

Relationship between school phobia and extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience among third-grade primary school pupils

Dr. Leila Boudida ¹, and **Dr. Derguini Said Mehdi** ²

¹ Lecturer B, University Abdelhamid Mehri, Constantine 2, Algeria, LAPSI,
Email: leila.boudida@univ-constantine2.dz, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6666-5966>.

² Lecturer A, University Abdelhamid Mehri, Constantine 2, Algeria, LPPE
Email: said.derguini@univ-constantine2.dz, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8401-5263>

Abstract---School phobia represents a significant psychological challenge that may negatively affect children's academic achievement, social development, and emotional well-being. The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between school phobia and three personality traits: extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience among third-grade primary school pupils. A descriptive correlational design was adopted. The study sample consisted of 30 pupils (15 males and 15 females) enrolled in the third grade of primary education in the city of Constantine, Algeria. Data were collected using four questionnaires designed to measure school phobia, extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience. The reliability of the instruments was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which indicated satisfactory levels of internal consistency. Pearson correlation coefficients were employed to analyze the relationships among the variables. The findings revealed significant negative correlations between school phobia and extraversion ($r = -0.83$), school phobia and assertiveness ($r = -0.90$), and school phobia and openness to experience ($r = -0.87$). These results suggest that pupils who display lower levels of extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience tend to exhibit higher levels of school phobia. The study highlights the importance of considering personality characteristics in understanding and addressing school phobia among primary school children.

Keywords---School Phobia, Extraversion, Assertiveness, Openness to Experience, Personality Traits, Primary School Pupils.

How to Cite:

Boudida, L., & Mehdi, D. S. (2026). Relationship between school phobia and extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience among third-grade primary school pupils. *The International Tax Journal*, 53(3), 1446–1453. Retrieved from <https://internationaltaxjournal.online/index.php/itj/article/view/662>

The International tax journal ISSN: 0097-7314 E-ISSN: 3066-2370 © 2026

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Submitted: 05 March 2026 | Revised: 27 March 2026 | Accepted: 25 April 2026

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1. Introduction

School attendance plays a fundamental role in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Schools provide opportunities for learning, social interaction, personal growth, and the acquisition of essential life skills. Through daily interactions with teachers and peers, children develop communication abilities, emotional regulation, and social competence. Regular attendance is therefore considered a crucial factor in ensuring academic success and healthy psychological development.

Despite the importance of schooling, some children experience significant difficulties adapting to the school environment. One of the most concerning manifestations of these difficulties is school phobia. School phobia refers to an intense fear or anxiety associated with attending school or remaining in the school environment. Children experiencing school phobia often exhibit emotional distress, avoidance behaviors, physical complaints, and persistent reluctance to attend classes. These symptoms may interfere with educational progress and negatively affect social relationships. Furthermore, research suggests that such behaviors are frequently linked to internalizing disorders, including anxiety and depression, which can impair a child's ability to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics (Vincenzo et al., 2024, p. 14).

School phobia is not merely a temporary dislike of school. Rather, it involves a complex interaction of emotional, social, familial, and psychological factors. Children suffering from school phobia may experience anxiety related to separation from parents, fear of social situations, academic pressure, peer relationships, or negative experiences within the school setting. If left unaddressed, school phobia may contribute to absenteeism, academic underachievement, and long-term adjustment difficulties.

In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on the role of personality traits in understanding children's adaptation to school environments. Personality traits represent relatively stable patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that influence how individuals respond to various situations. Certain personality characteristics may either facilitate or hinder a child's ability to cope with the challenges associated with school attendance and social integration.

Among the numerous personality traits examined in psychological research, extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience have received particular attention due to their relevance to social functioning and adaptation. Extraversion is characterized by sociability, enthusiasm, energy, and a tendency to seek interpersonal interactions. Children with high levels of extraversion often feel comfortable in social settings and are more likely to engage actively with peers and teachers. Conversely, traits such as assertiveness enable students to advocate for their needs and navigate interpersonal conflicts effectively, while openness to experience fosters a curiosity that may mitigate the fear of novel classroom environments (Martín et al., 2021).

