Middle School Students' Perceptions of the Quality of School Life in Ankara

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to measure the perception of middle school students in Ankara regarding the quality of school life. According to the findings obtained, the students have moderate level perceptions about the quality of school life. Their perceptions about sub-dimensions vary. While the students have the highest perceptions about sub-dimension "status", they have the lowest perceptions about "school management". The students have moderate perceptions about sub-dimension "student" which includes mutual relations between students. Similarly, they have moderate perceptions about feelings towards the school which include items related with school image as perceived by the students. The school management, which is directly responsible for the school climate and image, has an impact on life quality perception. Analyzing school life quality of the students by their demographic features, it was found that female students and students in a class consisting of 10-20 students have higher school life quality perception. Although academic success of the students varies, their school life quality perception does not vary.

Keywords: quality of the school life, middle school, student, Turkey

1. Introduction

One of the most important function of school is to educate students according to age conditions of students and country needs. Schools undertake a task to prepare students to life. Besides being an environment for education and learning, the school is also a living space. This space is primarily for the students. Therefore school is an important component of children. Children spend a significant part of their life at school as students. During this period, they interact with other students, their teachers, school management and staff of the school. Safety and happiness of the students and their social and psychological development are important for their academic success. Schools are institutions which are responsible for academic development of the students as well as their social and psychological development. While school life definitely contributes to professional and social goals, vast majority of students boost their intellectual aspect as well as aesthetic aspect (Marks, 1998). Thus, the education environment offered to the students should support both their academic and social and psychological development.

Psychological development of students at school is related with their affective behaviors. One of the studies regarding affective behaviors is the quality of school life. The quality of school life stems from the term "life quality". Life quality is a state of general and continuous subjective well-being (Linnakylä & Brunell, 1996). Subjective well-being is an individual's conclusion that he or she is satisfied with life according to a cognitive evaluation, and his or her having more positive feelings, which please him or her in life, than the negative feelings (Diener & Diener, 1997). Life quality which includes subjective well-being is considered within an individual's family and friend circles, school life, working life and spare time (Linnakylä & Brunell, 1996). The quality of school life is an indicator of students' well-being. It is a state of overall well-being arising from the relationships between school life and school environment. The quality of school life is a cognitive assessment and can also be considered as a subjective inclination (Karatzias, Athanasiou, Power, & Swanson, 2001). In fact, the quality of school life underlines student perspective in finding the strong and weak aspects of a school system.

The studies for improving school quality stress the factors which include both academic and social performance of the students, and argue that the academic success would be boosted by enhancing the effectiveness of the school (Bagley, Bolitho, & Bertrand, 1997). Another factor that increases the effectiveness of the school is student's quality of life at school (Johnson & Johnson, 1993). Consequently, a large number of authors have stressed on the quality of life at school (Ghotra, McIsaac, Kirk, & Kuhle, 2016). Quality of school life is also crucial for socialization of students. Besides learning things at school, the students also acquire a language and behaviors that are socially acceptable in a pluralistic and democratic society (Mok & Flynn, 2002). In a good school life, students assume their responsibility (Wolf, Chandler, & Spies, 1980). Therefore, the researchers suggest creating a positive school environment in order to eliminate behavioral disorders observed in problem students (Mok & Flynn, 2002). School experiences of students and what they acquire out of these experiences influence their future educational life. Students might decide to carry on their education or drop out as a result of their school experience (Malin & Linnakyla, 2001). Students' perceptions regarding their schools and the quality of communication with their teachers and classmates constitute their perceptions about the quality of school life (Sarı, Ötünç, & Erceylan, 2007). In addition to this, the quality of school life is also influenced by various factors: in particular, student's characteristics, academic success, age, sex, family characteristics, relations with friends, socioeconomic status, school expectations and academic motivation (Leonard, 2002; Mok & Flynn, 2002; Ghotra et al., 2016).

