

Understanding School Happiness: The Influence of Justice Disposition and Demographic-Social and Behavioral Factors

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Abstract

This study investigated the levels and predictors of school happiness among primary school students, with a particular emphasis on justice disposition. The sample consisted of 1065 students from public schools in three provinces of Aegean Region in Türkiye. Data were collected using the Justice Disposition Scale and the School Happiness Scale, and analyzed through descriptive statistics, correlations, and hierarchical regression. Results revealed that students reported moderately high levels of both school happiness and justice disposition. Regression findings showed that behavioral adaptation was the strongest predictor of school happiness, followed by justice disposition. In contrast, academic achievement, age, grade level, and family income were not significant. Screen time variables (mobile phone and television use) and number of siblings emerged as negative predictors, while maternal education showed a small positive contribution. Importantly, the inclusion of justice disposition provided the largest incremental increase in explained variance, underscoring the central role of fairness in student well-being. Overall, the findings suggest that relational, ethical, and behavioral factors outweigh purely demographic or academic indicators in shaping children's happiness at school, highlighting the need for school environments that foster fairness, emotional support, and positive peer relations.

Keywords:

School Happiness; Justice Disposition; Social and Behavioral Factors; Primary School Students; Subjective Well-Being

Introduction

In recent years, the importance of children's happiness has gained increasing attention in global educational and psychological research. For example, the Malta Wellbeing Index reports that 88.5% of children aged 7–8 consider themselves happy; however, this rate declines to 70% among adolescents aged 11–15, with notable challenges such as bullying and emotional distress (TVMnews.mt, 2024). Similarly, a large-scale study conducted in Italy with 1549 children aged 7 to 14 found that younger children report higher levels of happiness than pre-adolescents, with self-concept, self-esteem, and loneliness playing significant roles (Baiocco et al., 2019). These findings align with broader



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psychological theories emphasizing developmental transitions in childhood and their impact on subjective well-being (Holder & Coleman, 2009; López-Pérez et al., 2016).

In light of this literature, the present study aims to explore how Turkish primary school students' happiness is shaped not only by individual and behavioral factors but also by their sense of justice—a construct that has received limited empirical attention despite its moral and developmental significance during early schooling years.

Despite growing global interest in subjective well-being, the 2024 World Happiness Report ranks Türkiye 98th among 143 countries, and national data such as the 2023 Life Satisfaction Survey conducted by the Turkish Statistical Institute ([TÜİK], 2024) reveal limited attention to children's happiness. Yet, childhood—particularly the primary school years—is a critical period for emotional development, with direct implications for academic success and social adaptation (Suldo et al., 2011). International initiatives, including UNESCO's Happy Schools Framework (2016), highlight the importance of school environments that support student well-being. However, in Türkiye, especially at the primary level, empirical studies remain limited.

Various studies have explored the demographic and psychosocial determinants of children's happiness. Gender differences, for instance, consistently show that female students report higher levels of happiness (Çankaya & Meydan, 2018). Parental education—particularly maternal education—has been linked to enhanced emotional and social adjustment in children (Göçen, 2015), while low family income may increase vulnerability to peer bullying and emotional difficulties (Dilmaç & Özkan, 2019). Lifestyle factors such as book reading and screen time also influence happiness. While regular reading is associated with stronger social-emotional skills, excessive screen use has been linked to loneliness and psychological distress (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

Nevertheless, one critical construct—justice disposition, defined as sensitivity to fairness and ethical treatment—remains underexplored in the context of school happiness. Justice, a foundational moral value (Rawls, 1971), begins to develop in early childhood and significantly influences peer relations, empathy, and a sense of belonging (Dalbert, 2009). Yet few studies in Türkiye have examined how justice disposition interacts with broader demographic and behavioral variables in shaping children's happiness.

Research focus and variables included

Building on this foundation, the present study examines how a range of variables—organized

into demographic, socioeconomic, justice-related, lifestyle, and school-related performance domains—predict the happiness level of primary school students. These include students' gender, age, grade level, parental education, family income, number of siblings, household size, justice disposition, book reading, mobile phone/game use, television viewing time, academic achievement, and behavior scores. Collectively, these factors have been widely recognized for their role in student well-being and adjustment (Bibou-Nakou & Markos, 2013; Diener & Ryan, 2009; Suldo & Huebner, 2006).

For instance, demographic and socioeconomic variables such as parental education and family size have been linked to children's access to resources and emotional support. Justice disposition reflects students' perceptions of fairness, which shape trust and belonging in the school environment. Lifestyle habits—including reading and screen time—impact emotional and social functioning, while school-related performance and adaptation capture both academic outcomes and behavioral regulation, the latter being closely tied to peer interactions and prosocial competence. Controlling for these diverse predictors enables a clearer assessment of justice disposition's unique contribution to school happiness.

While the model captures these core influences, certain variables—such as peer relations, school climate, and teacher support (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Oberle et al., 2014), personality traits (Shoshani & Slone, 2017), and health behaviors (Tomprowski et al., 2011)—were excluded due to data limitations. Nonetheless, by systematically accounting for the key demographic, socioeconomic, lifestyle, and school-related variables, this study offers a comprehensive and contextually relevant perspective on the predictors of school happiness in Türkiye's primary education context. By systematically aligning the research model with these categories, the study directly addresses the research questions outlined below.