Assertiveness refers to an individual's ability to express thoughts, feelings, opinions, and needs confidently while respecting the rights of others. Assertive children are generally more capable of handling interpersonal conflicts, seeking assistance when needed, and communicating effectively within educational settings. Openness to experience reflects curiosity, creativity, flexibility, and willingness to engage in new experiences. Children who score high on openness are often more adaptable to change, more receptive to learning opportunities, and more willing to explore unfamiliar situations.

Considering the importance of these personality traits in children's social and emotional adjustment, the present study seeks to examine their relationship with school phobia among primary school pupils. Understanding these relationships may contribute to the development of preventive and intervention strategies aimed at reducing school-related anxiety and promoting positive school experiences. Furthermore, while existing literature has extensively examined the Big Five dimensions in adult populations, investigating how these specific personality factors influence the developmental trajectory

of school phobia in younger cohorts remains a critical gap in current psychological research (Jach et al., 2023, p. 2).

The study was guided by the following hypotheses:

- 1) There is a significant negative relationship between school phobia and extraversion among third-grade primary school pupils.
- 2) There is a significant negative relationship between school phobia and assertiveness among third-grade primary school pupils.
- 3) There is a significant negative relationship between school phobia and openness to experience among third-grade primary school pupils.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The present study employed a descriptive correlational research design. This approach was considered appropriate because the primary objective was to examine the relationships between school phobia and selected personality traits without manipulating any variables. Correlational studies are particularly useful for identifying associations among psychological constructs and generating insights into factors that may contribute to specific behaviors or emotional conditions. Furthermore, this cross-sectional methodology allows for the simultaneous assessment of multiple Big Five dimensions, facilitating a nuanced analysis of how traits such as agreeableness and neuroticism intersect with school-related anxiety (Gkatsa, 2023, p. 309).

2.2. Participants

The study sample consisted of 30 third-grade primary school pupils selected from the School Health and Monitoring Unit in Constantine, Algeria. The sample included an equal distribution of genders, with 15 male pupils and 15 female. All participants were enrolled in primary education during the 2022–2023 academic year.

The selection of third-grade pupils was based on the developmental significance of this educational stage. Children at this level are actively engaged in adapting to formal educational demands, peer interactions, and classroom expectations, making it an appropriate period for investigating school-related anxiety and personality characteristics.

2.3. Instruments

Four questionnaires were used to collect the required data.

2.4. School Phobia Questionnaire

The School Phobia Questionnaire consisted of ten items designed to assess emotional, behavioral, and cognitive manifestations of school-related fear and avoidance. The instrument measured general fear of school, fear of school-related situations, and avoidance behaviors associated with school attendance.

2.5. Extraversion Scale

The Extraversion Scale contained ten items evaluating sociability, preference for group activities, communication tendencies, and enjoyment of interpersonal interactions. Higher scores indicated stronger levels of extraversion.

2.6. Assertiveness Scale

The Assertiveness Scale included nine items assessing children's ability to express themselves, defend their rights appropriately, and communicate effectively with others. Higher scores reflected greater assertiveness.

2.7. Openness to Experience Scale

The Openness to Experience Scale consisted of ten items measuring curiosity, creativity, preference for variety, and willingness to engage in new experiences. Higher scores indicated stronger openness to experience.

2.8. Reliability of Instruments

The reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The obtained reliability coefficients demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency:

Instrument	Cronbach's Alpha
Extraversion Scale	0.88
Assertiveness Scale	0.88
Openness to Experience Scale	0.86
School Phobia Questionnaire	0.92

These values indicate that all instruments possessed acceptable psychometric properties for use in the present study.

