



# The Happiness Experiences of Refugee Children at School: a Phenomenological Study

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## Abstract

This study utilized the phenomenological research approach to examine the school happiness experiences of refugee children who migrated to Türkiye. This research builds on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model. The research was conducted with 27 Syrian refugee middle school students studying in Malatya, and data were collected using a semi-structured interview form. The data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings revealed that friendship, language, and communication skills, activities suited to their interests and talents, and teacher support were of critical importance in the school happiness experiences of refugee students. While refugee students expressed great happiness in spending time with their friends, they also experienced negative situations such as bullying and social exclusion. Language and communication problems constituted a significant barrier in the school adaptation process of refugee students and led to their isolation. Additionally, activities suited to their interests and talents reinforced their sense of belonging to the school and contributed to their social acceptance. Consequently, strategies should be developed to positively enhance friendships, strengthen language and communication skills, encourage activities suited to their interests and talents, and increase teacher support to improve the school happiness of refugee students and support their social integration.

**Keywords** Refugee students · Migrant students · School happiness · Phenomenology · Ecological model

## 1 Introduction

Migration stands as an inevitable reality in today's world. Millions of people leave their homelands each year for various reasons, stepping into new environments to establish their lives. These migrations affect adults and children facing economic, cultural, and educational challenges. In addition to these difficulties, it is widely accepted that education plays a critical role in the social integration of refugee children, alleviating the effects of trauma (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023), restoring a sense of emotional and social well-being (Guo et al., 2019), building their futures, and providing stability (Martin et al., 2023). Türkiye, hosting the most refugees (UNHCR, 2022), naturally hosts the most refugee children. For these children, schools represent a gateway to friendship and social connections (Miller et al., 2017), post-trauma recovery, future building, and many other positive aspects. Young children might not be fully aware of how crucial education is for their future or the structural arrangements made to support them. Still, they are acutely aware of their feelings, especially about their interactions within the school environment. In this context, we advocate for the importance of the social and emotional well-being of refugee children. Thus, this research focuses on the happiness experiences of refugee children attending middle school in Türkiye within the school environment.

Migration is defined as the movement of people from their place of birth to other locations, either temporarily or permanently. Economic reasons, better working conditions, natural disasters, wars, ethnic reasons, border changes, and population exchanges facilitated by international agreements compel people to migrate (Nayyar, 2002). Some people migrating to other countries are referred to as refugees. A refugee is someone who has left the country of their citizenship due to persecution based on their affiliation to a particular social group, belief, nationality, or political opinion (Uzun, 2015), cannot be assured of their safety, and thus has departed from their homeland, unable or unwilling to return (Ergüven & Özturanlı, 2013). Generally, people's expectations from migration are to achieve a better future. However, they embark on a journey into uncertainty. This uncertainty applies to both the migrating individuals and the host societies. From societies' perspective, migrants are seen as potential sources of labor support, population growth, and economic revitalization. However, during times of financial crisis and conflict, migrants are often blamed for problems and may face discrimination, racism, and violence (De Haas et al., 2019). Among the visible issues, one of the significant problems is integrating migrant children into the educational system. Studies (Akkaya-Kalayci et al., 2017; Belhadj Kouider et al., 2014) show that migrant children face social, communal, and academic challenges. These challenges can negatively impact children's emotional state in schools, affecting their happiness. Fang et al. (2016) also point out that various difficulties affect the situation of migrant students in schools. Factors such as adapting to a new culture, coping with economic hardships, social relationships, and academic success are essential in determining the happiness of migrant students within educational institutions.

For refugee children, the school environment in a new society, despite offering a stable and secure setting, requires additional effort for adjustment due to their sudden and challenging migration experiences, diverse backgrounds and cultural character-

istics, and the lack of a shared language (Hart, 2009; Rutter, 2003). Coming from different geographies and cultures than their peers, refugee students face adaptation problems such as communication barriers, peer bullying, and language deficiencies, which negatively impact their education (Yurdakul & Tok, 2018). The adaptation process to the host country also affects the school happiness of migrant students. School happiness is related to areas of adaptation, such as academic success, meeting psychological needs at school, and student behavior in school (Huebner & Gilman, 2006). School happiness is not only about the absence of sadness but also a positive psychological state where children feel good about themselves, value themselves, have positive relationships, and participate in school activities (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). A happy school environment is considered necessary for effective learning and the development of students' abilities. Students who are so glad at school exhibit higher academic achievement, more vital social skills, better peer relationships, and emotional adjustment (Bird & Markle, 2012; Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Children who are happy at school are less likely to experience stress, anxiety, or depression. Positive school environments provide children safety and security for their emotional development and well-being (Suldo et al., 2006; Weissberg et al., 2015).

In the integration process of refugee children, well-being is increasingly emphasized. Well-being is a concept in which individuals subjectively evaluate their emotional experiences and satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984). This concept is handled in two main dimensions within the framework of subjective well-being: cognitive dimension and affective dimension. While the cognitive dimension includes life satisfaction, the affective dimension includes positive and negative emotional experiences (Diener et al., 1998). One of the most basic indicators of subjective well-being is happiness, which reflects the person's general satisfaction and positive emotional state (Koch, 2017). Recently, Bajo Marcos et al. (2023) defined three main well-being indicators in their research to identify child-centered indicators in integrating refugee children: happiness, belonging, and global self-esteem. Among these indicators, happiness is important because it relates to other components and is an important part of well-being (McAuley & Layte, 2012). This link between well-being and happiness emphasizes the importance of positive emotional experiences in the integration processes of refugee children.

In social justice, multicultural education, and culturally responsive teaching, the relationships between teachers and students and among students within the school setting are crucial for adapting refugee students. Research findings indicate that peer support enhances the well-being of refugee students (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023). However, there remains a lack of understanding regarding the emotional experiences of refugee students in their socio-educational integration (Ziaian et al., 2018). Miri (2024) developed an integrated conceptual model to improve the education of refugees. One of the significant macro structures in this model is relational impact, which includes the emotional thoughts of refugee individuals. The positive emotional experiences of refugee children at school can influence their sense of security, school belonging, and achievements, referred to as microstructures. Quality interactions with peers and teachers can support children's well-being. Individuals need love and attention not only in early childhood or during challenging times but always. It is

well-known that the displacement of refugee children compounds their psychological well-being and increases stress levels. Schools can serve as a sanctuary and a balancing factor for the recovery of these children (McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). Happiness is one of the significant indicators of well-being in integrating refugee children into school (Dežan & Sedmak, 2023). The success of refugee children in education is also linked to their psychological well-being (Block et al., 2014).

