



RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Comparative Study on Upper Elementary School Students' Perceptions of Life's Meaning: Focusing on Students Receiving Care Services at Health Centers and General Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: Apr 24, 2024

Accepted: Aug 5, 2024

Keywords

Elementary School Students

Health Centers

Receiving Care Services

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and identify differences in how upper elementary school students perceive the meaning of life, comparing students who receive care services at health centers with those who do not. For the study, data were collected from upper elementary school students, both general students and those receiving care services at health centers, from four schools in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, through a questionnaire on their perceptions of the meaning of life, during the period from May 1 to July 1, 2024. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 23.0, employing t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and the non-parametric technique of chi square test to examine differences between the groups. The study found that children receiving care services perceived the meaning of life to be lower compared to general children. The study results suggest that children receiving care services may not receive sufficient emotional support and attention at home. This indicates the need for additional emotional support and care for these children, which should be considered when developing educational programs.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of Research

Upper elementary school years are a crucial period in child development, known as the concrete operational stage, where children begin to form self-concept and self-esteem. During this time, they develop social skills through interactions with peers and start to recognize their own abilities. It is also a significant phase as children begin to think about their existence, purpose, and life direction, making it an essential stage in their overall growth and development[1]. Due to the rapid changes in modern society, the lack of effective communication between parents and children in dual-income

households, and high parental expectations in families with few children, elementary school students are exposed to excessive academic pressure and a highly competitive environment focused on success. Consequently, during this sensitive period of developing diligence, self-esteem, and identity, these students may experience feelings of worthlessness, frustration, and inferiority, rather than planning their future dreams based on their motivations and talents [5].

The meaning of life is essential for individuals, as its absence can lead to existential emptiness, characterized by a lack of meaning and purpose. If this void persists, it can lead to existential frustration and even spiritual neurosis, significantly impacting one's overall well-being [6]. Spiritual neurosis, characterized by feelings of meaninglessness, lack of intention, purposelessness, emptiness, boredom, and numbness, can result in negative outcomes such as depression, aggression, and addiction [7]. Frankl asserts that humans are inherently driven to seek meaning, possessing the autonomy to transcend themselves and connect with something greater. He argues that true happiness does not lie in self-actualization but in the realization of values and the pursuit of meaning. The school-age years are the most crucial and sensitive period for preventing existential emptiness, as children are forming their self-concept, developing important social relationships with peers, and are significantly influenced by their parents' values and upbringing due to their dependence on them [1,8].

The meaning of life involves pursuing what one believes to be the most valuable and significant aspects of their purpose. It essentially provides guidance on how one should live, offering direction and clarity in life. [7,9]. The pursuit of life's meaning is a universal and fundamental motivation for all people. Questions about the meaning or value of life reflect a perception of one's mental autonomy [6]. Thus, it is crucial to offer education and social support that promotes a valuable and meaningful life, starting from the school-age years when self-concept begins to develop. However, in South Korea, most research on elementary school students has centered on the concept of respect for life. Studies have explored upper elementary students' awareness of life, developed life-respect education programs, and validated tools for assessing life-respect attitudes. There has been limited research specifically exploring students' perceptions of the meaning of life [10-12]. This study aims to explore the perceived meaning of life among school-age students, a critical period for self-identity development. By examining the perceptions of elementary school students who receive care services at health centers compared to those of general students, the study seeks to provide foundational data for developing more effective educational materials.

Research Purpose

The study aims to investigate and compare the perceived meaning of life between general elementary school students and those receiving care services at health centers. By identifying the differences in their perceptions, the study seeks to provide foundational data for developing educational programs designed to help children recognize their self-worth and discover their unique identity and potential.

RESEARCH METHODS

Methodology

The study aims to investigate and compare the perceived meaning of life between general elementary school students and those receiving care services at health centers. By identifying the differences in their perceptions, the study seeks to provide foundational data for developing educational programs designed to help children recognize their self-worth and discover their unique identity and potential.

