

Examining the Relationships between Career Development, Daily Life Decision Making and Social Emotional Learning Skills of Middle School Students

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Abstract

This presented research has three purposes: The first purpose of this study is to examine the power of middle school students' social emotional learning and daily life decision-making skills together as a predictor of their career development. The second purpose is to examine the career development of middle school students according to gender. Third purpose is to examine the career development of middle school students according to targeted high school type. The research group consisted of 263 middle school students (141 female, 116 male, 6 unknown). These students were studying in 3 middle schools in the center of a large city in the northwestern part of Turkey and their ages ranged between 10-15 ($X=12.31$; $sd=1.07$). The research data were collected by applying the Childhood Career Development Scale, Social Emotional Learning Scale for Adolescents, Daily Life Decision Making Scale and Personal Information Form. The research data were analysed using multiple linear regression analysis, t test, and one-way ANOVA. The research results showed that middle school students' social emotional learning and daily life decision-making skills scores together accounted for a significant proportion of the variance 0.19% of the career development scores of middle school students. The results showed that the career development score mean of students targeted Anatolian high school were higher than those aiming for science high school and vocational and technical high school. There was not significantly differences in career development scores of the students according to gender. The research results were discussed based on the relevant literature, provided important implications for the theoretical and practical literature on career development, social emotional learning and daily life decision-making skills and suggestions were presented for future theoretical and practical research.

Keywords: Career Development, Daily Life Decision-Making Skills, Social Emotional Learning Skills, Secondary School Student.

Introduction

As in many countries, middle school years in Turkey are the years of preparation for pre-adolescence in general development and for transitioning to high school in the education system. Super (1990) determined the 0-14 years of age as the Exploration Stage in the Life-Space and Life Spain Theory. Super (1990) developed a model to examine the career development of individuals in the Exploration Stage (children and pre-adolescents). The model is called as Childhood Career Model. It is consist of nine dimensions, which he called curiosity, research, self-concept, focus of control, interests, planning, time perspective and knowledge about career and key figures (role models). Super determine that children who can gain the behaviors in these nine dimensions can solve social problems more successfully and have the knowledge and skills to make healthy decisions. Moreover, Super states that enriching career development in childhood provides the foundation for an individual's career development in later periods.

Career development theorists (Ginzberg et al., 1951; Gotfredson, 2004; Super, 1974) state that the early years of adolescence, namely the middle school period, are a period when individuals begin to think about their career development and discover themselves by making temporary decisions in line with these thoughts. During middle school, students begin to explore occupations, develop occupational aspirations and expectations (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005) and crystallizing interests (Tracey, 2002). In addition, middle school students in Turkey have to decide on the type of high school they are aiming for when they finish the 8th grade. Therefore, it is thought that these students need to learn some social skills, especially decision-making skills. Decision making skills may enhance and facilitate career development of middle school students. Indeed, it has been observed that the career development levels of primary and

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middle school students who learn to use decision-making skills in daily life also increase (Obiunu & Ebunu, 2010; Philips & Pazienza, 1988; Schaefer et al., 2010; Ting et al., 2012). Therefore, the relationships between decision-making skills and career development will be examined in this study.

Research on children's career development contributes to their problem-solving and effective decision-making skills. Students with these skills are expected to be successful in both their education and professional lives (Magnuson & Starr, 2000; Maree, 2018). It is also accepted that early career support develops children's social skills such as communication, cooperation, and empathy and that the development of these skills leads to more successful academic and career outcomes. When the career development of pre-adolescent children in Turkey is examined, it is known that this period is the transition period from middle school to high school. In addition, research has emphasized that it is not enough to improve the academic development of pre-adolescent children for them to make a successful transition from middle school to high school, but it is also important to support their career development (Wallis & Docket, 2015).

It is accepted that social and emotional competence in childhood is one of the most important determinants of well-being in adulthood (Philips & Lakkadghatwala, 2023). However, it is known that social and emotional competence has an undeniable priority in childhood and does not always emerge spontaneously (Joseph & Strain, 2003). It is therefore necessary and important to design the learning environment effectively in order to develop children's social and emotional skills.

Career development programmes have a positive impact on children's academic achievement, leading to the development of social-emotional skills and improved classroom performance. It is noted that the incorporation of school-based programmes systematically designed to support the development of children's social-emotional skills first gained momentum in the 1970s and has since attracted the attention of educators and researchers (Greenberg, 2006). Social emotional learning (SEL) is defined as a process by which children can identify and effectively manage their own and others' emotions, develop empathy, make appropriate and effective choices for their needs, interact positively with peers, and use effective coping strategies when faced with difficulties (CASEL, 2003).