## 2 Ecological Systems Theory

The ecological systems theory offers a comprehensive approach that deals with the development of the individual together with environmental factors and the interactions between these factors instead of considering the development of the individual only in the context of individual characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to this theory, the individual continues his/her development within five intertwined environmental systems. The first layer, the microsystem, covers the closest environment with which the individual interacts directly. Elements such as family, school, teachers, and peers constitute the parts of this system (Karan & Erdemir, 2023). The mesosystem focuses on the relationship networks between the elements in the individual's microsystem; for example, the interactions between parents and teachers constitute this layer (Lau et al., 2018). The exosystem refers to systems in which the child is not directly involved but indirectly affected; other schools and non-family social structures fall into this category (Allen et al., 2016). The macro system, which includes broader social, cultural, and social beliefs, defines the widest environment that affects the development of the individual (Lau et al., 2018). The chronosystem deals with the timing, frequency, and change of events occurring in all these environmental systems (Emerson et al., 2022).

Arakelyan and Ager (2021) state that ecological systems theory offers a comprehensive tool for examining refugee students' adaptation processes to the host society and the effects of forced migration on child development. This theory has been used as a useful framework in many studies to understand refugee children's sense of belonging to school (Allen et al., 2021), to analyze the relationships between social context factors and their emotional health (Emerson et al., 2022), and to understand various welfare outcomes from micro-system to macro-system (Karan & Erdemir, 2023). Moreover, researchers emphasize the critical importance of proximal processes in this theory (Emerson et al., 2022). In this context, in our study, we took Bronfenbrenner's microsystem concept as a basic framework to examine the emotional experiences of refugee students arising from their interactions at school. The microsystem includes the elements that strongly impact an individual's behavior and emotional states (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This system is based on the individual's experiences and contributes to socio-educational integration processes by emphasizing the importance of children's interactions with peers and school staff (Martin et al., 2023). However, we recognize that interactions between macro and meso systems can also impact the well-being and happiness of refugee children. However, some criticisms focusing on the experiences of refugee children may ignore sociological factors (Antony-Newman & Niyozov, 2023). While

young children are known to have limited awareness of sociological, economic, and wider contexts, we hypothesize that their emotional experiences are more determinant of their attitudes towards school, learning, and the social environment.

### 3 Türkiye Context

Türkiye is a geopolitical bridge between the European Union (EU) countries and the Eastern/Middle Eastern bloc countries. Due to being at this intersection point, it has been and continues to be in contact with migration in some way throughout its history, sometimes as a direct transit point for irregular migrants in order to have better living conditions and sometimes as a preferred country to live in (Adil, 2020; Özden, 2021). It is seen that Türkiye has faced mass asylum seekers due to some events occurring in neighboring countries, especially after the 1980s, and the civil unrest in the Middle East has caused more people to seek asylum in Türkiye, making Türkiye a target country for migration (Gültekin et al., 2016). According to official data, as of 02/05/2024, there are 3,115,844 irregular migrants and 1,119,919 migrants with residence permits in Türkiye (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2024). Especially with the civil war in Syria in 2011, an intensive migration to Türkiye started, and the proportion of Syrian refugees among the refugees in Türkiye increased rapidly. In the early days, no significant problems arose since refugees from Syria lived in border provinces and camps (Yıldırım et al., 2017). The devotion of the local people and the refugees did not cause large-scale problems in the regions where they were located (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019). However, the war prolonged, and the refugees, who were seen as temporary guests, became permanent. As a result, refugees living only in camps and border provinces started to reside in different provinces and participate in social life. In comprehensive studies reflecting society's perspectives on refugees (Erdoğan, 2020), it has been observed that society has both a sense of conscience and solidarity and discomfort and concerns. In his research, Erdoğan (2020) draws attention to a different point regarding these feelings. People who do not have Syrians close to them see them as war victims fleeing persecution. On the other hand, those who live together with the Syrian population think that 'they cannot protect their homeland,' 'they are a burden to us,' and 'they will cause us many problems in the future.' Over time, the problems that emerged in the social sphere have been transferred to the political sphere. While initially a foreign policy issue, it soon became a domestic issue in Türkiye. Refugees, one of the most important elements of foreign policy, have also moved to the agenda of domestic politics (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019). As a result of these developments, it can be said that Türkiye's policies have been affected not only in the fields mentioned above but also in education.

Education in Türkiye is divided into formal and non-formal education. Formal education is divided into pre-school (1–2 years), primary school (4 years), secondary school (4 years) and high school (4 years) (Çalık, 2023). According to the January 2022 data of the Directorate of Migration Management, there are 1,365,884 foreign nationals in the education age group (5–17 years old). Of these, 68.51% are registered as students. When analyzed by levels, 53,170 preschools (5 years old), 387,037

primary schools (6–9 years old), 335,198 secondary schools (10–13 years old), and 105,379 high schools (14–17 years old), students are receiving education (Presidency of Migration Management, 2022).