Research Design

This study is a descriptive research study designed to understand the perceived meaning of life among upper elementary school students, including both general students and those receiving care services at health centers

Study Participants

The study involved upper elementary school students from four schools in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, including both general students and those receiving care services at health centers. The researcher visited the principals and homeroom teachers of these schools to explain the purpose and procedures of the study and obtained their consent to conduct the research. The selection criteria for participants required that children, as assessed by the school nurse, have no psychiatric health issues and no impairments in cognitive or interpersonal abilities. Additionally, participants needed to understand the study's purpose and provide written consent. The study's objectives, content, and procedures were explained to eligible children, emphasizing that their anonymity would be protected and that the data collected would be used exclusively for research purposes. Consent forms were then signed by children who fully understood and voluntarily agreed to participate. Moreover, an explanatory letter about the study was sent to the parents of the consenting students, from whom written consent was also obtained. The necessary sample size for the study was determined using G*Power 3.1.3 software. With a significance level of .05, an effect size of .50, and a power of .80, the required sample size was calculated to be 64 participants per group, totaling 128 participants. To account for potential dropouts, the survey was administered to 80 participants in each group.

Research Instruments

This study is a descriptive research study designed to understand the perceived meaning of life among upper elementary school students, including both general students and those receiving care services at health centers

Meaning of Life

This study utilized a 24-item scale developed by Kang et al. [12] to measure the meaning of life, specifically designed for late school-age children. The scale was administered to upper elementary school students, who were the primary subjects of this research. The tool comprises 24 items covering five domains: relational experiences, positive attitude, satisfaction/hope, goal pursuit, and experiences of family love. It uses a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a greater sense of meaning in life. The tool's reliability, measured by Cronbach's α , was .89 during its development, and in this study, it was found to be .91.

Data Collection Method

This study was conducted after receiving approval from the Sahmyook University Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 2-7001793-AB-N-012019012HR). All participants were informed about the study's purpose, assured that all data would be kept anonymous and securely stored in a double-locked cabinet, and that the data would be completely destroyed using a shredder after the study's completion. They were also made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. With this understanding, participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. Data collection took place from May 1 to July 1, 2024. Participants were recruited through parent meetings and after-school activities at four elementary schools in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province. Surveys were then conducted during small group meetings, where children attended with their parents. The researcher and a graduate colleague, who was well-versed in the study's objectives, explained the research purpose and ethical guidelines to the participants. After obtaining consent from both parents and children, a self-reported survey was administered and collected from those who agreed to participate. Given that the participants were minors, their consent was respected, and there was no

emphasis on their participation. To minimize parental influence, children completed the surveys separately from their parents, in a different location, with the parents' consent. Completing the survey typically took about 10 minutes. Participants received a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis Method

The data were analyzed using SPSS Win 23.0 software. Frequency analysis was used to examine the general characteristics of the participants. To explore differences in the perceived meaning of life between general children and those receiving care services based on their general characteristics, t-tests and one-way ANOVA were performed. Additionally, chi square test, a non-parametric method, was used to investigate differences between groups in categorical data.

RESEARCH RESULTS

General Characteristics of Participants and Their Perceived Meaning of Life Based on These Characteristics

In this study, the participants included 78 fourth-grade students (49.3%) and 80 fifth-grade students (50.6%). The difference in perceived meaning of life between these grade levels was not statistically significant ($t = 1.61, p = .110$). Regarding gender, there were 92 male students (58.2%) and 66 female students (41.7%). The difference in perceived meaning of life between genders was also not statistically significant ($t = -0.62, p = .534$). The number of siblings among participants was as follows: 74 students (46.8%) had no siblings, 34 students (21.5%) had one sibling, 40 students (25.3%) had two siblings, and 10 students (6.3%) had three or more siblings. The difference in perceived meaning of life based on the number of siblings was not statistically significant ($t = 0.11, p = .956$).

