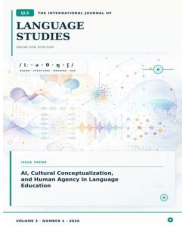
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Perceived Usefulness and Limits of PBIS in Vietnamese High School EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers a preventive framework for classroom conduct, yet its usefulness in language lessons depends on what teachers regard as participation. This qualitative case study examined eight high-school EFL teachers' accounts of PBIS-related practices at a private school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Semi-structured interviews conducted from June to August 2026 lasted 46–60 minutes, totaling 421 minutes. Reflexive thematic analysis developed six themes concerning task routines, the social meaning of reinforcement, collegial support, implementation constraints, linguistic scaffolding, and subject-specific professional learning. Teachers associated explicit expectations and modeled group roles with smoother transitions and more respectful interaction. However, orderly conduct did not necessarily involve sustained English production. Public praise, token rewards, and visible individual monitoring could also embarrass adolescents or undermine participation. Teachers described limited lesson time, examination priorities, uneven expectations across subjects, and documentation requirements as obstacles to consistent use. They favored task-specific expectations combined with vocabulary support, restrained acknowledgment, and private follow-up. The findings identify perceived conditions of usefulness rather than independently measured behavioral effects. They suggest that PBIS in EFL settings should be judged partly by whether routines preserve meaningful opportunities to use English, alongside their feasibility and acceptability to learners.

Keywords: positive behavioral interventions and supports; EFL classroom management; teacher perceptions; adolescent participation; qualitative case study; reflexive thematic analysis

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1 Introduction

An orderly English lesson is not necessarily a communicative one. Students can face their partners, hold the correct worksheet, and remain courteous while contributing little of their own language. Conversely, a room full of simultaneous discussion may be functioning as intended. For teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), managing behavior requires judgments about the relationship between classroom conduct and the learning task. Noise, silence, and first-language use have no single behavioral meaning outside that relationship.

These judgments become especially consequential in high school, where communicative work exposes learners to mistakes and peer evaluation while examination demands compete for their attention. Teachers must protect opportunities to speak without treating hesitation as automatic evidence of defiance. Research with Vietnamese novice EFL teachers identifies disruptive behavior and the selection of management strategies as continuing professional concerns (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). The issue is therefore both practical and pedagogical: a response that restores visible order may still leave the difficulty of participation unresolved.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) approaches behavior through prevention, explicitly taught expectations, acknowledgment, and differentiated support rather than relying mainly on punishment after an incident (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Its school-wide evidence base makes it relevant to classroom management, but school-level outcomes do not answer every subject-specific question. A reduction in disciplinary referrals, for example, cannot establish whether students use English more meaningfully in a discussion or whether a teacher can maintain a routine during a crowded lesson.

The present study examines that gap through teachers' experience in one private high-school setting in Ho Chi Minh City. It investigates how teachers interpret PBIS-related practices already in use, including occasions when those practices appear helpful, ineffective, or socially uncomfortable for learners. The focus is perceived usefulness and contextual fit, not an estimate of intervention impact. Three questions guide the inquiry: What changes in classroom behavior do teachers associate with PBIS-related practices? What conditions help or restrict implementation? What adjustments do teachers consider appropriate for high-school EFL lessons?

The study contributes a distinction between procedural participation and communicative participation. It also examines how apparently positive practices acquire different meanings in adolescent peer groups. By retaining accounts of failed reinforcement, persistent silence, and implementation burden, the analysis avoids equating support for PBIS principles with evidence that every procedure works.

2 Literature and conceptual orientation

2.1 Behavioral support and the problem of contextual fit

PBIS is a framework for organizing support across levels of need. Universal practices establish expectations for all learners; targeted and individualized support address difficulties that universal procedures do not adequately resolve. This structure should not be reduced to giving points or praising students. Its preventive logic requires teaching expected actions, recognizing them in context, and responding consistently when they do not occur (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Classroom-management research likewise emphasizes explicit instruction and constructive responses rather than a single reward technique (Simonsen et al., 2008).