Research Questions

To achieve this aim, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the justice disposition and happiness levels of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th-grade (aged 8–10) primary school students?
2. To what extent do the following variables predict the happiness level of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th-grade primary school students?
 - a) Demographic factors: Students' gender, age, and grade level
 - b) Socioeconomic background: Students' parental education (mother's and father's education), monthly family income, number of siblings, and household size
 - c) Justice disposition: Students' justice disposition

d) Lifestyle habits: Students' book reading, mobile phone/game use, and television viewing time
 e) School-related performance and adaptation: Students' academic achievement and behavior score

Methodology

This study was conducted using a correlational survey model. The correlational survey model is a research design used to determine the degree and direction of the relationship between two or more variables (Büyüköztürk, 2011; Karasar, 2005). This model aims to observe and collect data on the status of different variables in their natural settings without any intervention. Therefore, the results objectively reflect existing relationships (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Participants

The participants consisted of 1065 primary school students from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grades across three provinces in the Aegean Region of Türkiye. All students attended public primary schools officially affiliated with the Ministry of National Education. The research was conducted with the support and approval of provincial and district directorates of national education, as well as in collaboration with school administrations and classroom teachers. The participants were chosen through stratified sampling, considering demographic characteristics to ensure a balanced representation. The schools were selected to reflect diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including low, middle, and high-income areas. Detailed descriptive information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of study participants by demographic, socioeconomic, lifestyle, and school-related variables

Variable	N	%	Variable	N	%
Gender			Grade		
Female	594	55.8	2nd Grade	287	26.9
Male	471	44.2	3rd Grade	348	32.7
Total	1065	100	4th Grade	430	40.4
Age			Total	1065	100
8 years	317	29.8	Family Income		
9 years	314	29.5	Low	86	8.1
10 years	434	40.8	Middle	843	79.2
Total	1065	100	High	136	12.8
Mother's Education			Total	1065	100
Functionally literate	121	11.4	Number of Siblings		
Primary School	282	26.5	1 sibling	173	16.2
Middle School	200	18.8	2 siblings	487	45.7
High School	278	26.1	3 siblings	248	23.3
University	184	17.3	4 siblings	82	7.7
Total	1065	100	5 siblings +	75	7.0
Father's Education			Total	1065	100
Functionally literate	87	8.2	Daily TV Watching		
Primary School	268	25.2	1 hour	405	38.0
Middle School	273	25.6	2 hours	364	34.2
High School	264	24.8	3 hours	172	16.2
University	173	16.2	4 hours	85	8.0
Total	1065	100	5 hours	39	3.7
Books Read Monthly			Total	1065	100
1 book	67	6.3	Phone/Tablet Usage		
2 books	289	27.1	1 hour	440	41.3
3 books	243	22.8	2 hours	375	35.2
4 books	172	16.2	3 hours	127	11.9
5 books	294	27.6	4 hours	123	11.5
Total	1065	100	Total	1065	100
Behavior Scores			Academic Achievement		
1 point	12	1.1	1 point	109	10.2
2 points	55	5.2	2 points	179	16.8
3 points	395	37.1	3 points	203	19.1
4 points	215	20.2	4 points	206	19.3
5 points	388	36.4	5 points	368	34.6
Total	1065	100	Total	1065	100

Data collection instruments

Three different instruments were used to collect data in this study: a personal information form, the Justice Disposition Scale, and the School Happiness Scale. The Justice Disposition Scale was developed specifically for this research to measure students' justice dispositions.

These instruments were designed to capture both the demographic and psychological profiles of the participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing their school happiness levels.

Justice disposition scale

The Justice Disposition Scale, developed and validated specifically for primary school students aged 8–10 (Akar & Can Kaya, 2025), consists of seven items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 4 = Always). It measures students' sense of fairness through dimensions such as rule adherence, honesty, impartiality, and justice awareness. The scale demonstrated a strong unidimensional structure, with high factor loadings (0.874–0.936) and an explained variance of 82.92%. Internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$). Confirmatory Factor Analysis supported model fit with $\chi^2/df = 2.951$, CFI = 0.989, GFI = 0.948, AGFI = 0.956, IFI = 0.989, RMSEA = 0.061, and RMR = 0.016, confirming its reliability and validity for this age group.

Although unidimensional, the scale captures three key dimensions of justice through representative items: Distributive justice: "I want everyone to be treated fairly." Procedural justice: "I follow the rules and do not cheat." Interactional justice: "Even if I dislike someone, I don't treat them unfairly."

School happiness scale

To assess students' school-related happiness, the School Happiness Scale for Primary Students developed by Gündoğan and Akar (2019) was employed. The original version includes nine items across two dimensions—happiness and unhappiness—rated on a 3-point Likert format. Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses confirmed good construct validity (e.g., CFI = 0.989, RMSEA = 0.026), with a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.76$.