The data shows that more than half of the refugees in Türkiye are children of educational age. Considering that the education of these children has been interrupted due to wars and migrations, it can be said that their level of education is lagging. The presence of almost as many children of educational age as the population of the country in Türkiye has brought to the forefront the necessity of drawing a road map for the integration of refugee children into education. In the early days, short-term policies were prepared only for Syrian children in camps with the idea that Syrian refugees would return. However, as the war progressed and the number of refugees gradually increased, new policies and policy documents were developed at different times. In this context, a circular titled ‘Education and Training Services for Foreigners’ came into force on 23 September 2014. With this circular, policies were developed for Syrians living in camps and those living outside camps. Temporary Education Centres were established, providing education in Arabic and using the Syrian curriculum. The same circular also paved the way for Syrian students to receive education in public schools (SETA, 2016). These developments aimed to increase refugee children’s education level and ensure their social integration. In 2016, the Department of Migration and Emergency Education was established within the MoNE General Directorate of Lifelong Learning. A road map was created to integrate Syrian children into education. In this context, the PICTES (Promoting Inclusive Education for Children in the Turkish Education System) project, developed jointly by MoNE and the EU Delegation to Türkiye, was launched. The project significantly increased Syrian children’s access to education (Akman, 2020). Thanks to these projects, it can be said that the first educational steps towards integrating Syrian students into education have been taken with the participation of Turkish and Syrian teachers. While Syrian teachers facilitated the social adaptation processes of refugee students, Turkish teachers prepared them for a new learning environment, the Turkish education system. After this preliminary educational support, these students were directed to mainstream public schools to integrate with their Turkish peers and follow their compulsory k-12 education (Ekin & Yetkin, 2021). Along with educational integration, the PICTES project also contributed to social integration. PICTES counselors established one-to-one relationships with Syrian students, tried to solve their problems, and enabled them to make friends without feeling alienated (Ulukuş & Tümtaş, 2023). The integration process of refugee students into education continues with an inclusive education approach. In this process, they continue their integration programs in schools and receive education according to the Turkish curriculum in the same class as their peers.

Refugee students’ access to quality educational services is essential for individual outcomes and the social and economic results affecting a country. Indeed, negative school experiences and failures in adaptation can lead to unemployment, low economic outcomes, and an increased risk of these children becoming involved in criminal activities (Biasutti et al., 2019). There is a call to focus on social connections and school experiences for the academic as well as social-emotional development of refugee children (Picton & Banfield, 2018). Additionally, since students’ interpretations of what is meaningful and essential to them provide a genuine reflection of

their experiences (Ziaian et al., 2018), there is a need for more research that includes students' voices (Wrench et al., 2017). In this context, focusing on the happiness experiences of refugee children in school can contribute to developing pedagogical areas and strategic interventions centered on emotional support.

As a result, in line with the data obtained, it is seen that migration to Türkiye has intensified in recent years. Consequently, emerging problems have drawn attention, leading to increased related studies. These studies generally focus on the social adaptation of refugee students in schools and the issues they encounter in school and learning processes (Avcı, 2019; Aydeniz & Sarıkaya, 2021; Eren, 2019; Şeker & Sirkeci, 2015; Temur & Özalp, 2022; Üstün & Baş, 2022; Üstün & Gökçe, 2022). The problems identified in studies conducted in Türkiye typically center on communication, social acceptance, academic achievement, and the perspectives and lack of awareness of families regarding education. As indicated in the literature and mentioned above, all these factors are directly related to refugee children's well-being and school happiness. In this context, evaluating the educational experiences of children who have migrated to Türkiye has become an important issue. This study aims to determine the school happiness experiences of refugee children attending middle school.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

In this study focusing on the school happiness experiences of refugee children who migrated to Türkiye, the phenomenological research approach, one of the qualitative research methods, was used. The main purpose of phenomenological research is to explore how individuals experience a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). While the participants express the phenomena in detail, it is accepted that a process of extracting the essence of shared experiences is entered as the researcher starts to analyze these definitions (Giorgi, 1985). In phenomenological research, two approaches, Transcendental Phenomenology and Hermeneutic/Interpretative Phenomenology, are generally adopted (Kıral, 2021; Yalçın, 2022). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a widely used approach in modern philosophical and qualitative research. This method, which aims to understand people's experiences and the meaning of these experiences, focuses on how individuals perceive and make sense of the world (Smith et al., 2009).

The use of hermeneutic phenomenology in this study offers us some advantages. Firstly, by using hermeneutic phenomenology, we described refugee children's school happiness and focused on the meanings embedded in these experiences and tried to reveal how they perceived and interpreted school happiness in migration and integration. The hermeneutic approach went beyond the superficial description of the findings and enabled us to understand how school environments contribute to or undermine children's happiness. Its emphasis on interpretation allowed us to interpret the interaction of factors such as friendship relations, cultural identity, and emotional-psychological dimensions while addressing the complexity of school happiness. Finally, this approach aligns with the child-centered approach in previous research (Clarke & Platt, 2023; Dunlop-Bennett et al., 2019). An event considered

insignificant for adults can be traumatic for children and vice versa. Such an approach allowed us to uncover important constructs related to the emotional experiences of refugee children in context by centering their experiences.

Since hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on interpreting individuals' experiences, especially within social and cultural contexts, it is considered an appropriate approach for interpreting meanings about issues such as the difficulties experienced by refugee children, identity, and belonging. The phenomenon in this research is refugee children's school happiness. The shared experiences are the happiness/unhappiness experienced by refugee students at different levels and schools. In the study, comments on these experiences are included.

## 4.2 Participants

The study group of this research consists of 27 Syrian refugee students attending three middle schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in the city center of Malatya. Information about the participants is presented in Table 1. The participants were selected using maximum variation sampling and criterion sam-

**Table 1** Information on participants

	Gender	Age	Grade	Grade he/she started school in Türkiye	Academic Achievement
P1	Male	13	7	1	Low
P2	Male	14	8	1	High
P3	Female	11	5	Kindergarten	High
P4	Female	11	5	1	Average
P5	Male	12	6	Primary School	Low
P6	Male	14	8	1	Average
P7	Male	13	7	Kindergarten	High
P8	Female	11	5	Kindergarten	Average
P9	Female	14	8	1	High
P10	Male	13	7	Primary School	Average
P11	Male	11	5	1	Low
P12	Female	11	5	Kindergarten	High
P13	Female	14	7	1	Average
P14	Male	12	6	Kindergarten	Low
P15	Male	14	8	3	Low
P16	Male	14	8	3	Average
P17	Female	13	7	Kindergarten	Average
P18	Female	13	6	Kindergarten	High
P19	Male	13	5	1	Average
P20	Female	13	7	Kindergarten	High
P21	Male	12	6	Primary School	Low
P22	Female	16	8	1	Low
P23	Male	14	8	Kindergarten	Average
P24	Male	12	6	1	Average
P25	Male	14	8	1	High
P26	Male	12	6	1	Average
P27	Female	12	6	Kindergarten	Low