Regarding academic performance, 22 students (13.9%) were in the top category, with a perceived meaning of life score of 71.30 ± 7.84 points. 85 students (53.7%) were in the middle category, with a score of 75.05 ± 8.23 points, and 51 students (32.2%) were in the lower category, with a score of 74.00 ± 10.15 points. The overall relationship between academic performance and the perceived meaning of life was found to be statistically significant ($t = 7.81, p = .001$). Regarding the number of extracurricular academies attended, 75 students (47.4%) did not attend any, 85 students (53.7%) attended one, 2 students (1.3%) attended two, and none attended three or more. The difference in the perceived meaning of life based on the number of academies attended was not statistically significant ($t = 0.28, p = .893$). With respect to parental interest, 36 students (22.7%) reported that their parents showed care, provided support, and were highly engaged in their activities, with these students scoring 80.20 ± 8.28 points in perceived meaning of life. In contrast, 122 students (77.2%) indicated that their parents were less involved or interested, with these students scoring 75.57 ± 9.25 points. The difference in perceived meaning of life based on the level of parental interest was statistically significant ($t = 3.33, p = .001$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Meaning of Life according to General Characteristics**(N = 158)**

| Characteristic | Category | n(%) | | Meaning of Life | t or F | p |
|--|-----------------|------|------|-----------------|--------|------|
| | | | | M±SD | | |
| Grade Level | 4 th | 78 | 49.3 | | 1.61 | .110 |
| | 5 th | 80 | 50.6 | | | |
| Gender | Male | 92 | 58.2 | | -.62 | .534 |
| | Female | 66 | 41.7 | | | |
| Number of Siblings | None | 74 | 46.8 | | .11 | .956 |
| | 1 | 34 | 21.5 | | | |
| | 2 | 40 | 25.3 | | | |
| | 3 or more | 10 | 6.3 | | | |
| Academic Performance | High | 22 | 13.9 | 71.30±7.84 | 7.81 | .001 |
| | Middle | 85 | 53.7 | 75.05±8.23 | | |
| | Low | 51 | 32.2 | 74.00±10.15 | | |
| Number of Extracurricular Academies Attended | None | 75 | 47.4 | | .28 | .893 |
| | 1 | 85 | 53.7 | | | |
| | 2 | 2 | 1.3 | | | |
| | 3 | 0 | 0 | | | |
| Parental Interest | Yes | 36 | 22.7 | 80.20±8.28 | 3.33 | .001 |
| | No | 122 | 77.2 | 75.57±9.25 | | |

Comparison of the Degree of Meaning of Life between General Elementary School Students and Those Receiving Care Services at a Public Health Center

The study compared the perceptions of relational experiences, satisfaction and hope, experiences of family love, goal pursuit, and positive attitudes between children receiving care services and general children. Differences between the two groups were analyzed using mean scores (M), standard deviations (SD), t-values, and p-values for each category. The results are as follows.

For the relational experience item 'I am a valuable person to my family and others,' children receiving care services scored 3.64, while general children scored 3.86. This difference is statistically significant ($t = -2.006$, $p = .047$). For the item 'I am popular among my classmates,' children receiving care services scored 2.73, compared to 3.04 for general children, also showing a statistically significant difference ($t = -2.414$, $p = .017$).

For the satisfaction/hope item 'I believe that good things come after difficulties,' children receiving care services scored 3.01, while general children scored 3.43, a statistically significant difference ($t = -3.532$, $p = .001$). Regarding the statement 'I think each day depends on how much effort I put in,' children receiving care services scored 3.20, compared to 3.53 for general children, which is also statistically significant ($t = -3.421$, $p = .001$). In the category of experiences of family love, for the item 'My family loves me,' children receiving care services scored 3.67, whereas general children scored 3.87, showing a statistically significant difference ($t = -2.435$, $p = .016$).

In the goal pursuit category, for the item 'I work hard on the tasks I need to do,' children receiving care services scored 3.00, while general children scored 3.25, with a statistically significant difference ($t = -2.319, p = .022$).

