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Students' Perceptions of Self-Compassion and School Burnout

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine students' perceptions of self-compassion and school burnout. The relationshipal survey method, which is among quantitative research methods, was used in the study. The study sample consisted of 231 8th grade students studying in central secondary schools in Bolu, Turkey, during the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023. The results show that students' self-compassion is "often" and their perception of school burnout is "partially agreeable." It was found that there are positive and negative significant relationships between the sub-dimensions of self-compassion and school burnout, and that self-compassion significantly predicts school burnout. Suggestions such as including activities in schools that will increase students' perceptions of self-sensitivity and reduce their perceptions of school burnout were included.

Keywords:

Burnout, school burnout, self-compassion, students, Turkey.

1. Introduction

It is clear that education is made up of many stakeholders, and the focus of these stakeholders is on students and student success. It is well known that students, along with all other stakeholders in education, have various duties and responsibilities to attain the desired skills and fulfill the purpose of their education. The feelings and thoughts of students play an important role in fulfilling these duties and responsibilities. For example, students with high self-esteem can be expected to experience a positive change in their self-confidence and academic success, while students with low self-esteem experience a decline in academic performance and school burnout. For this reason, finding solutions to the problems, if any, by revealing these feelings and thoughts can be expected to increase student motivation and student success.

1.1. Self-Compassion

Each person has different personal and emotional characteristics and may react differently to events. For example, some people feel inadequate in the face of failure and have negative feelings and thoughts about themselves. They may feel loneliness and a sense of isolation because they ignore the fact that failure is a situation that all people can experience (Neff & Vonk, 2009). In contrast, people with high self-compassion accept that failure is a normal situation that anyone can face. They do not ignore, exaggerate, or dramatize their failures, problems, or pain. On the contrary, they can control their feelings (Neff, 2003a; Neff, 2003b). As can be seen, the concept of self-compassion, which occupies an important place in people's lives, can be defined as people's ability to be ready for feelings that cause pain and sorrow, to have a loving attitude toward themselves, to be understanding toward themselves when they experience failure and inadequacy, and to approach events consciously by accepting that negative situations they encounter are a vital reality (Aydın & Soyer, 2012; Neff, 2003a; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Karabacak & Uzun, 2014; Oral Seyhan, 2016). Neff (2003a) stated that self-compassion is not self-pity and expressed self-pity as a person isolating themselves from their environment and becoming entangled in the problems and emotions they experience. He emphasized that a

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person with self-compassion accepts that not only he or she but also other people may experience the problems he or she experiences and does not over-identify with his or her emotions.

The concept of self-compassion, understood as a positive awareness for people, consists of three basic concepts. These are "self-kindness, awareness of sharing, and consciousness." The first of these concepts, the concept of "self-kindness," is the state of striving to understand oneself without prejudice, being kind and patient with oneself rather than being cruel and harsh (Neff, 2003a). The second concept, "awareness of sharing," is the recognition that pain and happiness are not unique to the self but are shared experiences among all people. People who have this awareness accept that these feelings are a part of other people's lives, rather than experiencing feelings of isolation and social alienation (Neff, 2003b). The final concept, "consciousness," refers to a person's acceptance of the negative emotions of life without being carried away by those emotions (Neff, 2003b; Martin, 1997). Although these concepts seem to be different from each other, they contribute to their development through their interaction (Akin & Abacı, 2007) and have a positive impact on the individual's development. As it is understood, self-compassion in general has a positive effect on people. In the research, self-compassion was generally found to be positively related to concepts such as life satisfaction, self-acceptance, individual growth, happiness, etc. and to have a negative relationship with concepts such as depression and self-criticism. (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2005; cited by Akin et al., 2007).