A positive communication in teacher-student relations enhances the perception of quality of school life (Ghotra, McIsaac, Kirk, & Kuhle, 2016). Active student participation in teaching process (Schmidt, 1992) and supportive relations between teachers and students create an efficient class climate, and boost student commitment, motivation, morale and sense of success (Leonard, 2002). Such a positive class climate also contributes actively to educational outcomes of the students both in affective and cognitive fields (Mok & Flynn, 2002). Studies show that lower school-level climate was associated with lower grade point average (Wang et al., 2014). Another variable is the mutual relations between the students. The students who establish positive relations with their peers at school and are respected by their friends are happier at school (Smith & Sandhu, 2004). It's also known that wellbeing level of students and their happiness have also considerable influence on quality of school life (Gökler, Gürgan, & Taştan, 2015). Those who cannot develop suitable peer relations are more prone to get involved in juvenile delinquency, and lead an unhealthy and unhappy adulthood, and experience emotional problems and attempt suicide (Leonard, 2002). Since high level of support from friends would enhance satisfaction with the school, this prevents students from acquiring harmful habits (Samdal, Wold, Klepp, & Kannas, 2000). Another variable is related with students' feelings towards the school. School climate refers to students' perceptions of supportive relationships, feelings and attitudes toward school (Wilson, 2004). If a student does not have good communication with his or her teachers, other students and managers, and feels no value at school, or thinks that the school would not create any future chance in academic and social fields, and feels no attraction towards the social activities at school, such student would have negative perception about the quality of school life (Sarı, Ötünç, & Erceylan, 2007). On the contrary, if a student can sustain satisfactory relations with other students and teachers at school, and feels appreciated and successful in that school, he or she will most probably have positive perceptions about the school (Sari, 2006). If student perceptions, which are called school status, are positive, they positively affect the life quality of the students. If this variable is positive, students feel important and valuable themselves (Mok & Flynn, 2002). Because, children need to make contact with their friends and teachers, feel themself precious (Tunç & Beşaltı, 2014).

Besides, the role of early adolescents' life satisfaction in their engagement in schooling during the important transition grades between elementary and high school (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2010). Even if the success of the school is affected by several other factors, the school manager is the most important one. Therefore, school managements and school leaders effect on school achievement (Tunç & Beşaltı, 2014). Supporting the teaching climate based on learning and success depends on the effectiveness of the school manager (Halawah, 2005). The studies on school climate emphasize that school climate enhances the quality of students' school life (Freiberg, 2003). Academic, social and emotional development of students cannot be pursued not only by student's effort and teacher's help but also contribution by principals. In order to offer effective education and instruction all parties of education system should be involved in the process.

Turkish education system was found to have significant quality problems as a result of the international assessments on education systems of the countries. The degree of success achieved by the students in PISA exams are below the average of OECD countries (ERI, 2014). Negative feeling towards the school was determined as an explanatory variable for the PISA 2012 mathematics literacy performance of the high school students in Turkey. In other words, negative feelings of high school students towards the school cause decline in

student performance (MoNE, 2015). Negative features of a school and their reflections on the students and results are also true for the middle schools. It was found that there was a significant relationship between TIMMS (2011) results and middle school climate. The success of students in science and technology classes tends to increase in the middle schools in Turkey which attach high level of importance on success. There is a significant difference between the average success of the students attending to a safe and rule-governed school, and the success of those who do not attend to such a school. As the job satisfaction of the teachers increases, the success in science and technology classes also increases. As the degree of bullying the students experience decreases, their success average in science and technology classes increases (MoNE, 2014).

Measuring the quality of life at school, which have remarkable influence on student success (Bagley, Bolitho, & Bertrand, 1997; Mok & Flynn, 2002) and assessing school variables are of great importance for guiding new policies in order to enhance the quality of the education system. The quality of school life also underlines student perspective in determining strong and weak aspects of the school. In spite of its importance, the quality of school life found its way into the agenda of the education researchers in Turkey only in 2004 through the studies conducted by Sari and Doganay (2004). Although majority of the studies measure the perceptions of high school and university students about the quality of school life, there are only two studies measuring the quality of school life as perceived by middle school students. Analyzing students' views regarding quality of school life may shed light on the ways to promote the quality of school education. In this regard, the aim of this study is to measure the quality of school life as perceived by students attending to middle schools in Ankara. As a part of this objective, the paper secondarily evaluates the students' perception about quality of school life by their demographic features.

2. Method

This research conducted to determine quality level of the school life as perceived by middle school students is a descriptive study based on survey model.