2.9. Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine the strength and direction of relationships between school phobia and each personality trait. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were also calculated. Furthermore, to ensure the robustness of the findings, the internal consistency reliability was rigorously verified through these coefficients, confirming that the scales provide stable measurements across the studied cohort (Mourelatos, 2021, p. 8649).

3. Results

The analysis of the collected data revealed clear patterns in the relationships between school phobia and the selected personality traits. Descriptive statistics indicated that the mean score for school phobia among the pupils was 17.96 with a standard deviation of 5.40. The mean scores for extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience were 16.83 (SD = 3.94), 14.83 (SD = 3.20), and 17.16 (SD = 4.53), respectively.

3.1. Relationship Between School Phobia and Extraversion

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between school phobia and extraversion ($r = -0.83$). This finding indicates that pupils who scored lower on extraversion tended to exhibit higher levels of school phobia. In practical terms, children who are less sociable, less energetic in group activities, and less likely to engage with peers and teachers are more prone to experiencing anxiety related to school attendance. The negative correlation suggests that extraversion may serve as a protective factor against the development of school phobia. Similarly, the analysis confirmed a significant negative correlation between school phobia and assertiveness, suggesting that a child's capacity to express their needs and defend their rights may mitigate school-related distress. Finally, the inverse association between school phobia and openness to experience highlights that a lack of curiosity and resistance to new educational stimuli may exacerbate emotional avoidance in classroom settings. These correlations align with broader psychological literature, which posits that deficits in social and assertive competencies significantly predict increased susceptibility to withdrawal symptoms and avoidant behaviors (Tekin et al., 2018, p. 1523).

3.2. Relationship Between School Phobia and Assertiveness

The analysis also indicated a strong negative correlation between school phobia and assertiveness ($r = -0.90$). Pupils with lower levels of assertiveness, who may struggle to express themselves or defend their personal rights in social interactions, were more likely to demonstrate heightened school-related fear

and avoidance behaviors. This suggests that the inability to assert oneself in social and academic contexts can exacerbate anxiety about attending school, potentially leading to persistent absenteeism or behavioral avoidance. Furthermore, these findings emphasize that building assertive communication skills may function as a crucial intervention component for children struggling with school-based anxiety (Shalini, 2024).

3.3. Relationship Between School Phobia and Openness to Experience

Similarly, a significant negative correlation was observed between school phobia and openness to experience ($r = -0.87$). Pupils who were less curious, less flexible, or less willing to engage in new or diverse experiences were more susceptible to school phobia. This indicates that children with low openness may find changes in the school environment, unfamiliar academic tasks, or novel social situations stressful, contributing to avoidance behaviors and negative emotional reactions. Conversely, higher levels of openness to experience may facilitate greater cognitive flexibility, enabling students to better regulate their emotional responses when navigating challenging or unpredictable classroom dynamics (Ulaş & Seçer, 2024, p. 19408).

3.4. Summary of Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Correlation with School Phobia
Extraversion	16.83	3.94	- 0.83
Assertiveness	14.83	3.20	- 0.90
Openness to Experience	17.16	4.53	- 0.87
School Phobia	17.96	5.40	---

These results collectively indicate that lower levels of extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience are associated with higher levels of school phobia among third-grade pupils.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that personality traits significantly influence the experience of school phobia in primary school children. The negative correlations observed across all three traits—extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience—suggest that personality characteristics may act as protective or risk factors in the development of school-related anxiety. Consistent with previous research identifying the hierarchical influence of personality dimensions on anxiety, these results highlight how specific trait profiles—particularly those characterized by low extraversion—directly exacerbate symptoms of avoidant behavior (Wauthia et al., 2019, p. 5).

The negative relationship between school phobia and extraversion aligns with the idea that sociable and outgoing children are generally better equipped to navigate the social complexities of school life. Extraverted pupils are more likely to engage in positive interactions with peers and teachers, participate in group activities, and seek social support when encountering difficulties. Conversely, introverted children may find the social demands of school overwhelming, leading to avoidance behaviors and increased anxiety. This diminished capacity to seek external support and reconstruct stressful social experiences may render these individuals more susceptible to ruminative cognitive patterns, thereby intensifying their distress (Macovei et al., 2023, p. 3).