It can be assumed that the concept of self-compassion, which occupies an important place in people's lives, is an important concept not only for adults but also for children and adolescents. Considering that children and adolescents spend a large part of their time in school, it can be said that self-compassion is important for students. Just as a person with high self-compassion can show understanding in the face of unsuccessful or negative situations and approach situations consciously (Aydın & Soyer, 2012; Neff, 2003a; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Karabacak & Uzun, 2014; Oral Seyhan, 2016), a student with high self-compassion can show the same reaction. He or she can accept that failure is a fact of life and that failure in class does not only affect him or her but all students. It can be said that a student with low self-compassion will face situations such as self-criticism and depression as adults (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005; cited in Akin et al., 2007) and will experience school burnout by decreasing his or her interest in school.

1.2. School Burnout

School time is an important period in a person's life. During this time, in addition to positive feelings, a person may experience stress and anxiety for many reasons, especially before exams, and this may affect the student's attitude toward school (Güçlü, 2022). This stress and anxiety that affect students can lead to negative situations such as school burnout over time.

The term burnout, which is commonly used in daily life, is defined in the Turkish Language Association as "The state in which one loses one's strength and ceases to exert oneself" (Turkish Language Association [TDK], 2023). In the context of work, the concept of burnout is explained as insensitivity, emotional exhaustion, and a decrease in professional competence (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). School burnout, on the other hand, can be explained as a situation that includes feelings of fatigue and insensitivity towards the demands of school (Salmela-Aro, Savolainen & Holopainen, 2009a) and the negative effects (emotional, physical, and cognitive) on students due to excessive demands in the educational process (Aypay, 2011).

School burnout consists of three dimensions. These dimensions are "emotional exhaustion, the development of an indifferent attitude toward school, and a sense of inadequacy as a student" (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a). Constant fatigue due to overwork and tension due to oppression are described as "emotional exhaustion." It includes the feeling of constant burnout and fatigue that students experience from school and academic activities. The second dimension, indifference, is expressed in the individual's waning interest in their work and not finding it meaningful. (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a) The last dimension, inadequacy, is expressed by a decline in students' sense of competence and achievement in their lives (Salmela-Aro, Muotka, Alho, Hakkarainen & Lonka, 2016; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a). The basis of inadequacy is the decrease in the student's self-confidence and motivation for what he or she can do. In this situation, the student's effort decreases, and his or her academic success is negatively affected. The resulting negative situation can lead to burnout and school attendance problems (Aypay & Eryılmaz, 2011; Güçlü, 2022). According to Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker (2002), school burnout is the result of academic stress caused by the student's academic work not meeting the expectations of family, friends, and teachers. On the other hand, Zhang, Gan, and Cham

(2007) state that fatigue, insensitivity to academic tasks, indifference to school, insensitivity to the environment, viewing oneself as inadequate, questioning one's abilities, and consequently negative academic performance are among the indicators of school burnout. The essence of self-compassion is to be understanding toward oneself when personal expectations are not met, to support oneself compassionately without ignoring the problems, and thus to actively participate in solving problems (Brown, 1999). According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion plays an important role in self-direction by making one aware of one's own emotions. Examining the relevant literature, one finds that people with high self-compassion exhibit fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Deniz, Kesici & Sümer, 2008; Neff, 2003b; Neff, Hsieh & Dejitterat, 2005), stand up more resolutely against individual failures (Allen & Leary, 2010; Neff, Rude & Kirkpatrick, 2007), and experience less stress in their lives (Akin et al., 2007). It can be said that students with high self-compassion will be more understanding of themselves in the face of academic failure and will not suffer from negative situations such as school burnout. In countries like Turkey, efficient education leads to competition, and students compete with each other at every level of education. Grades and exams take an important place in this competition and can put pressure on students and their families from time to time. Because of this pressure, students are encouraged by their families to take courses to improve their education, so they have to try harder. As a result, teachers and parents have higher academic expectations for students (Yıldırım & Ergene, 2003). It can be said that this expectation is especially high for students who are approaching the transition to a higher level of education (Apay, 2011). Students in the 8th grade of the secondary school whose entrance exams for high schools are approaching are also affected by this situation. Students may be negatively affected by this expectation, feel inadequate, and become indifferent to the goals of the school, so they may experience school burnout (Apay, 2011; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a; Zhang et al., 2007). It can be said that students with high self-compassion can cope with school burnout by controlling the situation and being more patient and understanding with themselves. At this point, it can be interpreted that self-compassion and school burnout, which are discussed in this study, are important concepts related to students' quality of life. It can be assumed that uncovering students' levels of perception regarding these concepts and the relationship between these concepts will provide information about students to parents, teachers, and Ministry of National Education (MoNE) officials. Given the information obtained, it can be said that the effectiveness of education will be increased by making more accurate decisions about students. In this context, answers to the following questions were sought in the study:

- How do 8th grade students perceive self-compassion and school burnout?
- Is there a significant relationship between their perceptions of self-compassion and school burnout in relation to the sub-dimensions?
- Does the perception of self-compassion significantly predict the perception of school burnout?

2. Method

2.1. Study Model

In this study, a relational research design was used, which belongs to quantitative research methods. Relational research designs are generally used in the social sciences and frequently in the study of large groups (Büyüköztürk, 2014). Relational research designs can be explained as the arrangement of scans made on the whole population, a sample, or a sample taken from the population to reach a general judgment about the population in a population with a large number of elements (Karasar, 2012).

2.2. Study Group

The study group for research consists of 231 8th grade students studying in three secondary schools in the central district of Bolu, Turkey, in the first semester of the school year 2022-2023. The schools included in the study were identified through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a sampling method that focuses on information-rich situations by shedding light on the questions to be answered (Patton, 2002). The purpose of choosing the purposive sampling method in the study is to obtain more realistic data by reaching students from different socioeconomic strata. For this reason, 8th grade students studying in schools with different socioeconomic backgrounds in the center of Bolu were included in the study. Of the students who participated in the study, 125 (54.11%) were girls and 106 (45.88%) were boys. 172 (74.45%) of the students' parents are mothers, 57 (24.67%) are fathers, and 2 (0.86%) are others (brother, elder sister, uncle, etc.). It was found that 10 (4.32%) of the parents were illiterate, 60 (25.97%) had primary education, 35 (15.15%) had

primary/secondary education, 71 (30.73%) had high school, 43 (18.61%) of them had a university education, and 12 (5.19%) of them had postgraduate education.

2.3. Data Collection Tool

The study data were collected using the "Self-Compassion Scale" and the "School Burnout Scale". The "Self-Compassion Scale" was developed by Neff (2003a) and adapted into Turkish by Akin et al. (2007), and its validity and reliability study was conducted again by Erişen, Gökaya, and Yurdalan (2021) for secondary school students. The scale consists of 26 items and six sub-dimensions. The scale was created in a 5-point Likert format with the expressions Never (1.00–1.80), Rarely (1.81-2.60), Often (2.61-3.40), Usually (3.41-4.20), and Always (4.21–5.00). As a result of the validity and reliability study of the scale, the researchers concluded that the scale is a valid and reliable scale for research (Erişen et al., 2021). In the current study, the reliability study of the "Self-Compassion Scale" was conducted again, and as a result of the analysis, the following Cronbach's alpha values were obtained for the sub-dimensions: *Self-Compassion* .77, *Self-Judgment* .78, *Awareness of Sharing* .73, *Isolation* .70, *Consciousness* .76, *Overidentification* .71, a Cronbach's alpha value of .69 was obtained for the total scale.

The School Burnout Scale was developed by Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, and Nurmi (2009b), and its validity and reliability study was conducted again by Seçer, Halmatov, Veyis, and Ateş (2013) on elementary and secondary school students. The scale consists of nine items and three sub-dimensions. The scale was created in a 5-point Likert format with the expressions Strongly Disagree (1.00–1.80), Disagree (1.81-2.60), Partially Agree (2.61-3.40), Agree (3.41-4.20), and Completely Agree (4.21–5.00). As a result of the validity and reliability studies of the scale, the researchers concluded that the scale is a valid and reliable scale for research (Seçer et al., 2013). In the current study, the reliability study of the "School Burnout Scale" was reconstructed, and as a result of the analysis, the following Cronbach's alpha values were obtained for the sub-dimensions: *Emotional Burnout* .63, *Insensitivity* .78, *Reduced personal accomplishment* .58, and the total value of the scale was reported as .85. According to Lorcu (2015), reliability is low when the Cronbach's alpha is between .40 and .60. If it is between 0.60 and 0.80, the scales are reliable; if it is between 0.80 and 1, the scales are very reliable. This shows that the scales and their sub-dimensions used in the study are mostly reliable (except for the reduced personal accomplishment dimension) and have a high degree of reliability.

