

Policies to Support School-Age Children in Vulnerable Families

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Introduction

The family is the basic social unit, and it functionally supports and protects its members. Its core function is deemed to be providing care for children. Moreover, it is closely associated with social inequality since it reflects and reproduces such inequality. Family background, the lifestyles of family members, material resources, and cultural and social capital all have significant effects on children's lives, options, and opportunities. In particular, economic polarization can make it difficult to overcome inequality stemming from family factors, so the family environment can be considered a key element that impacts inequality of opportunities.

Research (Jang Sang-su, 2000; Bang Ha-nam & Kim Ki-hyeon, 2002; Koo In-hoe, 2003; Park Chang-nam et al., 2005; Kim Gwang-hyeok, 2008; Yeo Yoo-jin et al., 2007; Kim Yang-boon et al., 2014a; Kim Yang-boon et al., 2014b; Eom Moon-young et al., 2014) examining the relations between family background and academic achievement has shown that social policy intervention is required to narrow the academic gaps attributed

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to a lack of familial economic resources. However, some studies (Kim Tae-ill, 2005; Lim Cheon-soon et al., 2004) have argued that private education requiring economic resources actually has negative effects on academic achievement. Others (Lee Joo-ri, 2010) have pointed out that it is human resource-related factors, such as parental support and parent-child relationships, rather than economic resource-related elements that affect academic achievement. As a result, it is insufficient to focus simply on a lack of familial economic resources.

Not only a family's scarcity of financial resources, which is indeed a major factor, but also human resources (parents) should be included in the family background associated with children's academic achievement. Therefore, vulnerable families as used herein refers to those families that lack any of the following three elements: economic resources, human capital, and social capital. Childcare-related policies for supporting vulnerable families suffering from a shortfall in family resources need to be carried out at a national level as key investments in future generations.

Policies to support school-age children in vulnerable families need to be based on an analysis of the effects of human and social capital on academic achievement, including economic resources, parent-child relationships, and family capabilities. Family factors, especially income gaps, are likely to lead to differences in children's academic achievement, future occupation, and social status, resulting in an intergenerational transmission of poverty. Moreover, it is also necessary to consider socio-environmental changes, such as increasing economic polarization, the slowdown in intergenerational upward mobility, and limitations in opportunities for individual achievement. Against this backdrop, learning support policies for school-age children in vulnerable families should be implemented for the purpose of relieving the restrictions on learning opportunities attributable to family factors.

This paper is designed to identify the effects of family factors on academic achievement and suggest ways to promote related policies and thus improve the effectiveness of learning support policies for children in vulnerable families.

Supporting school-age children in vulnerable families in learning more effectively is a policy measure to relieve the limitations on opportunities for academic achievement stemming from family factors. Prior research has shown that measures to address family factors affecting academic achievement must be crafted in order to enhance the effectiveness of learning support policies. These results need to be reviewed and examined.

To this end, the longitudinal effects of poverty on children's academic achievement, as well as the related paths, were analyzed in order to verify the mediating effects of parenting style on children's academic achievement. Next, the path through which family factors impact children's academic achievement were identified, based on which we attempted to devise measures to improve and modify policies to help children in vulnerable families learn more effectively.

Definition and Scope of Vulnerable Families and School-Age Children

The term vulnerable families refers to a concept that was created considering the economic and structural weaknesses apparent in some families.

Herein, the scope of vulnerable families is limited to low-income, single-parent, and grandparent-grandchildren families. According to the broadest definition of vulnerable families, other types can be included. However, considering that the aim here is to identify the effects of family factors on school-age children's learning, family types were limited in the aforementioned manner.

The concept of school-age children herein is the same as the one used to distinguish them from preschoolers and to estimate changes in the number of school-age children. It is worth noting that families with school-age children should be supported in terms of not only simple childcare, but also for education. Therefore, school-age children in this study refers to elementary, middle, and high school students.

It is difficult to accurately identify the number of school-age children living in vulnerable families. This is because the exact number cannot be estimated using current statistics when considering a scarcity of not only economic resources, but also human and social capital. However, in the context of only a lack of economic resources, it can be estimated via the number of children or students in single-parent and grandparent-headed families, as well as through statistics on child poverty.

Child poverty does not refer to the poverty of the children themselves, but that of the families to which they belong. Specifically speaking, in accordance with regulations used by the UN and OECD member states, the term child poverty can be applied to cases where the families to which children younger than 18 belong are poor (recited from Kim Mee-sook, 2010; Huh Seon et al., 2014:8). The number of children in poverty can be applied to determine to the number of children in vulnerable families.

Based on child poverty rates for 2014, absolute⁴ and relative⁵ poverty rates are estimated at 4.7% (Jeong Eun-heui & Lee Joo-mee, 2015:73) and 7.0% (Jeong Eun-heui & Lee Joo-mee, 2015:77), respectively. If these absolute and relative poverty rates for 2014 are applied to the 7,695,337 people aged between 5 and 18 based on the midyear population (resident registration) for the year, the number of children in poverty can be estimated as approximately 361,680 and 538,673, respectively.

⁴ This rate is based on the minimum cost of living published by the government, including single-person households.

⁵ This rate is based on 50% of disposable income, including single-person households.

