

The effect of family contact on well-being and development of fostered children in Eswatini

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Abstract

Fostered children in the Kingdom of Eswatini often struggle to maintain ties with their biological families. This qualitative study utilized qualitative research approach, guided by Cultural Historical Activity Theory to assess the extent family contact in formal foster care centres in the kingdom of Eswatini contributes to the overall well-being and development of children. It also identifies the challenges and barriers in facilitating and maintaining family contact in foster care centres. Data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews with twenty-five participants. Results indicated that contact with biological family members helped fostered children sustain family bonds, decrease anxiety and aggression, and stay informed about family affairs. The study suggests maximizing the use of phone calls and social media, allowing the fostered children a reasonable number of days to visit their families, child parent therapies, and introducing more family funny days to enhance family contact among fostered children.

Keywords: *biological family, cultural historical activity theory, qualitative research, fostered children*

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1. Introduction

In 2023, UNICEF reported that globally, there were 105 children in foster care for every 100,000 inhabitants. The prevalence of children in foster care varied widely across regions, with South Asia recording 75 per 100,000, Western Europe 294 per 100,000, and Eswatini 352 per 100,000 in formal foster care facilities. This highlights the notably high number of children in foster care in Eswatini, many of whom could benefit from maintaining connections with their biological families. According to information from the Deputy Prime Minister's office, there are currently around 38 foster care centers across Eswatini. The office of the Deputy Prime Minister is responsible for identifying vulnerable children in need of placement in foster homes (Department of Social Welfare, 2021). The Department of Social Welfare (2021) further emphasizes that the Ministry of Justice is tasked with granting permission for children to be placed in foster care. This process aligns with the Children's Protection and Welfare Act (2012), which outlines the rights and protections of children.

The Department of Social Welfare (2021) recommends that NGOs can assist in fostering children, but their staff must be vetted by the Department of Social Welfare. According to the Children's Protection and Welfare Act (2012), foster homes have a responsibility to help children understand and accept the reasons their biological families are unable to care for them, while also helping them develop confidence in their own self-worth. The Act further stipulates that foster homes must ensure children receive quality welfare services, which includes involving the biological parents and allowing the child's participation in major decisions affecting their life. However, both the Child Protection Act (2012) and related guidelines do not explicitly address the importance of maintaining contact between fostered children and their biological families. This may explain the limited interaction between fostered children and their biological families.

Family contact refers to the ongoing communication and interaction between foster children and their biological parents, siblings, and other immediate family members. It is an essential element of the foster care system, designed to preserve and strengthen the child's ties to their birth family during their time in care. Recent research underscores the importance of regular family contact for fostering the well-being of children in care. For instance, Skipper et al. (2021) argue that maintaining consistent interaction with biological parents is vital for sustaining the parent-child attachment bond, even amidst potential challenges related to visitation. Both the frequency and quality of interactions between foster children and their

biological families is a crucial factor in promoting the healthy development and overall well-being of children in care (Hite et al., 2024). Additionally, Chamberlain et al. (2020) cite several reasons for family contact, including preserving a child's links to their cultural and ethnic history, guaranteeing continuity in relationships, and fostering the child's emotional attachment to their biological family members.

According to Martínez et al. (2016), foster children and their biological parents can assist each other's development and preserve attachment relationships through visits. Consequently, fostered children who are denied regular biological family contacts are likely to face life challenges. In a study conducted by Martínez et al. (2016), fostered children who received visits of low quality, felt less affectionate towards them, and felt more rejection or criticism from their parents. A variety of methods, such as supervised visits, phone calls, video chats, or letter- and photo-exchanges, can be used to maintain family ties. Usually, it is organised and supervised by the foster care provider or the child welfare organisation. The frequency and duration of family contact may alter based on the specific circumstances and the child's best interests. Poitras et al. (2021) found that family contact is crucial in fostering children's psychological and emotional well-being. Their research highlights that regular family interaction positively influences psychological adjustment and emotional health, particularly for children in foster care.

