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Exploring the School Perceptions and Well-being of Syrian Students: The Escalating Threat of Xenophobia in Turkish Public Education

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Abstract: *After the start of the Syrian civil war, a significant number of Syrians displaced to Türkiye. Syrian students face considerable challenges in adapting to the local education system, primarily due to language barriers in Türkiye. These obstacles contribute to a range of difficulties, including struggles with self-expression, challenges in acclimating to school environments, academic impediments, and issues related to exclusion and bullying. The aim of this study is to explore the overall well-being and school perceptions of elementary-level Syrian students under temporary protection status (TPS). Employing a multiple case study design, the research consisted of 60 Syrian students enrolled in a public school. From this larger group, three students were selected in conjunction with their school administrator, teachers, parents, and peers for an in-depth exploration. The data collection involved a combination of semi and structured interviews, structured observations, and students' drawings depicting their perceptions and feelings within the school environment. The collected data were analyzed through a deductive thematic approach. The findings revealed that Syrian students often feel a lack of belonging within their schools, having difficulty of understanding the content in science and Turkish lessons and reporting a sense of difference from both peers and teachers, with their Syrian identity perceived as a disadvantage. This feeling of marginalization has impeded their ability to adjust to the new educational landscape and broader culture. Drawing from these insights, the study offers recommendations to improve the school experiences and overall well-being of Syrian students. Additionally, the text outlines potential implications for methodological strategies in upcoming multicultural research endeavors.*

Keywords: *immigrant Syrian students, student happiness, school perceptions, threat of xenophobia.*

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Introduction

The "Arab Spring," which commenced in the Middle East in 2010, extended to Syria in March 2011, quickly escalating into an extended civil war. Spanning 13 years, this conflict seems to have reached a temporary resolution as opposition forces captured Damascus on December 8, 2024, effectively dismantling the Baathist regime. However, the civil war has had catastrophic consequences, claiming over 570,000 lives, internally displacing 7.6 million people, and resulting in the emigration of more than 5.5 million Syrians from their homeland (Güzel, 2021). Beginning in April 2011, Syrians commenced fleeing into Türkiye, as the borders of the neighboring country opened due to civil war. Many initially remained in border areas, nurturing hopes of returning home within months. However, as the conflict dragged on and the likelihood of a safe return diminished, hope began to wane among the displaced.

The situation was further complicated by the seizure of territories in Syria by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and 2015, which intensified the migration crisis, with numerous countries and organizations, including Türkiye, designating ISIS as a terrorist organization. By the end of 2014, the number of Syrians in Türkiye had increased to 1.5 million, a figure that, as of September 14, 2023, had increased by an additional 1.5 million (Ministry of Interior, 2024). According to the Ministry of Interior's Immigration Management, the number of Syrian refugees in Türkiye with a temporary protection status (TPS) (International Organization for Migration, 2019) has increased to 3,288,755 (Ministry of Interior, 2024). This substantial increase underscores how the enduring conflict in Syria and the prevailing instability in the region have significantly contributed to the rise in refugee populations in Türkiye.

Türkiye, with a population of 85 million, has an extensive education system that includes 19,904,679 students and 1,154,383 teachers (Ministry of National Education, 2023). Worldwide, educational systems aim to equip students for life constructively and effectively. This preparation involves imparting the knowledge, values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for students to develop productive and engaged members of society (Ministry of National Education, 2017). The objectives of the Turkish National Education System also emphasize fostering students' social and intellectual growth, as well as their well-being, while advocating for equal educational opportunities, as established in the Basic Law of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of National Education, 1975). Nonetheless, this principle has inadvertently led to a rapid process of marginalization, fueled by success-

oriented and competitive practices prevalent in the educational system (Öntaş & Atmaca, 2016). Kuzulu (2022) observes that education strategies rooted in liberal ideologies, such as the use of achievement tests, are designed to ensure equal opportunities for all. However, this approach exacerbates disparities between schools and encourages the systematic classification of students into distinct groups (Nasif & Hasan, 2018). Research indicates that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are the most significantly affected by this trend toward marginalization (Akay et al., 2018).

Schools, recognized as pivotal institutions for learning and educational activities throughout life, often function as primary agents of socialization after the family in various cultural contexts. They encompass key components of the educational process, including teachers, students, educational administrators, and learning resources (Alowyd & Irge, 2020). Akgün et al. (2014) noted that schools fulfill numerous responsibilities beyond their fundamental educational role; they provide a platform for social interaction where children can acquire knowledge, behaviors, and values. In multicultural and diverse educational settings, the school atmosphere is vital in influencing students' academic performance, attitudes toward learning, identity development, and overall well-being (La Salle-Finley et al., 2024). Tenney (2011) argues that an effective school context should prioritize student happiness by fostering engagement, meaningfulness, and enjoyment in the learning process. Research has emphasized the significant role of school administrators (Biasutti & Concina, 2021; Tajic & Bunar, 2023) and, notably, teachers (Martin et al., 2024; McDevitt, 2020) in facilitating students' active participation in meaningful activities that promote peer interaction and the expression of values and virtues. The influence of teachers and administrators is also crucial for ensuring both social and academic integration for all students, especially immigrant children (Tenney, 2011). Villavicencio et al. (2024) highlighted the indispensable role of teachers in creating safe and supportive environments, and empowering immigrant students to navigate and embrace new cultural norms—an essential aspect of their successful integration into the educational context and the wider community.

As of 2022, the Turkish educational system recorded an enrolment of 730,806 Syrian students in the compulsory education phase (Ministry of National Education, 2022). The increasing presence of the Syrian population in Turkey has intensified the demand for various social, economic, health, and educational services, leading to considerable disruptions within these sectors. These circumstances have contributed to a shift in public

perception, with the Turkish public developing negative attitudes toward Syrians, who were initially regarded as temporary guests (Doğan, 2015). A study on xenophobia and the experiences of refugees in Turkey illustrated that Turkish populations frequently expressed disdain, exclusion, and discriminative sentiments toward Syrians (Sarı, 2019). Ünal (2014) attributed the prevalence of these attitudes primarily to the significant rise in the African, Afghan and primarily Syrian population in Türkiye in recent years. Additionally, Doğan's study highlights that the escalation of xenophobic sentiments toward Syrians is closely linked to the prevalence of negative commentary on mass and social media as well. The tendency to portray foreigners, often in a subtle yet impactful manner, as threats or dangers on social media and in various media outlets can serve as a mechanism for promoting racism and discrimination (Doğan, 2015). In response to the inflow of Syrian refugees, the Republic of Türkiye, universities and several national and international non-profit organizations are undertaking a range of initiatives aimed at integrating these individuals into Turkish society. A notable example is the PIKTES project, which is coordinated by the Ministry of National Education and focuses on adapting Syrian children to the Turkish education system. Launched in 2016, this project is currently active in 26 provinces of Türkiye (PIKTES, 2024).

