

An Investigation into the Views of Refugee Students' Teachers on Their Subjective Well-Being: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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Abstract

The negative effects of natural and social issues on individuals have necessitated the discussion of the concept of subjective well-being as a major health concern. Teachers' subjective well-being has a crucial role in the functioning of the education system. This qualitative descriptive study aims to examine the views of refugees' teachers on their subjective well-being. The data obtained in the study were collected with semi-structured interviews. The data were collected from seven teachers working at a public primary school in Çanakkale, Turkey in the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The analyses of the semi-structured interviews with the teachers of the refugee students produced four subjective well-being themes – i.e., family relationships, communication with refugee students, cooperation with parents, and working conditions. The data revealed that teacher's good relationships with the refugee students' family members and parents, culture-sensitive education-oriented communication with students, and working conditions with a supporting school environment were key to enhancing subjective well-being of the refugees' teachers. This result presented a crucial implication for policymakers to prepare in-service training for the population of the interviewed teachers.

Keywords: Subjective Well-Being, Primary School Teachers, Refugee Students, Primary Schools

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Introduction

The fact that today's world is facing with the negative effects of global warming, natural disasters, economic recessions, homelessness, terrorism, and wars causes sadness, anxiety, and fear. People's challenging experiences affect well-being, a subject of positive psychology, which focuses on such other areas as happiness, strong personality, intelligence, creativity, groups, and institutions (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Well-being has complex definitions, and researchers have used similar terms, such as "happiness", "quality of life", or "life satisfaction". Despite these conceptualizations, what happiness and well-being are and how they are felt is still a question that positive psychology seeks to answer (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). Diener, Suh, and Oishi (1997) define subjective well-being (SWB) as how people evaluate their lives considering variables, such as life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, lack of depression and anxiety, and positive moods and emotions. SWB is a result of the individual's evaluations of their lives and emotional responses to events. Accordingly, SWB is defined as experiencing mostly positive emotions but fewer negative emotions and getting high satisfaction from life (Myers & Diener, 1995). If individuals have positive emotions, they derive high levels of satisfaction from their lives, thus have a high level of SWB (Diener, 2000). Similarly, Albuquerque et al. (2012) confirms that SWB is a multidimensional construct comprising three components, i.e., life satisfaction, positive emotion, and negative emotion. SWB is an essential indicator of the quality of life (Eid & Diener, 2004) and provide a necessary condition for mental health because if a person has been depressed for a long time or suffers from devastating anxiety, and they cannot function well (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997). As seen in the above definitions, SWB is not composed of a single construct, and many variables affect well-being (Bergman & Scott, 2001; Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011). In compliance with these definitions, SWB is related to happiness, life satisfaction, and positive emotions, which play a vital role in life and determine the judgments of a person in and about their life (Haybron, 2000).

More specifically, teachers' SWB has a crucial role in the functioning of the education system. The well-being of teachers has long and positive consequences in the schooling of students (Hung, Lin, & Yu, 2016). Teachers' SWB depends on various variables such as their life satisfaction, status, curriculum, coping with work-related stress, school administrator (Cenkseven-Onder & Sari, 2009), school environment, and classroom management challenges (Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015). According to Veronese et al. (2018), economic factors, psychosocial factors, professional factors, and contextual factors shape teachers' SWB. Furthermore, job satisfaction is also significantly related to SWB (Calaguas, 2017). These studies highlight that teachers' SWB is directly associated with the quality of educational service. The professional, environmental, and psychosocial conditions of teachers have considerably impacted their perceptions about SWB. In the last decade, many studies have been conducted on the nature of this phenomenon and what affects it. Poormahmood, Moayedi, and Alizadeh (2017) have examined the relationships between psychological well-being, happiness,

and perceived occupational stress among primary school teachers. They have concluded that occupational stress in teaching may lead to poor psychological well-being and reduced happiness in primary school teachers. Moreover, Song, Gu, and Zhang (2020) have researched the nature of teachers' SWB and explored the dynamic interaction between the key aspects of teachers' subjective wellbeing: altruism, self-efficacy, work satisfaction, and income satisfaction. Likewise, Cansoy, Parlar, and Turkoglu (2020) have found a positive and significant relationship between the self-efficacy levels of teachers and their psychological well-being. Additionally, Tang (2018) has pointed out that gender, age, administrative position, marital status, class size, wages, and professional training affect rural teachers' SWB.