pling methods. Permission from MoNE is required to conduct research in public schools in Türkiye. After obtaining the necessary permissions, the schools attended by refugee children were identified, and the list of these schools was obtained from the provincial MoNE in Malatya. Meetings were held with the principals of these schools to explain the purpose and scope of the research. Three schools with a high number of refugee students were identified. All three invited schools agreed to participate in the study. Subsequently, a researcher visited these schools and obtained a list of students showing their demographic information and academic performance. Support from school principals and guidance counselors was then sought to select suitable students from these lists for the sample. In maximum variation sampling, efforts were made to create a balanced participant group regarding age, grade level, and academic performance (high-average-low). The purpose of sampling based on maximum diversity is not to make a generalization based on this diversity but rather to try to determine the existence of common or shared phenomena in situations that differ. In other words, it is to reveal central themes and values (Neuman, 2014; Patton, 2002; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In addition, the patterns/themes emerging in maximum variation sampling are special in defining a phenomenon. In this context, the researcher should prioritize creating a list of similar or common sides among the differences (Morgan & Morgan, 2008). This strategy aimed to better understand the diversity and common themes in refugee children's experiences of school happiness by considering students' characteristics such as age, gender, grade level, and academic achievement. Despite the diversity, the common themes obtained shed light on the general happiness experiences of refugee students in the school environment. The criteria for criterion sampling included (1) the ability to express themselves in Turkish and (2) having attended the current school for at least one semester. The 27 students were selected based on these criteria and in coordination with the school administration to ensure diversity. All children have been living in Türkiye for at least six years, up to a maximum of twelve years.

### 4.3 Ethical Considerations

Before the data collection process began, ethical approval was obtained from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of İnönü University, with the decision dated 14.12.2023 and numbered 383,602. After receiving the necessary permissions from MoNE, informed consent forms were sent to the families of 42 students through school principals, following the criteria mentioned in the 4.2 section. Fifteen families refused to allow their children to participate in the study, while 27 families completed and returned the informed consent forms without any issues. All participants were informed about the study's aims, and participation was based on voluntariness. All data were kept anonymous and confidential.

### 4.4 Data Collection

The study used a semi-structured interview form created by the researchers as the data collection tool. Semi-structured interviews consist of open-ended questions and allow the participant to describe the world he/she perceives with his/her thoughts

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data for the study were collected between March 2024 and April 2024.

The interview form included demographic information about the participants (gender, nationality, educational status, etc.) and questions addressing the research sub-problems. The literature was reviewed in detail to prepare the relevant form, a literature survey on the topic was conducted, and a pool of questions was created. After working on these questions, those deemed to serve the purpose were selected. The prepared form was then submitted for review, and suggestions were made to four experts in child development, educational administration, educational psychology, and educational sociology to ensure the content validity of the interview questions. Based on the feedback received, the form was revised and finalized. It is well known that migrant children have a high risk of psychological problems due to the difficulties they experience. As a matter of fact, in a study conducted in Türkiye, it was determined that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder were common in Syrian migrant children due to war, the experience of injury or loss of relatives, the difficulties experienced during the migration process, and adaptation problems after migration (Oppedal et al., 2018). Although the aim of our study was not to determine the trauma experiences of migrant students, we took measures to avoid re-traumatizing these experiences. In this context, our interviews were guided by Alessi and Kahn's (2022) trauma-informed qualitative research guidelines. Accordingly, the researchers acknowledged that trauma may be common in migrant children and developed a comprehensive understanding of its possible effects based on the existing literature. Secondly, a setting for the interviews was chosen appropriate to the participants' preferences, where they felt safe, and their decisions or preferences were sensitized. Thirdly, the interviews avoided stressful questions, and empathy was shown to the participant children. Finally, when the participant children entered a negative emotional state during the interview, the interview was interrupted, support was received from the counselor at the school, and the children were asked whether they would continue the interview, and their preferences were respected.

The interviews were conducted in the schools where the children were educated. For this purpose, the school principal allocated a room to the researcher. Before the interviews, an initial meeting was held with the children in the presence of the school counselor to get acquainted. Participants were guaranteed complete confidentiality. They were informed that they could decide to continue or withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure confidentiality, the personal information of each participant was coded. The interviews lasted approximately 20–30 min. They began with an open-ended question inviting participants to share their school happiness experiences from their perspectives: "*How do you generally feel during your time at school?*". Probes were used during the interview to elaborate on the participants' views. The interviews were not recorded with a recording device to make the participants feel more comfortable; the researcher took verbatim notes. These notes were then verified with the participants after the interview.

## 4.5 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis begins with the data collection process. The study involves organizing the data, coding, and reducing the codes into themes. Themes are the fundamental findings that emerge from the inductive analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2013; Given, 2016). This study utilized a three-stage content analysis, including data exploration, coding, and presenting findings as themes (Clark & Creswell, 2014). Themes were formed by making a second-level abstraction of the codes created by the researchers. These themes reflect the common aspects of refugee students' experiences regardless of their differences.

In qualitative research, validity pertains to the appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data (Leung, 2015), while reliability relates to terms such as credibility, transferability, and authenticity (Elo et al., 2014). Standard methods to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research include member checking, triangulation, detailed description, prolonged engagement in the field, peer debriefing, and external audits (Creswell & Miller, 2000). According to Creswell (2015), using two or three of these methods is sufficient. This study employed peer debriefing and member-checking methods. For peer debriefing, feedback on the findings was obtained from a field expert, and necessary adjustments were made accordingly. For member checking, focus group discussions were conducted with ten refugee students who participated in the research. The analysis results, codes, and themes were shared with the participants in these discussions to verify the findings. To ensure reliability, the percentage of inter-coder agreement was calculated, and direct quotations were included. The inter-coder agreement was determined to be 86%, which supports Miles et al.'s (2014) recommendation that inter-coder agreement should be between 85 and 90%. To further ensure the reliability of the study, direct quotations from the students' responses were included. Each quotation was coded at the end with identifiers such as P1, P2, P3, etc., to indicate which student responded.