Despite such ongoing interventions, the consequences of migration are particularly evident for children. Aktın (2018) emphasizes that refugee children frequently endure intensified feelings of insecurity and fear, combined with social exclusion and discrimination within educational settings. Drawing on the principles of intersectionality and contemporary critical race theory (CRT), scholars underline that teachers' proficiency in employing multicultural strategies is vital for the effective education of immigrant students (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Pérez-Arredondo, 2024). Nevertheless, Kotluk and Aydin (2021) observe that Turkish schools, especially teachers, are inadequately equipped to effectively implement multicultural instructional strategies to address the specific needs of Syrian students. Consequently, the teaching and learning processes are largely approached through the lens of the dominant culture's students, lacking the necessary strategies, competencies, and experience to foster a more inclusive educational framework.

The marginalization and exclusion faced by Syrian students are further intensified by language barriers and cultural differences, which contribute to a sense of alienation and disconnection from their schools (Garbern et al., 2020). Additionally, Garbern et al. (2020) highlight further challenges, including physical abuse and public humiliation, revealing that

language barriers can precipitate various forms of bullying experienced by refugee students in public schools. A study by Abu-Amsha (2014) found that Syrian students in Lebanese public schools encountered both verbal and physical violence from teachers, administrators, and peers. Such adverse experiences adversely affect their mental well-being, resulting in lower levels of happiness compared to their peers. As a result, these negative experiences can lead to withdrawal from the educational system, driven by feelings of alienation, perceived insecurity, and overall dissatisfaction with the learning environment (Başaran, 2021).

Indeed, immigration is often viewed as a challenge, particularly from the perspectives of teachers and administrators in Türkiye (Bulut et al., 2018; Çınkır et al., 2024). The existing literature offers limited insights specifically regarding the key subjects of immigration—namely, Syrian students' needs and feelings. Yerli (2023) emphasized that marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups in Turkey are the most adversely affected by liberal educational policies. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of these children—frequently categorized as disadvantaged—within the current educational framework, which emphasizes academic success and competitiveness, is essential. A review of the literature indicates that much of the existing research has focused primarily on the challenges encountered by Syrian students under TPS in adapting to their schools, typically from the perspectives of teachers (Bulut et al., 2018) and school administrators (Alkalay et al., 2021; Çınkır et al., 2024). According to the relevant research, challenges common in countries with large immigrant populations include language barriers, cultural disparities, and a lack of resources and experience in implementing multicultural education in schools (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018; Barron et al., 2020; Garbern et al., 2020; Sieverding et al., 2018). In contrast, the present study aims to explore the needs and experiences of these students, seeking to understand their perceptions of school life and overall well-being through their narratives and viewpoints. Thus, the guiding question for this research is as follows: "How do the experiences of Syrian elementary school students under TPS shape their perceptions of and overall happiness in school?" Instead of exclusively addressing the challenges faced by immigrant students, their teachers, and school administrators, this study seeks to explore strategies for developing effective educational policies and pedagogical implementations. By prioritizing the lived experiences and perceptions of Syrian students under TPS, the research aims to improve their overall well-being and cultivate a positive perception of the school, which is increasingly influenced by neoliberal policies that place additional burdens on them in terms of academic achievement and competition.

Methodology and methods

Scientific research processes are fundamentally grounded in two primary paradigms: objectivism and subjectivism, which construct the epistemological and ontological frameworks. The subjectivist paradigm with a post-positivist research angle interprets findings through the perspectives and insights of individuals (Crotty, 1998). To achieve a comprehensive research process, a qualitative research approach was employed as the chosen methodology (Crotty, 1998). While the subjectivist paradigm highlights the distinctiveness of human experiences and delves deeply into human behaviors. In contrast, the objectivist paradigm prioritizes knowledge derived from the natural sciences, which is objectively validated by society and quantifies human behavior (Diesing, 1966). Çetin (2014) posits that the subjectivist paradigm effectively characterizes human behavior in educational research and serves as a valuable methodology for uncovering an individual's experiences and perceptions regarding specific situations or phenomena by employing methods such as observation and interviews facilitating an exploration of an individual's inner world.

Guided by a post-positivist research framework and employing deductive thematic analysis of the interviews, observations and student drawings data, this exploratory study aimed to examine the lived experiences of Syrian immigrant elementary students, focusing on their perceptions of and overall happiness within the school environment. A multiple case study design was used to guide the research process (Cohen et al., 2007). Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical investigation that explores a particular phenomenon within its real-world context. This approach involves the simultaneous and separate analysis of individuals, events, or communities, with careful consideration of their unique attributes. Consequently, the purpose of this study is not to formulate extensive generalizations. Rather, it is focused on exploring the perceptions and levels of happiness of Syrian students regarding their school lives, along with the factors influencing these aspects.

Study group and participants

The study group comprises 60 Syrian students enrolled in the 3rd and 4th grades at a public school located in the central district of a metropolitan area within the South-eastern Anatolia Region of Türkiye. As of 2024, there are 429,111 Syrians under the TPS residing in the province. The province hosts the highest concentration of Syrians relative to its overall population in the country (Ministry of Interior, 2024). Furthermore, based on the 2022 report by the Ministry of National Education, the number of

Syrian students in the province was recorded as 97,861 (Ministry of National Education, 2022). The school was chosen through a purposeful sampling method because of the sufficient representation of Syrian students (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Employing a purposeful sampling methodology, among the 60 Syrian students, to identify participating students, the "criterion sampling" method was employed, which involves selecting cases that meet specific, predetermined criteria. These criteria may be established by the researcher or sourced from a pre-existing list (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). In this study, key criteria included factors such as school attendance, open communication, and accessibility, as these criteria were deemed essential for aligning with the research objectives and facilitating a comprehensive data collection process (Patton, 2005). The final decision of the selected students was informed by the insights of these students' teachers and the second researcher's observations. The three Syrian students were identified as the primary participants in this study. In addition to these students, the research also included secondary participants—namely, one of the school administrators—the parents, teachers, and peers of the participating students—to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping the students' perceptions of school and their overall happiness. To ensure confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were used for all the participants. Table 1 illustrates the participants of the study.

