

The Impact of Children's Experiences of Abuse on Educational Adjustment: Focusing on the Moderating Effect of Community Support Systems

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Abstract

While children who have been abused often experience difficulties in adjusting to not only family but also school life, they sometimes overcome these difficulties by utilizing social support systems. Community children's centers have been highlighted as one of the representative community support systems related to children; however, the issue of declining service quality has been raised recently following the quantitative expansion of such centers. Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine whether community children's centers act as a buffer in the relationship between experiences of childhood abuse and difficulties in educational adjustment. The results of the analysis showed that, as in the preceding research, experiences of childhood abuse had a negative impact on the educational adjustment of a child and that satisfaction with the services provided by community children's centers had a positive impact on it. In addition, satisfaction with the services provided by community children's centers had a moderating effect, reducing the negative impact of childhood experiences of abuse on educational adjustment. The protective role of community children's centers must be strengthened based on these research results, and family-centered interventions to prevent abuse have been proposed as a fundamental solution.

Keywords: *Care institution, Child welfare, Community, School environment*

1. Introduction

While the Korean Child Welfare Act defines a "child" as any person under 18 years of age, a child's developmental trajectory can depend on their environment and age. Given that, after the age of ten, children experience rapid changes in all areas, including their bodies, cognition, emotions, and social spheres, we believe that it is especially important to examine this period of childhood [1].

Meanwhile, among the contexts that are related to the development of children at this age, schools play the most important role (after families) in the development of sociality. Therefore, the preceding research shows that effective educational adjustment in children increases their confidence and sense of responsibility [2] and that it also has a positive effect on their development up to adulthood [3]. Thus, there are many pieces of research that have included educational adjustment as an important dependent variable related to childhood development, and the factors that have been shown to predict effective educational

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adjustment include psychological and emotional [4][5][6], family-related [7][8][9], school-related [10][11], and community-related ones [12][13][14][15].

Family-related factors have the most prominent impact on the adjustment of children and have been reported to impact relationships with both peers and teachers [16]. However, abuse that occurs within a child's family causes various psychological after effects and has a negative impact on relationships with both peers and teachers. This leads to difficulties regarding academic achievements, aggression, and delinquent behavior, which ultimately lead to educational maladjustment [17]

From this perspective, the community support system surrounding a child can act as a substitute for the family regarding role models, and, when there are difficulties, it can provide a buffer by providing programs and services [18]. Therefore, when a child who is experiencing difficulties within their family utilizes community children's centers, they can act as a buffer against the difficulties faced [14]. At the same time, such services can improve children's self-esteem and aid in their recovery from internal conflicts and issues [19]. This assertion is supported by the preceding research, which shows that a high level of satisfaction with the services provided by community children's centers is a positive predictor of educational success [20][21][22]

Research on community satisfaction with the services offered by children's centers contains terminology like "user satisfaction" [21][22] and "service satisfaction" [20] and focuses on examining the direct impact on educational adjustment. However, examinations of how much of a buffer community children's centers provide against risk factors within the family in their role as community support systems are currently lacking. Despite the fact that community support systems can play an important role as a protective factor for children who experience emotional or physical abuse or neglect within the family, there is a relative lack of research being conducted on them [21][22].

Thus, this research examined the educational adjustment of children who had experienced abuse within their families. The aim of the study was to verify the moderating effect of community support systems as a protective factor. This research aimed to answer the following questions: First, what effect does abuse have on educational adjustment? Second, what is the impact of satisfaction with the service given by the community children's center on school adjustment? Third, does the satisfaction with the service given by the center buffer the negative effect of the experience of the abuse?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Experiences of abuse and educational adjustment

An examination by Lee and Kim [23], which examined difficulties within the family and their effect on the educational adjustment of children, showed that communication between parents and children impacted educational adjustment through empathy and ego-resilience; furthermore, other research showed that neglect and abuse by parents had a negative impact on children's ability to adjust to school life [24]. In addition, there is also research that shows that abuse by parents has an impact on educational adjustment through the mechanisms of the ego-resilience [9], parent/teacher/peer attachment [25], and self-perception [8] of a child. Through this lens, we can see that abuse not only has a negative impact on the individual emotions of a child but also on their ability to adjust to school life.

The family ideally acts as the primary safety net of a child, and factors related to it are also important to the developmental process [26]. However, the number of children who do not

receive sufficient care from their parents is growing due to the recent increase of dual-income and nuclear families; furthermore, the number of children who suffer from abuse and neglect is also continuously increasing [27].

However, most of the existing research is focused on individual characteristics as protective factors by excluding community support systems. Therefore, this research is focused on investigating community support systems as an important actor for reducing the negative effect of abuse experience of a children. We especially aim to examine community children's centers buffering effect by analyzing the level of satisfaction of children with community children's centers.

2.2. Community children's centres and educational adjustment

Community children's centers are a space where children are provided with afterschool care, and they can be considered a representative type of community support system. As children in vulnerable groups are the main targets of such services, the services provided by community children's centers can be effective for promoting child welfare, improved learning abilities, and maintenance of and adjustment to everyday home and school life [14].

