

School anxiety and presenteeism in refugee children in Turkey

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Abstract

In this study, the first aim is to compare school anxiety and presenteeism levels in refugee and native Turkish children. A total of 200 elementary and middle school students who are enrolled in the Turkish public school were selected as the study group via a purposive sampling technique in different countries in Turkey. Not only refugee children were selected but also native children were included in the study. Their teachers filled in the School Anxiety Scale-Teacher Form and the School Presenteeism Scale-Teacher Form on the behalf of refugee and native children. Independent samples t-test, Pearson product-moments correlation analysis and simple linear regression analysis were performed for data analysis. In conclusion, statistically significant positive correlations between school anxiety and school presenteeism have been determined in all participants. In comparison analysis, refugee children have more presenteeism and school anxiety levels than native Turkish children.

Keywords: Refugee, school anxiety, presenteeism.

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1. Introduction

It can be said that forced/immigration of a large number of immigrants is one of the most important factors of the social change that took place recently in Turkey. Undoubtedly, adverse living conditions and unfavourable geographical experiences occur for many migrants. As a result of these migration waves, lots of expectations, demands and problems continually emerge from fields such as economy to health, social life to education and many more. Psychological trauma, deprivation, poverty and poor sheltering, health and nutritional conditions brought by the abandonment of one's nativeland affect the physical and mental health of the forced immigrants at a serious level (Ozbey & Saricam, 2016; Topkaya, & Akdag, 2016).

The educational process and related educational problems of refugee children are among the most common problems faced by refugee families (UNHCR, 2014). Children are deprived of quality education due to unemployment, economic inadequacy, lack of social security and difficulties in communicating due to language barrier. The culture shock (a feeling of anxiety, loneliness and confusion that people may experience when they first arrive in a different culture than their own), different lifestyles, different environments, etc. can create school anxieties in refugee children. School anxiety is behavioural and physical reactions to threats or dangers that occurred or perceived in the school environment (Garcia-Fernandez, Ingles, Martinez-Monteagudo & Redondo, 2008; Kearney, Cook & Chapman, 2007; Reilly, 2015). Long-term school anxiety and stress are affecting the child's mental health negatively. It harms the child's daily life at home and at school and leads to problems in relationships with his/her peers (Wood, Chiu, Hwang, Jacobs & Ifekwunigwe, 2008). At the same time, it is considered as a reporter of bad lectures and failures at school (Grills-Taquechel, Fletcher, Vaughn, Denton & Taylor, 2013). School anxiety prevents academic progress when it exists for a long time and if necessary precautions are not taken, causes a student to not fulfil responsibilities and absence from education (Palladino, 2008).

School anxiety is an anxiety disorder (Lyneham, Street, Abbott & Rapee, 2008). According to UNHCR (2010), 44% of all refugees and asylum seekers in the world are children under the age of 18. Recent epidemiological studies have shown that between 6% and 12% of children complain of anxiety disorder at an advanced level in their daily life (Chiu et al., 2013; Cristea, Benga & Opre, 2008; Essau, Sakano, Ishikawa & Sasagawa, 2004; Miller et al., 2011; Thompson, Robertson, Curtis & Frick, 2012). It is known that approximately 30% of these children are able to receive treatment despite the existence of common and severe anxiety disorders (Whiteside & Brown, 2008). It is possible to say that the rate of receiving psychological support for refugee children is much lower when the negative conditions such as economic inadequacy and lack of social security are taken into consideration.

Another risk factor, such as school anxiety, is presenteeism in school for refugee children. Presenteeism is a concept that has been introduced by Cary Cooper in the field of health and productivity for the first time in 1994 despite the fact that it had been problem in workplaces for a long time (Willingham, 2008). Presenteeism can be defined as the loss of productivity due to the presence of the employee in the workplace, while he/she should not have come to work due to various illnesses (Chatterji & Tilley, 2002; Kivimaki et al., 2005; Levin-Epstein, 2005; Rostad, Fridner, Senden & Lovseth, 2017; Schultz & Edington, 2007). The first findings related to presenteeism were obtained through studies on the working class. Presenteeism, which shows that there is a loss of performance due to health problems, has attracted attention especially in the fields of preventive medicine, industrial health, organisational behaviour and human resources (Caverley, Cunningham & MacGregor, 2007; Cullen & McLaughlin, 2006; Hemp, 2004; Li, Zhang, Wang & Guo, 2019; Lowe, 2002; Meerding, IJzelenberg, Koopmanschap, Severens & Burdorf, 2005; Mikami et al., 2013). However, further studies have shown that presenteeism also exists among students (Jauregui et al., 2009; Law, 2007; Matsushita et al., 2011). When considered in the field of education, presenteeism is existing of a person in the classroom physically but not mentally. Situations such as a decrease in the number of tasks finished in time, decrease in school quality, inability to use the capacity at a high level and poor performance, lack of motivation, weakening of social relations with peers, absenteeism and increase