The Collaboration for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020a) defines five key social-emotional learning competencies. An analysis of these competencies shows that they include cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills. It is known that SEL consists of five basic dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making and relationship-building skills (CASEL, 2020b). Notably, there is mixed research on the positive impact of these skills on school life and academic achievement (Elias, 1997; Zins & Elias, 2006). The SEL skills defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making and relationship skills) are also expected to positively support career development. Looking at the studies that examine the impact of SEL skills on career development, it can be observed that in recent years it has started to be significantly included in literature (Dermody et al., 2022; Dymnicki et al., 2013; Howard & Ferrari, 2022; Paolini, 2020; Smith, 2020). Howard and Ferrari (2022) integrate the SEL model with childhood career development competencies and career-related models, presenting a new perspective on how to integrate social emotional experiences and competencies with children's career development. Bacanlı and Salman (2024) determined that SEL skills play an important role in the career adaptability of university students. In this context, it is expected that SEL skills will also play a role in enriching the career development of middle school students. Theoretical views that girls can display more mature career behaviors than boys due to the effect of general development (Super, 1963; Ginzberg, 1984) and the results of previous studies (Bacanlı & Sürücü, 2010; Bacanlı, 1995; Yayla, 2012; Sapmaz, 2010; Sürücü, 2005) which found that the career development levels of girls were higher than those of boys. Therefore, in this research, it was deemed important and necessary to examine the career development of secondary school students according to gender.

In Turkey, the middle school period is the period when students must undertake the responsibilities related to academic, social-emotional and career development required for entering the high school they target. Since the entrance to science high schools, Anatolian high schools and technical high schools depends on

the success they will show in the exam, middle school students focus on their academic development in order to pass the exams of the type or types of high schools they target type. They also need to undertake the career development tasks related to choosing the type of high school they want to enter for their career development. Therefore, it was deemed necessary and important to examine the career development of middle school students according to the type of high school they target in this research. Therefore, this presented research has three purposes: The first purpose of this study is to examine the power of middle school students' social emotional learning and daily life decision-making skills together as a predictor of their career development. Second purpose is to examine the career development of middle school students according to gender. Third purpose is to examine the career development of middle school students according to targeted high school.

Research Method

Research Design

This research is a correlational model, one of the quantitative research types, in which direct and indirect relationships between variables will be examined (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyum, 2012). In the correlational model, correlational statistics are used to measure and describe the changes in the mutual relationships between two or more variables (Creswell, 2017). In this respect, the change in the reciprocal relationships between career development, SEL and daily decision-making was examined. In this context, the data were analyzed with multiple linear regression analysis to determine the predictive power of SEL and daily life decision making variables together on career development score. In order to determine whether the level of career development in children differs according to the gender variable, t-test for independent groups was applied to the data. One-way analysis of variance (One-Way ANOVA) was applied to the data to test whether the level of career development in children differed according to the target high school type.

Population and Sample

The study group of this research was determined by convenience sampling method and consisted of 263 (141 female, 116 male, 6 undeclared) middle school students studying in different provinces of Turkey in the 2022-2023 academic year. The study group of the research was determined by convenience sampling method. It can be seen that the age of the middle school students who participated in the study was between 10-15 years old at the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grade levels and the mean age was ($\bar{X}=12.31$; $ss=1.07$).

Instrument

The data collection tools used in the research are given below.

Childhood Career Development Scale (CCDS)

The original version of the CCDS was developed by Schulthesis and Stead (2004) to measure the career development of children aged 0-14 years. The adaptation of the scale to Turkish culture was conducted by Bacanlı, Özer, and Sürücü (1990) on children in the same age group in Turkey. When the theoretical basis of the scale is examined, it is seen that it is based on Super's (1990) childhood career development model. The CCDS is a 3-point Likert-type scale consisting of 52 items. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were applied to the data obtained from $n=2500$ elementary school students to determine the construct validity of the Turkish CCDS. When the results of both analyses are analyzed, it is revealed that the CCDS consists of eight sub-factors as in the original. This eight-factor structure is consistent with the theoretical model on which the scale is based (Super, 1990) and with the structure of the original CCDS. In order to check the reliability of the Turkish CCDS, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to calculate the internal consistency coefficients for the whole scale and subscales. The Cronbach's Alpha values for the whole scale and subscales of the Turkish CDSC were as follows: the whole scale ($\alpha= .78$), knowledge ($\alpha= .64$), curiosity/investigation ($\alpha= .60$), interests ($\alpha= .64$), locus of control ($\alpha= .76$), key figures ($\alpha= .49$), time perspective ($\alpha= .65$), planning ($\alpha= .81$) and self-concept ($\alpha= .73$). The findings related to the validity and

reliability studies of the Turkish CDSC showed that this scale has satisfactory validity and reliability values. The Cronbach's Alpha value for the whole scale was .78, while the Cronbach's Alpha value for this study was .95.