Table 1. Primary and secondary participants of the study

Primary Participants	**Secondary Participants**			
Students	**Teachers**	**Parents**	**Peers**	**Administrator**
Mervan	Selma	Nour	Mazin	
Marva	Yasemin	Fatima	Farah	Enes
Zahra	Yahya	Mariam	Haneen and Sereen	

Mervan is the second child among the four brothers and has the lowest score on the school happiness scale. At just eight years of age, he appears smaller than his peers and exhibits introverted and shy traits. His parents, who are university graduates and immigrated to Turkey in 2020, are characterized as caring; however, their Turkish language skills are limited. Mervan's classroom teacher, Selma, has four years of teaching experience and demonstrates a nurturing attitude toward her Syrian students. Notably, she is disciplined and effective in managing the classroom environment. According to Selma, Mervan is a quiet and calm student, yet he struggles academically due to a lack of friendships. Conversely, two fellow students,

Marva and Zahra, shared positive insights about Mervan, indicating that they are their only acquaintances at school and that they approach him for assistance when they face difficulties. Mazin, a classmate, corroborated this by noting that Mervan typically refrained from participating in breaks and seldom engaged in conversations with others. Her teacher described Mazin as a student who enjoys playing games and performs relatively well academically in comparison to other Syrian students.

Marva is the eldest of four siblings, and her experiences and feelings about school are notably less positive than those of her peers based on her responses to the surveys applied to the study group. Despite being extroverted and talkative, Marva tends to engage in conflicts and quarrels with her friends, both in the classroom and around the school. Her teacher, Yasemin, a new and compassionate teacher, is perceptive and dedicated to her students. She recognizes Marva as an exceptionally intelligent child; however, she observes that Marva struggles to form healthy relationships with her peers. Furthermore, Yasemin noted that Marva's family does not show much interest in her academic life. She reports that Marva's parents have not attended any school events and that they have been separated for some time, although there is uncertainty regarding their current relationship status. Throughout the research, the researchers made several attempts to conduct interviews with Marva's parents, both in person and via phone, but they declined to participate. Marva's classmate, Farah, is another Syrian girl. Notably, Farah, who tends to be quiet, struggled academically and primarily interacted with fellow Syrian students.

Zahra, on the other hand, is the youngest member of her family, and her overall happiness and perception of school are particularly low. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the school environment, indicating that she feels unsupported by students, teachers, and administrators alike. Despite her low morale, Zahra is a forthright and sociable girl, often displaying resilience in her interactions with others. Being older than her peers, she comes from a family where both parents have completed middle school. Although her family is engaged in her education, their lack of proficiency in Turkish hampers their ability to offer meaningful academic support. As a result, Zahra's academic performance falls significantly short of her potential. Her teacher, Yahya, who has five years of experience, is known for being respectful yet firm, earning the affection of his students and demonstrating effectiveness in managing the classroom. He holds a positive view of foreign students and advocates for increased efforts to support them within the educational system, emphasizing the need to prioritize their unique challenges. Zahra's primary classmate is Sereen, who is

also a member of the TPS and is one year younger than Zahra. Sereen is a highly talkative student who achieves good academic results and has a few other friends in school in addition to Zahra. Notably, the fact that her friends are primarily Syrian highlights a lack of friendships with Turkish students. Zahra's other close friend is Haneen, another Syrian girl who shares Zahra's age. Haneen is a calm student who performs well academically relative to her peers.

Data collection procedure and overcoming challenges

Data collection and the assurance of fidelity were meticulously designed, given that the subjects of this study belonged to a vulnerable population of civil war victims who had immigrated to another country. To endorse the ethical standards and ensure the confidentiality of the study, pseudonyms were employed for all participants. Before the initiation of the data collection phase, which spanned from October 2022 to May 2023, consent was obtained from the participants with the approval of the Human Subjects Committee. Additionally, the research adhered precisely to the confidentiality rules set forth by the Ministry of National Education throughout the entire research process.

The primary participants in the study naturally presented challenges in communication due to their limited proficiency in both Arabic and Turkish, making it difficult for them to articulate their thoughts and feelings. To address this obstacle, all interactions with these students were conducted in their native language by the second author of the study, who is a Syrian national currently under the TPS in Turkey. Before initiating the data collection process, the second author dedicated considerable time and effort to establishing a rapport with the students. This engagement was crucial for fostering a sense of trust between the participants and herself. The data collection commenced only after the students conveyed their feelings of disconnection from the researcher.

Moreover, the creation of data collection instruments was rooted in the study's theoretical and conceptual framework, which focused specifically on the elements that shape immigrant students' perceptions and their overall satisfaction with the educational environment. Additionally, these instruments underwent a thorough review by subject matter experts and were tested with an appropriate group of Syrian students to validate their efficacy in capturing the intended variables. The deployment of these tools was conducted through the acquisition of necessary approvals for human subject research.

Data collection tools

The primary data collection involved interviews with the students' friends, family members, teachers, and a school administrator, alongside observations and the students' drawings.

Interviews

Structured and semi-structured interviews served as key data sources for this research. The primary aim of the structured interviews, as noted by Punch (2005), was to gather demographic information on both primary and secondary participants involved in the study. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) were conducted—eight interviews with each participant—to delve into the perceptions and overall satisfaction of elementary-level Syrian students within their school environment.

The nature of the interviews varied according to their focus and the participants involved, with the content and structure of the protocols adapted accordingly. Each interview consisted of 5 to 7 questions, with durations ranging from 15 to 45 minutes. Student interviews were conducted in the school library during periods when students were not engaged in academic work. Teachers were interviewed in the teachers' lounge whenever they were available, whereas parents were interviewed during home visits. All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The central emphasis of the interviews was on the school experiences of Syrian students, and the main themes emerged from the questions designed by the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. Specifically, the questions related to school perceptions were informed by the extant literature on the school experiences of immigrant students, as well as the general school perception literature (Nakamura-Thomas et al., 2023).

For example, typical questions directed toward primary participants regarding their school perceptions included inquiries such as "Can you describe your school? What does a typical day look like for you (Tell me about your day at school)? How would you assess your access to school materials and recreational activities? How are your relationships with your teachers, school administrators, and peers?" Similarly, questions aimed at gauging factors (Ramaswamy, 2023) influencing these students' overall happiness within the school included "What are your feelings about your school? How excited do you feel coming to school each morning or going home each afternoon? What are your feelings during interactions with your teachers, school administrators, and peers?

