in the educational process by giving them decision-making responsibility regarding budget, personnel, and curriculum. This model creates a more effective learning environment for children through the participation of teachers, parents, and other community members [5].

Therefore, SBM can be understood as a model which:

- To improve educational quality by decentralizing decision-making power from state and district offices to every school.
- To give principals, teachers, parents, and students greater control in the educational process by giving them decision-making responsibility regarding budget, personnel, and curriculum.
- To create a more effective learning environment for children through the participation of teachers, parents, and other community members.

The essence of SBM is to give more power to schools to make decisions related to their activities. Nowadays, there are many different models of SBM, based on reformers' aim and determined by national policy and the broader social context. The approaches of SBM are different in two main aspects, namely "what" (the level of autonomy empowered) and "who" (who has the power to make autonomous decisions).

The outstanding feature of the SBM model is to promote schools' internal capacity and increase their responsibility. Outputs are focused on by the schools, being the motivation for renovation. It is also the renovated trend of schools towards developing students' quality and competence, and attaching the responsibility to the decision of the School Council. In an educational institution, the School Council is the highest power organization. Its responsibility is to determine the school development strategy, make important decisions in the long and short term, mobilize resources to participate and use existing resources more effectively, and ensure transparency and openness in activities because of the participation of parents and the community. The Principal, on behalf of the School Council, manages the daily educational activities of schools.

In the SBM model, the school designs programs more initiatively and creatively, whose output is the needs of society, mobilizes resources to develop the school, ensures openness and transparency in finance, and limited expenditure on programs to improve students' achievement.

On the other hand, the SBM model also clearly shows the relationship between autonomy and accountability (responsibility to obey legal regulations on school management and accountability on outcomes to superior management agencies and stakeholders including school council, parents, local community, rewards, and punishments).

Thus, to implement autonomy, the schools should synchronously implement three A-factors, namely autonomy, assessment, and accountability. These are also core elements of the 3A model: Autonomy – the role of the School Council; Assessment – the role of teaching and learning assessment tools; and Accountability – the education management information system (EMIS) [13]. These factors form a feedback cycle for schools to implement autonomy according to the SBM model.

Accordingly, the autonomy model can be divided into three levels as follows [12]:

- Strong: The school council (consisting of parents and school administrators) decides and controls most activities regarding the profession, staff, and budget.
- Intermediate: The school council has the power to design the curriculum but limited autonomy regarding resources for implementation.
- Weak: The school council is established but mainly with an advisory role.

2.2.2 The Charter school model in USA

A Charter school in the United States is an elementary or secondary school (later including early childhood education) without requiring admission according to popular regulations of the states [1, 2]. Being public schools but they commit to achieving significantly educational goals.

The Charter school is established to allow schools to implement activities independently, take initiative in developing the curriculum to best meet the needs of the local, select teachers by themselves according to the school's goals, and receive funding from the local budget. If the terms of the contract are not fulfilled, the school will be dissolved (e.g., their results lag behind other public schools).

With Charter schools, the first important factor focused on by customers is the educational program. They decide on their educational program to ensure the output requirements and organization of educational activities, especially towards being suitable to reality and better meeting the requirements of the community and region. Because of the high-quality and innovative services, especially for students with special needs, charter schools are more flexible than traditional ones.

In terms of staff, Charter schools are allowed to hire and contract teachers without following the degree regulations of the State or Department of Education. In terms of finance, they receive funding from state and local budgets.

Compared with normal public schools, the accountability to parents and the community of Charter schools is higher because they are managed by parents, teachers, or administrators and are directly accountable to the community. Local authority allows schools to renew and make decisions by themselves based on students' needs. In addition, Charter schools are reviewed and reformed every five years by the governing body or Department of Education to ensure their performance and enhance the responsibility for their finance and operational mechanism.