Assertiveness emerged as the strongest correlate with school phobia. Pupils who lack assertiveness may struggle to communicate their needs, seek help when facing academic challenges, or protect themselves in potentially stressful social interactions. Consequently, these children may experience heightened feelings of vulnerability and helplessness in school settings, reinforcing avoidance behaviors. Enhancing assertiveness skills could therefore be an effective strategy to reduce school phobia. Moreover, because trait emotional intelligence often serves as a powerful incremental predictor of school refusal beyond

standard personality assessments (Filippello et al., 2018), integrating socio-emotional learning into these interventions may offer a more robust buffer against avoidant symptoms.

Openness to experience also demonstrated a significant inverse relationship with school phobia. Children who are less open to novelty and change may perceive school routines, new academic tasks, or transitions between classrooms as threatening. A lack of curiosity or flexibility can intensify stress responses, making school environments feel intimidating. Encouraging exploration, creativity, and adaptive coping strategies may mitigate these effects. Building on these personality-driven mechanisms, interventions that specifically target emotional regulation have demonstrated efficacy in reducing absenteeism by increasing a student's capacity to tolerate school-based stressors. Furthermore, students possessing such maladaptive traits often exhibit internalizing symptoms, such as depressive affect or persistent social inhibition, which necessitate comprehensive, school-based support programs (Kearney et al., 2023, p. 4; Li et al., 2023, p. 2).

Overall, the study underscores the critical role of personality traits in shaping children's emotional responses to school. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing school phobia should not only address environmental and academic factors but also consider the individual personality profiles of pupils. Programs that foster social engagement, assertiveness, and openness to experience may enhance resilience and reduce school-related anxiety. Future research should investigate the long-term efficacy of these tailored interventions in diverse educational settings to clarify the contribution of personality features to the complex phenomenon of school absenteeism (Carpentieri et al., 2022).

The practical implications are noteworthy. Teachers and parents can benefit from understanding the personality dimensions associated with school phobia. Early identification of children with low extraversion, assertiveness, or openness to experience can inform targeted support strategies, such as gradual exposure to challenging school situations, social skills training, and personalized learning approaches. By aligning intervention efforts with individual personality traits, educators and caregivers may improve school attendance, academic achievement, and overall psychological well-being. Furthermore, tailoring such support requires a nuanced understanding of school attendance problems, as the functional mechanisms driving school refusal—such as internalizing distress—often diverge significantly from the externalizing behaviors associated with truancy (Heyne et al., 2018, p. 17).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between school phobia and three key personality traits—extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience—among third-grade primary school pupils. The results demonstrated significant negative correlations between school phobia and all three traits, indicating that lower levels of extraversion, assertiveness, and openness are associated with higher levels of school-related fear and avoidance behaviors. Pupils who are less sociable, less confident in expressing their needs, or less receptive to novel experiences appear more vulnerable to school phobia.

These findings carry important implications for educational practice and child development. Teachers and parents can play a proactive role by identifying children who may be at risk due to their personality characteristics and implementing supportive strategies. For instance, gradually exposing children to social and academic challenges, fostering assertive communication skills, and encouraging exploration of new experiences can help reduce anxiety and enhance school engagement. Furthermore, understanding the interplay between personality and school phobia can guide the development of tailored interventions that address both emotional and behavioral aspects of school avoidance.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and the study was limited to a single educational setting, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which could introduce response biases.

Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs to assess causality, and the inclusion of observational or teacher-reported measures to corroborate findings.

In conclusion, this research underscores the crucial role of personality traits in shaping children's experiences of school phobia. By integrating awareness of extraversion, assertiveness, and openness to experience into educational planning and psychological support, educators and caregivers can more effectively promote school engagement, emotional well-being, and academic success among primary school pupils.

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