The Effect of Boys’ and Girls’ School Adjustment on Life Satisfaction in Korea

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine gender differences in life satisfaction and to examine the longitudinal and cross-sectional associations between school adjustment and life satisfaction in Korea. Methods/Statistical analysis: The participants were 2,110 elementary school students who were assessed in the first and fifth years, respectively. Data were collected from the KCYPS panel survey of 1st graders cohort in 2010 and 2014. Several t-tests, Pearson correlations, and multiple regressions were used. Findings: Results indicate that girls are better adjusted to school life than boys; however, boys are more satisfied with life than girls. Children’s school adjustment in the 1st and 5th grade was positively associated with life satisfaction in 5th grade. Improvements/Applications: This study confirmed the longitudinal and cross-sectional importance of school adjustment in children’s life satisfaction.

Keywords: Children’s School Adjustment, Gender Difference, KCYPS, Life Satisfaction, Longitudinal Effect

1. Introduction

Life satisfaction means one’s global evaluation about their life. Early work on quality of life focused on objective indicators like SES (Social and Economic Status) and recreational resources; however, recent work on the quality of life has paid attention to subjective indexes such as life satisfaction. The previous studies indicated that life satisfaction was the same meaning as happiness or unhappiness. For example, higher level of life satisfaction is associated with the happiness, whereas lower level of life satisfaction is related with depression and unhappiness. Also, life satisfaction is accounted as the byproducts of social and economic supports and outcomes, in spite of results showing a bidirectional relationship. Moreover, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies have indicated life satisfaction influences one’s positive behavioral, psychological, and social outcomes. As mentioned above, life satisfaction in children was associated with various important variables relevant to their adaptive functioning.

According to the Korea ministry’s 2013 data, however, Korea scored the lowest among the OECD concerning children’s life satisfaction. The major reasons for this result were that children couldn’t enjoy hobbies and leisure time and they were stressed over academic obligations. The goal of government is to swell the index to 77 points by 2019. Bettering the quality of children’s life is a desperate mission in Korea. Considering children spend most of their time in school, the relation between school adjustment and life satisfaction should be explored.

School adjustment is a complex process that requires adjustment in emotional, social, and cognitive domain simultaneously. It requires children to adjust themselves to day structure, school rules, and expectations. The better children adjust themselves to school life, the more they are satisfied.

However, empirical studies indicate that 20–30% of children exhibit problems during the first year of school; they have difficulty in following directions, are lack of academic and social skills. Indeed, they show anxiety and depressive disorders. It is not easy for children to adjust themselves to formal education; every year, many children have trouble adapting to school. Comparing to the environments of kindergarten and preschool, that of elementary school is hard and strict. The adjustment during
the transition to formal schooling was assumed to play a significant role in later school adjustment.

Previous studies indicated that the quality of children's life was associated with various experiences in the school setting. For example, there was a relationship between perceived quality of life and perceived control at school, and lower perceived quality of life was also associated with negative attitudes toward teachers and school. Also, the greater adolescents satisfied with their life, the higher they took part in school extracurricular activities. There are many studies concerning the relationship between children's school adjustment and quality of life; however, few studies had been conducted concerning the longitudinal effect of school adjustment in the 1st grade on life satisfaction in the 5th grade.

Children's life satisfaction studies have shown that demographic variables like SES, gender, and age were related to life satisfaction. SES was strongly related to children's life satisfaction: students with low SES showed lower life satisfaction than students with high SES. Gender difference in life satisfaction of children was not fully investigated; some results showed that boys are more satisfied with their life than girls in early and middle youth. Girls' and boys' life satisfaction were assumed to differ in Korea because they were expected to feel, think, and behave differently according to gender.

Therefore, this study determines gender differences on school adjustment and life satisfaction and examines the relation between school adjustment in the 1st and 5th grades and the outcome of life satisfaction.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

This is a cross-sectional and longitudinal study designed to examine the influence of children's early school adjustment on life satisfaction in middle childhood in Korea. Participants were 2,110 5th grade elementary school students. Participants were surveyed from the 1st grade to the 5th grade respectively, which belonged to the 1st elementary school cohort panel of the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey (KCYPs). The data was from the KCYPs in 2010 and 2014, which measured the 1st and 5th years. The purposes of this study and the possibility of withdrawal were explained to them. Also, written informed consent of the participants and their parents was obtained before this study.