2.2.3 Some lessons from international experience

Based on studying the SBM model for public and private schools and the charter school model for public schools but operations under trust contracts, it can be seen that each model has certain specific advantages with the same feature that schools are given the right to autonomy and decide on professional, human, and financial activities by themselves. Proper implementation of the models will improve outputs toward the competency approach in the following aspects: promoting learners' competency, helping learners have a positive attitude in learning, applying a variety of teaching methods, and using knowledge and skills in real life [3]. Thereby, some lessons in autonomy in preschool and general education institutions in Vietnam can be drawn as follows:

Firstly, schools have identified a starting point for autonomy, in which most schools *desire to create a new development step for schools* through the development and implementation of a new educational program to meet **the needs of society, especially in regions with good socio-economic conditions.**

Secondly, the school needs to operate under *the school council* to strengthen responsibility and improve the efficiency of school administration. The school board (school council) decides on issues about the profession, finance, and staff to make the right decisions for the school and enhance the role of autonomy and accountability.

Thirdly, *teachers and community members become participants in the education process of the school*, they also need to be trained in the management and use of the school's budget.

Fourthly, any school in transition to autonomy needs to meet the conditions to be given the autonomy right and to have a route for implementation. The experience of international countries shows that schools are guaranteed their initial operating budget by funding from the district or the state (Charter schools also get funding to fulfill their commitments). It shows that autonomy does not mean financial and budget cuts. The mainly factor is how to implement their autonomy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Proposing autonomy implementation in preschool and general education institutions in Vietnam

3.1.1 Proposing an autonomous model of preschool and general education institutions

Table 1 compares some contents between autonomous and traditional schools to see more clearly the characteristics of an autonomous school.

Table 1. Comparing the public and autonomous institutions

Contents	Public school	Autonomous school
Educational goals	Towards the general/mass national education goal.	To meet the diverse educational needs of regions and localities. To express the philosophy and development orientation of the school.
Professional activities	To implement by the national curriculum. To develop a school education plan.	To develop and implement school program actively, both ensuring implementation of the national curriculum and personalizing according to learners' needs, towards advanced programs.
Finance	To be allocated budget for frequent activities. To be partial autonomy within the allocated budget.	To be proactive and flexible in managing financial resources according to demand. To decide the use of allocated and mobilized financial resources.

Contents	Public school	Autonomous school
Staff	To staff the teachers by the job position. To select and dismiss the teachers depend on the governance agency.	To arrange teachers according to the requirements of the curriculum. To be empowered to manage and take responsibility for the staff (recruit, employ, dismissal...)
Management and administration roles	Board of school administrators: The Principal has a comprehensive management role, from determining goals and operating directions to organizing school activities. School council: advisory role (actually, it has not been promoted as specified in the School regulations).	School Council: strategic orientation, macro management (commitment to output values, resources), and social accountability. Board of school administrators: to manage and organize the implementation of educational activities in schools.
The role of teachers	To perform professional tasks	To be the subject of program development and participate in the management and supervision of professional activities
The role of educational forces	To support schools' activities	To co-operate the implementation of activities and supervise the implementation process
Accountability	To mainly report to higher governance agency upon request To be partial public	To make regular explanations within the school and higher governance agency To be totally public and ensure democracy
Output commitment	Towards the goal of the national curriculum	Towards the goal of the national curriculum and schools' core values, providing high-quality educational services

Experiences from some preschools and general education institutions in Hanoi being allowed to implement autonomy under a high-quality model in recent years showed an autonomy key point, which is also the autonomy-approached starting point. Therefore, the schools need to change themselves through their efforts and professional development realized in a school program that ensures the national educational goals, meets the needs and expectations of parents and students, and creates a basis for accessing "socialized" resources. Therefore, it should be understood that the nature of autonomy is to create an appropriate operating mechanism to promote school's capacity and create its new development steps. In other words, autonomy is an operational mechanism, not a goal itself. Its goal is to improve the quality of education and ensure effectively educational socialization towards the school development strategy. Autonomy is not only a challenge but also an opportunity for school's development. Thus, the first important factor considered as the starting point in conducting autonomy is to develop and implement the school program in line with its development goals and satisfy social needs. Other factors such as staff, finance, and facilities are the companion factors to support the effective implementation of the school program.

