Children's shyness, popularity, school liking, cooperative participation, and internalizing problems in the early school years[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Aims of the present study included understanding the manner in which shyness during the first year of formal schooling predicts early popularity in the peer group, as well as the manner in which children's shyness and popularity uniquely contribute to later school liking, cooperative participation, and internalizing problems. Structural equation modeling using parents', teachers', and children's reports suggested that children's ($N = 291$; 46% girls) kindergarten shyness predicted lower school liking and lower cooperative participation during second grade through its negative association with first grade popularity. Shyness during the first year of formal schooling may relate to difficulties in the classroom during later years due to problematic peer relations. The indirect relation of kindergarten shyness to second-grade internalizing problems through first-grade popularity was not statistically significant. Kindergarten shyness was also directly related to higher cooperative participation, which suggests that relations between early shyness and classroom engagement may be more complex than previously assumed.

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1. Introduction

Identifying characteristics and behaviors that facilitate academic functioning, especially in the early grades, is a fruitful research undertaking. School liking (children's positive attitudes toward school; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000) and cooperative participation in the classroom (compliance with rules, responsible behavior, and acceptance of teachers' authority; Ladd et al., 2000) are thought to benefit students' learning and academic progress (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In contrast, the presence of internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal, somatic complaints, and loneliness) may hinder academic success (Fredricks et al., 2004). Consequently, research into individual characteristics and interpersonal factors predicting school liking, cooperative participation, and internalizing problems represent efforts to better equip students to succeed in competitive academic and economic environments.

The influence of shyness, defined as "wariness in the face of social novelty and/or self-conscious behavior in situations of perceived social evaluation" (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009, p. 145), in multiple contexts (e.g., peer-group, teacher–child) is increasingly discussed in the literature. Shyness is a particularly relevant characteristic to examine in relation to school-related outcomes, given the social nature of the classroom. In addition, shyness is likely to be associated with internalizing problems, particularly when children's shyness is upsetting to them.

Sociometric popularity, which reflects being liked and accepted by peers as opposed to social power (Asher & McDonald, 2009), is a component of a child's peer system, the climate of which may influence classroom participation and attitude, as well as well-being. Popularity also may act as a mediator through which shyness affects children's adjustment, such that shyness relates to low popularity, and low popularity relates to poorer adjustment. We hypothesized that shyness during kindergarten would relate to school liking, cooperative participation, and internalizing problems during second grade through its relation with first grade popularity.

1.1. School liking and cooperative participation

Understanding predictors of school liking and cooperative participation is important. Forming a negative attitude toward and disengaging from the classroom during the first school years may set the stage for poor academic trajectories, such as low achievement

(Fredricks et al., 2004; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Ladd & Dinella, 2009).

1.1.1. Relations between shyness and school liking

School liking is expected to be lower for shy than non-shy children. Coplan and colleagues (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008; Hughes & Coplan, 2010) have theorized that shy children's transition to the school environment and functioning in the classroom might differ from non-shy children's, and this might have implications for affective connectedness to school. For example, shy children are reactive to novelty and experience excessive self-consciousness. The transition to school brings with it new peers and adults, as well as increased social and academic expectations. In addition, shy or withdrawn children's vulnerability to negative peer treatment may lead them to want to avoid activities with peers and promote further withdrawal (Rubin, Bowker, & Kennedy, 2009). Finally, shyness has been negatively related to teacher–child closeness (Justice, Cottone, Mashburn, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Rudasill, 2011). Discomfort in the classroom, poor peer treatment, and disconnected relationships with teachers may result in shy children's low school liking or a desire to avoid school. Although expected, empirical support for a negative relation between shyness and school liking is limited. Kindergartners' shyness has been negatively related to broad school adjustment (a composite which included school liking; Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008). Similarly, kindergartners' teacher-rated shyness has been negatively related to concurrent child-reported school liking (Valiente, Swanson, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012).