The scale was later adapted into a 4-point Likert format (1 = Never, 4 = Always) by Akar and Ay (2025), with the aim of increasing sensitivity while maintaining suitability for young students, consistent with recommendations in the literature (Revilla et al., 2014; Garland, 1991). This 4-point version was used in the present study and demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including an explained variance of 66.86% and a Cronbach's α of 0.81. Reverse coding was applied to negatively worded items, and total scores ranged from 9 to 36, with higher scores indicating greater school happiness.

Example items include: "I can't wait for school to start," "School is a happy place," and the negatively worded item "I want school to end."

Personal information form

A Personal Information Form was used in this study to collect demographic and social information about the participants. This form facilitated the measurement of independent variables and allowed for the categorical classification of data in line with the study's research questions. Specifically, the form included the following domains:

Demographic factors: Students' gender, age, and grade level.

Socioeconomic background: Parental education (mother's and father's education), monthly family income, number of siblings, and household size.

Lifestyle habits: Students' book reading, daily mobile phone/game use, and television viewing time.

School-related performance and adaptation: Behavior scores and academic achievement, both rated on a five-point scale by teachers.

This categorical organization allowed the independent variables to be systematically examined in relation to students' happiness levels.

Data collection, analysis, and interpretation

Data were collected with the support of school administrators and classroom teachers. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians following ethical approval by the relevant committee (see in ethical approval). The final dataset comprised responses from 1065 students. Prior to analysis, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. Negatively worded items were reverse-coded to ensure consistency in scoring.

Variables were coded based on their structure. Ordinal variables—such as parental education, academic achievement, behavior scores, grade level, number of siblings, screen time, and reading frequency—were treated as ordered categories. Nominal variables (e.g., gender, family income) were dummy-coded, with male gender and low income used as reference categories. This coding approach helped ensure statistical validity in the regression models.

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentages) were calculated for the Justice Disposition and School Happiness Scales. Pearson's correlation was used for continuous variables, and Spearman's Rho for ordinal ones. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the

contribution of each independent variable to school happiness and to evaluate overall model fit and effect sizes (Büyüköztürk, 2004).

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical regression was chosen because it allows researchers to examine the incremental contribution of theoretically distinct sets of predictors while controlling for potential confounding variables. By entering predictors in theoretically justified blocks, researchers can first account for basic demographic characteristics and then test the added value of psychological, behavioral, and academic factors. This structured and theory-driven approach enhances interpretive clarity and ensures that the unique contribution of key variables, such as justice disposition, can be identified beyond demographic and socioeconomic influences (Field, 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Model 1. Students’ demographic factors

Gender, age, and grade level were entered in the first step. These variables provide a baseline for understanding individual differences and are commonly used as control variables in well-being research. Previous studies have shown that female students often report higher subjective well-being than males (Çankaya & Meydan, 2018), while age and grade differences tend to play a limited role in primary school years. Including these variables first ensures that later effects are not confounded by basic demographic characteristics.

Model 2. Students’ socioeconomic background

In the second step, parental education, family income, number of siblings, and household size were added. These indicators reflect family resources and structural conditions that shape children’s opportunities for support and development. For example, higher parental education is often associated with increased cultural and social capital, whereas larger families may reduce individual parental attention, which in turn can affect children’s happiness (Dilmaç & Özkan, 2019; Göcen, 2015; Steelman et al., 2002). By adding these variables, we accounted for the broader social context in which students grow up.

Model 3. Students’ justice disposition

The third model introduced justice disposition, which has been highlighted in the literature as a key predictor of students’ well-being (Dalbert, 2009). Perceived fairness at school is closely linked to feelings of belonging, trust, and emotional security. Including this variable after demographic and socioeconomic controls allowed us to test whether justice disposition

independently contributes to school happiness beyond background factors.

Model 4. Students’ lifestyle habits

In the fourth step, book reading and screen time were entered. These lifestyle behaviors represent daily practices that influence both cognitive and emotional development. Reading for pleasure can foster imagination, empathy, and positive emotions, whereas excessive digital exposure has been associated with stress, reduced attention, and lower subjective well-being (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). By including these habits, we assessed the role of children’s everyday activities in shaping their happiness.

Model 5. Students’ school-related performance and adaptation

Finally, academic achievement and behavior scores were added to the model. While grades reflect cognitive outcomes, behavioral adaptation represents social functioning and adjustment in the school environment. Prior research indicates that positive behavior contributes more directly to happiness than academic performance, as supportive peer interactions and teacher approval play a central role in students’ daily well-being (Bibou-Nakou & Markos, 2013; Suldo et al., 2006). Including these variables last allowed us to test whether happiness is more closely related to socio-emotional adjustment than to performance outcomes.

Results

The basic statistics related to students’ school happiness and justice disposition

The mean, standard deviation, and percentile values of the scores obtained by students on school happiness and justice disposition are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Mean, standard deviation, and percentile values of the scores obtained by students on the scales

Scales	N	Min	Max	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	%
School Happiness	1065	9	36	27.3	6.90	76
Justice disposition	1065	7	28	22	4.65	78.5

Students’ school happiness levels

The minimum score on the school happiness scale is 9, while the maximum score is 36. The mean score obtained was 27.3, with a standard deviation of 6.90. This indicates that 76% of students are generally happy. However, the relatively high standard deviation

suggests significant differences in happiness levels among students. While some students reported very high happiness levels, others indicated lower levels.