Research examining the effect of community children's centers on the educational adjustment of children is being conducted for these reasons. Seo [28] reports that, the greater a child's level of satisfaction with the programs offered by community children's centers, the higher the likelihood that they will create positive relationships with peers. The research of Bang and Kim [13] also included a meaningful result that showed that the relationship between the child using a community children's center, the center's teacher, and the child's level of satisfaction with the center had a direct impact on educational adjustment. Through these research results, we can see that community children's centers, which provide care and opportunities for children, are a representative type of community support system that allows children to cultivate their abilities to overcome hardships.

However, we cannot examine the efficacy of community children's centers in detail merely by examining their use. We can say that the level of satisfaction that a child feels, from a qualitative perspective, with community children's centers has a close relationship with the level of educational adjustment of the child [20]. In longitudinal research regarding this subject, Jung and Ah [29] examined the level of satisfaction with community child centers among the children who used them, and they showed that children who reported a high level of satisfaction with the centers whose services they used adjusted well to school life afterwards. Lee and colleagues [30] examined the effect that the service domain of community children's centers had on educational adjustment and revealed that, the higher a child's level of satisfaction was with the learning support, counseling, and peer-relationship services offered by a center, the bigger the initial impact on educational adjustment was. Here, we can see the positive effect of community centers' service on educational adjustment.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data

This research is based on 536 responses by fourth-grade students, which were taken from 659 responses, excluding missing values. The data were collected during the third session of the first year (2018) of the Community Children's Center Children's Panel conducted by the Central Office of Community Child Center that was commissioned by the National Youth

Policy Institute (NYPI). The IRB(Institutional Review Board) approval number for this panel is 201904-HR-수탁-001-01.

The items regarding “educational adjustment” included eight questions with a Cronbach’s alpha of .830, it have two questions in each of the four categories of “learning,” “rules,” “peers,” and “teachers.” The results were modified for our use so that, the higher a child’s score, the higher the level of educational adjustment. The items regarding “experience of abuse” included four questions asking physical and emotional abuse with a Cronbach’s alpha of .863. A higher score represented a more severe level of abuse. The items regarding “service satisfaction” included nine questions asking how much help such services had provided to the respondents with a Cronbach’s alpha of .903. A higher score represented a higher level of satisfaction.

3.2. Data analysis

To verify the goodness-of-fit of the model, the goodness-of-fit indexes CFI, TLI, and RMSEA were used. Before using the structural equation model to analysis main research inquiries, the normality and multicollinearity of measurement variables were reviewed. The normality was examined through skewness and Kurtosis while multicollinearity was examined through a correlation analysis. The current study included 536 children, among which there were 272 (50.7%) boys and 264 (49.3%) girls. Participants of this study are in the 4th grade and of the same age.

4. Research results

4.1. Technical and correlation analyses of the main variables

The normality of the data was confirmed through technical analysis of the main variables, and the results of the analysis are shown in [Table 1]. Generally, the distribution of the variables can be said not to have deviated from normality if the absolute value is below 3 for skewness and 7 for kurtosis [31]. The analysis results showed that the absolute values of both skewness and kurtosis did not exceed 2, so that we can assume that the data take the form of a normal distribution.

Table 1. Technical analysis of main variables (N=536)

Variable	Average	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Experience of Abuse	1.81	.75	1	4	1.377	1.537
Educational Adjustment	3.21	.52	1.25	4	-.179	-.575
Service Satisfaction	4.15	.71	1	5	-.887	1.133

In addition, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine the direction and strength of the relationships between each of the main variables. The results of the analysis showed that experience of abuse had a negative (-) correlation with educational adjustment and community children’s center service satisfaction and that community children’s center service satisfaction had a positive (+) correlation with educational adjustment. The correlation coefficient between these main variables had a maximum value of $r=.579$ (service satisfaction - educational adjustment) which did not exceed the absolute value of .6, thus, it did not show issues of multicollinearity between variables. Through this analysis, we predicted that the possibility of issues of multicollinearity occurring in this research was low; thus, further analysis was conducted.

4.2. Analysis of the measurement model

An analysis of the measurement model was conducted first to determine whether satisfaction with the services provided by community children’s centers had a moderating effect on the impact that experience of abuse had on educational adjustment. The results of the analysis are shown in [Table 2].

Table 2. Measurement model analysis

Latent Variable	Factor	Estimate		SE	C.R.	CR	AVE
		B	B				
Experience of Abuse	1	.632	.526	.051	12.493***	.604	.642
	2	1	.873				
	3	.932	.838	.041	22.794***		
	4	.921	.821	.041	22.282***		
Educational Adjustment	1	1	.679			.510	.703
	2	.944	.778	0.065	14.449***		
	3	.913	.725	0.066	13.818***		
	4	.896	.669	0.069	12.973***		
Service Satisfaction	1	.968	.907	0.033	29.001***	.784	.948
	2	1	.887				
	3	.945	.861	0.035	26.823***		

$\chi^2=81.552$ ($df=41$, $p<.001$), $GFI=.973$, $CFI=.986$, $RMSEA=.043$, $p<.05^*$, $p<.01^{**}$, $p<.001^{***}$

4.3. The moderating effect of satisfaction with the services offered by community children’s centers

The moderating effect in this research was verified using the second moderating effect analysis method by Marsh et al. The model for this research is shown in [Figure 1].