Outcome research supports taking this framework seriously while preserving the distinction between evidence from other settings and evidence from the present case. Bradshaw et al. (2012) examined child behavioral outcomes through a school-level trial. Lee and Gage (2020) synthesized experimental and quasi-experimental research on school-wide PBIS and reported favorable overall effects. Neither study establishes how PBIS operates in Vietnamese high-school English lessons. Their relevance is to the broader rationale for preventive support, not to a presumed effect in the school examined here.

Implementation research offers a closer point of comparison. Fox et al. (2022) identified resources, team functioning, implementation fidelity, and staff beliefs among factors associated with sustained school-wide PBIS. Corbin et al. (2022) examined the relationship between implementation climate and teachers' perceptions of feasibility. These studies suggest a reason to investigate teachers' judgments without treating those judgments as objective outcome measures. Staff may endorse a framework while finding a particular procedure too demanding to sustain; they may also adapt a procedure because its prescribed form does not fit a lesson.

2.2 Participation and emotion in EFL lessons

Behavioral expectations in language classrooms must be related to a communicative purpose. A brief Vietnamese exchange may help learners clarify a task, whereas an extended unrelated conversation may replace the intended English practice. Silence can indicate thinking, limited vocabulary, uncertainty

about instructions, anxiety, or avoidance. Categorizing all such events as noncompliance risks directing intervention at the wrong problem.

Emotional conditions are relevant because learners often speak before they have full control of what they want to say. Teimouri et al. (2019) found a negative association between second-language anxiety and achievement across a large body of studies. That association does not show that a particular management procedure causes anxiety or that PBIS reduces it. It does establish that the emotional costs of participation deserve attention alongside observable conduct. Krashen's (1982) account of affect provides a way to interpret teachers' descriptions of hesitation and embarrassment, provided the affective filter is not presented as something measured by these interviews.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory provides a second interpretive perspective. Teachers and peers demonstrate ways of participating, and students observe how those actions are received. A modeled invitation to contribute may make a discussion accessible, while ridicule may discourage a learner from attempting another response. Recognition also has a social audience: acknowledgment intended as supportive can feel exposing. The two perspectives sensitize interpretation to emotional conditions and modeling without supplying a predetermined explanation for every account.

3 Method

3.1 Design and setting

The study used a qualitative single-case design to examine teachers' interpretations of existing practice within its institutional context (Yin, 2018). The case was the high-school EFL setting at Pathway School in the former District 9 area of Ho Chi Minh City. English lessons combined communicative activities with examination preparation. Teachers described using explicit expectations, group routines, acknowledgment, and respectful redirection within the school's broader behavioral-support context.

No new PBIS intervention was assigned for the study. There was no comparison group, systematic baseline measurement, classroom-observation dataset, disciplinary-record analysis, or language-proficiency assessment. The unit of analysis was teachers' interpretation of PBIS-related classroom practices. The study therefore does not assess implementation fidelity or assume that all practices participants described constituted a fully implemented school-wide PBIS system.

3.2 Participants and interview procedures

Eight teachers were purposively selected because they were currently teaching high-school EFL at the school and reported at least one semester of exposure to PBIS-related practices. They were assigned codes T1–T8. The sample included five women and three men, teachers with approximately two years to more than eight years of high-school experience, and assignments spanning Grades 10–12. PBIS exposure ranged from one to six semesters. Table 1 gives the profiles relevant to interpretation.

Table 1

Participant teaching profiles and interview durations

Teacher	Teaching experience	PBIS exposure	Grades	Minutes
T1	6–8 years	4 semesters	10, 11	54
T2	2–4 years	2 semesters	10	48
T3	More than 8 years	5 semesters	11, 12	58

Teacher	Teaching experience	PBIS exposure	Grades	Minutes
T4	4–6 years	3 semesters	10, 11	51
T5	4–6 years	4 semesters	11	46
T6	2–4 years	1 semester	10, 12	49
T7	6–8 years	3 semesters	10, 11	55
T8	More than 8 years	6 semesters	11, 12	60

Note. Profiles and durations are reported in the graduation project. Interview total = 421 minutes.

The interviews took place from June to August 2026. Individual durations ranged from 46 to 60 minutes and totaled 421 minutes. A separate 47-minute pilot interview in May informed revisions to the protocol and was excluded from the eight-participant corpus. Those revisions encouraged descriptions of specific classroom actions, separated strategic Vietnamese use from task avoidance, and explicitly invited examples of unchanged or adverse outcomes.