2.1 Population and Sample

The population consists of the students attending last grade in middle schools located in eight central districts of Ankara province during academic years 2014-2015. Stratified sampling method was used in order to determine the number of students in the population to be included in the sample. The total number of students was used as a determinant in identifying the strata. As a result of the calculations, 459 students from the middle schools located in these districts were included in the sample. Table 1 presents the demographic features of the study group.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distributions on demographic information of the students

Variables		1	2	3	4	Total
		Male	Female			
Sex	n	194	265			459
	%	42.3	57.7			100
		High	Moderate	Low		
Academic success	n	99	316	44		459
	%	21.6	68.8	9.6		100
		10-20 persons	21-30 persons	31-40 persons	41 and more	
Class size	n	142	237	73	7	459
	%	30.9	51.6	15.9	1,5	100

57.7% and 42.3% of the students included in the study were females and males, respectively. 21.6%, 68.8% and 9.6% of the students believe that they have high, moderate and low academic success, respectively. 30.9%, 51.6%, 15.9% and 1.5% of the students attend classrooms with a size of 10-20 persons, 21-30 persons, 31-40, and 41 and more persons, respectively. An overall evaluation of the table shows that majority of the students believe that they have moderate academic success. Nearly half of the students attend to classrooms with a size of 21-30 persons, while one thirds attend to classrooms with a size of 10-20 persons. It can be said that majority of the students do not receive education in very crowded classrooms considering the class size.

2.2. Data-Gathering Instrument and Data Analysis

"The Quality of School Life Scale" developed by Sari for middle schools (2012) was used as data collection instrument. The Scale consisting of 35 items include five Likert points: "strongly agree" (5), "agree" (4), "partially agree" (3), "disagree" (2), and "strongly disagree" (1). Total reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be .97. Reliability coefficients of the five sub-dimensions which are calculated within each one, explaining 57.59% of the total variance were as follows: .95 for teacher sub-dimension, and .92 for student sub-dimension, and .94 for feelings towards the school sub-dimension, and .91 for school management sub-dimension, and .90 for status sub-dimension. It was deduced from these results that the whole scale can be highly relied upon, and all dimensions also have high reliability.

Table 2. Reliability coefficients of quality of school lifescale

Variable	n	Cronbach's α
Teacher	9	.95
Student	9	.92
School management	6	.91
Feelings towards the school	8	.94
Status	3	.90
General	35	.92

Data collection instruments were administered during 2015 and 2016 academic years in the schools included in the sample. The questionnaires were distributed to students directly. During this process, it has been made clear that respondents should not reveal any identity-related information and that any information given will be kept secret and only used for scientific research.

Items 13, 14, 15, 27, 29 and 30 which reflect negative perceptions were inversely scored. The score intervals were 1-1, 79=strongly disagree, and 1,80-2.59=disagree, 2.60-3.39=partially agree, and, 3.40-4.19=agree, and 4.20-5.00=strongly agree. It was first checked whether the data have normal distribution in order to determine statistical analysis to be used, and it was found that the scale did not have a normal distribution. Due to this fact, nonparametric test techniques were chosen. Mann Whitney U test and Kruskall Wallis test, among the nonparametric tests, were used in order make the comparisons according to the sex and academic success level of the students and class size.

3. Findings

3.1 Students' General Perception about the Quality of School Life

Kolmogorov Smirnov normal distribution test was first used in order to determine the perception about the quality of school life of 459 students included in the research. Since it was found that the distribution was not normal ($KS_{(459)}$=0,051; p<0,05), median was relied on as the average value of the group. Accordingly, it was found that the students had moderate (partially agree) perception about the quality of school life with the whole group having median value of 3,11. Table 3 shows the perception averages of the students about the quality of school life.

Table 3. Participants' level of awareness on the entirety of the scale

N	Kolmogorov Smirnov		X
	K-S	p	
459	0,051	0,005*	3,11

*p>0,05

3.2 Findings about the Sub-Dimensions of the Quality of School Life

Looking into students' perception about the sub-dimensions of the quality of school life, we find the sub-dimension "teacher" graded as "agree" with a median of 3.44. It can be concluded that teacher attitudes and behaviors cause positive perception among the students. The sub-dimensions "student" and "feelings towards the school" were graded as "partially agree" with median values of 3.11 and 3.37, respectively. These results indicate that there might be some problem in students' formulating their perceptions towards their schoolmates and school. The sub-dimension "school management" was graded as "disagree" with a median value of 2.33. Thus, the students have negative perception about the quality of school life stemming from school management. It can be infered from this result that the students have problems related with school management. The sub-dimension "status" was graded as "strongly agree" with a median value of 4.33. Although the students have some negative perceptions about school, they have a negative perception about their own schools. Table 4 shows perception averages of the students regarding the sub-dimension.