2.2 Measurements

2.2.1 School Adjustment

To measure school adjustment, the School Adjustment Scale was used, which was based on. School adjustment constructs includes school learning, school rules, peer relationships, and teacher relationships at school. The School Learning subscale is composed of a five-item assessing how much the child is interested in learning. The School Rules subscale is composed of a five-item assessing how well children comply with classroom rules and responsibilities. The Peer Relationships subscale is composed of a five-item assessing how well children have a good relationship with peers. The Teacher Relationships subscale is composed of a five-item assessing how well children have a good relationship with their teacher. The scale ranges from 1 (extremely disagree) to 4 (extremely agree). The Cronbach’s α was 0.94.

2.2.2 Life Satisfaction

The Life Satisfaction Scale was used to assess life satisfaction, which was revised on the basis of. Life satisfaction was assessed using 3 items, which children responded on their satisfaction with their entire lives at the time. The scale ranges from 1 (extremely disagree) to 4 (extremely agree). Higher scores represent higher levels of life satisfaction. The Cronbach’s α was 0.93.

2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine means and SDs of school adjustment and life satisfaction. To determine the gender differences in children's school adjustment and life satisfaction, t-tests were used. Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted to test the association between school adjustment and life satisfaction. Multiple regression equations were conducted to investigate the variables that affect life satisfaction. The collected data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Results

3.1 General Characteristics

The Table 1 shows the baseline characteristics of the participants. Regarding the participants’ genders, 51.4% of the participants were boys and 48.6% were girls. The participants were in 5th grade, with a mean age of 10.97
(SD=.16) years. The mean family income of the participants was 4,600 dollars. Regarding the perceived economic status, 97.3% were over average.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics for a School Life Satisfaction

Descriptive statistics for school adjustment and its subscales (the 1st and 5th grades) and life satisfaction are shown in Table 2. The level of school adjustment subscale in the 1st grade was 2.90-3.62 (ranging 1-4); the mean of teacher relationships was the highest (3.62±.46) and the mean of peer relationships was the lowest (2.90±.38). The level of school adjustment subscale in the 5th grade was 2.92-3.23 (ranging 1-4); the mean of peer relationships was the highest (3.23±.59) and the mean of teacher relationships was the lowest (2.92±.31). The level of adjustment in the 1st grade was higher than adjustment in the 5th grade. Life satisfaction in the 5th grade was 3.43±.57 (ranging 1-4).

3.3 Gender Differences in School Adjustment and Life Satisfaction

Initial tests examined adjustment to school in 1st and 5th grades and life satisfaction in 5th grade across gender (see Table 3). Girls and boys differed significantly on school learning (t = -9.62, p<.001), school rules (t = -8.90, p<.001), peer relationships (t = -7.42, p<.001), teacher relationships (t = -11.13, p<.001) and total school adjustment (t = -11.95, p<.001) in 1st grade. Girls got significantly higher score than boys on school adjustment subscales and total school adjustment in 1st grade. Girls and boys differed significantly on school learning (t = -2.38, p<.05), school rules (t = -2.67, p<.05) and total school adjustment (t = -3.41, p<.001) in 5th grade. Girls reported more school adjustment than boys. However, boys and girls did not differ significantly on peer relationships in 5th grade. Also, boys were more satisfied with life than girls (t = 4.25, p<.001).

Table 1. General characteristics (N=2110)

| Variable         | Category     | n(%) | Mean±SD          |
|------------------|--------------|------|------------------|
| Gender           | Boys         | 1,084(51.4%) | 10.97±.16       |
|                  | Girls        | 1,026(48.6%) |                 |
| Age              |              |       | 152.3±58.86 cm   |
| Weight           |              |       | 45.42±16.63 kg   |
| Subjective       | Very rich    | 241(11.4) | 676(32.0)        |
| Economic status  | Rich         | 676(32.0) | 326(15.5)        |
|                  | A little rich| 326(15.5)| 809(38.3)        |
|                  | Average      | 809(38.3)| 47(2.2)          |
|                  | A little poor| 47(2.2) | 10(.5)           |
|                  | Poor         | 10(.5) | 1(0)             |
| Income           | Very good    | 86.3(40.9) | 1181(56.0)      |
|                  | good         | 1181(56.0)| 63(3.0)         |
|                  | bad          | 63(3.0) | 3(.1)           |
|                  | very bad     | 3(.1) |                  |