Students' justice disposition levels

The Justice Disposition Scale has a minimum score of 7 and a maximum score of 28. The mean score was calculated as 22, with a standard deviation of 4.65. This result shows that students have a high level of justice disposition, at 78.5% of the maximum score. The relatively low standard deviation indicates that students have more homogeneous attitudes toward justice, meaning their perceptions of fairness are quite similar.

Overall, the findings suggest that students exhibit both happiness and a strong emphasis on fairness in the school environment. However, further in-depth research into the reasons behind the variations in happiness levels may be beneficial. These differences could be linked to factors such as social relationships, academic success, and family support.

The correlations between school happiness and the variables

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to explore relationships among the study variables, and the results are presented in Figure 1.

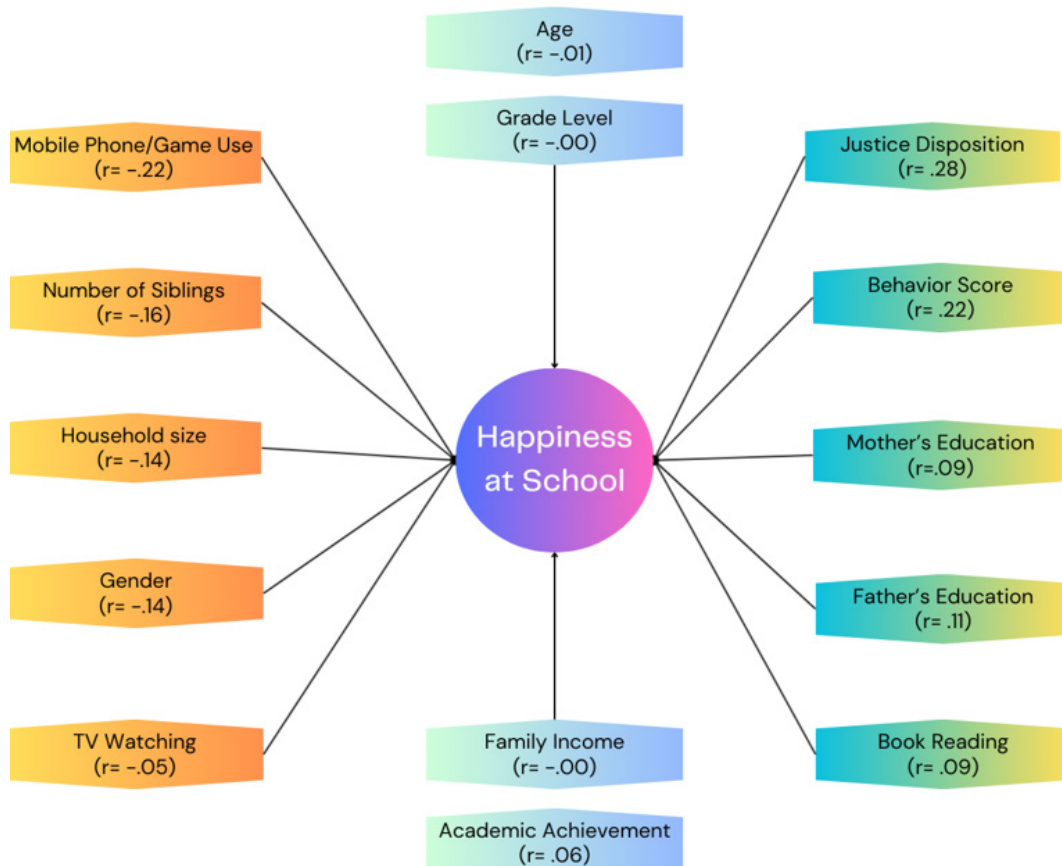
Figure 1

The correlations between school happiness and the variables

Figure 1 visually summarizes the correlation coefficients between school happiness and a range of demographic, behavioral, and psychosocial variables. The central node, Happiness at School, is connected to each variable, with the color tones reflecting the direction and strength of the relationships.

On the left side of the diagram, represented in orange tones, are the variables that showed negative correlations with school happiness. These include number of siblings ($r = -.16$), household size ($r = -.14$), gender ($r = -.14$, with girls reporting higher scores since gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male), mobile phone/game use ($r = -.22$), and TV watching ($r = -.05$). These findings suggest that excessive digital exposure, reduced parental attention in larger families, and gender-related differences in social-emotional adjustment may hinder students' subjective well-being.

By contrast, the variables on the right side, depicted in yellow-green tones, demonstrated positive associations with happiness. These include justice disposition ($r = .28$), behavior score ($r = .22$), book reading ($r = .09$), father's education ($r = .11$), and mother's education ($r = .09$). Such results highlight the role of ethical sensitivity, adaptive social behavior, family educational resources, and intellectual engagement in fostering school happiness.



Finally, the top and bottom nodes, shown in neutral blue tones, represent variables that did not yield statistically significant correlations. These include age ($r = -.01$), grade level ($r = -.00$), family income ($r = -.00$), and academic achievement ($r = .06$). The absence of significant relationships suggests that structural and economic indicators, as well as performance outcomes, may play a less central role compared to relational and behavioral factors.