in expenses of the teachers are accepted as results of presenteeism. According to Saricam and Cetintas (2015a), indications of presenteeism in students are a) focus on something else while lecturing and b) performance loss due to their minds being in other places or things. Shortly, the body is in class, but the mind is not in class.

School and business life has similarities. Obligatory attendance is one of them. According to Balay (2000), an institution has corporate goals and values. For example, the employee must continue to work and perform well. In the same way, it is compulsory that the students attend regularly and on time. Another similarity is the expectation of academic performance and productivity.

1.1. The purpose and importance of the research

The right to education, which must be provided as an obligation based on international contracts and constitution, is one of the fundamental rights that allow children's other rights come to life. According to the UNESCO study conducted in 2011, refugee children who are unable to benefit from education are at a greater risk of exploitation and abuse and are more likely to show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (uneasiness, stress, anxiety, hopelessness, etc.) and variety of regressions in physical and psychological developments. Refugee children who face these problems may also experience depression, moral problems (such as vagabondism or vandalism), social maladjustment and behavioural disorders. Therefore, they may show academic inadequacy or low academic performance. As a result of all these negative conditions, school refusal is inevitable (Kearney & Spear, 2012). On the other hand, an appropriate school environment or a supportive classroom environment has a significant effect on the psychological adjustment of students. It especially allows students to improve psychological harmony, sense of belonging, social skills and academic achievement; while reducing depression, anxiety, school refusal behaviour, emotional or behavioural difficulties and exclusion significantly (Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997; Phan, 2003). One of the sub-type school refusal behaviours is school anxiety (Ingles, La Greca, Marzo, Garcia-Lopez & Garcia-Fernandez, 2010). Kearney et al. (2007) stressed that school anxiety is a subset of symptoms of general school refusal behaviour, which is defined as a general difficulty attending or remaining in school for an entire day and is observed in youths aged 5 to 17 years.

Psychological, genetic, biological and environmental factors are influential in school anxiety. Often there are combinations of more than one factor (Hanie & Stanard, 2009). Extreme and intensive changes that students experience are exacerbating school anxiety in the social and academical context. Cultural factors, academic pressure, high academic expatiations, time management problem, technology addiction, sexuality, violence, negative social environment, materialism, commodification, etc. are the reasons that increase the pressure on the adolescents and children and may cause school anxiety (Ingles et al., 2015; Martinez-Monteaquedo, Ingles, Trianes & Garcia-Fernandez, 2011). Given the frequent experiences of resettlement, accommodation, nutrition, friendship, social exclusion and discrimination, language deficiency, negative school environment, future ambiguity and teacher/manager attitudes, migrants are more likely to experience school anxiety after migration (Gumuscu & Saricam, 2016; Measham et al., 2014; Rah, Choi & Nguyen, 2009; Sakiz, 2016).

Many asylum seekers are exposed to multiple traumas before migration (such as traumatic experiences and past losses) that will adversely affect mental health and after migration (such as difficulties that the country faces) (Demirbas & Bekaroglu, 2013). Refugee children are less likely to fulfil their responsibilities to the school because of traumatic problems. This leads to the desire of refugee children not to be present in the school at all, so the level of presenteeism is predicted to increase.

In this study, it is aimed to determine school anxiety and presenteeism levels of refugee children and to provide a road map for alternative education applications (such as effective inclusive education practices). The study is thought to be beneficial to the educational programs that will be applied to the schools that started to open for the refugees in the big cities with increasing numbers. The main

purpose of the research is to determine whether refugee and Turkish students have differentiated their school anxiety and presenteeism scores. The sub-aim of the study is to determine whether there is a relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism and to determine the presenteeism's explaining the effect on school anxiety. To reach these goals, a number of hypotheses have been claimed:

1. Refugee children's presenteeism scores will be higher than Turkish children's scores.
2. Refugee children's school anxiety scores will be higher than Turkish children's scores.
3. There is a positive relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism.
4. Presenteeism is an important explanatory of school anxiety.