Given that teachers' SWB is important to their life satisfaction and the quality of the education they would provide, revealing teachers' views on their SWB potentially offers us a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Examining the views of classroom teachers regarding their SWB, may contribute to the studies in this field to foster alternative ways intended for the motivation and performance of teachers. Recently, a migration wave to Turkey from Syria has had a crucial impact on teachers' roles. Teachers teaching refugee students must be culturally competent to apply a more humanistic approach in a school setting and provide effective education for Syrian refugee children; therefore, it is crucial to understand teachers' well-being (Üzar-Özçetin, Çelik, & Özenç-İra, 2020). Teachers' SWB may be an important factor in coping with hardships associated with refugee education. Despite the importance of this issue, there is limited number of studies focusing on the SWB of the refugee students' teachers. Given the importance of teachers' well-being, this study aimed to examine primary school teachers' views on their SWB, and the factors related to their SWB. To this end, the authors sought to answer the following questions:

- How do the primary school teachers' relationships with the families of the refugee children affect the teachers' SWB?
- How do the primary school teachers' relationships with the refugee students affect the teachers' SWB?
- How do the attitudes of the refugee students' parents affect the primary school teachers' SWB?
- How does the school environment affect the primary school teachers' SWB?

Method

Study Design and Participants

The present paper is a qualitative descriptive research study. Seven teachers working at a public primary school participated in this study. The data were collected in the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The participating teachers were determined through criterion sampling,

one of the purposive sampling methods of the qualitative research. For this purpose, two criteria were considered in determining the participants: (1) voluntary participation and (2) serving as a teacher with refugee students in their classes. The personal facts of the participating teachers are available in Table 1.

Table 1. Personal facts of the participant teachers

Teachers	Gender	Level	Professional experience
T1	Female	Primary School	15 years
T2	Male	Primary School	30 years
T3	Male	Primary School	25 years
T4	Female	Primary School	13 years
T5	Female	Primary School	23 years
T6	Female	Primary School	24 years
T7	Female	Primary School	24 years

As seen in Table 1, most of the teachers (n=5) participating in the study were women. All were primary school teachers with refugee students in their classrooms. Most (n=5) were senior teachers.

Instruments

The data of this study were collected using semi-structured interview forms and analyzed descriptively. The interview questions were presented in Figure 1.

- What does the concept of SWB mean to you?
 - What does your SWB depend on?
 - How does your school environment affect your psychology?
 - How do the attitudes of your fellow teachers at your school affect your psychology?
 - How does the school administration affect your psychology?
 - How do the behaviors of the students at your school affect your psychology?
 - How do the refugee students at your school affect your psychology?
 - How do the attitudes of your refugee students' parents affect your psychology?
 - How do the positive reactions from your environment affect your psychology?
 - How do your relationships with your family affect your psychology?

Figure 1. Questions in the semi-structured interviews

Data Analysis

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the participant teachers. The interviews lasted for about 20-40 minutes. Initially, all the audio recordings were transcribed. Then, the data were grouped and matched with the relevant research questions. Themes were created and classified by the researchers separately. Finally, the researchers agreed upon the final coding under

four themes. To ensure the validity of the study, verbatim quotes were isolated from the responses. Additionally, the researchers included no comments during the analysis to achieve a higher reliability. The continuous comparison method was adopted in the analysis of the data.

Results

In this section, the themes of the study and the quotations from the interviews with the teachers were included. The analyses yielded four themes concerning the teachers' SWB. The relevant themes were family relationship, communication with refugee students, cooperation with parents, and working conditions, which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes related to teachers' SWB

Teachers	Family relationship	Communication with refugee students	Cooperation with parents	Working conditions
T1	- Spending time with the family - Fellowship	- Inability to communicate with refugee students	- Cooperating with parents - Receiving positive feedback from parents	- School administration acting in cooperation - Presence of sincere teachers
T2	- Positive and negative communication with the family	- Visiting homes of refugee students - To make refugee students feel that they belong in the school	- Parents acting in cooperation - Being ready for any kind of help to school	- Low number of teachers - Teachers knowing each other - Having sincere relationships
T3	- Positive or negative situations experienced at home	- Difficulties in negotiating and communicating with refugee students	- Acting in cooperation with parents - Making joint decisions with parents	- Having a good working environment
T4	- Positive and negative situations experienced with the family	- Inability to communicate with refugee students and their parents - Parents' indifference	- Cooperating with parents - Receiving too many messages on WhatsApp* during the pandemic and re-making the statements already made	- School administration and other teachers open to cooperation - Having a sincere environment
T5	- Positive and negative situations experienced with the family	- Inability to communicate with refugee students	- Parents' efforts to establish contact via WhatsApp and the need to make a separate statement to each parent.	- Having a sincere relationship with teachers - The school administration open to cooperation
T6	- Establishing good communication with the family - Healthy family members	- Inability to communicate with refugee students	- Making joint decisions with parents - Cooperating with parents	- School administration and other teachers' transparency - School administration providing the necessary materials
T7	- Good family relationships	- Having trouble communicating with refugee students	- Parents trying to establish too much contact both in private and group	- School administration in cooperation - Teachers knowing each other and acting in cooperation