In sum, the diagram underscores the multidimensional nature of school happiness and points to the greater importance of justice perception, behavioral adaptation, and emotional support over demographic or purely academic indicators. Accordingly, educational interventions aiming to enhance students' well-being should prioritize relational, ethical, and socio-emotional development alongside cognitive achievement.

Regression analysis for predicting students' school happiness scores

To examine the factors influencing students' happiness, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. The results are summarized in Table 3.

When examining the results in Table 3, justice disposition emerged as the strongest predictor of school happiness ($\beta = .28$). This finding indicates that a fair school environment plays a central role in children's subjective well-being. The second most influential factor was behavior score, showing that positive social and behavioral adjustment is strongly associated with happiness. Third, mobile phone/game use was negatively related to happiness, suggesting that excessive screen time may undermine students' emotional well-being. Next came number of siblings and household size, both negatively associated with happiness, implying that children in larger families may receive less individual attention and support. Gender was also a significant predictor; since girls were coded as "1" and boys as "2," the results show

that female students reported higher levels of happiness compared to males. At a lower level of influence, father's and mother's education (with a small but positive effect), book reading (positive), and television watching (negative) were also associated with happiness. In contrast, academic achievement, age, grade level, and family income did not make significant contributions.

Table 3
Hierarchical regression model summary

Model	Predictors Included	R Square	ΔR^2	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	Demographic factors: Students' Gender, Age, Grade level	.022	-	7.82	3	106	<.00
2	Socioeconomic background: Students' Parental Education, Family Income, Number of Siblings, Household Size	.056	.034	9.44	4	106	<.00
3	Justice disposition: Students' Justice Disposition	.115	.059	69.9	1	106	<.00
4	Lifestyle habits: Students' Book Reading, Mobile Phone/Game Use, TV Watching Times	.132	.017	6.71	3	105	<.00
5	School-related performance and adaptation: Students' Academic Achievement and Behavior Score	.171	.039	24.7	2	105	<.00

The hierarchical regression analysis was conducted in five steps. In the first step, demographic factors (gender, age, grade level) explained 2.2% of the variance in school happiness, with gender showing a significant effect in favor of girls. In the second step, socioeconomic background variables (parental education, family income, number of siblings, household size) added 3.4%, raising the total explained variance to 5.6%. The third step introduced justice disposition, which produced the largest increase, accounting for an additional 5.9% and raising the total explained variance to 11.5%. In the fourth step, lifestyle habits (book reading, mobile phone/game use, TV watching) contributed a further 1.7%, reaching 13.2%. Finally, in the fifth step, school-related performance and adaptation (academic achievement, behavior score) added 3.9%, increasing the total explained variance to 17.1%.

Figure 2
Cumulative explained variance (R^2) of hierarchical regression models predicting school happiness

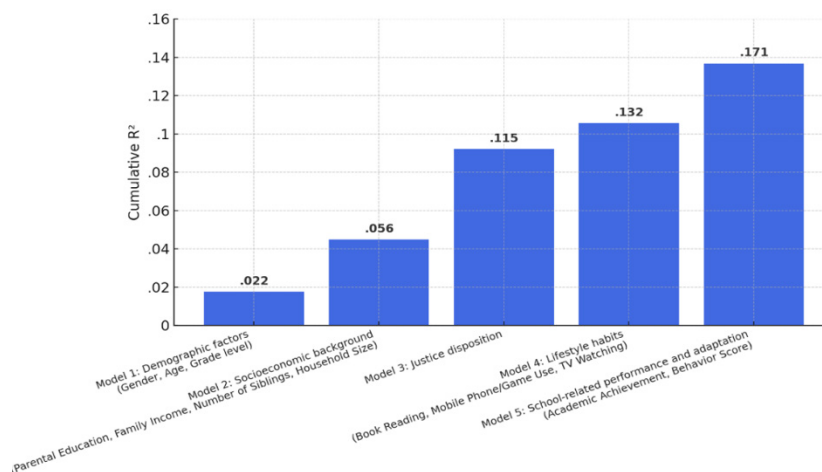


Table 4
Standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients for the final model

Predictor	B	SE B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	17.939	3.692	-	4.859	<0.001
Gender (Female)	-1.499	0.399	-0.108	-3.761	<0.001
Grade	-0.105	0.461	-0.012	-0.229	0.819
Age	0.098	0.448	0.012	0.218	0.827
Father's Education	0.044	0.202	0.008	0.219	0.826
Mother's Education	0.603	0.215	0.105	2.809	<0.005
Household Size	-.292	.183	-.059	-1.596	.111
Number of Siblings	-0.804	0.189	-0.125	-4.246	<0.001
Family Income	-0.511	0.445	-0.034	-1.148	0.251
Justice Disposition	0.308	0.044	0.207	7.067	<0.001
Books Read	0.206	0.161	0.039	1.279	0.201
Phone Usage	-0.640	0.215	-0.092	-2.975	<0.003
TV Watching	-0.471	0.190	-0.094	-2.476	<0.013
Students'Academic Achievement	0.255	0.195	0.040	1.312	0.190
Behavior Score	1.786	0.260	0.262	6.878	<0.001