Social Emotional Learning Scale in Adolescents

The Social Emotional Learning Scale for Adolescents (SELS) was developed by Totan (2018). This scale covers individual-centered social and emotional learning content based on self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship building skills and responsible decision-making skills. The scale consists of 5 sub-dimensions and 23 items: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship building skills and responsible decision-making skills. The score that can be obtained from the scale varies between 23 and 115. High scores obtained from the scale indicate a high level of ability in that field. For the reliability study of the SEL scale, Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient was calculated. The reliability coefficients were $\alpha=.76$ for self-awareness, $\alpha=.70$ for social awareness, $\alpha=.73$ for self-management, $\alpha=.74$ for relationship building skills, $\alpha=.74$ for responsible decision making and $\alpha=.92$ for the total. The reliability coefficients calculated for each sub-dimension indicate that it is a reliable measurement tool. The Cronbach Alpha value for this study was found to be .92.

Daily Life Decision Making Scale

Daily Life Decision Making Scale (DLDMS) developed by Mincemoyer and Perkins (2011). The DMDLS is a 20-item, 5-point Likert-type scale. In order to determine the validity of the structure of the DLDMS for Turkish middle school, elementary school and secondary school students, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) study was conducted on the data collected from the mentioned students. The CFA results showed that the Turkish scale, like the original scale, is a 20-item and five-dimensional scale. The DMDLS consists of 5 subscales: defining the problem, identifying alternatives, identifying risks and consequences, choosing an alternative, and evaluating the decision. The adaptation study of the scale for Turkish middle school students was conducted by Özkan (2019). The Cronbach Alpha value for the whole scale was found to be .90. For this study, the Cronbach Alpha value was found to be .91.

Personal Information Form

The personal information form includes questions such as school type, date of birth, gender, grade level, parental education level, target high school type, career decision, etc. In the personal information form, in order to protect the confidentiality of the research, no special questions such as name and surname were included, and this form was prepared by the researchers.

Findings

In this section of the study, the results of the statistical analyses applied to the data are presented.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Regarding the Variables of the Study

	n	Minimum	Maksimum	\bar{X}	ss	Skewness	Kurtosis
Childhood Career Development	263	52.00	154.00	121.52	23.07	-1.333	1.210
Social Emotional Learning Skills	263	23.00	115.00	83.40	17.12	-.747	1.441
Decision Making in Daily Life	263	20.00	100.00	71.29	15.31	-.609	.922

As seen in Table 1, it is seen that the mean scores of students' career development ($\bar{X}=121.52$, $SD=23.07$), social emotional learning skills ($\bar{X}=83.40$, $SD=17.12$), decision-making skills in daily life ($\bar{X}=71.29$, $SD=15.31$).

Table 2. Total Scores, Means, Standard Deviations and Correlation Coefficients between Career Development Scale, Social Emotional Learning Scale and Decision Making in Daily Life Scale

Variables	\bar{X}	ss	1	2	3
1.CCDS	121.52	23.07	1	.049	.013
2.SELS	83.40	17.12		1	.000
3.DMDLS	71.29	15.31			1

N=263 * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;

CDS: Career Development Scale

SELS: Social Emotional Learning Scale

DMDLS: Decision Making in Daily Life Scale

As seen in Table 2, the relationships between childhood career development and social emotional learning ($r=.049$, $p<.05$) and decision-making in daily life ($r= .00$, $p<.00$) are positive but not statistically significant.

Table 3. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Total Scores of Career Development

Variables	B	SH	β	t	p
Stable	106,486	7,432		14,327	.000
SELS	,011	,119	,008	,089	.929
DMDLS	,199	,133	,132	1,494	.136

$R= .13$, $R^2= .019$, $F_{(2,260)} = 526.501$, *** $p<.001$, ** $p<.01$

SELS: Social Emotional Learning Scale

DLDMS: Daily Life Decision Making Scale

As seen in Table 3, total scores from DLDMS and SELS (from predictor variables) were used as predictors of total scores from CCDS (from predicted variable) in multiple linear regression. When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that DLDMS total and SELS total scores entered into regression together did not significantly predicted CCDS total scores and DLDMS total and SELS total scores together explained 0.19% of the variance related to CCDS total scores (Multiple $R = .13$, $R^2 = 0.19$, $F(2,260) = 526.501$). According to the results of the 't' test regarding the predictor variables, social emotional learning ($\beta = .011$, $p > .01$) and daily life decision-making skills ($\beta = .132$, $p > .01$) did not significantly predict career development on their own.