Family relationship

The well-being of teachers was directly related to their family relationships. In the study, the teachers stated regarding the theme of family relationships that good relationships with the family positively affected their SWB. One of the teachers (T1) expressed that being able to share all kinds of emotions in family relationships too has a positive effect on SWB. Another teacher (T6) said that good relationships with family members too influenced SWB. The views of some teachers were as follows:

The concept of family is very important to me. Good communication with my family and the health of my family positively affects my psychology. (T1)

Communication with my family, being able to share every emotion with them, being with my family every moment makes me feel safe. However, my psychology is negatively affected by problems I have had with my family from time to time and situations where I feel that I cannot be understood by them, which inevitably reflects on my daily life. (T5)

Communication with refugee students

All the teachers stated that they could not communicate with refugee students effectively. They pointed that this situation had a negative effect on their psychology and their SWB. The views of some teachers were as follows:

We work in cooperation with the school administration, other teachers, and parents in the school family union so that our refugee students feel like they belong to the school. We express to them that our refugee students and their families fled the war and took refuge in our country, and our other parents should be understanding towards refugee students and their families. Together with our parents in the school family union, we visit the homes of our refugee students and help them socialize with other parents. Our refugee students had a hard time communicating with their friends and teachers at the beginning of the semester, but as they learn Turkish over time and feel like they belong to the school, it becomes easier for them to adapt to the school. This situation makes me feel productive as a teacher and positively affects my subjective well-being. (T4)

We have many refugee students at our school. At the beginning of the term, the biggest problem we faced with our refugee students was the inability to communicate. It is really hard not to speak the same language and to get along. However, they have started to learn Turkish during the semester, and I have had many refugee students so far, some of them have been very successful. Witnessing the success of the students and being able to teach them something make me feel professionally satisfied. This has a positive effect on my SWB. (T1)

Cooperation with parents

All the teachers expressed that they worked in cooperation with the parents, and this cooperation had positive effects on their SWB. T4, T5, and T7 stated that, as a result of the transition to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic, they communicated with the parents via WhatsApp groups to share the necessary information with them. However, they also noted that some parents disturbed them a lot through this communication process, and this situation exhausted them and negatively affected their SWB. The views of some teachers were as follows:

We did not experience any problems with the parents until the pandemic process, on the contrary, we acted in cooperation with the parents. We shared information about the students, school and lessons with parent WhatsApp groups that we established with the pandemic. Despite this, the number of parents who tried to contact us privately was quite high, and it was tiring to share the information I give in the group again for each parent, which lowered my motivation. (T7)

Acting in cooperation with parents and getting their support has had a positive impact on me so far. ...but with the [COVID-19] pandemic, I think the parents' level of anxiety about their children's education has increased, and accordingly, there are many parents who try to reach and get information about their children via WhatsApp. This situation may be a little tiring and affects my psychology negatively. (T4)

Working conditions

The teachers remarked that working conditions impacted their SWB since good relationships between school administrators and teachers had a decisive role in teachers' certain behaviors in school settings. All the participants stated that the school administration's being open to cooperation and establishing a sincere atmosphere among the teachers positively affected their SWB. The views of some teachers were as follows:

I have worked at many schools in my 24-year career. I have been working at this school for 6 years. I can say [it is] the best school I have worked at. It is not crowded, the number of teachers is low, and all teachers know each other, which ensure a friendly atmosphere. We cooperate with the school administration. We have no problem reporting the materials we need to the school administration; the administration always helps us. Factors like these also keep me motivated.

The presence of a peaceful environment, our success in what we do, the appreciation of students, parents, and colleagues show us that we are on the right track and give us happiness. The requests for help from the individuals around our school also help us be motivated. (T2)

The close relationships between teachers were found to be related to the teachers' well-being. The teachers stated that being a small population of teachers in school led to sincere relationships.

We have a small number of teachers; this simply means all teachers know each other. We can communicate sincerely and effectively with our fellow teachers, and we can work in cooperation. We make some requests for provision of materials to the school administration. The school administration provides the necessary materials. Matters like this also positively affect my SWB. (T4)

SWB reminds me of having positive relationships with each other, and life satisfaction. In other words, I can say that it is a person's point of view on life. It is a privilege to be able to look at life positively and see the positive aspects of the events experienced. I think people who can achieve this would have a high level of SWB. (T3)

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The SWB of teachers is one of the prerequisites for a qualified education (Bashaireh & David, 2019). Çetin (2019) stated that there is a significant relationship between teachers' SWB and occupational resilience. It can be inferred that teachers better adapt to challenging working conditions whenever they have a high level of well-being, which in turn, can improve their beliefs that their training is more efficient and will strengthen their job satisfaction. Therefore, it is important to investigate factors related to teachers' SWB (Arslan, 2018). The current research showed that participating teachers regarded SWB as an important issue for their life satisfaction. In this study, family relationships, communication with refugee students, cooperation with parents, and working conditions were found to be the themes related to the participants' well-being.