## 5 Results

As a result of the analyses, four themes were identified regarding school happiness based on the interactions of refugee students at the microsystem level in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. These themes are friendship relations, language and communication, teacher support, and activities suitable for interests and talents (Fig. 1). Despite demographic differences, these themes reflect refugee students' common experiences of school happiness. In addition, although these themes provide a framework for refugee students' experiences of school happiness, they also encompass negative experiences or experiences where students feel unhappy. When presenting the research findings, direct quotations from the participants' views were included, and the actual names of the participants were not used. Instead, each participant was assigned a unique code (e.g., P1, P2, P3...), and these codes were used to present the participants' views in the findings.

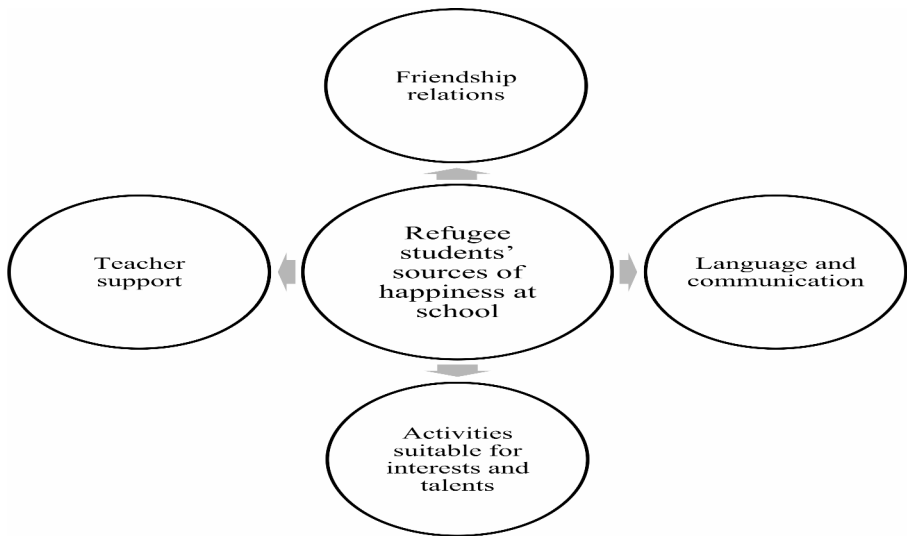


Fig. 1 Themes related to refugee students' sources of happiness at school

## 5.1 Friendship Relations

The codes developed under this theme include making friends, spending time with friends, feeling valued, participating in group activities, helping, social exclusion, peer pressure, and bullying. The findings suggest that friendships are central to refugee children's school well-being. Although individual experiences varied, students frequently emphasized the importance of being accepted in peer groups and included in games. For example, participant P2 expressed what makes him happy at school: *"Spending time with my friends, traveling to and from school with them, hanging out together."* This statement reveals how shared activities and friendship bonds are a source of happiness for refugee students. Similarly, P3 said, *"My friends and teachers care for me. This makes me happy."* P3 stated how the support shown to him by his friends and teachers strengthened his emotional balance and commitment to school.

As an example of a positive peer interaction, P11 shared the following memory: *"We were playing a game in the garden where we threw pine cones at each other. When I ran out of pine cones, a Turkish friend gave me some of hers. I was very happy."* This small act of kindness and cooperation left a deep impression on the student and became an unforgettable experience. At the same time, P11 was also aware of whom the support came from and emphasized this by saying, *"My Turkish friend."* It is understood from these words of the participant, who is only a fifth-grade student, that the support comes from has a special meaning for children. This finding shows the importance of games and interactions that create cooperation and mutual support opportunities between refugee and Turkish children. Such positive interactions can increase refugee children's emotional resilience and social cohesion.

However, friendships can be a source of happiness and sadness for some refugee students. Participants also mentioned negative experiences such as exclusion, discrimination, and bullying. For example, P13 said, *"Today, a friend of mine told me,*

*"You are a Syrian. Don't talk to me." I was very upset.*" P13 expressed the sadness he felt in the face of social exclusion. The same participant expressed another bullying and the sense of alienation he felt as follows: *"When we were leaving the school, Syrians said, why did you come here... go away from our homeland, and they popped balloons over our heads. I was very scared. They talk behind my back in the classroom. I do not feel that I belong here."* Similarly, P4 said, *"I don't have any friends in the class (her eyes fill up). They won't let me into their games."* She shared his feelings of loneliness. P6 said, *"Two students in the class especially bother me. At first, I felt like an outcast. They would come and make fun of me and sometimes hit me. They still do it sometimes."* and shared the effects of peer bullying.

These experiences reveal the bidirectional effect of peer relationships: These relationships can provide belonging and happiness but also trigger feelings of isolation and rejection. P8 expressed that her friends did not consider her valuable enough with the following words: *"Playing games with my friends makes me feel like I am the one who is always forgotten. If I was not there, they would not notice my absence. They play with me but wouldn't notice if I wasn't there."* This statement reveals how important it is for children to be included in games and to feel valued in their peer group. In the face of this exclusion, some students formed closer relationships with other refugee students, leading to grouping over time. P10 expressed this situation: *"Especially when we started primary school. Turkish friends did not let us into their games. They called us a gang, but we are not a gang."* Although such group dynamics provide a sense of security and solidarity, they can reinforce divisions between refugee and local students. P19 said, *"Some friends let me join their games, but some exclude me just because I am Syrian (she cried). In my old school, some of them called me a dog just because I was Syrian, and they did not let me join their games."* P19 expressed the emotional effects of discrimination and exclusion. On the other hand, students who were included in the games and accepted by their peers expressed happiness and a sense of belonging. This finding emphasizes the critical role of social acceptance and positive peer interactions in supporting refugee students' emotional and social well-being.

## 5.2 Language and Communication

Under this theme, the following codes emerged, particularly in communication and adaptation difficulties arising from the language barrier: inability to follow lessons, feelings of restlessness and helplessness, inability to make friends, lack of social interaction, and isolation in the classroom. Language can become an important source of happiness or unhappiness in the school environment, affecting students' understanding of lessons and building relationships with peers. Some students who overcame language barriers reported becoming more compatible with their friends and happier at school.