The semi-structured protocol addressed teaching roles, classroom difficulties, perceived changes, emotional climate, modeling, implementation conditions, and recommendations. Follow-up prompts asked for both a helpful and an unhelpful incident. Interviews were conducted mainly in English, with occasional Vietnamese expressions retained and translated in the written records. Participant profiles, field-note summaries, and reflexive memos supplied contextual documentation. The study's interview material, as reported in the underlying graduation project, forms the empirical basis of this article; the present preparation did not generate additional interviews or observations.

Sample adequacy was considered in relation to the specificity of the case and the substance of the interviews rather than statistical representativeness. Information power is a useful consideration for a narrowly defined qualitative sample (Malterud et al., 2016). Nevertheless, eight teachers from one institution cannot represent Vietnamese EFL teachers generally, and a narrow sampling frame does not eliminate the possibility of shared institutional assumptions.

3.3 Analysis and research quality

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The reported process involved repeated reading, coding meaningful passages, developing candidate themes, checking their boundaries against the wider corpus, and integrating them into an interpretive account. Codes concerned specific actions and tensions, including clearer task entry, silence despite compliance, rejection of reward points, speaking embarrassment, and documentation burden. Themes were developed around patterns of meaning rather than the number of mentions of PBIS terminology.

Six themes were retained from the study's thematic record. Negative cases were particularly important when considering the scope of a claim: orderly groups producing little English, older learners resisting rewards, and a student experiencing a monitoring sheet as a label. Participant codes attached to short quotations allow the reader to distinguish an individual account from an interpretation across accounts. Quotations reproduced here follow those reported in the graduation project; no independent re-transcription of audio was undertaken for article preparation.

Krashen's and Bandura's perspectives informed interpretation after attention to participants' accounts; they were not treated as causal tests. Reflexive memos recorded assumptions about silence, first-language use, and reinforcement. This approach seeks coherence between evidence and interpretation rather than mechanical intercoder agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The contextual

documents support an audit trail but do not triangulate behavioral outcomes in the way that independent classroom observations would.

4 Findings

The six themes address the three research questions while preserving differences among teachers. Table 2 summarizes the central interpretive claims. The accounts concern what teachers perceived in their lessons; none of the themes supplies an independently measured reduction in undesirable behavior.

Table 2

Six themes and the boundaries of their interpretation

Theme	Interpretive claim	Boundary or contrary case
1. Task routines	Explicit roles and expectations help teachers organize task entry.	Compliance may coexist with minimal English production.
2. Recognition and social exposure	Private correction and supportive peers can make attempts easier.	Public praise, tokens, or visible monitoring can embarrass learners.
3. Collegial support	Shared values and practical exchanges help teachers adapt routines.	Informal support can be uneven and does not ensure consistent use.
4. Implementation demands	Time, examinations, and documentation shape feasibility.	Endorsing the framework does not mean every procedure is sustained.
5. Linguistic and age-sensitive support	Expectations need language scaffolds and credible acknowledgment.	Grade comparisons are contextual, not developmental effects.
6. Professional learning and follow-up	Teachers seek EFL-specific mentoring and discreet targeted support.	Proposed procedures were not evaluated in an implementation trial.

4.1 Routines helped task entry without assuring English engagement

Teachers associated clear expectations with smoother transitions into pair and group work. Rather than telling students simply to behave or participate, they described modeling how to start an exchange, allocating roles, and making individual responsibilities visible. T5 used roles to address free-riding in group work, while T7 combined a language goal and a behavior expectation on a lesson slide. These accounts locate usefulness in making a task's social organization understandable.

The qualifications were as revealing as the positive reports. T1 observed students facing their partners and following the worksheet while reading mechanically instead of sustaining a conversation. T8 summarized the distinction: "PBIS gets students to follow the group routine and be polite" (T8), while meaningful English effort remained dependent on proficiency and teaching. T3 described greater courtesy without a corresponding enthusiasm for discussion among students preparing for examinations. A student could comply with the routine and still make only a minimal linguistic contribution.