Table 2. Mean and SD of school adjustment in 1st and 5th grade and life satisfaction by gender

| Variable          | Category     | Gender | n | t   |
|-------------------|--------------|--------|---|-----|
| School Adjustment | 1st grade    | boys   | 1084 |     |
|                   |              | girls  | 1026 |     |
|                   | (1~4)        |        |     |     |
| school learning   |              | 3.17±.49 | 3.36±.39 | -9.62*** |
| school rule       |              | 3.49±.44 | 3.64±.34 | -8.90*** |
| peer relationship |              | 2.84±.40 | 2.97±.34 | -7.42*** |
| teacher relationship |         | 3.52±.52 | 3.73±.36 | -11.13*** |
| total             |              | 3.25±.37 | 3.42±.28 | -11.95*** |
| School Adjustment | 5th grade    | boys   | 1084 |     |
|                   |              | girls  | 1026 |     |
|                   | (1~4)        |        |     |     |
| school learning   |              | 3.11±.51 | 3.16±.49 | -2.38* |
| school rule       |              | 3.15±.50 | 2.33±.46 | -3.81*** |
| peer relationship |              | 2.91±.32 | 2.93±.28 | -1.66 |
| teacher relationship |         | 3.20±.58 | 3.27±.61 | -2.67** |
| total             |              | 3.10±.39 | 3.15±.37 | -3.41*** |
| Life satisfaction | 5th grade    | boys   | 1084 |     |
|                   |              | girls  | 1026 |     |
|                   | (1~4)        |        |     |     |
|                  |              | 3.49±.54 | 3.38±.60 | 4.25*** |

*p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

Average (3.62±.46) and the mean of teacher relationships was the lowest (2.90±.38). The level of school adjustment subscale in the 5th grade was 2.92-3.23 (ranging 1-4): the mean of peer relationships was the highest (3.23±.59) and the mean of teacher relationships was the lowest (2.92±.31). The level of adjustment in the 1st grade was higher than adjustment in the 5th grade. Life satisfaction in the 5th grade was 3.43±.57 (ranging 1-4).
3.4 Correlation among Main Variables

Boys' school learning ($r = .13$, $p < .001$), school rules ($r = .08$, $p < .001$), peer relationships ($r = .12$, $p < .001$), and teacher relationships ($r = .11$, $p < .001$) in the 1st grade were significantly related with boys' life satisfaction in 5th grade. Boys' school learning ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), school rules ($r = .30$, $p < .001$), peer relationships ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), and teacher relationships ($r = .32$, $p < .001$) in the 5th grade were significantly related with boys' life satisfaction in 5th grade (See Table 4).

Girls' school learning ($r = .11$, $p < .001$), school rules ($r = .09$, $p < .001$), peer relationships ($r = .12$, $p < .001$), and teacher relationships ($r = .18$, $p < .001$) in the 1st grade were significantly related with girls' life satisfaction in 5th grade. Girls' school learning ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), school rules ($r = .44$, $p < .001$), peer relationships ($r = .37$, $p < .001$), and teacher relationships ($r = .35$, $p < .001$) in the 5th grade were significantly related with girls' life satisfaction in 5th grade (See Table 5).

| school learning 5th | school rule 5th | peer relationship 5th | teacher relationship 5th | life satisfaction 5th |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| school learning 1st | .22***         | .17***                | .20***                   | .12***                | .13***                |
| school rule 1st     |                |                       |                          |                       |                       |
| peer relationship 1st | .17***        |                       | .20***                   | .12***                | .12***                |
| teacher relationship 1st | .17***        | .14***                | .20***                   | .13***                | .11***                |
| school learning 5th | 1              |                       | .56***                   | .51***                | .36***                |
| school rule 5th     | 1              |                       | .47***                   | .49***                | .30***                |
| peer relationship 5th |              |                       | .48***                   | .42***                |                       |
| teacher relationship 5th |          |                       |                          |                       | .32***                |

***$p < .001$

Table 5. Correlation among main variables in girls

| school learning 5th | school rule 5th | peer relationship 5th | teacher relationship 5th | Life satisfaction 5th |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| school learning 1st | .21***         | .17***                | .19***                   | .10***                | .11***                |
| school rule 1st     | .14***         | .14***                | .12***                   | .10***                | .09***                |
| peer relationship 1st | .12***         | .10***                | .17***                   | .07***                | .12***                |
| teacher relationship 1st | .12***         | .12***                | .19***                   | .13***                | .18***                |
| school learning 5th | 1              | .64***                | .52***                   | .49***                | .45***                |
| school rule 5th     | 1              | .45***                | .40***                   | .44***                |                       |
| peer relationship 5th |              |                       | .50***                   | .37***                |                       |
| teacher relationship 5th |          |                       |                          |                       | .35***                |

***$p < .001$
relationships ($\beta = .14$, $p < .001$), and teacher relationships in 5th grade ($\beta = .11$, $p < .01$) were significant independent factors predicting boys’ life satisfaction in 5th grade (see Table 7).

For girls, the model predicted 27.8% of total variance in girls’ life satisfaction. Stepwise multiple regression analysis showed that school learning ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$), peer relationships ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$), teacher relationships in 5th grade ($\beta = .12$, $p < .01$), and teacher relationships in 1st grade ($\beta = .09$, $p < .01$) were significant independent factors predicting girls’ life satisfaction in 5th grade (Table 8).

