Adjustment of Korean First-Graders to Elementary School: The Role of Family Income, Type of Early Childhood Education Program, and Private Education Before and After School Entry

This study reviews the current status of Korean first graders, their experience with early care and education (ECE) programs, and their participation in private and after-school education. The research also examines how school adjustment during the first grade is related to family income, types of ECE programs, and participation in private and after-school education. Using the first year data of the Korean Child and Youth Panel Survey (KCYPS) 2010, this study analyzes 752 first graders who attended only one of two types of ECE programs (child care centers or kindergartens), after which two 25% income extremes were examined. The analysis demonstrates that children from low-income households attended child care centers more often, while children from high-income households attended kindergartens more often. For both low-income and high-income groups, child care centers had a lower starting age and longer attendance periods than did kindergartens. High-income household children started attending ECE programs earlier, experienced more private and after-school education, and received a larger number of private and after-school educational lessons. For the second research purpose, children from low-income families showed better peer relations in school adjustment, while children attending child care centers showed better teacher relations than children attending kindergartens. Children with after-school education also exhibited better peer relations. These findings show the importance of government support for early learning, especially for low-income families and offer a foundation for developing private education polices for early childhood before and after school entry.

Early adjustment to formal schooling is a critical factor that affects school performance in later years (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Eckert et al., 2008; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006; Pianta, 1997). School adjustment depends on a variety of complex interrelated elements that vary over time (Reynolds & Bezruczko, 1993), including academic and social areas such as relationships with teachers and peers, observance of regulations, and participation in school activities (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996).

Many children today receive center-based early care and education (ECE) prior to starting elementary education. According to the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education [KICCE] (2011), the percentages of children enrolled in center-based programs at ages 3, 4, and 5 as of 2010 are 25.1%, 41.5%, and 54.7% respectively. These programs have become
One of the primary ecological factors that influence children's overall growth and development. To understand how the experience of South Korean children with ECE programs may influence their adjustment to elementary school, it is important to note that there are two distinctively different ECE systems currently in place in South Korea. Early childhood care and education in Korea started early in the 20th century and developed through two separate systems: Kindergartens and child care centers. Each system began with a different purpose; kindergartens mainly to educate preschoolers whereas child care centers care were designed for young children who needed non-maternal care. Child care centers have also emphasized education with their goal being "educare" thereby incorporating both education and care in same effort. In terms of target age and jurisdiction, kindergartens mainly serve 3-5 year olds and are based on the Early Childhood Education Act under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology [MEST]. Child care centers, serving ages 0 to 5, are currently under the Ministry of Health and Welfare [MHW], and comply with the Infant-Child Care Act. Teacher certification procedures are similarly divided into two streams. Although there has been an effort to integrate early education and childcare (Rhee, Kim, Shin, Moon, & Choi, 2006), such as with the implementation of the Nuri curriculum (MHW & MEST, 2012), it is widely recognized that more effort is needed to supplement education at child care centers and emphasize the caring aspect at kindergartens as each system currently does have different goals.

The previous research has well documented that children's experience with high quality ECE is linked to their subsequent development and school adjustment (Belsky et al., 2007; Howes et al., 2008; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Vandell et al., 2010). Early experience in group care settings can offer young children valuable exposure to social interaction with teachers and their peers and help in their transition and adjustment to the formal school environment and its education contexts. Participation in center-based early childhood programs prior to public school entry can influence various outcomes, including both academic and social performance (Fantuzzo et al., 2005), thus suggesting the benefits of higher-quality instruction or closer teacher-child relationships for the acquisition of positive academic and social skills (Howes et al., 2008).

Access to high-quality ECE programs and/or a particular experience related to early learning may depend on the family background and social circumstances of each individual child's family. Socioeconomic status (SES) of families is especially known to be directly connected to both the options and resources parents have available for their children (Kim, Lim, Kim, Yang, & Jeong, 2010; Kimmel, 2006; Lee, 2011; Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Rose & Elicker, 2008; Woo, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2009). Evidence from prior empirical research shows that poverty has a substantial impact on children's performance that includes school adjustment. For instance, Margetts (2009) claimed that children's school adjustment in Grade 5 is predicted by family socioeconomic status based on government financial support for families and attendance at before-school-hours program in the early weeks of schooling. Entwisle, Alexander, and Olsen (2007) also confirmed the correlation between SES and children's early school achievement. Researchers have investigated the development of children from low-income families in the Korean context as well (Chang & Chung, 2012; K. Kim, 2011; Min & Kawn, 2004). J. Kim (2009) revealed that economic pressure had greater direct impact on a child's school life and problem behavior for a poor family compared to an average household. Low-income parents also show a higher stress level which often negatively influences their children (Kwak, Kim, & Yoo, 2007).

Given that family income has direct linkages to the choices parents have available to them, families in poverty are certainly more challenged in terms of providing their children appropriate early learning experience. In order to promote equal educational opportunities to children from all backgrounds, the South Korean government has invested considerable resources in increasing the supply of ECE programs and also providing child care subsidies for low-income families. This support has been recently expanded and free child care for all children at ages 0-2 was implemented in 2012. Beginning in 2013,