The first theme of the study was family relationship. This theme referred to the teacher's good relationships with their family members. According to the teachers, if they had a positive relationship with their family members, they felt happy, which reflected on their job. Good relationships do not mean everything for SWB, but they are an essential element (Biswas-Diener, Diener & Tamir, 2004). Gülaçtı (2010) has found that perceived family support considerably predicted SWB. Therefore, teachers' positive family relationships may make them feel happier and positively affect their daily relationships and professional behaviors. Similarly, Situmorang et al. (2019) supported these findings as there was a highly significant positive relationship between female teachers' SWB and the variables gratitude, optimism, and work-family balance. Jalali and Heidari (2016) have specified that happiness and SWB are the strongest predictors of job performance of primary school teachers. It is expectable that individuals who have problems in their familial lives are unhappy, which is likely to adversely affect their SWB.

Another critical finding of this study was concerned with communication with refugee students. Almost all the teachers stated that the increased number of refugee students in their schools with the refugee migration in recent years influenced their SWB because they did not know how to conduct a culturally responsive education. All the teachers expressed that being unable to communicate with refugee students diminished their motivation for teaching and caused a feeling of inefficiency. Similarly, Üzar-Özçetin, Çelik, and Özenç-Ira (2020) found that teachers of refugees are unwilling to teach refugee students. These findings may indicate that teachers cannot effectively apply cultural education in their classrooms. Thus, they may find communication with refugee students challenging.

The third theme of the study was cooperation with parents. Some of the teachers stated that they formed WhatsApp groups upon the pandemic-induced transition to distance education, yet many parents wanted to get information about their children individually through private channels, and the repetition of the information given in the common groups for each parent harmed the SWB of the teachers. As parents intervened with educational processes over WhatsApp groups, it seems to have affected teachers' performance and SWB. It is certain that the positive relationships that teachers will have will lead them to meaningful integrity and they will be emotionally positive (Chan, 2010). In this sense, the deteriorated relations with parents over WhatsApp groups created for in-class communication prevented the teachers from feeling positive. In the last decade, many studies have been conducted on the nature of teachers' SWB and what affects their SWB. Poormahmood, Moayedi, and Alizadeh (2017) have investigated the relationships between psychological well-being, happiness, and perceived occupational stress among primary school teachers. They have concluded that occupational stress in teaching may lead to poor psychological well-being and reduce happiness in primary school teachers. If teachers have no good relationships with parents, teachers' professional stressors may increase, which may diminish their teaching performance.

The last theme of this study was working conditions. The participating teachers stated that the relationships between their colleagues and the attitudes of administrators impacted their SWB. Most of the participants expressed that the school they worked at was not crowded, the teachers knew each other, and the school administration was open to cooperation. Similarly, Arslan (2018) stressed that a high level of well-being is associated with the successful functioning of teachers in the workplace. Additionally, the leadership style of school principals may be considered a factor shaping teachers' well-being at school and teachers' emotional commitment thereto (Heidmets & Liik, 2014). Janovská, Orosová, and Janovský (2017) mention that the supportive behavior of the principal, which is defined as active participation, interest, determination, advising, emotional support, and appropriate information provision, is associated with well-being. Increased physical and psychological health and SWB of teachers is crucial in improving the overall atmosphere at schools. Furthermore, a high level of well-being is associated with additional benefits that enhance teachers' professional performance

(Rahm & Heise, 2019). Schools should create a positive and healthy work environment that cares not only for the physical health but also for the psychological health of teachers, recognizes the teacher with signs of burnout, and provides stress-coping strategies for training or workshops (Hung, Lin, & Yu, 2016).

Limitations

This study had some limitations. Firstly, the sample size could be larger to provide a higher level of data saturation. Besides, the participating teachers had students of varying origins (i.e. Syrian, Afghan). Therefore, the sample of teachers was not homogeneous.

Implications

In this study, the refugees-related themes concerning SWB of teachers were found to be family relationships, communication with refugee students, cooperation with parents, and working conditions. This finding provides an implication for policymakers to prepare in-service training for the teachers of refugee children. It is obvious that there is a need for enhanced education to promote teachers' SWB. Since SWB is a complex phenomenon, further studies should be conducted to gain deeper insights into the SWB of the teachers of refugees.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in the preparation and publication of this study.

Ethical Considerations

An ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee to conduct the study (Project number: 2020-YÖNP-0047). Written and verbal consents were obtained from each teacher participating in the study.

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