Silence and Vietnamese use required interpretation rather than automatic correction. Teachers described allowing short first-language clarification before an English-output phase. T7 linked some apparent refusal to missing vocabulary, and T6 recalled learning to pause before treating silence as defiance. The issue was whether an action helped learners enter the intended task or displaced it. Teachers' reports of better conduct therefore support a narrower conclusion than a claim of improved communicative competence.

4.2 Supportive interaction depended on the social meaning of recognition

Teachers connected private redirection and less confrontational responses with greater willingness to attempt speech. T1 described acknowledging an imperfect paraphrase rather than immediately correcting grammar in front of the class. T2 recalled students stopping when he approached because they expected criticism. He interpreted their later willingness to continue as a response to noticing successful attempts, although the study provides no independent measure of that change.

Peer behavior was important in accounts of presentations. T4 recalled a student withdrawing after classmates laughed at a pronunciation error. She responded by teaching an audience routine involving attentive listening, constructive comments, and questions without ridicule. She associated repeated rehearsal of that routine with greater willingness to present. T8 similarly emphasized peer feedback, observing that "Modeling sets the standard, and peer response cements it" (T8). These examples describe classroom conditions teachers considered safer; they do not establish a measured change in anxiety.

Other episodes challenged the assumption that positive intent guarantees a supportive experience. T1 and T3 described older students regarding token rewards as childish or irrelevant to examination priorities. T6 found scripted praise unconvincing with Grade 12 learners. In T2's account, a student experienced a visible daily monitoring sheet as stigmatizing: "You treat me like I'm a delinquent student" (T2, English translation reported in the interview account). T2 replaced the conspicuous form with a less visible conversation. This case qualifies the use of targeted monitoring rather than demonstrating that every check-in procedure is harmful.

Recognition was consequently understood as useful when it was credible, proportionate, and sensitive to adolescent relationships. Public visibility could encourage constructive participation or make a student feel exposed. The teachers' distinctions concerned how acknowledgment was delivered, to whom, and before which peers, not simply whether praise was present.

4.3 Shared values and collegial exchange supported professional judgment

Several teachers described school values of respect and emotional awareness as compatible with preventive support. T4 linked respectful listening in English lessons to expectations encountered in other school activities. T2 considered reinforcement by homeroom teachers helpful in establishing Grade 10 routines. These are accounts of perceived alignment, not an independent audit of school policy.

Colleagues supplied practical ways to enact those values. Teachers shared slides, role cards, and examples for gallery walks, interviews, and discussion tasks. T6 found conversations with experienced EFL teachers more useful than general induction for deciding how to respond naturally to older learners. T8 described practical departmental exchange as a way to make adaptation a shared responsibility.

Teachers also distinguished consistency from identical procedures. T3 wanted discretion over acknowledgment in senior classes while supporting common expectations of respectful conduct. The accounts suggest that shared principles became usable through situated judgment. Informal exchange nevertheless had limits: access to practical knowledge could depend on which colleagues a new teacher consulted. Supportive relationships did not by themselves constitute an equitable or sustained professional-learning system.

4.4 Time and competing demands restricted consistent use

The 45-minute lesson repeatedly appeared as a constraint. Teachers described settling the class, revising language, explaining expectations, running a communicative activity, and providing feedback within the same period. T1 acknowledged reducing check-ins during examination periods. T7 described difficulty attending to individual behavior while monitoring a class of around 32 learners. Such accounts concern feasibility rather than rejection of preventive principles.

Teachers also associated disengagement with fatigue and the timing of lessons. T2 described the last period on Friday as difficult; T7 recalled reducing task demands during a week of tests and school activities. These examples do not establish a general fatigue effect. They show how participants interpreted the fit between a routine and students' immediate capacity.

For senior classes, assessment priorities were especially prominent. T3 described students completing a speaking task minimally before returning to other subjects or examination work. T6 reported polite responses to redirection without sustained English production in Grade 12. Positive acknowledgment could protect the relationship without resolving a perceived mismatch between the task and what students believed would be assessed.

Uneven expectations across subjects and administrative requirements added further pressure. Teachers described learners moving between classrooms with conflicting approaches to talk and correction. They also questioned whether lengthy targeted-support records could be completed reliably. The difficulty was not simply the absence of a good technique; it involved the conditions under which techniques were expected to be maintained.