The fit indices of the structural model were shown to be $X^2=207.675$ ($df=84$), $CFI=.970$, $GFI=.953$, and $RMSEA=.052$. We can say that the research model fit the sample data adequately, as the indices were satisfactory. The analysis results of the structural model showed that experience of abuse had a negative (-) impact on educational adjustment and that, the greater the amount of such experience, the lower a child’s level of educational adjustment became ($B=-.062$, $p<.05$). This result is supported by [8][9] prior studies. The moderating variable of community children’s center service satisfaction had a positive (+) impact on educational adjustment, and, the higher the level of service satisfaction was, the higher a child’s level of educational adjustment was as well ($B=-.345$, $p<.001$). In addition, the moderating variable of the interaction term of experience of abuse and community children’s center service satisfaction had a negative (-) impact on educational adjustment, and it was shown to be statistically significant ($B=-.068$, $p<.01$). That is, the findings show that the moderating effect of satisfaction with the services provided by community children’s centers is meaningful (refer to Table 3) and this result was backed by [13] [14] prior studies.

Table 3. Structural equation model analysis

Path			Estimate		SE	C.R.
			B	β		
Experience of Abuse (A)	-->	Educational Adjustment	-.062	-.103	.027	-2.285*

Service Satisfaction (B)	-->	Educational Adjustment	.345	.597	.033	10.625***
(A)×(B)	-->	Educational Adjustment	-.068	-.132	-.068	-2.810**

$X^2=207.675$ ($df=84$, $p<.001$), $CFI=.970$, $GFI=.953$, $RMSEA=.052$, $p<.05^*$, $p<.01^{**}$, $p<.001^{***}$

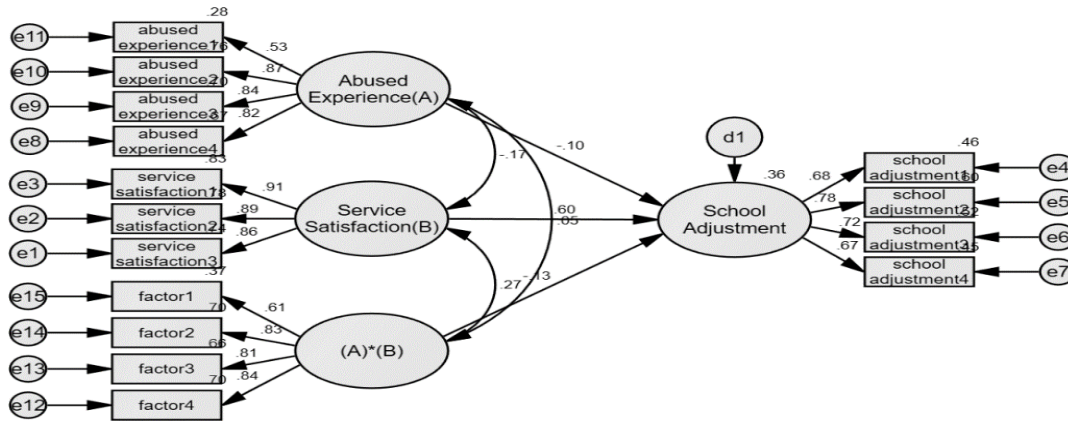


Figure 1. Final structural equation model

5. Discussion

Based on these research results, we would like to present suggestions for strategies and intervention measures to improve the services offered by community children’s centers, which are a representative type of community support system, with the aim of improving the educational adjustment of abused children.

First, the protective role of community children’s centers must be strengthened. As satisfaction with community children’s centers was confirmed to be a protective factor and a moderating variable, in-depth discussions on methods of improving abused children’s level of educational adjustment are needed. When creating community children’s center programs, it is important that such programs allow for the acquisition of skills related to educational adjustment, and it is vital to identify the level of educational adjustment of children in cooperation with their schools.

Second, intervention to prevent abuse within the family is required. Even if community support systems are strengthened, their function as a protective factor is limited if the level of abuse is severe. Therefore, interventions to prevent such abuse must be prioritized. To this end, organizations related to child welfare, including community children’s centers, must conduct regular parental-education classes, and, when difficulties are identified, integrated case management must be conducted.

Third, there is a need to expand the operational support for community children’s centers. The quality of the services offered to children must be enhanced to improve the level of satisfaction with the services offered by community children’s centers. To achieve this end, support must be expanded for the employees of such centers who provide the services and for operations. Specifically, policy improvements regarding increased operating budgets, expanded numbers of legal workers, etc. can be expected to directly contribute to improving the quality of the services provided to children.

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