Table 4. Analysis Results Regarding the Examination of Childhood Career Development Total Scores According to Gender Variable

Gender	n	\bar{X}	ss	Levene's Test Sig	t	p
Female	141	122.021	24.286	.423	332	.740
Male	116	121.050	21.999			

As can be seen in Table 4, the mean total score of female students on the career development scale of children is $\bar{X}= 122.021$; the mean total score of male students on the career development scale is $\bar{X}=121.050$. According to the results of the research, there was no statistically significant relationship between the career development levels of female students and male students ($t(255) = 1,769$; $p>.01$)

Table 5. Analysis of the Career Development Scores of the Students in the Study Group according to the Type of Target High School and Variance Results for Total Scores

Target type of high school.	n	\bar{X}	Variance Source	Total Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean of Squares	F	Levene	p	Eta Square η^2
Anatolian High School	50	124.83	Between Groups	30314.41	3	10104.80	21.270	20.850	.000	.242
Science High School	31	97.92	In-group	95013.75	200	475.069				
Social Sciences High School	88	131.25	Total	125328.2	203					
Vocational and technical high school	35	110.54								
Total	204	121.06								

As seen in Table 5, according to the results of the ANOVA test conducted to determine whether the career development scores of secondary school students show a significant difference according to the type of high school they aim for, the F value $F(3,200) = 21,270$; $p < .001$ level was found significant. Tukey pairwise comparisons test was performed to determine the difference between the groups and it was found that the students aiming for Anatolian high school had higher mean career development scores than the students aiming for science high school; the students aiming for Anatolian high school had higher mean career development scores than the students aiming for vocational and technical high school; the students aiming for social sciences high school had higher mean career development scores than the students aiming for science high school and vocational and technical high school. When the effect size values are examined, it is seen that the type of target high school has a high level of effect on career development score, which is .242 (Cohen, 1998).

Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to examine the power of middle school students' social-emotional learning (SEL) and daily life decision-making skills together to predict their career development levels. The results of the analysis showed that SEL and daily life decision-making skills together explained 0.19% of the variance in the career development of middle school students. The SEL skills and daily life decision-making skills alone did not significantly predict career development of middle school students. However, this presented study is the first to examine the predictive power of SEL skills for career development in the field of career counseling. SEL skills are increasingly being studied in fields such as psychology, psychological counseling and guidance, education, and sociology. SEL skills were first initiated in the field of career psychological counseling with the international project study called the SEL Skills & Career that was initiated in 2018 and is about to be completed, and which also included Turkey (Social Emotional Learning & Career Development Project, 2018). It can be said that there are very few studies in Turkey examining SEL skills in the field of career psychological counseling (Bacanlı & Salman, 2014; Karacan-Özdemir & Bacanlı, 2019). Therefore, the results of this presented study support the results of the research of Salman & Bacanlı (2024) in which SEL skills were examined as a predictor of career adaptability. In short, it is recommended that future studies be conducted to examine the relationships between SEL skills and the career development of children, adolescents, young adults, and adults.

The early years of adolescence are considered to be a time when individuals begin to think about their career development and make tentative decisions and self-discoveries in line with these thoughts (Ginzberg et al., 1951; Gotfredson, 2004; Super, 1974). In addressing the key issues of career development, it is generally accepted that many different characteristics of a person influence career development. Decision-making style stands out as one of these characteristics (Dik et al., 2008; Reese and Miller, 2006). On the other hand, the results of the study indicate that the decision-making variable in everyday life is not a predictor of career development. Contrary to this finding, Maree (2018) states that individuals whose career development has been supported from early childhood are more successful in setting specific goals and taking action towards them. This can be interpreted as a positive correlation between career development and career decision making. Similarly, Liu et al. (2014) argue that the study of childhood career development and the implementation of related practices promote independent career decision-making. A study conducted by Yayla (2011) examined the extent to which the decision-making styles of 8th grade students predicted their career development. The results showed that students' decision-making explained 23% of the total variance in children's scores on the career development scale. Considering 21st century skills, it is clear that the SEL skills are part of life skills. From this perspective, incorporating activities that cover the SEL skills for middle school students is expected to play an important role in their career adaptability (Bacanlı and Salman, 2024) and career development. SEL skills have recently gained attention as a research topic in the career psychological counselling literature (Bacanlı et al., 2022; Howard & Ferrari, 2022; Özdemir & Bacanlı, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Solberg et al., 2019). In this study, SEL skills were not found to be a significant predictor of career development. However, it is expected that students with developed SEL skills have a higher level of awareness of themselves and their social environment and are more likely to make effective career choices (McMahon & Watson, 2022). It is also known that children who engage in activities aimed at developing career development and SEL skills are better able to adapt to changing career conditions and experience a more successful transition to young adulthood. Therefore, based on the existing literature and the findings of this study, future research could explore the relationship between SEL skills and variables such as career development and vocational maturity. Karacan-Özdemir and Bacanlı (2020) emphasises the importance of developing policies that support social-emotional skills within the framework of positive youth development and focusing on these skills in conjunction with career guidance in schools. In this context, school psychological counselors could conduct psychoeducation and group guidance programs, group and individual career counseling, and similar practical studies aimed at helping middle school students learn SEL skills and decision-making skills to improve their career development.