4.5 Participation expectations needed linguistic and age-sensitive support

Teachers' recommendations repeatedly paired behavioral expectations with means of meeting them in English. T7's formulation was direct: "behavior management without language support fails" (T7). He proposed vocabulary banks, sentence frames, and manageable speaking goals. T2 suggested differentiated roles so that less fluent learners could contribute without matching the length or complexity of advanced classmates' output.

T4 described a graduated route from prepared sentences with a trusted partner to less scripted participation in a group. T5's role cards likewise made a contribution more concrete, provided the roles distributed real speaking opportunities rather than merely assigning labels. These examples position scaffolding as part of making an expectation attainable, not as a reward for compliance.

Age-sensitive acknowledgment and task relevance formed a second part of this theme. Teachers of senior classes favored restrained feedback, bounded choice, and a clearer connection between speaking tasks and academic priorities. Their grade comparisons remain descriptive: the accounts cannot establish that age alone explained differences in response. The supported claim is that teachers regarded the social meaning and curricular purpose of a practice as conditions of its usefulness.

4.6 Professional learning and targeted support needed to fit EFL work

Teachers requested examples involving communicative tasks rather than generic discipline scenarios. T6 characterized initial preparation as limited: "The onboarding training was too brief and too theoretical" (T6). Others wanted to examine speaking withdrawal, audience ridicule, group domination, and situations in which Vietnamese use either supported or replaced English practice. Mentoring and observation were proposed as ways to develop the judgment needed in those episodes.

The preference for manageable targeted support did not amount to rejecting support beyond the classroom. T2, T5, and T8 described the need for clearer communication among English teachers, homeroom teachers, and designated support staff. Shorter records and discreet follow-up were proposed to reduce burden and unwanted visibility. However, the interviews did not establish that a suitable digital system, access policy, or staffing arrangement already existed.

Teachers' proposals therefore identify design requirements rather than a ready-made solution: subject-specific examples, protected student dignity, a named route for follow-up, and documentation proportionate to the teaching task. Their accounts support examining whether a procedure is workable and acceptable before assuming that formal adoption will produce consistent use.

5 Discussion

5.1 Procedural order and communicative participation are different outcomes

The most consequential distinction across the accounts was between following a routine and contributing meaningful English. A routine can make task entry more predictable, reduce interruptions, or clarify turn-taking without supplying the vocabulary, ideas, or reasons to continue an exchange. This distinction helps explain why teachers could describe PBIS positively while also reporting persistent silence or superficial task completion.

For EFL practice, behavioral indicators need an instructional reference point. Facing a partner may be a useful condition for interaction, but it is not equivalent to explaining a view or responding to another person's meaning. Conversely, brief first-language planning may support later English production. The findings suggest that classroom order is valuable insofar as it protects access to the learning activity. A universal preference for quiet behavior would miss that purpose.

This interpretation complements, rather than contradicts, research supporting school-wide PBIS outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Lee & Gage, 2020). The studies address different outcomes and levels of analysis. The present case supplies an account of how subject teaching complicates what counts as improvement; it cannot confirm or overturn school-level effect estimates. Its contribution lies in identifying an outcome distinction worth testing through direct observation and learner perspectives.

5.2 Recognition can support participation or increase social exposure

Teachers' descriptions of private correction and supportive audiences are consistent with attending to the emotional conditions of language use (Krashen, 1982; Teimouri et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it would be unwarranted to conclude that PBIS lowered students' anxiety. No anxiety scale or student interview was included. Teachers inferred emotional responses from hesitation, posture, participation, and their recollection of particular episodes.

The negative cases sharpen the interpretation. Rewards could appear childish; conspicuous monitoring could signal deficiency. These reports suggest that a practice's social meaning mediates its acceptability, even when the teacher's intention is supportive. Bandura's (1986) attention to social learning helps make peer response visible in that interpretation. Learners observe not only a modeled action but also the interpersonal consequences of being seen to perform it. The interviews do not measure that mechanism, but they offer a plausible explanation for why the same broad category of recognition was described differently across situations.

The implication is to examine acknowledgment as an interaction, not to assume that more praise is always better. Specific, understated feedback may preserve a learner's contribution without turning it into unwanted public attention. Whether students experience such feedback as respectful remains an empirical question that teacher accounts alone cannot settle.