Similarly, in the positive attitude category, for the item 'I believe there is power in love,' children receiving care services scored 3.14, compared to 3.93 for general children, showing a statistically significant difference ($t = 2.846, p < .001$). (Table 2)

Table 2. Comparison of the Degree of Meaning of Life between Elementary School Students Receiving Care Services at a Public Health Center and General Students (Care Center Students: n=78, General Students: n=80)

| Item contents | | | Local Center Child | General Child | t | p |
|---------------------------------|----|--|-----------------------|------------------|--------|------|
| | | | M(SD) | M(SD) | | |
| Relational Experience | 1 | I have more good qualities than bad ones. | 3.27(.53) | 3.50(.58) | 1.802 | .073 |
| | 2 | I am a valuable person to my family and others. | 3.64(.59) | 3.86(.34) | -2.006 | .047 |
| | 3 | I like my personality. | 3.14(.85) | 3.35(.68) | -1.733 | .085 |
| | 4 | I am popular among my classmates. | 2.73(.93) | 3.04(.71) | -2.414 | .017 |
| | 10 | I have many happy memories. | 3.52(.65) | 3.66(.42) | -2.978 | .063 |
| | 11 | I like people. | 3.30(.68) | 3.63(.58) | -2.314 | .082 |
| Satisfaction / Hope | 5 | I am glad to have been born as a girl (or boy). | 3.57(.65) | 3.62(.68) | -.492 | .623 |
| | 6 | I believe that good things come after difficulties. | 3.01(.89) | 3.43(.68) | -3.532 | .001 |
| | 7 | I think each day depends on how much effort I put in. | 3.20(.67) | 3.53(.58) | -3.421 | .001 |
| | 12 | I have hobbies that I enjoy. | 3.53(.71) | 3.72(.49) | -1.932 | .056 |
| | 13 | There are many things around me that make me happy. | 3.19(.88) | 3.35(.85) | -1.197 | .233 |
| | 15 | I have things I want to do in the future (future aspirations). | 3.48(.73) | 3.64(.58) | -1.633 | .105 |
| Experience of Family Love | 8 | I love my family. | 3.75(.53) | 3.88(.38) | -1.740 | .084 |
| | 9 | My family loves me. | 3.67(.56) | 3.87(.44) | -2.435 | .016 |
| Goal Pursuit | 16 | I find out for myself what I need to do every day. | 2.84(.79) | 3.03(.78) | -1.543 | .125 |
| | 17 | I am working towards achieving my future aspirations. | 3.09(.74) | 3.20(.72) | -1.000 | .319 |
| | 18 | I work hard on the tasks I need to do. | 3.00(.73) | 3.25(.70) | -2.319 | .022 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----|--|-----------|-----------|--------|---------|
| | 19 | I am currently doing what I have always wanted to do. | 3.93(.85) | 3.96(.79) | 1.270 | .075 |
| Positive Attitude | 14 | I believe there is power in love. | 3.14(.75) | 3.93(.58) | 2.846 | p<.001* |
| | 20 | I am grateful when someone helps me, even a little. | 3.26(.74) | 3.34(.52) | 2.876 | .065 |
| | 21 | I am thankful for each day of my life. | 3.24(.75) | 3.48(.66) | 1.258 | .055 |
| | 22 | I smile often. | 3.28(.78) | 3.57(.53) | 3.773 | .069 |
| | 23 | I am willing to help friends who are less fortunate than I am. | 3.15(.72) | 3.38(.57) | -2.325 | .022 |
| *p<.001, **p<.05 | | | | | | |

Comparison of the Degree of Meaning of Life between Elementary School Students Receiving Care Services at a Public Health Center and General Students

This study compared the average scores of love, goals, attitudes, relationships, and hope between children receiving care services and general children. The analysis of differences between the two groups is as follows. In the category of love, children receiving care services had an average score of 2.71, while general children scored 3.87. This difference is statistically significant (t = 1.375, p = .020). For attitudes, children receiving care services scored an average of 3.29, compared to 3.50 for general children, which is also statistically significant (t = -3.449, p = .014). In the relationships category, children receiving care services scored 3.16, whereas general children scored 3.54, indicating a statistically significant difference (t = -2.193, p = .045). (Table 3)