2.4. Ethical

The research data were collected from student volunteers with the approval of the Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University Human Research Ethics Committee in Social Sciences, protocol number 2022/456, and the Bolu Provincial Directorate of National Education, dated December 16, 2022.

2.5. Data Analysis

Before analyzing the data, a normality test was performed, and the skewness and kurtosis values were calculated.

Table 1. Skewness and Kurtosis Values of Scales and Dimensions

Scale/Dimension	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-kindness	.278	-.659
Self-judgment	.616	-.548
Awareness of sharing	.352	-.624
Isolation	.310	-.793
Consciousness	.183	-.750
Over-identification	.267	-.778
Self-compassion total	-.385	.081
Emotional burnout	.157	-.660
Insensitivity	.358	-.504
Reduced personal accomplishment	.293	-.708
School burnout total	.168	-.447

Table 1 shows the skewness and kurtosis values of the scales and sub-dimensions. The skewness value of the self-compassion scale was -.385, and the kurtosis value was .081; the skewness value of the school burnout scale was found to be .168, and the kurtosis value was found to be -.447. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) assume

that the data have a normal distribution when the kurtosis and skewness values are between -1.5 and +1.5. For this reason, parametric tests were included in the study. The mean (\bar{X}) and standard deviation (Sd) were examined to determine the participants' level of self-compassion and school burnout. In addition, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient analysis was used to show the relationship between students' perceptions of self-compassion and school burnout in the context of the sub-dimensions. According to Köklü, Büyüköztürk, and Bökeoğlu (2006), if the correlation coefficient is 0.00, there is no relationship; if it is between 0.01-0.29, the relationship is low; if it is between 0.30-0.70, the relationship is medium; if it is between 0.71-0.99, the relationship is high; if it is 1.00, the relationship is excellent. Finally, regression analysis was used to determine the predictive power of self-compassion for school burnout.

3. Findings and Comments

This section of the study presents the results and comments related to the findings.

Table 2. *Students' Perception Levels of Self-Compassion*

Scale/Dimension	\bar{X}	Sd
Self-kindness	2.84	0.97
Self-judgment	2.49	1.03
Awareness of sharing	2.67	0.97
Isolation	2.71	1.05
Consciousness	2.85	0.99
Over-identification	2.76	1.04
Self-compassion total	2.71	0.46

Table 2 shows the degree of self-awareness of the students. Examination of the table shows that in the self-compassion scale, the sub-dimension of self-judgment (\bar{X} =2.49) is "rarely"; self-kindness (\bar{X} =2.84), awareness of sharing (\bar{X} =2.67), isolation (\bar{X} =2.71), consciousness (\bar{X} =2.85), and overidentification (\bar{X} =2.76), and the overall scale score (\bar{X} =2.71) are at the level of "often." From this point of view, it can be interpreted that students' self-compassion is at a moderate level. The reason for this can be seen in the fact that the students in the 8th grade have fears about the future; they are under pressure from their families, and therefore their self-compassion is low.