Observations

Following over a month of prolonged engagement and consistent participation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) in daily academic routines both inside and outside the classroom, the researcher successfully cultivated a vital rapport with the primary participants. After establishing secure scaffolding to ensure the integrity of the data, the second author conducted a total of nine formal structured observations—three in each primary participant's classroom—as well as several informal structured participant observations (Athens, 2010) throughout the study. The structured observations concentrated on the experiences of Syrian students, which shaped their perceptions of school and contributed to their overall sense of happiness. The themes that arose from the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study guided the observations, concentrating on the participants' preferences regarding the allocation of their classroom and break time, as well as the individuals with whom they opted to engage. Additionally, the observations examined the nature of their relationships with school administrators, teachers, and peers. The analysis also explored their participation in both curricular and extracurricular activities, taking into account experiences that occurred within and outside the classroom.

Drawings

As an additional data collection method, the participating students were encouraged to create drawings representing their perceptions of the school. Drawing offers a meaningful lens for researchers to understand children's experiences and abstract concepts tangibly, especially in light of the linguistic challenges and anxieties these students may encounter (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). Additionally, Malchiodi (2005) affirms that children express their self-perceptions and experiences through their artistic creations. In times of distress, their drawings can articulate fears, emotions, and fundamental needs—such as safety, love, protection, and care (Loureiro et al., 2020). The characteristics of these artworks, including the colors selected by the children, hold significant interpretive value (Akalın & Üstündağ, 2012). To evaluate the physical and mental well-being of Syrian students and how they shape their perceptions of school and overall happiness in that environment (Nakamura-Thomas et al., 2023), the study employed drawings created by the participating Syrian students as a method of data collection. During the document review process, the students' artwork proved to be an effective tool for data collection. While Mervan and Zahra utilized this opportunity to illustrate their perceptions of school, Marva opted not to participate in this phase of data gathering. A semi-

structured interview protocol was also subsequently implemented with Mervan and Zahra regarding their drawings, enabling them to provide deeper insights into their views on school and their overall sense of happiness.

Data analysis

The research employed a deductive thematic analysis method to interpret the collected data from interviews, observations, and drawings created by the participating students. Instead of deriving themes directly from the data, this approach utilized predefined themes, as proposed by Crabtree and Miller (1999), which were informed by the study's theoretical and conceptual framework on the basis of the literature related to immigrant students' perceptions of educational environments (Nakamura-Thomas et al., 2023) and their overall happiness in schools (Ramaswamy, 2023). Data collection and analysis were performed concurrently, following the procedural steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for deductive thematic analysis. To familiarize themselves with the dataset, the researchers conducted an initial review to evaluate the theoretical grounding of the data. After this, the researchers engaged in collaborative coding sessions to achieve consensus on the primary themes derived from the literature regarding school happiness and perceptions of schooling.

The key themes guiding the analysis included Syrian students' perceptions of their schooling experiences and influencing factors, such as 1) relationships with peers, teachers, and school administrators; 2) evaluations of their circumstances, including feelings of being loved, recognized, and secure; 3) their physical and psychological well-being; and 4) shared experiences, whether through community practices or personal interactions. To understand Syrian students' overall happiness in school, the analysis emphasized key themes related to 1) relationships with peers, teachers, school administrators, and family; 2) engagement in curricular activities; 3) access to school facilities; 4) academic success; and 5) participation in extracurricular activities. To illustrate the process of data analysis, the research team examined data collected through the prompt "Tell me about your day at school?" focusing on perceptions of happiness and various relevant themes. These themes included 1) relationships with peers, teachers, and school administrators; 2) assessments of personal circumstances; 3) physical and psychological well-being; 4) shared experiences, whether through community engagements or personal interactions; 5) participation in curricular activities; 6) access to school facilities; 7) academic achievement; and 8) involvement in extracurricular activities. With the use of a deductive

thematic analysis approach, the research team aimed to explore all the data points thoroughly while adhering to the theoretical and conceptual framework established for the study.

Additionally, the analysis of student drawings incorporated specific themes derived from the literature on the representations of students' perceptions of school life. The primary themes guiding the interpretation of these drawings included 1) notable figures; 2) color usage; 3) body parts; 4) line quality; and 5) emotional expressions (Çevikbaş, 2016).

Rigor and quality of the research

The rigor of this research was ensured primarily by the second author's proactive role during the entire study. As a Syrian person under TPS, this researcher helped to overcome cultural and linguistic challenges that are natural to any multicultural research setting. In addition, the issues related to potential biases in qualitative interpretation were clearly defined through comprehensive and empirically substantiated descriptions under the guidance of a well-structured conceptual framework and relevant literature related to immigrant students' challenges in schools.

In addition to extended engagement and the utilization of various data collection methods and timelines (Yin, 2003), researchers have viewed instances of conflict as significant opportunities to deepen the study and enrich the insights derived (Silverman, 2006). By purposefully exploring negative instances, the researchers aimed to expand their comprehension of the difficulties faced by Syrian students in their everyday school experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, the researchers either reassessed their theoretical assumptions or collected supplementary data in response to any conflicting scenarios encountered. For example, researchers noted a discrepancy when a student expressed that he was "not happy at school at all," yet demonstrated considerable enjoyment and happiness while playing in the schoolyard. This observation provided a valuable opportunity for the researchers to delve deeper into the theoretical implications of the findings in subsequent interviews, during which the student articulated that her only moments of happiness at school occurred during breaks when she could gather with her Syrian friends. Therefore, to ensure quality assurance, a deliberate focus on contradictions and negative instances contributed to the overall rigor of the research.

Findings

This research utilized a multiple case study design to explore the experiences of three primary school Syrian students under the TPS. The findings are structured according to the research questions developed to capture the nuances of these individual cases.

Syrian Students' Perceptions about School

The students' perceptions of school were influenced by their relationships with peers, teachers, and school administrators, as well as their assessments of their circumstances, which included feelings of love, acknowledgment, and safety. Additionally, these factors encompassed their physical and mental well-being, as well as shared experiences stemming from community practices or personal interactions.

Interactions

Relationship with the school administration: The school administration primarily connects with students when issues or complaints emerge. Enes, a school administrator with two years of experience, noted that among these Syrian students, he personally recognized only one student, Mervan, who approached him a few times without incident. Enes generally step in to mediate conflicts that arise between Syrian students and their Turkish peers. He remarked, "Managing a school like this can be challenging because some foreign students lack discipline, and their parents seem indifferent" (Enes, Interview, January 2023).