Significant predictors

Behavior score emerged as the strongest positive predictor of school happiness ($\beta = .262, p < .001$), showing that students with better behavioral adjustment report higher well-being. Justice disposition also made a robust contribution ($\beta = .207, p < .001$), indicating that fairness perceptions are a key factor in students' happiness at school. Mother's education had a modest but significant positive effect ($\beta = .105, p = .005$), suggesting that maternal educational background contributes positively to children's well-being. In contrast, several factors had negative effects: number of siblings ($\beta = -.125, p < .001$) reduced happiness, while phone usage ($\beta = -.092, p = .003$) and TV watching ($\beta = -.094, p = .013$) both indicated that excessive screen time is detrimental

to well-being. Finally, gender ($\beta = -.108, p < .001$) was significant; since gender was coded as 1 = female and 2 = male, this negative coefficient means that female students reported higher happiness than their male peers.

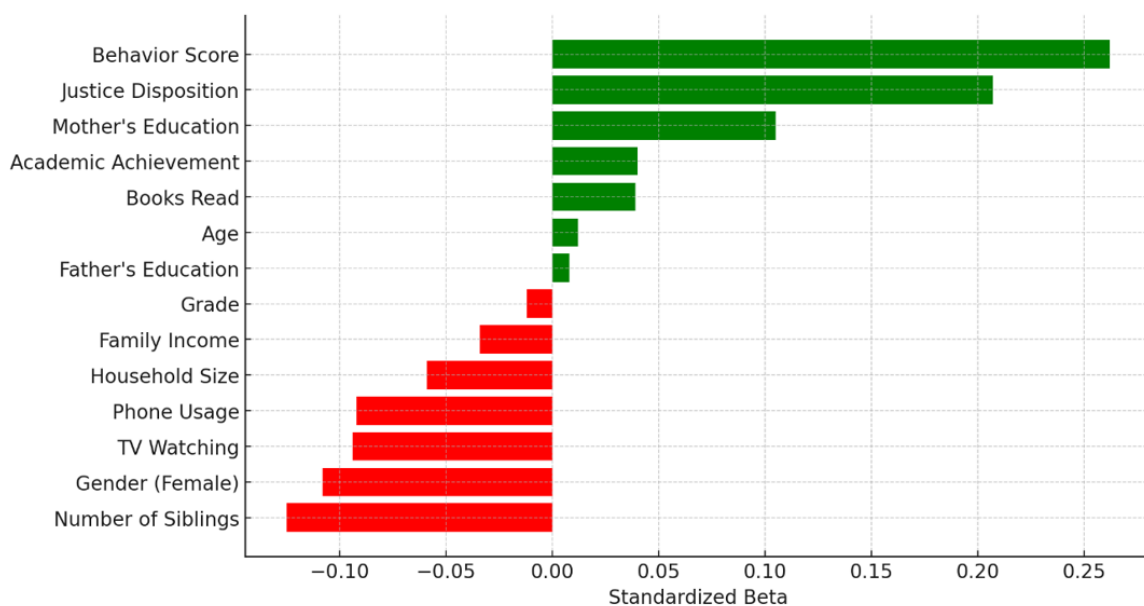
Grade level, age, father's education, family income, household size, book reading, and academic achievement were not significant predictors in the final model. These findings suggest that structural and purely academic indicators have limited influence on students' happiness compared to relational and behavioral dimensions.

Taken together, the results highlight that justice disposition and behavioral adaptation are the most influential predictors of happiness at school, while screen time and family size factors can undermine well-being. Importantly, female students consistently reported higher happiness, and maternal education had a modest but meaningful positive role. Overall, the findings emphasize that social, emotional, and ethical dimensions are more decisive than academic performance or demographic factors in shaping students' subjective well-being.

Discussion

The present study examined the levels and predictors of school happiness among primary school students, with a particular focus on the role of justice disposition. Descriptive findings revealed that both students' reported happiness and their sense of justice were at moderate to high levels, consistent with prior research highlighting the importance of fairness and social connectedness in children's subjective well-

Figure 3
Standardized regression coefficients for predictors of primary school students' happiness



Non-significant predictors and key insights

being (Dalbert, 2009; López-Pérez & Sánchez, 2016). Beyond these overall levels, the hierarchical regression analysis provided a nuanced picture of how different groups of variables contributed to school happiness. The results showed that, at the individual predictor level, behavioral adaptation emerged as the strongest factor ($\beta = .262$), followed closely by justice disposition ($\beta = .207$). At the model level, the inclusion of justice disposition contributed the largest increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .059$). Taken together, these findings indicate that both behavioral and ethical dimensions play a central role in shaping school happiness, followed by socioeconomic background, lifestyle habits, and demographic factors. This layered structure not only clarifies the relative weight of each domain but also demonstrates that relational, ethical, and behavioral dimensions carry greater importance than purely demographic or academic indicators in fostering student well-being.

Students' school happiness levels

Students' school happiness level was found to be 76%, which is broadly consistent with general satisfaction levels reported in the literature. However, given that primary schools often fulfill children's basic needs—such as play, friendship, and structured support—a slightly higher rate might be anticipated. In the absence of peer bullying, discrimination, or academic stress, students typically perceive school environments positively.