Table 4. Participants' perceptions about the sub-dimensions of the scale

Dimensions	Kolmogorov-Smirnov		X
	K-S	p	
Teacher	0,070	0,000*	3,44
Student	0,051	0,007*	3,11
School Management	0,055	0,002*	3,37
Feelings towards the School	0,104	0,000*	2,33
Status	0,163	0,000*	4,33

*p<0,05

3.3 Life Quality Perceptions According to Demographic Variables

Looking into the general perceptions on life quality according to the variable students' gender, a significant difference was noted between student responses (U=22895,000; p<0,05). Female students' perception about the quality of life (M_{female}=3,20) was higher than that of males(M_{male}=3,07). Although there were differences between sexes in perceptions about the quality of school life, the perceptions of both groups were graded as "partially agree". The perceptions of the students were also analyzed by sub-dimensions according to the sex. The result of the analysis showed a significant difference in dimension "status". The medians were examined, and it was found that female students' perception (M_{female}=4,33) was "strongly agree", and male students' perception (M_{male}=4,00) was "agree". This can be interpreted to show that female students have higher perceptions about the quality of school life in status dimension compared to male students.

As a result of the Kruskal Wallis test, the perceptions of the students about the quality of school life did not show a significant difference according to academic success (x^2=5,660; p>0,05). The analysis of the medians showed that academic success was as "partially agree" on each level (M_{high}=3,20; $M_{moderate}$=3,11; M_{low}=3,02). This can be interpreted to indicate that students' academic success has moderate effect on their perceptions about the quality of school life. The perceptions of the students towards the sub-dimensions were analyzed according to academic success variable. The result of the analysis showed that there was significant difference in sub-dimensions feelings towards the school (x^2=9,852; p<0,05) and status (x^2=8,168; p<0,05). The students with high academic success perception had "agree" (M_{high}=3,50) perception in sub-dimension "feelings towards the school". The students with low academic success perception had "partially agree" (M_{low}=2,93) perception in sub-dimension "feelings towards the school". The students with both high and moderate academic success level had "strongly agree" (M_{high}=$M_{moderate}$=4,33) perception in sub-dimension "status". The students with low academic success level had "agree" (M_{low}=4,00) perception in sub-dimension "status".

As a result of Kruskal Wallis test conducted, it was found that students' perception of the quality of school life showed significant difference by class size (x^2=7,722; p<0,05). It was noted that there was difference between the opinions of the group where the class size was 10-20 persons and the group where the class size was between 21 and 30 persons. The analysis of the median values of the groups showed that the median value of the group with a class size of 10-20 persons was higher. Accordingly, it can be argued that the perception of the quality of school life is higher in the classes where the class size is 10-20 persons. The perceptions of the students were

also analyzed for the sub-dimensions according to the variable class size. The analysis showed that there was only significant difference in sub-dimension "student" (x^2=11,640; p<0,05). The students in classes with a class size of 10-20 persons had higher perception of life quality.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper aimed to measure the perception of quality of school life of the middle school students studying in middle schools in Ankara. Students' perception of the quality of school life was first analyzed as perception about general quality of school life. The students had moderate perceptions about the quality of school life. The middle school students in Turkey take high school entrance exams. They can enroll in a high school depending on the scores they achieve in this exam. According to the data from the Ministry of National Education, the students were most successful at religion class, and lowest successful at mathematics, science and Turkish classes (MoNE, 2016). Considering the data from the ministry and the results of this paper together, it can be inferred that the students have moderate quality of school life and they could not achieve the expected success in high school entrance exam. Thus, it can be pointed out that there is a relationship between the quality of school life and school success in the context of the study (Mok & Flynn, 2002). Erden and Erdem (2013) found in their study, where they measured the perceptions of middle school students in Van province about the quality of school life, that the students expressed their perception with "barely agree". Van province is ranked as 75th in Socioeconomic Development Rating, whereas Ankara is ranked as 2nd (MoD, 2013). A study conducted on perceptions of middle school students in Gaziantep province about the quality of school life found that the students expressed their perception about life quality with "agree" (Aliyev & Tunc, 2015). Gaziantep is ranked as 30th in Socioeconomic Development Rating. It can be said that the difference in perceptions about life quality of middle school students in capital Ankara, and in Van province, located in eastern Turkey, and in Gaziantep, located in southeastern Turkey, might vary depending on the socioeconomic characteristics (Leonard, 2002; Mok & Flynn, 2002).