5.3 Feasibility is part of implementation rather than an afterthought

Teachers' endorsement of PBIS principles coexisted with reports of abandoned paperwork and shortened routines. This tension is compatible with implementation research linking sustained use to resources, teamwork, and perceived feasibility (Corbin et al., 2022; Fox et al., 2022). The present interviews add concrete examples from language lessons: a behavioral prompt competing with feedback time, a speaking task competing with examination priorities, and a targeted record competing with immediate attention to learners.

Adaptation may therefore be a reasonable professional response, although the study does not establish which adaptations preserve the essential features of PBIS. Clear common principles and flexible enactment need to be distinguished from inconsistent or arbitrary treatment. Subject-focused

mentoring could make those decisions discussable, particularly when a beginning teacher must decide whether silence indicates processing, anxiety, or avoidance. The question becomes which expectations should remain common and which aspects need adjustment for the task and learner.

6 Implications and limitations

6.1 Directions for a formative school trial

A modest response would begin with one recurring communicative task rather than a new monitoring system for every lesson. Teachers could pair a visible language goal with a small number of observable expectations, model the interaction, and provide optional phrases that allow less confident learners to enter it. Review should consider what English learners actually contribute as well as whether transitions become smoother. These are proposed practices derived from teachers' recommendations, not interventions evaluated in the present study.

The graduation project proposes a twelve-week formative cycle. Preparation would occupy the first two weeks, classroom trials and refinement the next four, and authorized targeted follow-up and cross-subject coordination the following four. A final two-week review would examine feasibility, participation, and unintended effects. This schedule has not been implemented as part of the reported dataset. Any trial would require institutional agreement about workload, student feedback, confidentiality, and staff responsibilities.

An initial review could combine brief teacher notes, limited observation of speaking opportunities, and approved student feedback about correction and recognition. It should retain cases where a routine does not help. Private targeted support should use existing authorized channels, with access limited to staff who need the information. No finding here justifies acquiring a particular application or publicly identifying students who receive additional support.

6.2 Boundaries of the evidence

The single-school, purposive sample limits transferability. Teachers working in one institution may share expectations or describe practices in institutionally acceptable terms. Retrospective interviews are vulnerable to selective recall and favorable attribution; striking incidents may be easier to remember than ordinary lessons. Differences associated with grade or PBIS experience could also reflect teacher style, proficiency, task design, or assessment demands. The design cannot separate those explanations.

Students, parents, administrators, and teachers of other subjects were not interviewed. The absence of student accounts is particularly consequential for interpreting embarrassment, motivation, and acceptability. Field notes about interviews do not replace classroom observation, and a thematic matrix does not supply behavioral frequency data. The article's evidence is the interview account reported in the graduation project; original audio, complete transcripts, and consent documents were not independently audited during preparation of this manuscript.

Future research should examine classroom interaction directly and seek learners' views under appropriate consent procedures. A longitudinal study could distinguish implementation, participation, and language outcomes, while a comparative design would be needed for stronger causal claims. Grade-sensitive hypotheses and the proposed implementation cycle should remain questions for those studies rather than conclusions already established here.

7 Conclusion

Eight teachers described PBIS-related practices as useful when expectations clarified how to begin and sustain classroom work, correction protected dignity, and support remained manageable. Their accounts also identified limits: orderly conduct could coexist with little English, recognition could

embarrass adolescents, and practical demands could undermine consistent implementation. The findings support a task-sensitive account of behavioral support in which linguistic access and peer relationships matter alongside clear routines. They establish teachers' perceived conditions of usefulness in one school, not a demonstrated reduction in misconduct or an improvement in language achievement.

Ethics and informed consent

The underlying graduation project reports institutional authorization and voluntary informed consent before the interviews. Participants are identified by codes, and identifying details of students are omitted. The article reports teachers' accounts and introduces no additional participant data.

Data availability

The article draws on the interview-based graduation project and its reported participant profiles and analytic documentation. Interview material is not included as a public dataset because it contains potentially identifiable information. Access to underlying research records is subject to participant consent and the institution's requirements.

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Declaration of generative AI use

Generative AI assisted the restructuring and language editing of the graduation project into this article, reference checking, and document preparation. No additional interviews, participant quotations, or empirical results were generated as research data.

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