The second purpose of this study is to examine career development of middle school to gender. The result for second purpose showed that the career development levels of middle school students do not differ significantly according to gender. This finding is consistent with various research findings in the relevant literature (Can & Taylı, 2014; Salami, 2008; Schulthesis & Stead, 2010). However, Bacanlı and Sürücü (2011) suggest that gender is an important predictor in the career development of middle school students. Super (1990) states that female students experience faster physical development compared to male students, which is reflected in the career development process. At this point, it can be noted that different research findings support the existing theoretical perspectives. For example, studies conducted by Işıklar and Bozgeyikli (2010), Sapmaz (2010), Watson and McMahon (2005), and Vignoli et al. (2004) found that the career development of primary school students differs by gender, with female students exhibiting higher career exploration behaviours compared to male students. Sürücü, Kondaş and Bacanlı (2015) also found that the career development of gifted elementary school students varies by gender, with female students having significantly higher curiosity/research scores than male students. Existing research findings in the relevant literature provide some support for the findings of this study. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies examine children's career development according to the gender variable using different sample groups. The career development scores of middle school students show a significant difference according to the type of upper secondary school they aspire to. The main scores are highest for social science high schools, followed by Anatolian high schools, vocational and technical high schools and science high schools. It was found that students aiming for Anatolian high school have higher average career development scores than those aiming for science high school; students aiming for social science high school also have higher scores than those aiming for science high school; and students aiming for social sciences high school have higher average career development scores than those aiming for science high schools and vocational and technical

high school. This finding suggests that there is a relationship between the academic success of schools that admit students through centralised examinations and the career development of students. As the level of academic success of the targeted type of high school increases, students' career goals become clearer, which has a positive impact on their career development. This finding is supported by research showing that children's career development scores vary according to the type of targeted high school (Bakır & Büyükgöze-Kavas, 2021). The results of this study have important implications for future studies. First, it is recommended that school psychological counsellors include activities that support students' career development.

The results of this study have several practical implications. School psychological counselors should add activities and interventions that focus on career development, decision making, and the SEL skills. These will help middle school students make better and more satisfying high school and career choices. School psychological counselors and advisors could work with students to develop their career development, decision making, and the SEL skills. Therefore, this research provides important contributions and implications to the theoretical and applied literature on career development, decision-making skills, and SEL skills. However, this research has some limitations. One of the main limitations of this study is that it was conducted on a small sample of students currently engaged in educational activities in Turkey. Therefore, it is suggested that a similar study be repeated with a larger and more diverse sample group. In addition, future studies should involve a more diverse sample, and qualitative approaches to enhance outcomes.

Conclusion

Evaluating the results of this study as a whole, it is evident that it provides some foundational data for future research in the area of children's career development. The findings suggest that social-emotional learning (SEL) skills and daily decision-making skills have a low-level but effective influence on supporting and enhancing the career development of middle school students. In this study, the career development levels of middle school students were examined to determine whether they were statistically different based on gender and type of secondary school attended. The results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference in career development scores according to gender, while there is a significant difference based on the type of targeted high school. Developmental career theories suggest that career development tasks begin during the middle school years. However, it should be noted that most of the studies conducted in Turkey focus on adults, university and high school students (Güven, 2009; Yeşilyaprak, 2009; Yılmaz & Gündüz, 2018) and there is a limited availability of measurement tools for childhood career development (Bacanlı, 2006). Therefore, this study addresses important factors that influence the career development of middle school students, particularly SEL skills and career decision making.

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