Table 3. Comparison of the Degree of Meaning of Life between Elementary School Students Receiving Care Services at a Public Health Center and General Students (Care Center Students: n=78, General Students: n=80)

| Item contents | Local Center | General | t | p |
|--------------------------|--------------|-----------|--------|------|
| | Child | Child | | |
| | M(SD) | M(SD) | | |
| Average of Love | 2.71(.27) | 3.87(.59) | 1.375 | .020 |
| Average of Goals | 3.96(.56) | 3.14(.57) | 3.029 | .074 |
| Average of Attitudes | 3.29(.33) | 3.50(.52) | -3.449 | .014 |
| Average of Relationships | 3.16(.51) | 3.54(.43) | -2.193 | .045 |
| Average of Hope | 3.23(.45) | 3.45(.46) | 3.506 | .082 |
| p<.001, p<.05 | | | | |

DISCUSSION

This study compared perceptions of life's meaning among upper-grade elementary students, focusing on those receiving care services at a public health center versus general students. The research aimed to identify differences between the two groups, providing essential data for policy and educational recommendations to enhance children's quality of life.

The meaning of life among the subjects did not show statistically significant differences based on general characteristics such as grade level, gender, number of siblings, and number of extracurricular classes. This suggests that these variables do not significantly influence the perceived meaning of life

in upper-grade elementary students. However, academic performance and parental attention had a significant impact on the perception of life's meaning. This indicates that academic achievement and family support play crucial roles in shaping the meaning of life for elementary students. Children with higher academic performance had significantly higher scores in the perception of life's meaning compared to those with lower performance. This suggests that academic achievement may positively influence students' self-efficacy and self-esteem. Previous studies on middle and high school students have also reported that students with higher academic performance tend to have greater life satisfaction and a more positive self-concept [13]. Therefore, providing support to enhance academic achievement could be a crucial factor in improving the perception of life's meaning among children. In fact, children who received attention from their parents had significantly higher scores in the perception of life's meaning compared to those who did not. This suggests that emotional support and attention within the family are crucial in shaping a child's sense of meaning in life. Parental interest and support can enhance a child's emotional stability and self-efficacy, which in turn contributes to a more positive perception of life's meaning [14]. Previous studies have also reported that parental support and attention positively influence children's emotional development and life satisfaction [14].

The analysis of the differences in the perception of life's meaning between children receiving care services and general children revealed that, overall, children receiving care services tend to perceive a lower sense of meaning in life. This observation implies that these children may not be receiving adequate emotional support or attention at home, highlighting the need for additional emotional support and care for these children.

The comparison of relational experiences between children receiving care services and general children showed that the latter group scored higher on items such as 'I am a valuable person to my family and others' and 'I am popular among my classmates.' This suggests that children receiving care services perceive their social value and sense of belonging to be lower. These results indicate that children receiving care services may not be receiving adequate emotional support at home or within their peer groups. Previous research also reports that children lacking emotional support at home tend to experience difficulties in interpersonal relationships[15], highlighting the need for specific measures to address and improve this issue. Considering that children receiving care services may not be receiving adequate emotional support at home, it is necessary to strengthen emotional support programs. These programs can help children enhance their sense of social value and belonging.

Comparing the satisfaction and hope between children receiving care services and general children, it was found that general children scored higher on items such as 'I believe that good things come after difficulties' and 'Each day depends on how much effort I put in.' This suggests that children receiving care services may have lower positive expectations for the future and less belief in the effectiveness of their efforts. These perceptions can negatively affect their self-esteem and overall life satisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary to provide programs that enhance positive future expectations and self-efficacy for children receiving care services. These programs should support children in developing belief in their efforts, setting goals, and gaining confidence in achieving them.

Examining the experience of family love between children receiving care services and general children revealed that general children scored higher on the item 'My family loves me.' This suggests that children receiving care services may not feel sufficient love and support at home. Family love and support are crucial for a child's emotional stability and the formation of life's meaning. Therefore, it is important to provide programs or counseling services aimed at strengthening family relationships and increasing emotional support within the families of children receiving care services.