Research Methods

Prior research has shown that school-age children's study habits, self-esteem, and academic self-efficacy are associated with academic achievement. Family factors such as parents' income, private education, parenting style, parent-child relationships, and parental support, as well as elements of social support including peer relationships and teacher-student relationships, were all found to have significant effects on academic achievement. School-age children's self-esteem was shown to significantly affect academic achievement, while at the same time interacting with other factors such as family elements, peer relationships, and teacher-student relationships.

In sum, vulnerable families are deemed to face difficulties in sufficiently supporting school-age children (providing private supplemental education, etc.) due to their lack of financial resources. Of course, some studies have found no significant relationships between private education and academic achievement. Others showed that private education does not directly affect such achievement, acting instead as a mediating factor for parenting style or learning management. However, these findings signify that where the same level of income and private education is ensured, parenting styles will produce different results in academic achievement. In other words, school-age children in vulnerable families experience limitations in learning opportunities (private education, etc.) due to a lack of economic resources, but if parenting styles and family factors act positively, they can improve children's study habits and self-esteem and thereby produce positive results in terms of academic performance.

In this context, we examined whether study habits and self-esteem function as mediators between family factors/teacher-student relationships and school-age children's academic achievement via path analyses to identify whether the mediating path changes.

Research Questions

Research question (1): Through which paths will poverty, family factors, peer relationships, and teacher-student relationships affect school-age children's academic achievement?

Research question (2): Considering factors that affect school-age children's academic achievement, how can existing learning support policies be reshaped?

A survey of 212 elementary school students and 293 middle-school students in vulnerable families was conducted in order to gather data for this research study.

Analysis of the Path Through which Family Factors Affect the Academic Achievement of Children in Vulnerable Families–Fact-finding

Analysis Overview

We examined whether the effects of family factors on the academic achievement of children in vulnerable families can be explained via mediating variables such as study habits and self-esteem.

We conducted a survey of elementary and middle school students participating in the After-School Academy operated by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family for children and teenagers in vulnerable families.

Analysis Results

Examining the path through which family factors affect the academic achievement of children in vulnerable families, the direct influences of the factors disappear after mediating variables such as study habits and self-esteem are applied. In other words, family factors have indirect effects on children's academic achievement via study habits and self-esteem. This is true for both elementary and middle-school students.

The effects of family factors, peer relationships, and teacher-student relationships on study habits and self-esteem were compared for this study. Family factors were found to have a considerable effect on the two variables, which held true for both elementary and middle-school students. Generally speaking, the mediating effects of the path from family factors to study habits and academic self-efficacy were shown to have relatively greater significance. In other words, the more negative family factors are, the more negative effects they have on children's study habits and the lower is the children's academic self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy correlates with academic achievement, with these two variables affecting one another. This path may lead to lower grades, an indicator of academic achievement.

The effects of the path variable on academic self-efficacy and grades, which were chosen as dependent variables for the path model, were compared and examined. According to the results, the effect on academic self-efficacy was found to be greater than the influence on grades. Given that academic self-efficacy and grades affect one another, a path from family factors to study habits to academic self-efficacy and to grades can be assumed. Against this backdrop, higher grades resulting from learning support are expected to be produced following the involvement of academic self-efficacy. This is because grades within academic achievement are associated with academic capabilities such as literacy and numeracy, as well as with family factors, and cannot be improved quickly. Therefore, current learning support policies for school-age children in vulnerable families are unable to produce prompt results and require long-term social investment instead.

The differences children in vulnerable families show in terms of family factors were also analyzed by family structure and income level. Elementary school students showed

statistically significant differences in parental support by family structure, with two-parent families offering greater support compared to other types of families. On the other hand, middle-school students saw statistically significant differences in parents' support by income level. In terms of parent-child relationships, elementary school students revealed statistically significant differences by family structure and income level, while middle-school students presented statistically significant differences only by income level. In the context of family capabilities, both elementary and middle-school students demonstrated statistically significant differences only by income level, revealing little difference by family structure. These findings indicate that objective family structure, as represented by two-parent families and other types of families, does not bring about significant differences in family capabilities.

Policy Implications

First, according to the path model, the effect of the path variable on academic self-efficacy, a subjective indicator, is greater than its influence on grades, an objective indicator, with academic self-efficacy and grades affecting one another. As a result, a path from family factors to study habits to academic self-efficacy and then to grades can be assumed. In terms of grades, tangible results are difficult to produce within a brief period of time, so academic self-efficacy needs to be considered alongside grades as a performance indicator in learning support.

Second, the analysis results show that study habits and self-esteem have full mediation effects on the relationships between family factors and academic achievement. This signifies that a system for enhancing the academic achievement of children in vulnerable families should be designed that equally takes into consideration learning and family factors. This is why current policies for supporting children in vulnerable families, which focus on costs and learning, should be revised.

Third, given that inter-group differences by family structure in terms of family capabilities are not statistically significant, we should be more careful when dealing with vulnerable families in accordance with family structure or type.

Even in the case of two-parent families, low family capabilities can have negative effects on children's study habits, and thus ultimately on their academic achievement, in accordance with the path assumption for the structure model revealed here. Therefore, when devising criteria for the selection of learning port service beneficiaries, the level of family capability, indicators for parent-child relationships, and other factors should also be considered, as well as economic resources, family structure, and family type.

These findings also imply that a parent and family support system for strengthening family capabilities is required in order to improve the effectiveness of a learning support program for children in vulnerable families.

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