P10 and P7 expressed their views on this issue as follows:

*At first, my Turkish was not good, so my relationship with my friends was worse. But now I get along with my friends and understand the lessons better.*

*I have both Syrian and Turkish friends. I have no problems in communication. (His Turkish is fluent. His diction is very clear.) I can express myself. We play games and spend time together. My friends do not hesitate to include me.*

From the refugee children's statements, it is clear that students without language barriers can establish closer relationships, understand their lessons better, and adapt to school more easily. The refugee children were well aware of the impact of language on their social and educational lives. From these views of refugee students, it is understood that language is a means of communication and a critical factor affecting students' social acceptance and academic success. However, language barriers can also be a source of unhappiness for refugee students. Due to language barriers, students may have difficulty making friends and experience social isolation. Although the refugee children stated that they were taking Turkish lessons, their language deficiencies made it difficult for them to follow the lessons, and this situation negatively affected their school life. The language barrier causes difficulties in making friends and classroom interactions, leading to problems such as social isolation and reluctance to attend school.

In order to understand the emotional effects of the language barrier, the answers to the question "Do you ever feel like a foreigner at school? Can you explain these situations?" are remarkable. P17 responded to this question as follows:

*Yes. I don't want to join them; they don't invite me anyway. My Turkish is just getting better. I didn't understand it when I was younger, so I was irritable.*

This response reveals that students experience emotional difficulties due to communication problems before learning the language. In addition, it is also understood that local community students prioritize language in their friendships. For example, participant P21 expressed the impact of the language barrier on making friends in the following words:

*My classmates do not approach me because I cannot speak Turkish well.*

These views suggest that the language barrier is a critical obstacle that needs to be overcome for refugee students to build relationships, understand their lessons, adapt to school, and ultimately be happy at school. The participants' statements suggest that the language barrier should be considered not only from an academic perspective but also from a social and emotional perspective. These findings again emphasize the importance of language as a cultural tool in refugee students' school experiences.

### 5.3 Activities Suitable for Interests and Talents

The codes that emerged under this theme are Play, physical activity, extracurricular activities, achievement and self-confidence, social acceptance, and supporting talents.

In interviews with refugee students, most mentioned their interests in different subjects and expressed happiness from participating in these classes. Some students were fond of religious culture classes, others enjoyed mathematics or science classes,

and those inclined towards physical activities expressed happiness in participating in physical education classes. Particularly, students emphasized physical education, extracurricular sports activities, and games and activities involving interaction with their peers. For example, P12 stated, *“I like the religious culture and ethics class the most, and then science. I feel better in the religious culture class.”* P1 explained, *“I like playing ball. That’s why I like physical education classes.”*

P10, a wrestler child who has achieved success in wrestling competitions at the provincial level, expressed their views as follows:

*I love wrestling the most. I even won a medal (proudly). My teacher says I’m good at it. I let off steam... When I became the provincial champion, my school friends started getting closer to me. Even Mehmet (who has mental and physical disabilities) started greeting me.*

This participant’s views highlight the importance of activities suited to students’ interests and talents in making them feel good. Moreover, providing refugee students with opportunities to showcase their talents can attract them and support their social acceptance. P10 is aware that the achievement they received led to greater acceptance by their peers.

#### 5.4 Teacher Support

The codes that emerged under this theme are praise and appreciation, compassion, providing peer contact, inclusion in activities, and acceptance of interests.

The research findings indicate that the relationships refugee children establish with their teachers are among the key factors affecting their school happiness. Positive teacher support significantly impacts refugee students’ adaptation to school, their feelings of happiness, their perceptions of subjects, and their preferences for specific subjects. Students consider teachers’ interest in them and their warm and sincere behavior significant sources of happiness. Some refugee students’ views regarding their teachers are as follows:

*“...I get along well with my teachers. I love them very much. My grades aren’t excellent, but my teachers help me. Especially our homeroom teacher is very attentive.”* (P22).

*“I like the science class and teacher the most. Our teacher is excellent, always paying attention to us and talking with us. He helps us and explains the lessons very well.”* (P2).

*“I feel very happy when my teachers smile and say ‘well done’ when I answer a question correctly. This happened once in a science class. Our teacher is very nice.”* (P13).

Participant P13, although she received praise only once in science class, she did not forget it and expressed her happiness. This shows how teacher support and motiva-

tional language can encourage the happiness of refugee students. P22 spoke fondly of her class teacher for the attention she gave her, even though she was not doing well in his classes. This underlines teacher support as a critical factor for emotional integration.

During the interviews, P5 responded to the question, “*What do you do when you feel sad or stressed at school? How do you cope with it?*” by saying, “*I used to hit whoever bothered me. But I don’t do that anymore (smiled), I promised my teacher.*” revealing that teachers also play a role in students’ ability to control their behavior. This response from the refugee student shows that the teacher is not only a transmitter of information but also a guiding figure, contributing to the positive transformation of the student’s behavior. The teacher’s supportive approach enabled the student to adopt a more positive coping method. P7 shared a happy memory of encountering his teacher in the mosque and praying together. The meaning the student gave to this memory shows that the cultural and religious bond he established with his teacher created a deep source of happiness in the student. The student’s happy recollection of this memory reveals that the teacher-student relationship is not only limited to interactions in the classroom but also strengthened through cultural and emotional bonds.

The interviews with refugee children also revealed some negative experiences related to their relationships with teachers, which emerged as significant factors affecting their school happiness. For example, participant P6 said, “*I don’t like my homeroom teacher. He doesn’t help, and I’ve lost interest in the subject. I love the math class at school. I don’t like science and history at all. Our teacher teaches and leaves. I don’t understand what the teachers are explaining. Our math teacher is excellent and explains very well.*” From these views, it is evident that negative interactions with teachers, especially regarding academic support, individual attention, and general interest, negatively affect students’ school happiness.

## 6 Discussion

Focusing on refugee students’ school happiness experiences is expected to enhance the understanding of their emotional experiences while integrating into the school environment and guide the development of intervention strategies at the school level and in broader contexts. The research findings revealed everyday experiences related to the importance of friendship, language, and communication, activities suited to interests and talents, and teacher support in refugee students’ happiness/unhappiness experiences at school.