Table 3. *Level of Students' Perception of School Burnout*

Scale/Dimension	\bar{X}	Sd
Emotional burnout	2.83	0.97
Insensitivity	2.60	1.10
Reduced personal accomplishment	2.64	1.12
School burnout total	2.71	0.93

Table 3 shows the extent of school burnout as perceived by students. Looking at the table, it can be seen that students' opinions are at a level of "partially agree" for emotional burnout (\bar{X} =2.83), reduced personal accomplishment (\bar{X} =2.64), and an overall scale score of (\bar{X} =2.71). However, for the insensitivity (\bar{X} =2.60) subdimension, they are at the "disagree" level. Considering the negative impact of school burnout on students' academic performance, the fact that students' perception of school burnout is not very high can be interpreted as a positive situation. This is due to the efforts of parents and school administrators, especially teachers, in the development of students and the importance they attach to extracurricular activities in school.

The second sub-problem of the study uncovered the relationship between students' self-compassion and perceptions of school sensitivity in the context of the dimension.

Table 4. *The Relationship Between Students' Perception of Self-Compassion and School Burnout*

		School burnout		
		Emotional burnout	Insensitivity	Reduced personal accomplishment
Self-compassion	Self-kindness	-.216**	-.233**	-.331**
	Self-judgment	.460**	.369**	.506**
	Awareness of sharing	-.113	-.152*	-.244**
	Isolation	.509**	.451**	.465**
	Consciousness	-.101	-.130*	-.213**
	Over-identification	.525**	.394**	.404**

p< .01 **Note: 0.00 indicates no relationship; between 0.01-0.29 low; between 0.30-0.70 medium; between 0.71-0.99 high; 1.00 indicates perfect relationship (Source: Köklü et al., 2006).

Examining Table 4, it was found that there was a low negative correlation between the emotional burnout sub-dimension of the School Burnout Scale and the self-compassion scale subdimensions: Self-kindness (-.216; $p < .01$), awareness of sharing (-.113; $p < .01$), and consciousness (-.101; $p < .01$). On the other hand, there is a positive, moderately significant correlation between the subdimensions of self-judgment (.460; $p < .01$), isolation (.509; $p < .01$), and overidentification (.525; $p < .01$). Similarly, there is a low negative correlation between the insensitivity sub-dimension and the self-compassion scale subdimensions: self-kindness (-.233; $p < .01$), awareness of sharing (-.152; $p < .01$), and consciousness (-.130; $p < .01$). There is also a moderately positive correlation between the sub-dimensions of self-judgment (.369; $p < .01$), isolation (.451; $p < .01$), and overidentification (.394; $p < .01$). Finally, there is a moderate negative correlation between the reduced personal achievement sub-dimension of the School Burnout scale and the Self-Kindness sub-dimension of the Self-Awareness scale (-.331; $p < .01$), as well as a low negative correlation between the awareness of sharing sub-dimensions (-.244; $p < .01$) and consciousness (-.213; $p < .01$). There is also a positive moderate correlation between the self-judgment (.506; $p < .01$), isolation (.465; $p < .01$), and overidentification (.404; $p < .01$) subdimensions. From these results, it can be concluded that increasing students' perceptual levels, especially in the self-kindness, awareness of sharing, and consciousness subdimensions, can reduce school burnout. Therefore, both families and school authorities should focus on activities that can improve these perceptions among students.

Table 5. *The Effect of Self-Compassion on School Burnout*

Variable	B	Standard Error	t	R	R ²	F	p
Constant	-2.237	.089	25266	-	-	-	-
Self-compassion	.177	.031	5.752	.355	.126	33.090	.000**

**p<.01

Table 5 presents the results of the simple linear regression analysis related to the prediction of school burnout by self-compassion. Examination of Table 4 revealed that students' perceptions of self-compassion significantly predicted their perceptions of school burnout. $R = .355$; $F = (1,229) 33.090$, $p < .01$. It was concluded that self-compassion explained approximately 13% of the variance regarding school burnout. Although it is statistically significant, it can be said that self-compassion has low predictive power for school burnout. The reason for this could be that school burnout is influenced by individual or organizational factors or that there is an inconsistency between the data set and the models.

4. Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

The first sub-problem of the study included students' self-compassion and perceptual levels of school burnout. It was found that students' self-compassion scale is "rarely" in the sub-dimension of self-judgment and "often" in the sub-dimensions of self-kindness, awareness of sharing, isolation, awareness, over-identification, and total scale. Tel and Sarı (2016) and Soyer (2010), in their studies with university students, found that the average scores of the scale and its sub-dimensions were generally between 2.5 and 3.5 and were similar to the results of this study. From this point of view, it can be said that although students belong to different age groups, they generally have a similar understanding of self-compassion. Self-compassion, which occupies an important place in individuals' lives, is the ability of individuals to be ready for events that cause pain and suffering, to have positive feelings about themselves, to accept that this is an important fact when they encounter shortcomings, etc. (Aydın & Soyer, 2012; Neff, 2003a; Neff & McGehee, 2010; Karabacak & Uzun, 2014; Oral Seyhan, 2016). It can be hypothesized that students with high self-compassion have a more positive outlook on life. This can be explained as positive because self-compassion is generally positively correlated with concepts such as self-acceptance, life satisfaction, happiness, and personal development, while it is negatively correlated with concepts such as self-criticism and depression (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2005, cited in Akin et al., 2007). Therefore, students' self-perceptions are not very low, which is considered positive.

It was found that students' perceptions of school burnout were at the level of "partially agree" in all subdimensions (emotional burnout, insensitivity, reduced personal accomplishment) and total scale. In this case, it can be said that students' perception of school burnout is at a moderate level. Polat (2018:267), in his

study on secondary school students, found that students' perception of school burnout on the total scale was $\bar{X}=2.39$, which is different from the results of this study. The reason could be the application time and different sample sizes.

Emotional exhaustion, insensitivity, and reduced professional competence are signs of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). The state of exhaustion, insensitivity, and inadequacy to the demands of school (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a) is defined as school burnout. Although there are many reasons for school burnout, it can manifest as educational stress in 8th grade students. The reasons include the fact that students are in their last year of school, are uncertain about their future, and that their families put pressure on the exam. The fact that students in the current study did not perceive a high level of school burnout can be interpreted to mean that students do not have a major problem with school burnout. Considering the negative effects of school burnout on student performance, this situation can be considered positive.

In the second sub-problem of the study, the relationship between the sub-dimensions of the self-compassion scale and the school burnout scale was revealed. In examining the data, there are significant negative relationships between the sub-dimensions of the Self-Compassion scale (self-kindness, awareness of sharing, consciousness) and the sub-dimensions of the School Burnout scale; there are positive and significant relationships between the sub-dimensions of the Self-Compassion scale (self-judgment, isolation, over-identification) and the sub-dimensions of the School Burnout scale. Neff (2003a) states that self-compassion plays an important role in self-direction by making one aware of one's own emotions. At this point, it can be said that activities that increase students' awareness of self-compassion should be given high priority in schools. In this way, school burnout, which harms student achievement, can be prevented (Apay & Eryılmaz, 2011; Güçlü, 2022).

In the third sub-problem of the study, self-compassion was found to significantly predict school burnout, albeit at a low level. The fact that self-compassion predicts school burnout at a low level, even though it is significant, can be seen in the fact that other factors besides self-compassion play a role in school burnout. The academic competition that students experience in school, as well as parents' behavior toward students, also shape students' lives. Parents may withhold social activities from students and focus them solely on their studies (Aypay, 2018). This situation increases the stress that affects school burnout (Çam, Deniz & Kurnaz, 2014), and the central exams that become crucial in life can trigger school burnout along with competition in school (Çapulcuoğlu & Gündüz, 2013). School burnout can also have a negative impact on students' academic performance (Demir Kaya, Kaya & Kaya, 2023). From this perspective, it can be inferred that factors other than self-esteem play a role in students' school burnout, which leads to the fact that the prediction of school burnout by self-esteem is low.

In light of the research findings, recommendations can be made for counseling services in schools, especially for 8th grade students, that include activities to improve students' self-esteem. Collaboration with universities and nongovernmental organizations can help raise awareness of school burnout among teachers, administrators, and parents. Creating a positive school culture where students can easily express themselves and reach their potential can also be emphasized.

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