The students also had different perceptions about the sub-dimensions. While they had the highest perception about sub-dimension "status", they had the lowest about "school management". The items related with the teachers in the scale are related with teachers' diligence to teach to their students and their positive approach towards them (Mok & Flynn, 2002). Learning experiences in school are also strong predictors of quality of school life (Kong, 2008). The results show that positive teacher-student communication influences students' perception about life quality (Sun-Keung, 1999). The sub-dimension "status" relates to a student's being accepted among friends at school. The students feel appreciated at school. These results can be associated with the impact of friends and teachers on students' perception about the quality of school life. The results of this paper can be said to indicate that the students' perception that they are accepted particularly in their friend circles positively affect their perception about the quality of school life (Thien & Razak, 2013). Nevertheless, the students had moderate perceptions about the sub-dimension "student", which includes the relations between students. Similarly, the students had moderate perceptions about the sub-dimension "feelings towards the school", which included items concerning the school image the students had. Considering both sub-dimensions together, it is possible to think that these sub-dimensions actually concern the school management. It can be said that the school management, being responsible for school climate and image, has an impact on the perception of life quality. It is acknowledged that a positive environment at school enhances students' sense of responsibility at school (Mok & Flynn, 2002). An effective school management supports the teaching climate which pushes the limits of learning and success. School climate is created by providing interests and support for all students. Improving school climate also improves the effectiveness of the manager, teachers' performance, and student success and behaviors. This improvement is only possible when the communication between manager, teacher and students is solidified (Halawah, 2005). The schools having high academic success with no disciplinary problems have positive influence on perception of the quality of school life (Hunt-Sartori, 2007). According to the results of the study, it can be said that the school management negatively affects students' quality of school life. A school management mentality with insufficient capacity to solve problems would raise doubts with respect to creating a positive effect on school image and school climate.

Analyzing students' perception of the quality of school life according to demographic features, the female students and students in a class consisting of 10-20 students had higher school life quality perception. The result can be interpreted to indicate that as the class size decreases, the communication in the classroom increases. It is known that female students are more hardworking at school (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). The studies have shown that perception of the quality of school life is higher among female students (Sun-Keung, 1999; Mok & Flynn, 2002; Hunt-Sartori, 2007). Yet, there are studies where there was no difference of opinion between female and male students (Gillman & Huebner, 2006; Weintraub & Bar-Haim Erez, 2009). The students in

classrooms with a class size of 10-20 persons having closer communication and interaction might have positive impacts on the perception of quality (Ayık & Ataş-Akdemir, 2015). While the academic success of the students vary, their perception about the quality of school life does not. It is known that the perception about the quality of school life of students are affected by high academic success expectations (Mok & Flynn, 1997). It is believed that multidimensional studies looking into the relationship between school life quality and school success would contribute to the literature.

Consequently, the findings show that different socioeconomic characteristics of the middle school students might affect the perception of the quality of school life. The small class size might be an important variable for the quality of school life. The positive climate created by the school management and students' well-being levels might also affect the perception of the quality of school life. The students in schools with high academic success might have higher perception of the quality of school life. Besides, setting goals including positive feelings toward the school in curriculums in Turkey might positively affect the perceptions of the students. Students' acquiring skills such as self-appreciation, eagerness to learn and having positive friendship relations would make their perception of the quality of school life positive (Leonard, 2002). The research into causal relationship between perception of the quality of school life and academic success of the students living in provinces with different socioeconomic characteristics, and their school management, its leadership approach and school climate would contribute to the literature.

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