In the Kingdom of Eswatini, formal foster care facilities play a vital role in providing children, who cannot live with their biological families, a safe and nurturing environment. Hence, maintaining regular contact between children and their biological family members throughout the caregiving process is key to supporting a child's emotional development and enhancing their overall well-being (Tarren-Sweeney, 2018). According to Kunene (2023), in an article in *The Times of Swaziland*, Deputy Prime Minister Themba Masuku urged Chiefs to adopt orphaned children from foster care facilities across the country to prevent them from being abandoned when they reach adulthood. This initiative aligns with Eswatini's cultural practices, which emphasize that orphans should not feel the absence of their biological families within the community. This concept, rooted in the principle of Ubuntu, reinforces the belief that "it takes a village to raise a child." If foster children are not given the opportunity for regular family contact, it is viewed as disconnecting them from their heritage and kinship. Masuku recognized the presence of several foster care facilities in the country and highlighted

that Eswatini's foster children continue to face challenges, such as the lack of a permanent home once they age out of foster care, as they are not allowed to remain in these facilities.

While the importance of maintaining family connections for foster children has been acknowledged internationally, this situation reveals a gap in the family connections available to foster children in Eswatini (Cotton et al., 2021). Additionally, there has been limited research on the specific role and impact of family contact in formal foster care settings in Eswatini. Similarly, there is a notable lack of research in Eswatini's foster care system regarding family contact, and little existing literature that applies the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework in this context. To fully understand the frequency, nature, and quality of family contact, it is essential to explore the perspectives and experiences of both foster children and their families regarding the significance and effects of these interactions.

This study aims to address the existing knowledge gap and provide valuable insights into the importance of maintaining family connections for children in foster care by examining the role of family contact within formal foster care centres in the Kingdom of Eswatini. This study specifically examines the role of family contact within formal foster care centres in Eswatini and its impact on the well-being and development of children. It also identifies the challenges and barriers that hinder the facilitation and maintenance of such family connections in these settings. In Eswatini, some children choose to remain in foster care centres due to a lack of contact with their biological families. For some, this disconnection leads to risky behaviors, including involvement in criminal activities, as they see imprisonment as a safer alternative. These children may view prisons as a place where they experience a sense of security, as they have no emotional or familial ties outside of these institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study used the activity theory known as the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). CHAT offers a thorough framework for comprehending the intricate relationships that exist between people, their social contexts, and the cultural and historical settings in which they live. By focusing on the procedures, resources, and cultural artefact that mould and impact the function of family contact, this theory can provide insightful information about how family contact dynamics operate within official foster care facilities. According to Skipper et al. (2021), CHAT offers a potent lens for examining social practices and human activity within

contexts. It can assist in examining how social structures, historical context, cultural norms, and family contact practices affect interactions between children, their birth families, and foster care providers.

In their investigation of foster care in Spain, González-Martnez and Torres-Jiménez (2020) used CHAT, demonstrating the theory's value for looking at the sociocultural facets of foster care practises. Researchers can use CHAT to determine the mediational tools and cultural artefact, including the role of technology and communication platforms that influence the frequency, calibre, and efficacy of family contact in formal foster care centres. As indicated by Arvaja et al. (2019), CHAT can shed light on how technology can promote family interaction and how it affects how well-adjusted emotionally foster children are. In the context of Eswatini, the foster care system is deeply embedded within the nation's unique cultural and historical landscape. Applying CHAT allows for an examination of how traditional family structures, community values, and historical events influence current foster care practices and family contact norms. This analysis is crucial for identifying systemic contradictions and areas of conflict that may hinder effective family reunification and child development (Mpofu & Machingauta, 2024).