In the context of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the research findings reveal that friendship relations play a central role in refugee students’ experiences of happiness and unhappiness at school. At the microsystem level, interactions such as spending time with friends and being supported and valued by them stand out as an important source of happiness in the participants’ experiences. Friendship relations provide social support for refugee students and offer a potential healing mechanism that facilitates their adaptation to the school environment (Palaiologou & Prekate, 2023; Samara et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2021). In addition, it has been shown that peer belonging is closely related to emotional health and subjective well-

being (Emerson et al., 2022; Friedrich Schutz et al., 2024). However, these relationships should be evaluated at the individual level and in broader socio-cultural contexts. At the mesosystem level, the support provided by families, teachers, and the school influences students' social adjustment processes, while at the macrosystem level, social and cultural factors can also shape these relationships. While Amina et al. (2022) state that refugee students see their friends as a source of trust and protection teachers cannot provide, Hlado et al. (2024) emphasize that forming friendships among refugee students creates a sense of stability and belonging beyond language acquisition. Therefore, positive peer relationships support the developmental and psychological adaptation of refugee students and contribute to their adaptation to new social environments and the development of cultural competence (Friedrich Schutz et al., 2024).

Friendship relations are also central to ensuring refugee students' school belonging. In a study focusing on the experiences of 15 refugee students in Costa Rica schools, van Korlaar and Voorend (2024) reported that teachers do not have a central role in supporting students' belonging to the school as they are not equipped to respond to students' needs. Instead, they found that the role of peers was more important for students' successful participation. In Bešić et al.'s (2020) study, friends were important for refugee students not to be lonely, to spend time together, and to communicate. Due et al. (2016) examined school belonging in younger children of refugee origin and found that friendships with children from similar cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds helped to increase school attachment. However, our results show that this is perceived as a grouping by non-refugee children, and even these children are seen as a gang and excluded. In their research in Croatian schools, Vrdoljak et al. (2022) stated that refugee students preferred in-group contact. This may further reinforce social isolation in refugee children. This finding underlines the importance of carefully assessing the friendships between local students and refugee students and encouraging both to improve refugee children's integration and social well-being.

Although friendship relations are a source of happiness, our findings show that refugee students may be exposed to bullying, exclusion, intolerance, and racism depending on their friendship relations. As Schwartz et al. (2021) stated, friendship relations are not unidirectional regarding developmental impact. Besides being a source of happiness, fun, support, and closeness, friends can also be a source of bullying and violence. Refugee students may have many factors that trigger negative experiences in friendship relations. Samara et al. (2020) compared refugee children and British-born children on psychological, social, behavioral, and health-related issues and found that refugee students experienced bigger peer problems. These problems were explained by friendship quality. In another study, Popham et al. (2023) found that social support from peers, loneliness, and social isolation are protective factors against mental health problems in refugee students. In this context, supporting better quality friendship relations between refugee children and other children can buffer negative experiences while promoting happy experiences. Another factor that may trigger negative experiences may be the broader contextual conditions of the country of residence, such as social, cultural, and economic. In our study, it was observed that refugee students were exposed to racist discourses while being bullied. Karan and

Erdemir (2023) reported that refugee students were not exposed to exclusionary discourses and practices based on ethnicity in their peer environment. With the increase in the number of refugees in recent years, discriminatory and stigmatizing discourses and actions against refugees have increased in Türkiye (Doğan & Ünal, 2021). In addition, the economic downturn in Türkiye and negative news in the media have further exacerbated discriminatory discourses. These contextual conditions can also be reflected in the friendship relations of refugee students in the microsystem. These difficulties and obstacles in friendship relations can be overcome through quality interaction. Positive friendship relations support refugee students' school well-being, reduce bullying behavior, and promote acceptance.

Interactions in the microsystem have a great impact on individuals. Many studies have shown how interactions within the microsystem are related to students' school belonging (Allen et al., 2021; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Our results underline the positive and negative effects of proximal interactions emphasized by Bronfenbrenner (1979), specifically the positive and negative effects of relationships with friends on refugee students. Ecological system theory emphasizes the importance of warm and quality interactions in promoting positive emotional development (Shelton, 2018). We propose interventions to improve positive interactions by encouraging cooperation and collaboration among students in schools with refugee students.

When refugee students' happiness in the educational environment is analyzed, the microsystem level, which includes the closest social environment, comes to the fore. Communication with friends, teachers, and other school staff in the microsystem plays a critical role in refugee students' sense of belonging and perception of happiness. Our research observed that these interactions are shaped by language and communication skills. The results showed that language and communication are important factors in students' school happiness. While relationships with strong language and communication skills increase refugee students' commitment to school, language barriers lead to negative consequences such as adaptation difficulties and isolation. In addition, there is also a lack of attendance, absenteeism, and in-class communication difficulties (Avcı, 2019; Aykırı, 2017; Üstün & Gökçe, 2022). This situation reveals that language and communication are fundamental factors that directly and indirectly affect students' happiness. When we look at other studies in different cultures (Barrett & Berger, 2021; Becker et al., 2023; Franczak & Lutz, 2024; Tsiaousi & Chiou, 2024), we see that refugee students experience similar problems. This shows that refugee students experience similar problems regardless of the culture they start to live in. In conclusion, language and communication skills are a determining factor in refugee students' school well-being. Supporting language skills for refugee students and teachers' developing more effective communication strategies by overcoming language barriers can contribute to students' happiness at school. For example, Barrett and Berger (2021) state that when teachers working with refugee students show sensitivity to students' mother tongue and cultural background, they achieve more positive results in the adaptation process of these students. Such interventions can reinforce students' sense of belonging and make their school experience more positive. Therefore, implementing language and communication skills development programs for refugee students in schools will contribute to their becoming happier and more successful individuals in their educational lives. Supporting students' lan-

guage and communication skills can enable teachers to communicate effectively with refugee students, overcome language barriers, and have more positive experiences in the school environment. Therefore, raising awareness on language and communication and improving students' language skills should be considered important steps to increase refugee students' school happiness.