Based on the above characteristics, international experience, and the real situation and desires of schools that have been autonomous and are implementing autonomy, the autonomy model of preschool and general education institutions in Vietnam is showed in Figure 1.

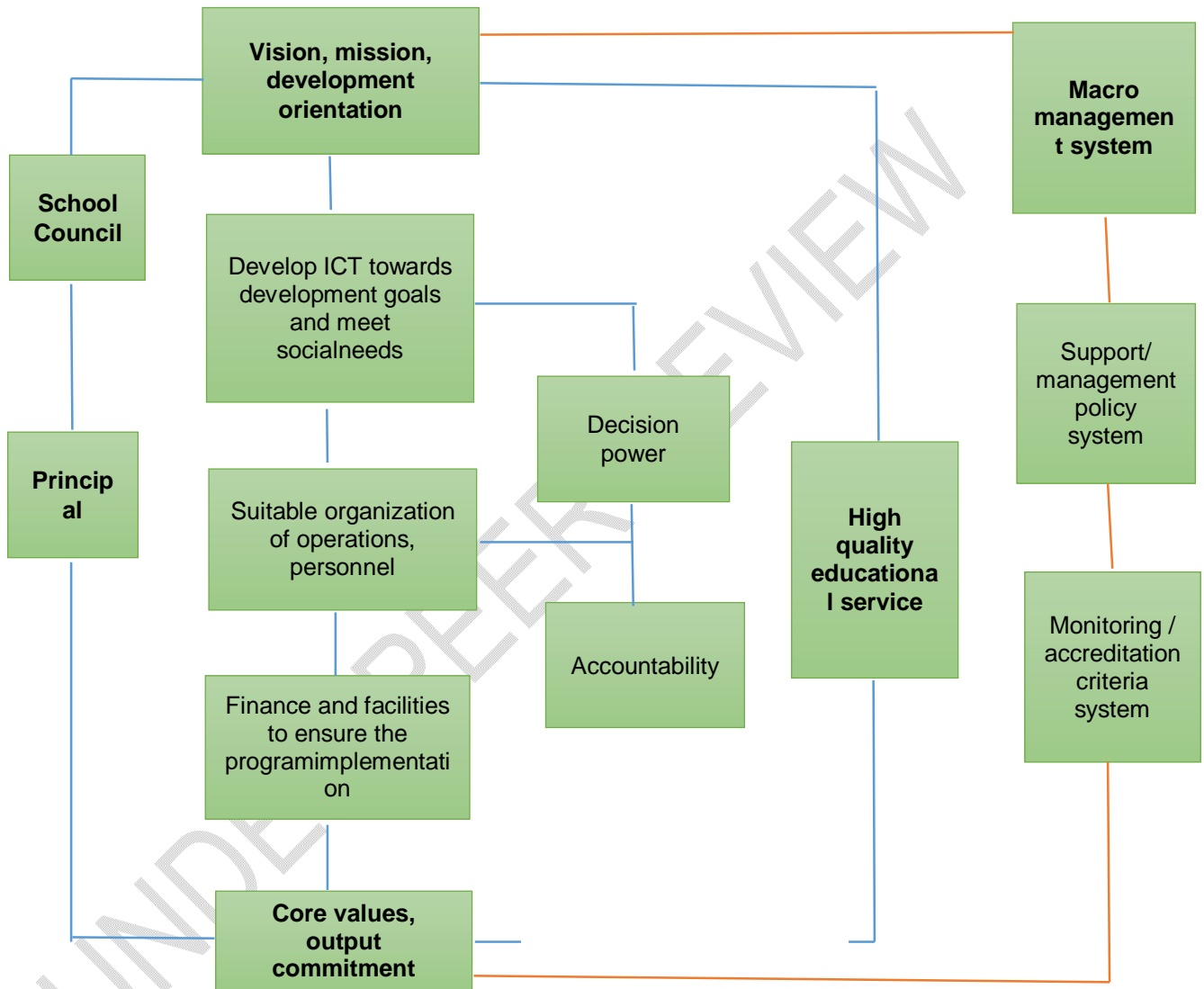


Figure 1. Model of developing autonomous preschool and general education institutions

The above model represents the relationship between internal and external factors in an autonomous educational institution. It also includes the same elements and relationships as the model of a preschool and general education institution. The main difference is the implementation level of "decision rights" and "accountability" in activities.