A study by Mpofu and Machingauta (2024) on the dynamics of foster care in Eswatini highlights the benefits, challenges, and strategies for effective foster parenting. This research underscores the importance of understanding cultural and historical contexts to address challenges in the foster care system effectively. By applying CHAT, researchers can identify underlying tensions and propose culturally sensitive interventions that align with the societal values and historical experiences of Eswatini (Hite et al., 2024). Moreover, CHAT's emphasis on identifying contradictions within activity systems enables researchers to pinpoint specific areas where cultural practices and institutional policies may be misaligned. This insight is invaluable for developing targeted interventions aimed at resolving these contradictions, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of formal foster care facilities. By acknowledging and addressing these systemic tensions, stakeholders can work towards creating a more cohesive and supportive environment for fostered children and their families (Postholm & Vennebo, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is particularly effective for exploring complex phenomena such as biological family contact for fostered children. Qualitative research fosters participatory methods and offers significant opportunities for meaningful community engagement, promoting agency, empowerment, and addressing power imbalances (Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021). As highlighted by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research seeks to understand the lived experiences, meanings, and social contexts of individuals. This approach aligns with the objective of investigating the role of family contact within formal foster care systems. To achieve this, the study employed a case study design, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complex, real-life dynamics of biological family contact in foster care settings. This design enabled the consideration of various factors, such as the nature, frequency, and emotional or psychological impact of the contact on the child (Priya, 2020). By focusing on specific cases, researchers were able to collect rich, qualitative data that provided valuable insights into how family contact influences children's well-being, behavior, and their adjustment to foster care.

3.2. Participants of the Study

The study participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which involves intentionally selecting individuals based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Andrade, 2020). A total of 25 participants were recruited from four foster homes, two located in the Hhohho region and two in the Manzini region. The sample included ten foster children, eight foster parents, and seven biological family members, all of whom were deliberately chosen to align with the study's inclusion criteria (Andrade, 2020). To facilitate the selection process, we first approached the gatekeepers of all the centres, who then assisted in recruiting individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Additionally, gatekeepers helped identify the biological family members of the foster children.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviews were employed to collect data for this study. The FGDs involved ten foster children, selected from four different centres. To facilitate the discussion, we conducted the focus group in one foster care centre. Two

researchers were involved in the process: one asked the questions while the other recorded the participants' responses. For interviews with foster parents and biological family members, we conducted one-on-one interviews. The researchers divided these participants, with one interviewing seven individuals and the other interviewing eight. An interview guide was used to ensure that the questions were aligned with the research objectives, helping to address the study's research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.4. Data Analysis

The data from the perspectives was analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative research method ideal for examining written interview transcripts. This approach, which is well-suited to analyzing responses on a range of topics from personal experiences to social challenges, involves identifying and categorizing recurring themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Following this, the six-step thematic analysis methodology outlined by Naeem et al. (2023) was applied. This process includes becoming familiar with the data, generating preliminary codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing those themes, defining and labeling them, and ultimately constructing the analysis. Each of these steps was followed carefully to ensure a thorough and meaningful interpretation of the data.

3.5. Research Ethics

When conducting research, it is essential to uphold the rights of the participants. Adhering to ethical guidelines plays a crucial role in achieving key research objectives, such as ensuring the integrity of information and minimizing errors. Ethics not only guarantees the accuracy of data but also helps mitigate potential mistakes (Dar & Shairgojri, 2022). In our study, we rigorously followed ethical protocols, which included informed consent, confidentiality, non-maleficence, and beneficence (Nichol et al., 2021). This process involved obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring their rights were respected throughout the study. To protect participants, we first sought approval from all relevant gatekeepers. For one of the centers, which was managed by correctional services, we obtained permission from the Commissioner General. For other centres, we approached the directors directly. All centres provided official permission letters.

Participants were thoroughly informed about all aspects of the study, including its objectives, methods, potential risks, and benefits. They were given the opportunity to ask

questions and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. These measures were implemented to protect participants' rights and ensure that the research was conducted ethically. Most importantly, their identities were kept confidential and were represented by codes, such as ST1, ST2, and ST3, to maintain privacy.

4. Findings and Discussion

Data was generated using FGD and one on one interviews. We used FGDs to collect data from fostered children in selected foster homes. Some children where we found it necessary were interviewed one by one. The study employed the same strategy with foster parents. Some foster parents participated in an FGD while some were interviewed one on one. With the biological family members, we used one on one interviews. For ethics reasons excerpts from foster parents were coded [FP], foster children [FC] and biological family member [BFM]. The first question sought to find out how family contact in formal foster care centre in the kingdom of Eswatini contribute to the overall well-being and development of children. The themes that emerged from this question follow:

It helps to maintain family bonds. Participants from the fostered children FGD revealed that family contacts are crucial as it help to maintain family bonds. One participant had this to say.