Relationships with Teachers: When discussing their relationships with teachers, Mervan and Zahra were hesitant to directly address their current instructors. Instead, they expressed their views through comparisons with their previous teachers. Mervan reflected on his past experiences, stating,

> *"I had a teacher who often singled out my friends but ignored me when I tried to contribute. It felt like he favored the Turkish students over the Syrians. Fortunately, my current teacher, Selma, is different! She actually listens to me, lets me participate actively, and genuinely tries to address our issues. She appreciates my hard work, which feels great compared to my previous teacher, who never seemed to like me" (Mervan, Interview 2, December 2022).*

Although his comments were about his present teacher, Mervan alluded to his prior teacher to convey his previous feelings of neglect and perceived discrimination, noting favoritism toward Turkish students.

Zahra also exhibited reluctance in discussing her feelings about her current teacher, instead of referring to her former instructor to illustrate her sentiments. She remarked,

> *"My teacher gets angry a lot. My current teacher is better, but my previous ones often yelled at me and wouldn't allow me to speak in class. Yahya, my current teacher, once got upset with me and threw a book in my direction. While my cheek hurt, he has since been more supportive, taking me to the board and showing interest in my contributions. However, I am cautious of him because he can be tough when angry and treats some students unequally" (Zahra, Interview 2, December 2022).*

Sereen, a classmate of Zahra and a Syrian student, voiced her concerns about Zahra's treatment by their teacher, Yahya, stating, "Our teacher is consistently harsh with Zahra and never allows her to come to the board. Whenever there's a dispute, he punishes Zahra simply because she's Syrian" (Sereen, Interview, April 2023). Both Zahra and Sereen perceived their teacher as being biased against his Syrian students, believing that he treated them unjustly owing to their Syrian identity.

Marva, another student, shared her perspective with her teacher, saying,

> *"My teacher, Yasemin, can be a bit strict and sometimes impatient, yet we generally get along well. She looks out for me and exhibits a caring side. I think she likes me, but she seems to favor better-behaved girls. When I face challenges, I feel like she doesn't take my concerns as seriously" (Marva, Interview 2, December 2022).*

While the participating students voiced cautious positivity regarding their teachers, they all reported experiencing unfair treatment that they attributed to their Syrian identity. The observations confirmed that no teachers allowed these students, nor others from similar backgrounds, to voice their opinions during class discussions. Interactions between teachers and Syrian students were largely limited to directives such as opening books, listening to lectures, or noticing.

Peer Relationships and Social Dynamics: The dynamics of the students' relationships with peers—another critical factor affecting their perceptions of school—were characterized by pronounced conflict. None reported having productive relationships with their classmates, and negative interactions were common. Feelings of alienation and threats from peers were frequently expressed. For example, when asked about his Turkish peers, Mervan was reluctant to share. His friend Mazin, another Syrian student, noted that Mervan rarely interacted with classmates, stating, "Mervan doesn't even talk to me much. He often skips recess" (Mazin, Interview, April 2023), underscoring Mervan's loneliness at school. Mazin added that Mervan faces "violence" from Turkish peers, stemming from his limited Turkish proficiency, which contributes to his avoidance of recess.

Zahra echoed similar concerns about the physical threats she faced at school, expressing,

> *"I feel bad because the kids in both my class and outside make fun of me. There's this one student who teases me often, especially during our first lesson. It feels like they dislike me simply for being Syrian. They even take my notebook, and when I refuse to give it to them, they threaten me, saying, 'If you don't comply, we'll deal with you later.' Just yesterday, someone grabbed my arm and scared me. I feel pressured to obey them to stay safe. They do not seem to like us; my brother was even stabbed once because he did not give in to their demands" (Zahra, Interview 2, December 2022).*

Marva expressed her preference for avoiding interactions with Turkish classmates, stating, "I always feel shy and afraid speaking in Turkish, so I just don't speak at all" (Marva, Interview 2, December 2022). Her classmate Farah observed, "Marva often asks the teacher for a break and tends to miss school a lot. She struggles to connect with Turkish students and often finds herself in fights" (Farah, Interview, April 2023).

The friction between Syrian students and their Turkish counterparts appeared to be a significant barrier, a conclusion supported by observations that revealed limited opportunities for interaction during lessons designed for instructional purposes.

Their assessment of circumstances

The students' assessments of their situations also revealed an interplay between feelings of being valued, acknowledged, and secure in the school environment. An analysis of the data revealed a direct correlation between the participants' self-worth, recognition, and sense of safety, all of which were intertwined with their Syrian identity. Their evaluations of their current experiences indicated a pervasive absence of feelings of love, recognition, and safety, which they attributed to their heritage. Mervan articulated, "If I were a teacher, I would treat everyone fairly and wouldn't be so quick to anger" (Mervan, Interview 2, December 2022). He expressed a desire for his teacher's engagement, stating, "I wish my teacher would ask me why I feel sad when I do and would take the time to learn about my family" (Mervan, Interview 2, December 2022).

In addition to the lack of positive recognition, Zahra revealed her low self-confidence in speaking Turkish, attributing part of this feeling to her limited fluency. She explained, "Whenever I try to share my thoughts in class, my classmates laugh and ask, 'Do you even know Turkish?'. This is a repeated experience for me!" (Zahra, Interview 3, January 2023). Zahra's remark highlights the detrimental impact of the language barrier on her

social interactions, exacerbating her feelings of insecurity within the school environment. "I dislike school; I don't feel safe anywhere," she articulated.

Fear and trust emerged as critical emotions influencing the students' circumstances. Marva noted, "I feel safest in our classroom because my teacher protects me. The schoolyard, however, isn't safe; I've been beaten there." These basic safety concerns also seem to hinder their academic performance. Mervan explained, "My Turkish isn't great, so I struggle to communicate in class. I don't truly participate, which embarrasses me" (Mervan, Interview 2, December 2022). These findings indicate that the primary reasons for his loneliness and fear were significantly tied to language barriers that limited his school experience. These observations further corroborated this finding, illustrating that students often sought to protect themselves by minimizing interactions with teachers and Turkish peers.

Physical and mental well-being

To gain a deeper understanding of how the participating students perceived their school environment, data were collected through observations and student-generated drawings. Throughout the interviews, the students exhibited anxiety when prompted to reflect critically on their school experiences, especially with respect to their interactions with teachers. The observational data indicated that all the participating students regarded school mainly as a compulsory environment. While they superficially claimed to enjoy the school experience, they often expressed discomfort within that setting. For example, during an initial interview, Marva stated, "I love school" (Marva, Interview 1, December 2022). However, her teacher, Yasemin, indicated that Marva usually showed reluctance to attend school (Yasemin, Interview, April 2023).