4. Discussion

The current study furthered our understanding that children’s early school adjustment took important role in life satisfaction. Also, gender difference in the relation between school adjustment and life satisfaction was confirmed. Examining children’s subjective perceptions of life may be the key factor in promoting their happiness and wellbeing from the positive psychology perspective. Considering that children with higher life satisfaction is likely to show high self-esteem and strong internal motivation and lower level of anxiety, it is necessary to increase children’s life satisfaction. After children enter primary school, the time spent in school increases and the influence of school adjustment on children’s lives is stronger than ever.

The result of this study was consistent with previous studies which indicated that there were gender differences on life satisfaction; boys were more satisfied than girls. These results reflected that girls are more sensitive to appraisal of themselves and comparisons of themselves with others. Children’s self-consciousness and self-esteem increase during middle childhood, which is reflected in the feeling of being satisfied with oneself.

However, girls are better adjusted to school life than boys. This result is in line with research that shows girls are better at having positive relationships and sympathy for others. Boys are likely to have more difficulty in adjusting to new school life than girls in a transition period; therefore, boys with low adjustment should be taken care of carefully by teachers and parents. As children’s early school adjustment is associated with later school adjustment, support from significant others is needed to free them from burden and difficulties in transition periods.

**Table 6.** Stepwise regression using children's school adjustment to predict children's life satisfaction

| Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---------|---------|---------|
| B       | $\beta$ | B       | $\beta$ | B       | $\beta$ |
| constant| 1.15    | 1.01    | .96     |         |         |
| school learning 5th | .78 | .42*** | .54 | .29*** | .49 | .26*** |
| peer relationship 5th | .27 | .24*** | .22 | .20*** |         |         |
| Teacher relationship 5th |         |         | .11 | .11*** |         |         |
| F       | 452.24*** | 106.59*** | 24.53*** |         |         |
| $R^2$   | .177    | .216    | .224    |         |         |

***$p < .001$**

**Table 7.** Stepwise regression using boy's school adjustment to predict boy's life satisfaction

| Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---------|---------|---------|
| B       | $\beta$ | B       | $\beta$ | B       | $\beta$ |
| constant| 1.45    | 1.36    | 1.32    |         |         |
| school learning 5th | .78 | .42*** | .53 | .32*** | .48 | .29*** |
| peer relationship 5th | .18 | .18*** | .15 | .14*** |         |         |
| teacher relationship 5th |         |         | .10 | .11*** |         |         |
| F       | 229.93*** | 28.41*** | 10.26*** |         |         |
| $R^2$   | .175    | .196    | .204    |         |         |

***$p < .001$**
goals that they are progressing towards important life goals. Many studies explored on the role of school adjustment in children's life satisfaction have been carried out mainly with cross-sectional studies. However, this study furthered the longitudinal effect of school adjustment on life satisfaction as well as the cross-sectional effect. These results suggest the importance of school readiness before entering formal school and an effective school adjustment strategy to increase the life satisfaction in Korean children.

Third, the independent variables influencing life satisfaction differ a little between genders. In the case of boys, school learning, peer relationships, and teacher relationships in the 5th grade affected boys' life satisfaction in 5th grade. In the case of girls, however, school learning, peer relationships, and teacher relationships in the 5th grade, and teacher relationships in the 1st grade affected girls' life satisfaction in 5th grade. These results are in line with the research that showed the importance of a positive relationship with significant others in promoting girls' psychological wellbeing. The girls who make a better relationship with 1st grade teachers are more likely to be happy in 5th grade. The understanding of this specific relationship between children's school adjustment and life satisfaction and how it differs by genders is important in the development of strategies to increase positive psychological well-being.

On the other hand, the result that school learning is the most influential factor in both boys' and girls' life satisfaction reflects the reality of Korean education. Previous studies indicate that school learning is the most essential factor of children's life satisfaction. Korean students spend long hours studying at school, at expensive hagw on/private educational institute) and online. Even though they perform well on tests, their interests in school and satisfaction rate are low, compared with their peers in other OECD countries. Korean students are likely to be anxious and stressed because they have a burden of high performance. Promoting Korean children's life satisfaction is a complicated and multifaceted task; however, it is significant and important.

Life satisfaction means a one's overall evaluation of quality of life based on their criteria, including the perception that they are progressing towards important life goals. This study confirmed the importance of school adjustment in children's life satisfaction. Therefore, integrated approaches to cultivate and strengthen children's school adjustment will improve positive developmental outcome in children.

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6. References

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