2. Method

Relational screening and causal comparative models were used together in the research. Relational screening models are research models aimed at determining the presence and degree of change between two or more variables. In this research, the relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism has been tried to be determined. Causal comparison aims to reveal the causes of an existing situation or an event, and the variables or effective outcomes that influence those reasons (Buyukozturk, Cakmak, Akgun, Karadeniz & Demirel, 2015). In this method, the results are tried to be determined without any interference with the conditions and the participants. In this research, school anxiety scores and presenteeism scores were compared according to citizenship status.

2.1. Study group

The study group constitutes of 200 (100 refugees and 100 Turkish) primary and secondary school students in Balikesir, Antalya, Istanbul and Kütahya provinces. 14 primary education teachers and four Turkish language teachers who were in different seven schools filled out forms. The students are in the age range of 10–15, consisting of 80 girls and 120 boys. The study group was selected for the purpose-easily accessible sampling technique.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Presenteeism scale-teacher form (PSTF)

Presenteeism Scale for Students was developed by Matsushita et al. (2011) and it has two sub-dimensions (completing work, avoiding distraction). Teacher's form of the scale was derived from Presenteeism Scale for Students by Kanpolat and Saricam (2016). PSTF is the five-point Likert-type scale (1 = never; from 5 = always). In EFA results, 10 items (i.e., 'Student does not have enough energy to complete the assignments/lessons/tasks') were collected in two sub-dimensions; factor loadings were ranged from 0.32 to 0.61. The Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.85$ for the whole scale, $\alpha = 0.88$ for completing work and $\alpha = 0.83$ for avoiding distraction. The results of the item analysis showed that the corrected correlations for the items were ranked between 0.28 and 0.54. In this study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.78$.

2.2.2. School anxiety scale-teacher report (SASTR)

Lyneham et al. (2008) developed the SASTR and it was reduced to 16 items (i.e., 'This child is afraid of asking questions in class') which were answered on a 4-point (lowest '0' and highest '48' points) and it has also two sub-dimensions (general anxiety and social anxiety). The Turkish adaptation of the scale was made by Saricam and Cetintas (2015b). Confirmatory factor analysis for construct validity of the scale showed that 16 items were consistent with the original form in two dimensions ($\chi^2/df = 1.72$, RMSEA = 0.044, CFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.93, RFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.046). The factor loads of the scale ranged from 0.55 to 0.79; the Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient was $\alpha = 0.93$ for the whole scale. Spearman–Brown reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.88 for the whole scale; as well as the corrected item-total correlations of the scale ranged from 0.49 to 0.78. In this

study, Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability has been found coefficient $\alpha = 0.89$ for the whole scale; $\alpha = 0.81$ for general anxiety and $\alpha = 0.78$ for social anxiety.

2.3. Process

For the implementation of the scales, firstly, the schools where the refugee children live intensively were determined and checked if it was possible that the school counselor or the branch teachers were able to help them. The first author took official permissions from school managers in Balikesir and Antalya cities. Teachers who were in Istanbul and Kutahya voluntarily involved in this study. The teachers who accepted the process filled out their application forms for refugee and Turkish students. Before the process, teachers were informed about the purpose of the study and the necessary points to pay attention to. After the process, forms were collected and the data were transferred to the computer environment. In the analysis of the data, it has been found that Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test values and skewness–kurtosis values (-1.96 and +1.96) are suitable for parametric tests (Kim, 2013). Independent samples *t*-test was used to determine whether refugee and Turkish students differed in school anxiety and presenteeism scores. Pearson product-moments correlation analysis was applied to determine whether there is a relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism. To identify the explanatory effect of presenteeism in school anxiety, simple linear regression analysis was performed, considering presenteeism as an independent variable and school anxiety as a dependent variable. The importance level of the study was $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

Independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether the Turkish and refugee students had a significant difference from the school anxiety and presenteeism variables, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *t*-Test results of Turkish and refugee students according to school anxiety and presenteeism variables

Variables	Native Turkish children		Refugee students		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	\bar{X}	Standard deviation (SD)	\bar{X}	SD		
1. School anxiety	30.43	4.76	38.91	4.74	19.46	0.000
2. Presenteeism	23.56	4.42	26.08	4.49	9.78	0.000

* $p < 0.05$

As shown in Table 1, the school anxiety and presenteeism scores of refugee children were significantly higher than the scores of Turkish children. According to this, the level of school anxiety ($\bar{X} = 38.91$) for refugee children is significantly higher than the level of school anxiety ($\bar{X} = 30.43$) for Turkish children. Moreover, the level of presenteeism ($\bar{X} = 26.08$) for refugee children is significantly higher than the presenteeism level ($\bar{X} = 23.56$) for Turkish children.