Similarly, Mervan expressed enthusiasm for school, saying, "I love school a lot; if I keep attending, I could become a doctor someday" (Mervan, Interview 1, December 2022). However, observational data revealed that his interactions with peers were heavily influenced by fears of potential violence and bullying. His drawing portrayed school as an institution characterized by strict regulations and authority. In this illustration (Drawing 1), Mervan chose to depict a three-story building using a palette of dark blue, dark brown, and dark green, complete with imposing, closed doors. The multilevel design, featuring distinctly locked doors, symbolizes Mervan's view of education as a hierarchical and authoritative institution. His color choices—a combination of blue and brown for the first and second floors—convey feelings of oppression, whereas the blue

and green pair for the first and third floors hints at struggles with maladaptive emotions and mental well-being.

Drawing 1. Mervan's drawing



Furthermore, his drawing reflects feelings of isolation; he illustrated himself alongside one of his closest Syrian friends in the schoolyard, highlighting their connection yet depicting himself as physically distanced from others by a tree—a symbol of rejection. The artwork also included elements of anxiety, such as the absence of ears, exaggerated hand shapes that resemble clenched fists, and missing fingers.

Like Mervan, Zahra viewed school as a structured environment where rules are necessary for maintaining order. She articulated, "I think following school rules is important because they help keep us all safe…" (Zahra, Interview 3, January 2023). Zahra's drawing (Drawing 2) visually communicated aspects of her physical and mental well-being, particularly regarding her perceptions of the school environment. It featured numerous details that underscored the regulatory nature of the school, including a prominent door and a clock symbolizing institutional hierarchy and authority.

In Drawing 2, long lines in front of the door may portray Zahra as an aggressive child. Additionally, her drawing encompassed elements that indicated her mental well-being, including a purple rooftop symbolizing the weight of her responsibilities and her need for support. Zahra's only friend both at school and within her neighborhood, Haneen, expressed feelings of embarrassment over her classmates' mockery when Zahra attempted to participate in class or approach the board.

Drawing 2: Zahra's drawing



However, Haneen noted that Zahra consistently defended her, stating, "Zahra always protects me; she's different and strong enough to stand up for herself like a lawyer" (Haneen, Interview, January 2023). In Zahra's artwork, flying birds positioned in the background further symbolize her feelings of anxiety as well.

Shared experiences

The shared experiences among the students within their classrooms were significantly limited because of perceived language barriers and a lack of parental support. The impact of the language barrier was evident through both observations and the thoughts of their teachers. Mervan and Zahra routinely opted not to engage with their Turkish peers, deliberately avoiding interactions with Turkish classmates at school (Mervan and Zahra, In and Out of Class Observations, December–April). Marvas, in particular, faced challenges in their social interactions with Turkish peers, both in the classroom and during recess. She often finds herself embroiled in disputes, seeking her teacher's intervention to help resolve conflicts (Marva, Observation, December 2022).

Mervan's teacher, Selma, remarked on his behavior, stating, "He seems hesitant to communicate with me or his classmates," adding that Mervan's lack of fluency in Turkish made it difficult to engage in discussions. She noted, "Mervan is rather shy and doesn't actively participate in class. He follows rules but rarely communicates with those seated next to him" (Selma, Interview, April 2023). Mervan did not perceive his Turkish classmates as friends, declaring, "In my previous class, I didn't have any friends because all of the kids were Turkish, but in my current class, I have

Syrian friends" (Mervan, Interview 2, December 2022). Zahra further elaborated, "When my two Syrian friends aren't at school, I feel lonely because no one else wants to be around me. People keep telling me, 'You're Syrian, so we won't play with you." (Zahra, Interview 4, April 2023).

In addition to the shared experiences of these students, their parents' involvement in the school community has been sporadic and largely ineffective. Yasemin, Marva's teacher, noted the limited parental engagement, stating, "I met her mother once, but after that, we didn't communicate by phone or in person. I've asked Marva several times for her mother to come to school, but she never did" (Yasemin, Interview, April 2023). Although these parents seem to care about their children's educational experiences, their limited proficiency in Turkish culture inhibits meaningful communication and shared experiences with teachers and school administrators. This language barrier restricts their ability to contribute positively to the students' perceptions of school. Similarly, Zahra's teacher, Yahya, commented on the lack of parental involvement and its repercussions, stating, "We spoke to Zahra's mom once, but it didn't go well, as she doesn't speak Turkish. Honestly, I think her family would do better if they made more effort for her academic success" (Yahya, Interview, April 2023). Once again, the language barrier significantly affects the shared experiences of those involved in the education of these Syrian students.

Syrian students' overall happiness in school

The theoretical and conceptual framework of this study, which is grounded in the relevant literature, posits that the factors shaping the perceptions of schools also influence students' overall happiness within the educational environment. This investigation includes a comprehensive evaluation of Syrian students' relationships with their peers, teachers, and school administrators as part of an exploration of their school perceptions. Consequently, this section highlights the various factors contributing to these students' overall happiness at school, such as their relationships with family, their integration into the broader Syrian community, their academic achievements, and their participation in curricular and extracurricular activities.

Relationships

Concerning their overall happiness, the students reported generally feeling content outside the school environment. Mervan shared his joy, stating, "I'm a pretty happy kid! I love going to the park, riding my bike, and going to school. It makes my day when my dad brings me food" (Mervan,

Interview 3, March 2023). His mother affirmed his happiness but also recounted his unpleasant school experiences, saying,

> *"Mervan is such a bright and energetic child—always chatting! Lately, however, he's been a bit of a troublemaker, likely owing to kids bullying him during recess. His dad spoke to the principal and vice principal, but they haven't resolved it yet" (Nour, Interview, March 2023).*

Similarly, Marva conveyed her happiness, stating, "I'm a happy kid because my dad and friends care very much about me. Whenever I feel down and cry, they remind me, 'Don't worry, we're here for you!'" (Marva, Interview 3, April 2023). Despite attempts to converse with her mother, Fatima was unresponsive to questions regarding Marva's educational experience.