International frameworks underscore the importance of fostering happiness in education. The United Nations (2016) emphasizes its relevance to quality of life and social cohesion, while UNESCO's Happy Schools Framework (2016) calls for inclusive and emotionally supportive school environments. The World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024) indicates that student well-being is highest in countries like Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Compared to these contexts, the 76% observed in this study appears lower, potentially reflecting structural or cultural challenges specific to Türkiye.

This finding is further contextualized by comparative studies in Europe. For instance, the Malta Wellbeing Index reports that 88.5% of children aged 7–8 describe themselves as happy, though this drops to 70% among 11–15-year-olds due to rising exposure to emotional distress and peer-related issues (TVMnews.mt, 2024). Similarly, an Italian study involving 1549 students aged 7–14 revealed that younger children report significantly higher happiness levels than older peers, with key mediators including self-concept, self-esteem, and perceived loneliness (Baiocco et al., 2019).

In Türkiye, earlier studies reported even higher school happiness rates—around 90% and 91%—based on 3-point Likert scales (Okutan et al., 2024; Tay, 2023).

The current study's use of a 4-point Likert scale likely facilitated more differentiated and realistic responses. As UNESCO (2016) notes, culturally relevant and age-appropriate assessment tools are essential when measuring constructs like school happiness across diverse educational settings.

Students' justice disposition levels

Students' justice disposition was measured at 78.5%, suggesting a strong awareness of fairness and ethical behavior. This aligns with developmental theories which suggest that children at this age are increasingly capable of recognizing moral dilemmas, even if they still require adult guidance for resolution (Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1932). UNESCO (2016) also emphasizes the role of fairness and inclusion in supporting students' moral and emotional development.

Cross-cultural evidence reinforces these findings. In both Germany and the U.S., students who perceive their school environments as fair report greater satisfaction and well-being (Dalbert, 2009; Tyler, 2006). The positive correlation observed between justice disposition and school happiness in the present study is consistent with these patterns. Moreover, as Baiocco et al., (2019) point out, children with a strong sense of self-worth and lower levels of loneliness—often associated with perceived fairness and emotional security—tend to report higher levels of happiness, reinforcing the broader socio-emotional relevance of justice in education.

Students' demographic and socioeconomic factors and school happiness

The findings indicate that demographic variables explained a modest portion of the variance in school happiness ($R^2 = .022$). Within this group, female students reported significantly higher happiness than males, consistent with earlier studies highlighting girls' stronger social connectedness and greater emotional resilience (Göçen, 2015; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018; Mertoğlu, 2020; Tenney, 2011). Similar gender-related patterns have also been observed in international research conducted in Spain and Canada. In contrast, grade level and age were not significant predictors, suggesting that developmental differences across schooling years may not substantially influence subjective well-being in this sample. While some studies point to fluctuations in happiness across school stages (Okutan et al., 2024; Tay, 2023), further longitudinal research is needed to clarify these developmental trajectories.

Socioeconomic background contributed an additional 3.4% of explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .034$). Maternal education was positively associated with school happiness, reinforcing previous findings on its importance for children's emotional and academic

development (Pentti et al., 2019; Stevens & Jarden, 2019). In contrast, parental education and household income were not significant predictors, supporting the view that social and emotional resources may outweigh purely economic ones (Pentti et al., 2019). A higher number of siblings significantly predicted lower happiness, echoing research that highlights reduced parental attention and competition for family resources as potential explanations (Steelman et al., 2002; Whiteman et al., 2011). However, in collectivist cultural contexts such as Türkiye, where extended family support is more common, these negative effects may be moderated. Future studies should investigate how cultural norms and family structures interact with sibling dynamics to shape student well-being.

Students' justice disposition and school happiness

The regression analysis demonstrated that justice disposition was the strongest individual predictor of school happiness, with a standardized effect of $\beta = .207$ ($p < .001$). The inclusion of this variable in the third step of the hierarchical model explained an additional 5.9% of the variance, underscoring the central role of perceived fairness in shaping students' subjective well-being at school.

These findings are consistent with earlier research showing that perceptions of fairness enhance trust, satisfaction, and belonging within educational settings (Colquitt et al., 2001; Tyler, 2006). At the primary school level, where moral and social development are still emerging, fair treatment by teachers and peers is especially influential (Piaget, 1932; Kohlberg, 1981; Pentti et al., 2019). Such practices not only promote harmony in the classroom but also strengthen children's broader sense of justice and security.

Although justice disposition is a particularly salient predictor, it interacts with other domains of school life. Social relationships, behavioral adaptation, and even certain lifestyle habits also play complementary roles in fostering happiness (Diener, 2012; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Therefore, cultivating fairness in school environments should be seen as a foundational but not solitary strategy; a holistic approach that integrates ethical, emotional, and social dimensions is crucial for promoting student well-being.

Students' school-related performance and adaptation and school happiness

The results indicate that behavioral adaptation was the strongest predictor of school happiness ($\beta = .262$, $p < .001$), emphasizing the importance of emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and positive peer interactions in fostering student well-being (Bibou-Nakou & Markos, 2013). Recent empirical evidence supports this as well—Somerville (2024) found that supportive teacher behaviors and students' emotion

regulation skills significantly predicted well-being in primary school contexts.