The internal factors of the autonomy model can be expressed as follows:

- Development philosophy/goal is the orientation of the school development strategy towards the renovation and improvement of the education quality. The school development strategy is based on the needs of society, practical conditions, and its renewal desire. Determining the development strategy is a significant basis for the school to affirm its brand and position in society. It is a condition for the school to make a transformation and be well-known in society.

- To attract social resources and have the basis for accountability, schools need to affirm core values and output commitments, developing schools with social needs.

- There are three aspects of schools' organizational structure and operation, namely program development, organizational structure, and finance and infrastructure. The program development is a core and prerequisite factor to organize the activities. The organization of staff, finance, and facilities are synchronous factors, supporting the effective implementation of the school program.

- High-quality educational service is the result of the three factors mentioned above, being school's goal and meeting social needs.

- All schools' activities must be carried out by a school governing mechanism, with the effective and synchronous participation of elements and forces, in which the school Council plays a significant role in deciding the school's strategy.

- The schools' autonomy level is shown by their decision-making power and accountability. The greater the decision-making power is, the higher the accountability is. It is also the high level schools' autonomy.

The external factors are the professional and administrative management system (Department of Education and Training; People's Committee of city/district, etc.). To support and spread the autonomy model, the managers' role is crucial in promulgating policies to create a legal corridor for school's activities. In addition, it is necessary to have a criteria system of regular and periodic monitoring and accreditation to make appropriate decisions, allowing the school to continue to carry out autonomy or reduce decision-making rights if its commitments are not fulfilled.

Therefore, an autonomous public educational institution is still a public school. Necessary and sufficient schools' factors to implement autonomy include: (1) Having sufficient capacity and conditions to carry out autonomy; (2) Being empowered to decide on some activities; and (3) Being willing to change the management model. It also shows that the transformation from a traditional model to an autonomous one - a trend of educational innovation, will create a new development step for the school. But the principle of development is uneven. The speed and level of development in each school are quite different. Based on their conditions and contexts, some schools will pioneer a higher quality model, according to a suitable route.

3.1.2 Some key solutions to implement autonomy in preschool and general education institutions

a. Developing and implementing the School Education Program – a starting point to carry out autonomy

International experience and practical implementation of autonomy in some general education institutions in Vietnam over the past time showed that, among approaches to

autonomy (profession, personnel, and finance), professional autonomy is the starting point to start autonomy. It is the first important factor in improving the quality of education, demonstrating the school's capacity and development orientation, and meeting social needs.

It is necessary to implement the following basic activities to develop a school educational program:

- To define clearly the vision, mission, and development goal of the school satisfying the need of the community.
- To define clearly the viewpoints and development orientation of the school educational program, both meeting the goals of the national educational curriculum and supplementing/focusing on specific characteristics that create the core values of the school (background culture, cross-disciplinary general competence, personal qualities and values, global citizenship, etc.) so as to meet the diverse learning needs of individuals.
- To research educational infrastructure, the socio-economic status in the region, parents' needs, students' competence, quality, teachers' structure, and conditions ensuring education quality such as practice facilities, equipments, educational means, learning materials, etc.
- To develop outcome standards in each stage, basing on the achieved standards/requirements of the national curriculum, supplementing requests towards the specific characteristics of the school.
- To develop an annual plan to implement the educational program at each level/grade and organize the implementation basing on the actual situation of the school after analyzing national and local curriculum.
- To monitor and evaluate regularly for timely adjustment.
- To organize annual evaluation of educational performance and quality and accredit the program implementation quality according to standards and criteria of nation, areas, and schools.