Zahra succinctly captured her happiness, saying, *"I am a happy kid because I always smile" (Zahra, Interview 3, January 2023).* Her mother painted a picture of Zahra as a strong individual who detests injustice:

> *"She truly cannot stand it and always speaks up. My daughter is happy, hardworking, and quite smart; however, she tends to be a bit quarrelsome and aggressive. I still worry about her schooling because she faces harassment on her way there—sometimes even getting pushed down a hill! Honestly, I have hesitated to send her to school" (Mariam, Interview, March 2023).*

The observational data indicated that while these Syrian students experienced a strong sense of happiness with family and friends, their experiences of joy at school were markedly different, as they all expressed discontent stemming from negative attitudes from peers. Mervan articulated this sentiment, stating, *"When other kids at school or in our apartment bully me, it makes me truly sad" (Mervan, Interview 3, March 2023).* Zahra echoed similar feelings; she explained that exposure to violence was a source of her unhappiness: *"If nobody hit me, I would be happy." She suggested, "I could be a happier kid if I went to a school where all the kids were Syrian… if there were a school just for Syrians, I think I'd be a lot happier there!" (Zahra, Interview 4, April 2023).*

Teachers also observed the students' struggles with happiness inside the school environment. Selma, Mervan's teacher, expressed doubt concerning his overall contentment, noting, *"I feel like Mervan finds it challenging to express his feelings, hindered by the language barrier, which makes it tough to determine his happiness" (Selma, Interview, April 2023).* Regarding Marva, her teacher remarked,

> *"I believe Marva loves me very much; she often comes to hug me and says, 'I love you, teacher.' However, for reasons unknown, she frequently fights with friends and appears sad and cries most of the time. When I ask her what's wrong, she*

responds, 'Everyone curses at me, and no one loves me'" (Yasemin, Interview, April 2023).

Yahya, Zahra's teacher, poignantly described her demeanor: *"There's always a trace of sadness on her face, and from my observations, she's unhappy at school." (Yahya, Interview, April 2023).* He suggested that Zahra's unhappiness might be tied to her difficulties connecting with Turkish classmates due to language obstacles.

Limited interactions with Turkish peers and teachers have a significant effect on students' happiness levels. Mervan's search for affection and validation from his teacher highlights the essential role that teachers play in fostering the well-being of these students. The discomfort these students feel in expressing concerns about the lack of support and recognition from their teachers underscores their continuous yearning for love and validation. Despite Zahra's feelings of exclusion from her classroom teacher, she found solace in her interactions with the school counselor, whom she described as kind, saying, *"I feel good when I visit the school counselor" (Zahra, Interview 4, April 2023).*

Engagement in curricular and extracurricular activities and academic success

While academic success has the potential to foster happiness among students, it simultaneously imposes stress on Syrian learners, dampening their overall enjoyment of school. Specifically, classes that demand fluency in Turkish present significant challenges for these students. Mervan, for instance, acknowledged his struggles with subjects outside of mathematics, stating, *"I like math the most because I understand it, but life sciences, science and Turkish are very hard" (Mervan, Interview 2, December 2022).* Marva voiced similar concerns over her performance and anxiety in Turkish literacy, and science saying, *"Turkish and science classes have been tough for me. I often feel embarrassed in trying to speak it, which makes me shy about participating in discussions. I worry about making mistakes and appearing foolish" (Marva, Interview 2, December 2022).* Zahra's limited Turkish proficiency also created substantial barriers to her academic achievement in Turkish and science as well as self-esteem. She explained how her struggles with the language hindered her school performance.

In contrast, Zahra thrived in a non-traditional learning environment. Throughout the study, she participated in an online Arabic Qur'an course designed specifically for Syrian children that focused on teaching the Arabic language alongside Quranic interpretation. Zahra expressed high levels of satisfaction with this experience, and her mother noted, *"She's currently taking an online Qur'an course and is performing significantly better than she does in school!"*

(Mariam, Interview, March 2023). This example illustrates that Zahra not only excelled in this native-language educational setting but also found greater joy outside traditional schooling.

The data indicated that curricular activities within the school often presented several challenges, including diminished self-esteem, limited academic achievement in science and Turkish, and anxiety surrounding self-expression. Additionally, researchers have examined the potential influence of extracurricular activities on students' overall happiness within the school context. Unfortunately, no extracurricular opportunities were available for these Syrian students.

Results and discussion

The findings of the study revealed the complex interplay between students' perceptions of school and their overall happiness within that environment. In addition to this fundamental outcome, the research identified several critical factors that influence both the perceptions and overall happiness of these elementary-level Syrian students.

Lack of belonging

The results of this study indicate a strong correlation between students' perceptions of their school within the context of TPS and their sense of belonging. Specifically, it was found that students do not perceive themselves as integral members of their schools. School belonging is defined as the degree to which students feel personally accepted, respected, supported, and included by others in their educational environment, particularly teachers and peers (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Although students have structurally integrated the school and grasped the established rules, the findings suggest that they do not feel comfortable in either the school or their classes. This discomfort can be attributed to students' inability to adopt their classes as places they identify with, leading to a deficiency in their sense of belonging.

Mammadova and Aypay (2023) further strengthen this notion by asserting that the school climate plays a crucial role in shaping students' sense of belonging. Their research highlights that while some students experience a sense of belonging in certain schools, this sentiment is absent in others. The belief among participants under TPS that they would be happier in different schools aligns with the findings of Mammadova and Aypay. In light of this, we argue the importance of the implementation of support mechanisms that encompass both curricular and extracurricular activities, as well as incentives to engage these students more fully within their

classrooms. Malaeb & Ware (2023) further underscore the significance of parental involvement as a crucial aspect of this support system. They propose the implementation of an administrative framework that facilitates collaboration between parents and teachers, to better assist students. It is essential to array such initiatives at the district level to improve the achievement of these students in Turkish and science, enhance their experiences, and foster a sense of belonging. To address the feelings of alienation experienced by Syrian students, we contend that implementing administrative solutions is essential for fostering the adoption of culturally responsive educational practices. These practices aim to enhance intercultural learning by utilizing the cultural knowledge of Syrian children and promoting collaboration with their parents (Arvanitis, 2021). Furthermore, there is a critical need for comprehensive intercultural and mediation training for teachers to better support this initiative.

Lack of interaction and alienation

In this research, the participating students identified a significant factor contributing to their dissatisfaction with school: a deficiency in the language skills necessary for effective communication with peers and teachers. The findings revealed that this sense of inadequacy led to feelings of embarrassment when engaging in classroom interactions, causing students to hesitate in expressing their thoughts and emotions. Subsequently, this dynamic adversely impacts their overall perception of the school environment and their sense of happiness. In a parallel study, Stewart et al. (2019) highlighted that the language barrier, among other issues, significantly influenced these students' perceptions of their educational experience.

Conversely, refugee students often find themselves in disadvantaged positions within their host societies, facing various cultural, social, and economic challenges (Stewart, 2017). Among these obstacles, Stewart (2017) emphasized that the difficulties arising from their distinct adaptation processes to the host culture significantly hinder their ability to integrate. The findings of this study involving both students and their families suggest that these individuals frequently encounter cultural and racial marginalization in their educational environments.