1.1.2. Relations between shyness and cooperative participation

Competing arguments exist regarding the manner in which shyness should relate to classroom engagement, but the emerging body of literature points to a negative relation (Evans, 2010), perhaps because shyness inhibits tendencies to interact with classroom peers. Nonetheless, the prognosis for shy students' classroom engagement might not be all *gloom and doom*. Shyness is likely negatively related to some, but not all, aspects of classroom participation. We expect shyness to be positively related to cooperative participation, as shy children typically are viewed as compliant and well-behaved in the classroom (Evans, 2010). Bosacki, Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, and Hughes (2011) found that although teachers recognized shy children's lack of confidence and difficulty gaining peer acceptance, they perceived shy children as non-disruptive, attentive listeners who conformed to classroom routines. Furthermore, social anxiety, heightened when interacting with adults and authority figures (e.g., teachers), is likely to prompt compliance (Beidel & Turner, 1998).

Shy children's cooperative participation has been examined as part of a composite of classroom participation or engagement. For example, Valiente et al. (2012) reported a negative relation between kindergartners' shyness and their participation (a composite of cooperative and independent participation). Hughes and Coplan (2010) also obtained a negative relation between 9- and 13-year olds' shyness and academic engagement. Half of the items encompassed aspects that would be considered cooperative participation in the present study (which we expect to positively relate to shyness), but the other half of the items included behaviors such as hand-raising in class, which we did not include, but would expect to negatively relate to shyness. Differentiating between forms of classroom participation may provide a clearer understanding of the manner in which shyness relates to engagement. In the present study, we isolated one component of classroom participation – cooperative participation.

1.1.3. Relations between popularity and school liking

Popularity is conceptualized as being liked and accepted by one's peers, and in the early school years is moderately stable, positively related to cooperation and positive peer interactions, and negatively related to aggressive behavior (Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983). Popular children are expected to enjoy school, given it is an environment in which peers want to interact with them. Unpopular children may view school as boring, lonely, or threatening, due to their lack of a positive connection with the peer group. Popularity and related aspects of peer relationships have been positively related to school liking. For example, teacher-reported popularity has been positively related to concurrent school liking for older elementary students (Kwon, Kim, & Sheridan, 2012), and kindergartners' peer acceptance was positively related to school liking (Ladd & Coleman, 1997).

1.1.4. Relations between popularity and cooperative participation

Many characteristics associated with popularity (e.g., being cooperative, prosocial, and non-disruptive; Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982) are likely to prompt cooperative participation. Moreover, social relatedness with peers should enhance a sense of belonging, motivation, and participation in academic contexts. Peer acceptance and friendships (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998) are believed to promote social inclusion in the classroom which, in turn, yields resources that foster interpersonal and academic success (Ladd, 2003). In contrast, children who are less-liked and less-accepted by peers may have characteristics less compatible with cooperative participation, such as aggression (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Aggressive children may display defiance toward teachers and classroom rules. Children low in acceptance may disengage from classroom activities to protect themselves from further rejection (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Young children's popularity, per se, has not been examined with respect to cooperative participation; however, kindergartners low in peer acceptance have shown low classroom cooperative and autonomous participation, and this effect has been mediated by poor peer treatment (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999).

1.2. Internalizing problems

Not all children with internalizing problems appearing in early childhood will retain these problems throughout childhood, but some do. Sterba, Prinstein, and Cox (2007) found 13% of boys and 21% of girls to have an elevated and stable trajectory of internalizing problems from ages 2 to 11 years, supporting the notion that early onset internalizing symptoms can be more severe and long-lasting than late-onset internalizing symptoms. Furthermore, internalizing problems have been associated with academic difficulties. Internalizing problems have been negatively related to academic achievement for 7- and 8-year olds (van Lier et al., 2012). Symptoms associated with internalizing behavior (e.g., loss of concentration, low self-esteem) may reduce adaptive functioning in the classroom. Given the potential stability of internalizing problems and the association between internalizing problems and academic functioning, we sought to advance the understanding of factors associated with young children's internalizing problems.

1.2.1. Relations between shyness and internalizing problems

Theoretically, shyness is expected to be related to internalizing problems. For some shy children, conflicting motivations may influence internalizing problems, in that they want to belong and interact with classmates but are upset that they are unable to do so. In addition, shy children may utilize ineffective coping strategies which enhance internalizing problems (Findlay, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Shyness also is expected to relate to internalizing due to shy children's problems with peers. For example, shy third graders