The impact of language and communication skills is not limited to friendship relations but also plays an important role in teacher-student interactions. The support students receive from their teachers stands out as a powerful factor that can directly affect their emotional and academic well-being. Teacher support is considered indispensable for refugee students to overcome their educational difficulties (Bakır-Ayğar & Kaya, 2017; Bešić et al., 2020). Teachers' support for refugee students strengthens their sense of belonging to the school and plays a critical role in increasing their happiness levels. Accordingly, teachers' effective communication with refugee students can be seen as a prerequisite for the support they will provide to them. Our data revealed the importance of teachers' support for refugee students. Beyond creating a positive and safe academic atmosphere for refugee students, teachers' support is critical for developing their social cohesion and belonging (Cohen, 2023). Teacher support, especially in coping with the traumas and adaptation difficulties brought about by the migration process, plays a decisive role in students' academic achievement and psychological well-being (Mammadova & Aypay, 2023). Emotional support from teachers helps refugee students overcome the difficulties they experience and contributes to building resilience and positive social capital (Hoş, 2016). Teachers' supporting refugee students and mediating their relationships with their peers support social capital formation. Indeed, unlike other studies, our results point to the critical role of teachers in providing peer contact. Studies from different countries reveal that teacher support is universally important in supporting refugee students' school belonging and well-being. For example, an Australian study (Due et al., 2016) highlights that refugee students are eager to build relationships with their teachers and that this relationship is important for their school belonging in a new country. Crouch et al. (2014) in the USA found that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with students' school belonging. Sobitan (2022), in his study conducted in England, emphasizes that refugee students' receiving support from teachers when they need it is one of the factors of school belonging. Studies conducted in Türkiye also emphasize the supportive role of teachers. Akan and Alkış-Küçükaydın (2023) state that refugee students' school happiness is positively related to teacher support, and teachers are seen as a source of happiness. Similarly, Bakır-Ayğar and Kaya (2017) emphasize that there is a linear relationship between teacher support and students' sense of belonging to school. Especially for refugee students at primary school age, teachers' supportive attitudes are very effective in developing feelings of belonging and happiness (Bešić et al., 2020). As supported by the findings in the literature, teachers' creation of inclusive educational environments for refugee students stands out as a factor that supports school happiness while alleviating the impact of the traumas experienced by these students. In the post-traumatic period, refugee students have different needs compared to other students, and teachers who are aware of these needs can have a significant impact by providing them with the most necessary support. Teachers' compassion and warmth towards refugee students can be beneficial

in helping them overcome trauma and support their happiness. These findings suggest that although cultural contexts differ, teachers, as an important element of the microsystem, play a universal role in refugee students' school well-being. Teachers' creating inclusive educational environments with an approach that considers the needs of refugee students can contribute to them taking part in the educational process as happy, successful, and harmonious individuals despite the traumas they have experienced.

The findings of the study revealed that activities appropriate to refugee students' interests and abilities are an important source of school happiness. In particular, physical and play-based activities were highly emphasized by the students, who reported that these activities brought them joy. Within the framework of Ecological Systems Theory, we argue that such activities enable refugee students to interact with their peers in broader social contexts and support social cohesion and school happiness. As a matter of fact, it is emphasized in the literature (Due et al., 2016; Karan & Erdemir, 2023) that refugee students need leisure time activities suitable for their interests and abilities and that these activities strengthen school belonging by providing entertainment opportunities.

The study of Chowdhury et al. (2024) shows that equal participation of refugee students in extracurricular activities increases the tendency of host country students to see them as friends. It is noted that such activities can be provided through both schools and voluntary organizations. Mendenhall & Bartlett's (2018) qualitative research focusing on the activities offered by an external organization for refugee students also reports that extracurricular activities are fun and useful for students and provide an opportunity to acquire many skills that cannot be learned at school. In this context, providing opportunities for language development is also an important contribution to these activities. In Trisokka et al.'s (2021) study, refugee students reported that out-of-school activities were when they interacted the most and gave them the most importance. However, such activities can provide opportunities for inclusion and a sense of exclusion. This highlights the importance of interactions between the microsystem components of Ecological Systems Theory, as it is through structured and well-organized activities that students can build harmonious interactions with the school and social environment.

A mixed-method study conducted by Sağın et al. (2022) determined that Syrian students who participated in school sports teams experienced a higher sense of belonging than those who did not. In addition, in this study, it was reported that sports teams contribute to Syrian students creating a social circle of friends, socializing, accelerating the adaptation process, cooperating, complying with school rules, and increasing their satisfaction with school. Within the scope of this theme, an important finding that was not emphasized much in the literature was that giving refugee students the opportunity to exhibit their talents encouraged their social acceptance. It was observed that the student's demonstration of these talents attracted the attention of their circle of friends and improved social relations. In conclusion, creating opportunities for refugee students to showcase their interests and talents and including out-of-school activities can contribute to socio-educational integration and the well-being of these students.

## 6.1 Limitations

Although this research provides significant insights into the school happiness experiences of refugee students, it has several limitations. The study is limited to students' interactions within the microsystem, specifically within the school environment. However, family relationships, societal norms, and socioeconomic factors may influence students' school experiences. The participants in this study are limited to 27 Syrian students from three different middle schools. Another limitation of the research is related to the data collection method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. In different studies, data could be collected based on long-term observations. Although the participants have been residing in Türkiye for at least six years, they may still have some language barriers. In this context, the fact that the interviews were not conducted in the participant's native language can be considered a limitation. Some of the feelings and experiences of the students may not have been fully conveyed.

## 7 Conclusion

This study sheds light on the sources of school happiness, a crucial component of the psychosocial well-being of refugee students, by examining their experiences within the microsystem. Our qualitative data analysis revealed the importance of friendship relations, language and communication, activities suited to interests and talents, and teacher support in supporting the psychological well-being of refugee students. Our analyses indicate that improvements in these areas could provide opportunities to enhance refugee students' social acceptance and school integration and develop their academic and social competencies. Furthermore, our findings suggest that positive friendship relations, activities suited to interests and talents, teacher support, and language and communication support can also act as protective factors against negative experiences such as bullying and exclusion. We recommend incorporating activities suited to student's interests and talents that facilitate positive interactions with other students in schools with refugee populations and considering these dimensions in intervention strategies related to school happiness. Additionally, we emphasize the importance of teachers connecting with refugee students through educational and pedagogical practices. Moreover, we hope that focusing directly on student experiences will further broaden our understanding of students from disadvantaged groups.

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**Data Availability** The authors may share data on request.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** Ethical approval has been obtained from the University Ethics Committee.

**Research Involving Human and Animal Rights** All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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