A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism levels in refugee students, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson correlation matrix results relating to school anxiety and presenteeism in refugee students

Variables	1	2	\bar{X}	SD	Cronbach α
1. Presenteeism	-	0.51	24.03	4.43	0.80
2. School anxiety	0.51	-	34.63	4.75	0.88

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 2, there was a statistically significant relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism in the $p < 0.01$ significance level. Accordingly, the correlation coefficient between presenteeism and school anxiety was $r = 0.51$.

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the relationship value between presenteeism and school anxiety, and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis scores for relationship between presenteeism and school anxiety

Variable	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients		t	R	R ²	F
	B	SE _B	β					
school anxiety	-0.66	0.05	0.63		12.24	0.63	0.40	149.92

** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 3, presenteeism significantly predicts school anxiety. Presenteeism accounts for 40% of the total variance of school anxiety. According to Kline (2006), this ratio is statistically perfect explanatory if it is over 40. According to these results, presenteeism has been found to be an important explanatory factor for school anxiety.

4. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether the refugee and Turkish students' school anxiety and presenteeism scores differed. The sub-aim of the study was to determine whether there is a relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism and to determine whether it can predict school anxiety. Some hypotheses were put forward for these purposes.

In the first hypothesis of the research, it was claimed that the presenteeism scores of the refugee children would be higher than the scores of the Turkish children. According to findings, the presenteeism scores of the refugee children were higher than the scores of the Turkish children. We couldn't find any research, having the same findings. One of the important factors in the emergence of educational barriers for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon is the inadequate/weak educational awareness of families and children (UNHCR (2014). As refugee families and their children's primary needs are eating, drinking, sheltering, etc., education (school) can be a luxury for them, or they can now be considered on the second plan. Even if educational opportunities exist, some families may be reluctant to send their children to the school. This may be due to the concern that the children will not be safe in the educational environment or on the way to the school. Some families are worried that their children will benefit from the education they receive and force their children to work to contribute to the family economy (DPCSD, 1996). Therefore, even if the children go to school in such a case, absence or presenteeism will occur. In addition, public areas (tent cities, camps) cause epidemics, so even if children go to school, they will not be present at the school (a case of presenteeism). Kono, Uji and Matsushima (2015) noted that post-traumatic stress disorder is an effective factor in the development of presenteeism. Refugee children are likely to have a high probability of experiencing presenteeism in school because war and immigration have traumatic effects on children (Hollifield et al., 2002; Lopes Cardozo, Vergara, Agani & Gotway, 2000; Nose et al., 2017). In addition, the same authors argued that as the social support increases, the presenteeism may decrease. Post-war migrations, fragmented family structures and subsequent disorganised experiences make it difficult to alleviate the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder with social support (Cirakoglu, 2003). In this context, social exclusion (Beirens, Hughes, Hek & Spicer, 2007; Rundstrom, 2016), where refugee children often live in contrast to social support, may be another reason for the high level of presenteeism. The difficulty of paying attention among school-age refugee children can lead to school failure, school drop-outs and subsequent learning and behavioural disorders. Another cause of the high level of presenteeism may be children are choosing to withdraw

from interpersonal relationships or other various activities and to move away from school (Erden & Gurdil, 2009; Gozubuyuk, Duras, Dag & Arica, 2015).

According to the second hypothesis of the research, refugee children's school anxiety should be higher than Turkish children. According to research findings, school anxiety of refugee children is statistically higher than that of Turkish children. According to this result, refugee children live more anxiety and stress on school issues than Turkish children, so their academic failure and school absenteeism may be higher than Turkish children. There are studies showing that students' anxiety disorders are associated with low socioeconomic status, culture and identity problems in the literature (Deveci, Calmaz & Acik, 2012; Erdik & Altiparmak, 2012; Gul Akmaz & Ceyhan, 2009; Yilmaz, Dursun, Gungor Guzeler & Pektas, 2014). According to Salmela-Aro and Read (2017), high levels of school fatigue were seen in refugee students compared to Finnish indigenous students. In general, it has been observed that families who migrated for war or similar reasons have problems of children's adaptation to the school, even though their children have been able to benefit adequately from education, opportunity and equality in education or health (Topsakal, Meray & Kece, 2013). According to Uluocak's (2009) findings, the school adjustment rate of children who have experienced immigration is significantly lower than children who haven't and those show more psychological maladjustment. Another difficulty the refugee children face which also promotes social anxiety (sub-dimension of school anxiety) is the language barrier. The fact that refugee children mostly have limited language skills both affects their academic education and communication negatively (Davy, Magalhaes, Mandich, & Galheigo, 2014; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Roebers and Schneider (1999) reported that refugee children who speak German have lower levels of anxiety and higher compliance and self-esteem than those who do not. To sum up, class and school anxiety may be associated with increased opportunities offered depending on the level of socio-economic income, as well as higher levels of education at higher socioeconomic income levels, student support, and a more conscious approach. Considering adverse circumstances such as immigration, low socioeconomic status, inadequate language skills and parental support, it is probable that the school anxiety of refugee children is high.