The situation of some schools that have implemented autonomy showed that developing a school education program in line with the development orientation is the key for the school to show its commitment to society in improving the quality of education. It is also the key for the school to offer an appropriate tuition fee to ensure its revenue, both stabilizing conditions and mechanisms so as to encourage teachers' dedication and "reinvesting" infrastructure better and better.

b. Improving school administration capacity - a breakthrough in implementing the autonomy model

In educational management science, the concepts of management and administration have been analyzed and understood in a fairly unified way. In general, the difference between school management and administration is reflected in the "priority weight" for aspects when organizing and administering the mission. In terms of function, the management is associated with implementing policies decided by the management entity, connecting, motivating, and controlling employees; whereas, the administration is related to strategic thinking, decision making, plans, and policies at the grassroots level, reflected in the

planning, processes, operating benchmark (requirements of the performance of tasks). In terms of influence, with management, decisions are affected by the manager's decision and point of view in the system, while with administration, they are affected by the community, the actual conditions, features of the organization, etc. Therefore, the transformation from management to administration is a mechanism change from decentralization and delegation to giving autonomy, supervision, and accountability. The contents of school administration in autonomous educational institutions include the exercise of the "rights" assigned for autonomy and the implementation of "accountability" internally, locally, and at all levels of management.

The transformation from management to administration is related to the role of the Board of school administrators (led by the Principal) and the School Council. According to the new governance point of view, schools are given more autonomy and decision-making power, including profession, finance, and personnel, instead of just "executive agencies". According to the popular models in the world, it is necessary to give administrative rights to a "group" representing "benefit-related groups". Thus, the rights and responsibilities are not concentrated on a few individuals but a group, shouldering and sharing responsibility. It leads to increased democracy and responsibility in school governance, which also means that the publicity, transparency, and supervision mechanism will be more evident.

According to Article 55, Clause 1, the 2019 Vietnamese Education Law, at a public school, the school Council is an administration organization, exercising the right to represent the ownership of the school and related parties. In kindergartens, preschools, and general education institutions, this Council decides on the direction of the school's activities, mobilizes and supervises the use of resources for the school, and attaches the school to the community and society, ensuring the achievement of educational goals^[11]. In fact, it only plays an advisory role without really performing the role specified in the Education Law, at preschool and general education institutions.

The limit of the current policy documents is just to regulate the role of the School council without specific regulations and guidelines on its position, function, and legal status of the Head. Therefore, the implementation of the rights and responsibilities of the council's Head is also limited. If the Head and the Principal share the responsibility, the "burden" of autonomy and self-responsibility will be "lighter" as it can both enhance the "management" role of the Principal in organizing educational activities and increase the co-operation of other stakeholders with the role of subject and "co-owner" of the Council in all schools' activities. Thus, the better a school fulfills the role of the Council and the Principal, the more the governing capacity will be improved, and then the autonomy capacity will be improved.

4. CONCLUSION

Pre-schools and general education institutions are now more or less given the opportunity to be autonomous, including in developing school programs, using teachers, staff, and finance. Therefore, each school must realize its strengths to actively determine the level of autonomy they need to strive for (strong, average, weak). As a rule, the higher the level of fulfillment of the autonomy conditions is, the higher the "decisive power" of the school is. However, it is also necessary for schools to recognize the challenges when implementing autonomy. For autonomous schools, the transformation from centralized management (focused on the School administrators) to administration (focused on the School Council) can be quite new.

Psychology and traditional culture also affect the readiness to implement accountability and publicity within schools, superior management agencies, and society. In addition, with adaptive education, schools focus more on teaching activities and neglect other educational

activities to meet the diverse needs of society. Besides, there are no policies and guiding documents to help the school have clear and effective implementation steps. Moreover, factors when implementing autonomy (permitted, capacity, and readiness of the school) are asynchrony. Therefore, only schools with the readiness to "overcome challenges" and reasonable steps will successfully exercise autonomy. For example, PhanHuy Chu High School, Sai Dong Kindergarten, CauGiay junior secondary school, etc., are proof of that success.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

CONSENT

Respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

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