'Maintaining family contact makes me feel I am still part of the family, and I am valued'

"it helps me emotionally, as I do not feel abandoned. I still feel part of the family."

[FGD]

The findings align with a study by Angel (2014), which emphasized that foster children considered maintaining contact with their siblings vital for preserving their identity and sense of belonging. Angel (2014) further asserted that the children's self-perception was shaped by their connections to both foster and biological siblings. Mason (2008) concurs with these observations, noting that a key need for children placed outside of their homes is to form meaningful relationships with people who hold significance in their lives. However, a contrasting study by Van Holen et al. (2020) found that family contact often evoked mixed emotions. Foster children reported missing their biological families but seeing them also

brought sadness. Additionally, Mpofu and Machingauta (2024) discovered that foster children faced significant adaptation challenges in their new environments. In this context, maintaining family connections could help ease these adaptation difficulties. A study by Hampton et al. (2021) on the psychological effects of forced family separation on asylum-seeking children and parents at the US-Mexico border revealed that both children and parents suffered significant trauma during both the separation and reunification processes. Consequently, denying foster children access to their biological families can have detrimental effects on their psychological well-being.

It helps to reduce anxiety and aggression among fostered children. One participant highlighted that family contact helps in reducing anxiety and aggressive behaviour.

“If they do not come to visit me, I feel aggressive. There is a time I recall; they did not visit me for about four months, and I could really see I was starting to be non-sociable even to my peers I stay with in here” [FGD]

The narratives are similar to the explanation of Maaskant et al. (2015) that fostered children developed mistrust in their biological parents due to lack of frequent contact with them. Similarly, Goldberg (2000) argues that emotional anguish and detachment result from the undesirable separation and loss of an attachment person, regardless of the degree of connection, which may give rise to undesirable behaviours such as melancholy, criminality, and aggressiveness (Kaplan et al., 1999). Biological family members who fail to visit their biological fostered children make them develop aggressive behaviour. Children feel unloved and neglected.

It helps one to stay up to date with what is happening back home. One child participant in the FGD felt that even though they are in foster centre, they need to know what is going on with their families. He had this to say: *“it brings a lot of relief from thought of one’s family member hurt, sick or dead”*. They felt such information should be delivered to them right in time especially death messages. One participant said, *“Sir we are Africans, I hope you know bad spells brought by not knowing your relative have passed on”*. Fostered children felt contact with biological family is a must to them. In a study carried out by

Stevenson et al. (2024), sibling support is linked to improved resilience and mental health in foster children.

It helps the biological parents to continue being involved in the lives of their children.

Participants felt that when parents maintain constant contact with their children, it helps foster a sense of responsibility. This ongoing communication strengthens the child-parent relationship. This finding aligns with the study of Bengtsson and Karmsteen (2021) on the recognition of parental roles. Their research found that all parents, regardless of their circumstances, seek recognition in their children's lives, which motivates them to actively cooperate in all activities involving their children.

The second research question sought to find out the possible challenges hindering fostered children from maintaining contacts with their biological families. The themes that emerged follow.

Distance and financial constraints. Participants cited distance and financial constraints as key factors preventing them from maintaining contact with their families, particularly in terms of physical visits. This is largely due to the fact that many Emaswati live below the poverty line. As a result, many children are placed in foster care because their families are unable to care for them financially. These families struggle to afford transportation costs to visit their children.

Distance in my case, my home is situated in the Shiselweni region (far away from here), they will not just pass by my parents and relatives will only come if I have pressing needs/issues [FGD]

I am here because my parents and relatives were unable to look after me due to financial constraints. My family is struggling financially thus why it is difficult to meet regularly. [FGD]

Poverty, lack of money makes it difficult for the biological family to call or visit the fostered child [F1]

The information shared by the participants reveal that financial constraints on the part of the biological family and long distances between foster homes and biological family homes make it difficult to facilitate regular contacts. According to Nock and Ferriter (2005) and Snell-Johns et al. (2004), people from low-income communities failed to adhere to clinical

interventions, citing bus fare as the reason. This is also the reason why some children in foster homes are not visited by their biological family members.