The analysis of goal pursuit between children receiving care services and general children revealed that general children scored higher on the statement 'I work hard on the tasks I need to do.' This suggests that children receiving care services may face challenges in setting and striving to achieve goals. It highlights the need for educational support to improve their self-regulation skills and motivation. Such support can help these children develop the abilities needed to set and accomplish their goals.

The comparison of positive attitudes between children receiving care services and general children showed that general children scored higher on the item "I believe there is power in love." This indicates that children receiving care services may lack a positive attitude towards life. Since a positive attitude significantly impacts children's mental well-being and life satisfaction[16], emotional support and educational programs aimed at enhancing this attitude are necessary. Such initiatives should support children in developing a positive outlook on life and improving their mental well-being.

This study compared the average scores of love, goals, attitudes, relationships, and hope between children receiving care services and general children to analyze the differences between the two groups. The results showed statistically significant differences in the areas of love, attitudes, relationships, and hope. These findings provide important insights into the various factors influencing the formation of life's meaning for children receiving care services.

In the category of love, children receiving care services scored 2.71, compared to 3.87 for general children, indicating higher scores for the latter. This suggests that children receiving care services may feel less loved by their families or those around them, highlighting a possible lack of adequate emotional support at home for these children. This lack of perceived love can negatively impact a child's self-esteem and emotional stability. Previous studies have also reported that family love and support play a crucial role in a child's emotional stability and the formation of a positive sense of life's meaning [16]. To help children enhance their sense of social value and belonging, it is important to strengthen emotional support programs, particularly considering that children receiving care services may not be receiving adequate emotional support at home.

In the category of goals, children receiving care services scored 3.96, while general children scored 3.14. However, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. This suggests that the perception of goal setting and achievement is not significantly different between the groups. Nonetheless, considering the score difference, further studies with repeated measures are needed to verify the findings. Previous studies have reported that the perception of goal setting and achievement is closely related to an individual's self-esteem and academic performance[17]. Therefore, the higher scores in goal pursuit among children receiving care services can be interpreted as a positive sign. This suggests a need for targeted programs to support these children in achieving their goals.

In the category of attitudes, children receiving care services scored 3.29, while general children scored 3.50, with the latter group showing higher scores. This indicates that children receiving care services may lack a positive attitude toward life. Positive attitudes significantly impact children's mental well-being and life satisfaction [12]. Therefore, it is necessary to provide emotional support and educational programs to help children receiving care services develop a more positive attitude.

In the area of relational experiences, children receiving care services scored 3.16, while general children scored 3.54. This suggests that children receiving care services face more challenges in social relationships compared to their peers. Social relationships are crucial for building a support network and ensuring emotional stability[18], Therefore, it is important to provide programs that

enhance interpersonal skills and strengthen social support networks for children receiving care services.

In the category of hope, children receiving care services scored lower than general children, although the difference was not statistically significant. According to previous research[19, hope and positive future expectations significantly impact children's mental health and life satisfaction. It has been reported that children with higher levels of hope tend to achieve better academic performance and social adjustment. As such, this may suggest that children receiving care services lack positive future expectations and hope. Since hope significantly influences children's sense of meaning and life satisfaction, it is crucial to provide support that helps these children develop a more positive outlook on the future.

CONCLUSION

This study compared and analyzed the perceptions of the meaning of life among elementary school students receiving care services at public health centers and those not receiving such services. The results indicated that children receiving care services tend to perceive a lower sense of meaning in life compared to their peers. This suggests that these children may not be receiving sufficient emotional support and attention at home, highlighting the need for additional emotional support and care for them. The findings of this study can serve as foundational data for policy and educational proposals aimed at improving the quality of life for children receiving care services. It is essential to develop various support measures to help these children form a better sense of life's meaning. Additionally, further research is needed to repeatedly validate these findings and to develop more specific support strategies.

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