Capturing a comparative perspective regarding Syrian students' adaption to host countries the existing literature indicates that among Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, the latter reports the fewest incidents of mistreatment such as bullying attributed to language barriers. Studies focusing on this phenomenon suggest that the use of Arabic as the primary language of instruction in Jordanian schools, affiliated with practices in Syria,

coupled with the widespread appreciation for "Bedouin" hospitality, facilitate a more effective integration process (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018; Barron et al., 2020). Indeed, research employing experimental methods to investigate discrimination and social exclusion of Syrian immigrant students within public schools operating a double-shift schedule in Jordan found extraordinarily low levels of discriminatory behavior (Barron et al., 2020). Furthermore, another study posits that the double-shift system contributes to the reported decrease in intimidation and bullying incidents in Jordanian public schools. This structure segregates immigrant students into an afternoon session, thereby limiting their interaction with Jordanian students attending classes during the day shift (Sieverding et al., 2018).

All participating Syrian students reported feeling different from their peers and teachers, with their identities as Syrians being perceived as deficient. This perception underscores the idea that racial and cultural marginalization complicates their integration into the new cultural and social landscape. In this context, Brown et al. (2006) assert that the alienation experienced by refugee students triggers substantial feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation during their school experiences. A study with a similar methodology reported that refugee children sometimes expressed reluctance to attend school, as they felt overshadowed by their peers' perceived success. Consequently, these children may begin to harbor self-loathing, which might also contribute to psychological and physical violence in the form of xenophobia (as described by Marks et al., 2021), which they endure by their classmates, a concern frequently highlighted in our findings. According to Brown and colleagues (2006), the self-doubt and existential questioning faced by refugee students often lead to ingrained feelings of being 'othered,' manifesting in thoughts such as "Why am I not like them?" and "Why did I come here?" These thoughts exacerbate their negative self-perception and cause them to scrutinize their peers. The findings from this study further reveal that such psychological struggles adversely impact students' attitudes toward school and their overall happiness.

As noted by Aslan (2020), the relationships between students under TPS and their Turkish peers can sometimes escalate into physical violence. Aslan's research indicated that Syrian students faced difficulties in their interactions with their Turkish peers, including a reluctance from Turkish students to engage with them, which occasionally resulted in conflicts. Similar observations have emerged in the literature (see Börü & Boyacı, 2016; Kiremit et al., 2018), showing that Syrian students are often socially and physically marginalized within school settings because of factors including language barriers, cultural discrepancies, and prejudice. Notably,

many participants in this study expressed feelings of unsafety at school and reported greater happiness when at home.

Lack of teacher support

For Engels and colleagues (2004), students' happiness in an educational setting arises from a balance among their expectations, psychological needs, and environmental influences. The findings from the study revealed that all three students who participated reported feeling happier at home than at school. Nonetheless, their overall school happiness is closely tied to feelings of safety, love, and positive recognition from others, especially their teachers. Specifically, those students who perceived love and recognition from their teachers demonstrated a more favorable view of their school environment and occasionally expressed feelings of happiness (Keddie & Niesche, 2012). This emphasizes the importance of perceived affection from teachers as a key contributor to students' positive perceptions of school (Nakamura-Thomas et al., 2023), and school happiness aligns with the assertions made by Konu et al. (2002) and Ramaswamy (2023). These scholars identified several factors that impact children's happiness in educational contexts, such as social relationships—primarily teacher-student interactions—as well as school climate, self-esteem, academic achievement, disciplinary measures, the overall school environment, and feelings of safety.

The current study indicates that Syrian students under TPS experience a lack of security due to a negative school climate and limited peer relationships, which adversely affect their happiness at school. Teachers play a crucial role in establishing effective classroom climates and fostering social justice and interactions (Konu et al., 2002; Rissanen & Kuusisto, 2023). The significance of teachers in the educational experiences of TPS students has also been highlighted by various researchers as well. Mammadova & Aypay (2023) reported that positive school memories among Syrian students often stemmed from their relationships with teachers, whereas negative memories were frequently associated with peer interactions. Their research revealed that these students commonly encounter verbal or behavioral bullying and feelings of rejection from peers. However, students' happiness and perceptions of school improve when teachers engage in protective behaviors, provide them with a voice, and express affection toward them. According to Allen et al. (2018), healthy teacher-student relationships are the most significant determinants of a student's perception of school and their sense of belonging.

The findings of this study indicate that in the context of TPS, teachers are the individuals whom students trust the most and rely on for support in the classroom. Kırılmaz & Öntaş (2020) emphasized that the classroom management strategies employed by teachers, along with their specialized teaching methods, attitudes, and perceptions toward Syrian students, are vital for fostering a respectful and caring classroom environment. On the other hand, Güven & İşleyen (2018) noted that students within the TPS may present challenges for teachers in terms of classroom management. In contemporary educational systems shaped by neoliberalism, instances of failure often serve as a mechanism for marginalization within classroom environments that prioritize academic success (Öntaş & Atmaca, 2016). An additional significant finding derived from the students' perspectives is that the experiences of Syrian students under TPS, who participate in classes that differ from their peers in language proficiency and sociocultural and socioeconomic dimensions, are not adequately addressed by educational approaches that prioritize individualized learning needs. Our findings indicate that the teachers involved in this study lacked the necessary resources to support multicultural and multilingual student demographics effectively. Consequently, we contend that providing professional development opportunities for teachers working with Syrian students is essential. Such support would enable them to foster a learning environment that acknowledges and nurtures these students through the implementation of effective curricular and extracurricular activities within the school setting.

Limitations and further research

This study aimed to examine the factors that influence Syrian students' perceptions of their school and their overall happiness. While teachers contributed insights on the basis of their experiences with these students, their role was secondary, which restricted a comprehensive understanding of the actions undertaken by them. Gaining insight into the pedagogical competencies and epistemological beliefs of these teachers, as well as their expertise and qualifications in multicultural and multilingual instructional settings, would enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by Syrian immigrant students in our schools.

Another limitation of this research is the focus on Turkish students' perceptions of their Syrian counterparts. Future studies should concentrate on how and what Turkish students develop their understanding of Syrian students, as this understanding has been identified as a potential source of

conflict and has been associated with incidents of physical and psychological violence between the two groups.

Furthermore, this study aimed to identify the factors that affect Syrian students' perceptions of school and their overall happiness within that context. However, the descriptive thematic nature of the research limited our exploration of the correlation between these students' views of school and their sense of happiness. The intricate interplay between these variables remains an unanswered question. Future research must delve deeper into this interconnectedness by employing more rigorous methodologies, such as critical inquiry, action research, or symbolic interactionism.

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