Attitudes of some of the parents toward the children at foster care. It should be noted that children are fostered for various reasons. Some are fostered because of their behaviour, some because of the way they were born, some because biological parents are poor or disabled that they cannot look after them. Those who came because of bad behaviour are normally abandoned if the parent and fostered child fail to reach a common ground.

Some parents are still furious, they do not understand that here in the facility we came for rehabilitation and care. They need to understand that rehabilitation is a process, it needs the parents to play a role in supporting us. [FGD]

Some families are angry at their children and are not willing to involve themselves with the child. [FP3]

“Parents and children have anger issues emanating from past family disputes (children and parent not ready to change or forgive each other” [FP5]

The attitudes of the members of the biological family play a major role in reducing contact of the biological family with the fostered children.

Fostered children not having biological parents. The fostered parents noted that in cases where fostered children do not have biological parents, maintaining biological family contacts is difficult.

“Fostered children without biological parents face challenges maintaining biological family contact as their family might not be willing to maintain the contact with fostered children” [FP 6]

Most the fostered children come from child headed families, who may find it difficult to keep contact with their siblings [FP4]

The sad reality these days where families are headed by children struggling to make ends meet. Having money to visit their siblings can be a toll order. This concurs with the study conducted by Maushe and Mugumbate (2015) on child headed households who found that children from these families struggle financially to meet their basic needs. Similarly, Mthethwa (2009) noted that older siblings become responsible for their young siblings as extended family members can no longer assist due to economic hardships.

Fostered children coming from broken family structures. Broken family structures were cited as one of the reasons why it is difficult for the children to maintain biological family contact.

“They come from broken family structures where biological parents might be fighting, or biological parents having bad relationship with other family members as a result children are caught in the crossfire” [FP1]

Some children come from fractured family structures, where parents are in conflict over custody or other issues, and sometimes even extended family members become involved. This turmoil can make it challenging for these children to maintain connections with their biological families. According to Chavda et al. (2023), such family instability can significantly harm a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development. While both the child and the foster family may be open to maintaining contact with the biological family, ongoing disputes within the family can often make this difficult, if not impossible.

Biological families and parents seeing foster homes as damping grounds. Some participants expressed the view that certain families perceive foster homes as places for problematic children, which may contribute to their reluctance to maintain connections with fostered children. This perception contradicts the principles of CHAT, which emphasizes the role of the entire community in raising children. According to CHAT, every community member has a part to play in fostering the well-being of a well-adjusted child (Skipper et al., 2021). Furthermore, this mindset conflicts with Swazi cultural values, which center around Ubuntu the belief in collective responsibility and mutual care. Viewing foster care as a form of abandonment undermines the spirit of Ubuntu, as it disregards the community's duty to nurture and support all its members, including foster children.

“We always try to engage these family members but most of them care less to maintain ties with these children. I feel they see our centres as damping grounds.” [FP4]

There is a need to conscientize biological family members to see the importance of maintaining ties with their children. Using foster care centres as damping grounds should be discouraged.

The last research question sought to get strategies and interventions that can be used to enhance family contact with fostered children. The following emerged as themes.

Maximize the use of phone calls and social media. Participants noted that the advent of technology has made it easier for biological families to stay in touch with foster children. Foster homes were encouraged to invest in additional cell phones, which would facilitate communication between foster children and their biological families. This aligns with the principles of CHAT, which emphasizes the role of various tools and artifacts in child development (Rutt & Mumba, 2023). Cell phones, as a tool, can be particularly effective in helping foster children maintain connections with their biological families (Karanasios et al., 2021).