By contrast, academic achievement did not emerge as a significant predictor of happiness. This finding aligns with research suggesting that academic pressure can undermine students' emotional well-being, even when performance levels are high (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). However, recent data from a large-scale Chilean sample shows a positive relationship between school happiness and academic performance, particularly for younger students and those with higher self-efficacy, indicating a more nuanced connection that is mediated by grade level and emotional factors (Hochschild Ovalle, 2024). Similar patterns have been observed internationally; in both the U.S. and East Asia, high academic demands are often associated with reduced life satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2011; Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

Students' lifestyle habits and school happiness

Lifestyle factors also played an important role in students' well-being. Excessive mobile device use and television watching were both negatively associated with school happiness ($\beta = -.092$ and $\beta = -.094$, respectively). These results reinforce prior findings that excessive screen time is linked to diminished social interaction, greater emotional strain, and lower physical activity (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

In contrast, book reading was not a significant predictor of happiness in this study. Although previous research has highlighted its potential benefits for emotional intelligence and perspective-taking (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2018), its impact on daily school happiness may depend on factors such as the depth of engagement or the social context in which reading occurs.

Cross-national studies provide further support for these findings. In the U.S., excessive screen use has been linked to lower psychological well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2018), while in South Korea, high smartphone use has been associated with stress and emotional difficulties (Kim et al., 2020). Finnish research likewise indicates that although moderate screen use can sometimes be neutral or even beneficial, excessive use is consistently linked to disengagement and reduced motivation (Pentti et al., 2019).

Taken together, these global patterns suggest that the negative impact of digital overexposure on happiness is widely observed, although its severity may depend on the type of activity—passive versus interactive. This underscores the need for schools and families to collaborate in promoting balanced technology use, ensuring that digital engagement does not replace

meaningful social and physical experiences.

Conclusion

This study explored the factors affecting school happiness among primary school students, with a focus on justice disposition, behavioral and demographic variables. Behavioral adaptation was the most significant predictor, emphasizing the value of emotional and social skills. Justice disposition also significantly predicted happiness, highlighting the importance of fairness in school life.

Excessive screen time (via phones and TV) had a negative impact, while academic achievement was not a significant predictor—indicating that academic success alone does not guarantee happiness. Girls reported higher happiness levels than boys, suggesting gender-based differences in social-emotional development. Additionally, maternal education had a positive effect, while parental education and income were not significant. Having more siblings was associated with lower happiness, likely due to limited parental attention and shared resources.

Overall, these results underline the importance of supporting not only academic, but also emotional and social development to enhance students' happiness at school.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are presented to enhance students' happiness at school. To foster a sense of justice among students, it is suggested that they be actively involved in establishing behavioral rules, while teachers receive in-service training on educational justice, equitable classroom practices, and inclusive language. Strengthening student councils and encouraging meaningful student participation in school decision-making processes can further support students' sense of belonging.

To support social and emotional learning (SEL), integrating weekly activities—such as empathy games, emotion cards, and storytelling—into the curriculum is recommended. Initiatives like peer mediation and classroom-based emotional sharing can provide safe environments for conflict resolution and emotional support. Guidance counselors may adopt a more proactive role by not only offering individual guidance but also leading structured SEL sessions at the classroom level.

To mitigate the negative effects of academic pressure on student well-being, schools may consider reducing homework and assessment loads and incorporating play-based or exploratory learning activities into weekly routines. Regular well-being screenings and

emotional check-ins can help identify students who need additional support. Shifting from grade-based evaluations to formative, process-oriented feedback may also enhance students' intrinsic motivation.

Strengthening family involvement can be achieved through regular information sessions, especially targeting mothers with lower levels of formal education. Initiatives such as shared reading sessions, co-learning activities, and parent support groups can foster deeper school-family collaboration and extend emotional and academic support into the home.

Regarding digital technology use, introducing digital literacy education in the early years of primary school is recommended. Schools can work in collaboration with families to guide students in critically engaging with media and managing screen time responsibly. In addition, increasing access to non-digital recreational spaces and activities within school settings may help support students' holistic development.

For students from large families, personalized mentoring and academic support programs may prove benefits. Assigning volunteer teachers or older peers as mentors and offering after-school study groups or homework clubs can ensure more individualized academic and emotional support.

Limitations and future directions

This study was conducted with primary school students in the Aegean Region of Turkey, and its findings should be interpreted with caution when generalizing to other regions. The Aegean Region has a higher-than-average socio-economic status compared to other parts of Turkey, which may influence student happiness levels and access to educational resources (TÜİK, 2024). Future studies should explore regional variations and conduct longitudinal research to assess how happiness evolves across different grade levels.

Additionally, while this study focused on demographic, behavioral, and justice-related factors, future research could explore peer relationships, school climate, and mental health variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of school happiness.

Disclosure and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with established principles of research ethics, including respect for participant rights, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Ethical approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board of Uşak University

(Decision Date: May 9, 2024; Approval Number: 2024/122). Prior to data collection, all participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained. Furthermore, all data were anonymized to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality throughout the research process.

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