According to the third and fourth hypotheses of the research, there will be a positive relationship between school anxiety and presenteeism and also presenteeism will predict school anxiety. According to the research findings, school anxiety is also high in the children with a high level of presenteeism. In other words, children who are physically but not mentally in school live school anxiety at the same time. Presenteeism and mental health are closely related (Wang, Schmitz, Smailes, Sareen & Patten, 2010). With presenteeism, different problems (such as lack of motivation, instability, forgetfulness and chronic pain) arise due to stress and depression (Evans-Lacko & Knapp, 2016; Johnston et al., 2019). Anxiety, stress and depression disrupt mental health (Yang et al., 2015). Reluctance in daily activities, loss of function, etc., learning disabilities in school and emotional disturbances such as difficulties in peer relations may lead both presenteeism and school anxiety at the same time in refugee children (Fazel, Garcia & Stein, 2016; Ferreira & Martinez, 2012; Hamdan-Mansour, Abdel Razeq, AbdulHaq, Arabiat & Khalil, 2017; Jastrowski Mano, 2017; Koroglu, 2006; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Another problem seen in refugee children is the lacking sense of belonging because of the low socio-economic and academic accomplishment level (Reed, Fazel, Jones, Panter-Brick & Stein, 2012; Walsh et al., 2016). On the other hand, they have a higher sense of rejection (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2015; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). School loyalty includes effort of presence; to have a high level of energy and mental stability while studying; to give importance to their studies, to feel enthusiasm, inspiration and pride, to challenge, to get carried away; concentrating on their studies and being happy (Bilge, Tuzgol-Dost & Cetin, 2014). Saricam and Cetintas (2015a) found a positive relationship between presenteeism and school burnout. Cetintas and Saricam (2016) also found that there are some correlations between presenteeism and perceived school experiences. For example, presenteeism has positive relationships with academic pressure and low academic motivation. Notwithstanding, it has negative relationships with school engagement. It can be said that in the concepts of presenteeism; school burnout, fatigue, insensitivity, sense of

inadequacy, lack of success and productivity are effective (Cetintas & Saricam, 2016). In this case, presenteeism and school anxiety may be expected in children and adolescents with a low sense of belonging and school engagement with social exclusion.

In fact, there have been no studies about presenteeism and school anxiety in children. However, in the researchers conducted among the universities, the reflection of the continuity in the lessons to the grades increases the presenteeism (Macfarlane, 2013). In a different study, according to the records of the university health centre, the problem of absenteeism leaves its place to presenteeism in students who are frustrated with the lessons (Matsushita et. al., 2011). Educational conditions in schools, social relations in classrooms, the tasks that the pupils have to fulfil, teacher attitudes have led to increased presenteeism in refugee children mainly because of the language barrier sourced understanding problems. The school environment in this condition is expected to increase school anxiety (Martinez-Monteagudo et al., 2011). As a result, as presenteeism increases, school anxiety is also increasing; or presenteeism leads to school anxiety.

5. Limitations and recommendations

We don't know any information about students having any illnesses. Participants may request this information when they are asked to do so. Presenteeism and school anxiety may be caused by this discomfort. The study can be expanded by observing which courses the students exhibited these behaviours. On the other hand, refugee students face many barriers to education, and healthy growing and appropriately educating this diverse student population presents many challenges to schools and society. There is a necessity for inclusive and targeted intervention action plans to promote social inclusion and improved educational and mental health outcomes for refugee students and also their families. Especially, government agencies and stakeholders assume responsibility regarding inclusive education. Moreover, a supportive school environment such as social trust or respect to differences has a significant effect on the psychological adjustment of refugee students.

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