“On weekends we try to give these children an opportunity to communicate with their families the only challenge cell phones are few. I suggest as an institution we need to add more cell phones. Relatives are also encouraged to buy cell phones for these children so that they can access them through social media.” [FP5]

“Sir we appreciate the opportunity the foster home is giving us towards getting in touch with our families during weekends. The challenge we have few cell phones which limit us from reaching out to our families. Adding more cell phones is ideal.” [FGD]

“Maybe we can explore introducing visual communication tools/platforms such as zoom, teams and WhatsApp video calls.” [FP1]

The excerpts emphasize the need to add more cellphones to improve family contact and allowing the fostered children reasonable number of days to visit their families. Participants felt that allowing fostered children to visit their biological families regularly was ideal.

“I wish we can be allowed to visit our biological families at least once a month or twice a term. Not maintaining family ties is traumatic.” [FGD]

Both fostered children and foster parents emphasized the importance of providing these children with opportunities to periodically visit their families. This perspective aligns with findings from Juba et al. (2024), which explored the impact of family involvement on the quality of care for older adults. The study highlights the significance of developing

interventions to foster successful collaboration between families and professional caregivers. Similarly, the same approach should be applied to fostered children, ensuring that their families play an active role in their care and well-being.

Child and parent therapies. Participants felt that parents and their children should be counselled together. These psychological interventions will help mend broken relations with their children.

“I feel it is important that we receive counselling with our parents or family members. Sometimes some of we feel bad that we are not living with our biological families. We feel as if we are outcasts.” [FGD]

“My brother thing is stressful personally I am ashamed to face my child. I feel I am failure in front of him. It is the reason I find difficult to maintain communication with him. My situation is beyond me. Sometimes we need people that we can talk to.” [BFM 3]

Therapy plays a vital role in supporting both parents and children by equipping them with tools to enhance their emotional and psychological well-being. Among the various therapeutic approaches, CHAT therapy stands out as an effective tool to help both parents and children overcome challenges. Specifically, it can be instrumental in conflict resolution, stress relief, enhancing parenting skills, fostering a deeper understanding of child development, and improving personal well-being (Engeström & Pyörälä, 2021).

Introducing more family fun days. Participants suggested the use of family fun days where fostered children will mingle with their biological family members.

“I suggest that as a home we should increase the number of family funny days. This will offend our children an opportunity to see their biological family members.” [FP3] [FGD]

Family fun days were proposed as a strategy to maintain and strengthen family contact, drawing on the principles of CHAT, which emphasizes the role of tools and social interactions in achieving goals. In this context, the focus is on utilizing various tools, such as organized activities, to facilitate meaningful family engagement. The objective of this study is to enhance biological family contact with children in foster care, where family funny days can act as a

mediating tool, providing a relaxed and enjoyable setting that fosters connection and strengthens relationships within the family system (Engeström & Pyörälä, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study emphasizes the importance of maintaining family contact for fostered children in Eswatini. Despite the increasing number of foster children, staying connected with their biological families offers significant benefits. It helps children remain informed about important family events, such as deaths and other milestones, and nurtures familial bonds. Furthermore, regular contact reduces anxiety and aggression among fostered children, promoting emotional well-being. However, several challenges hinder the maintenance of this connection. These include the distance to foster homes, financial constraints, some parents' negative attitudes towards foster care, the perception of foster homes as a dumping ground, and the impact of broken family structures. These factors significantly impede fostered children from keeping in touch with their biological families.

To address these barriers, the study recommends several strategies and interventions, including maximizing the use of phone calls and social media to facilitate communication, allowing fostered children a reasonable number of days to visit their families, implementing child-parent therapy sessions, and organizing family fun days to strengthen relationships. Additionally, it is recommended that the government and non-governmental organizations assist families by providing transportation funding to help both parents and children maintain regular visits. For families experiencing breakdowns, the involvement of traditional leaders and psychologists is crucial to address these challenges and prevent the abandonment of fostered children. It is also recommended to conduct a similar study using a mixed-methods approach, along with longitudinal or comparative studies, across all four regions of Eswatini. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic and allow for a broader comparison of regional differences.

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This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the Declaration of Helsinki (1964). The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by Department of Social Welfare Eswatini (Deputy Prime's Office).

Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used ChatGPT in correcting grammar and punctuations in this manuscript. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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