



# Affective and Social Mastery Motivation in Preschool as Predictors of Early School Success: A Longitudinal Study



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## ABSTRACT

Recent research has documented the importance of school readiness in young children. Children who start school without basic skills often continue to show lower achievement throughout schooling. Most current assessments of school readiness focus on early measures of academic skills, such as literacy and numeracy. Although these skills are useful in predicting school success, research suggests that socioemotional and motivational factors may be even more important. Moreover, although there is strong evidence supporting the importance of social and emotional *competencies*, such as emotion understanding and social skills, in school readiness, there is a dearth of research on the role of affective/expressive and social aspects of *mastery/competence motivation* in early school readiness and achievement. In the present study, we used Structural Equations Modeling to examine the role of affective aspects of mastery motivation, social mastery motivation, Socio-Economic Status (SES), and Intellectual Quotient (IQ) in preschool in longitudinally predicting math achievement, reading achievement, and social skills during grades 1 and 2 in 327 Hungarian children. Results indicated that children's negative reactions to failure/challenge predicted all of these measures of school performance, over and above the role of child IQ and SES; in addition, mastery pleasure predicted reading, and persistence in peer interaction predicted social skills in the early grades. Results contribute to the growing literature supporting the importance of motivation and of achievement-related emotions in school readiness and school success.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent research has documented the enormous importance of school readiness for young children (Guernsey, Bornfreund, McCann, & Williams, 2014). Children who start school without basic skills such as numeracy, emerging literacy, and socioemotional competence have great difficulty catching up with peers who have higher levels of school readiness (e.g., Burchinal, Magnuson, Powell, & Hong, 2015; Snow, 2006; Tymms, Jones, Albone, & Henderson, 2009). Although in the past, school readiness has been defined primarily in terms of pre-academic skills such as emerging literacy and numeracy, there has been increased awareness of the importance of non-academic, behavioral aspects of school readiness, including socioemotional competence (e.g., Denham et al., 2012; Izard et al., 2001; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011) and Approaches to Learning (e.g., Meng, 2015). A body of research documents that socioemotional *competence*, includ-

ing emotion knowledge, social skills, and ability to appropriately regulate one's emotions, is associated not only with future social and emotional competence, but also with academic competence (e.g., Denham et al., 2012; Izard et al., 2001; Rhoades et al., 2011). However, it also has become clear that, beyond *skills*, another factor that affects school success is children's positive Approaches to Learning. "Approaches to Learning" refers to a set of interrelated behavioral propensities that facilitate children's learning, including enthusiasm for learning; focused, goal-oriented persistence; and mastery/competence motivation (e.g., Hyson, 2008; McDermott, Rikoon, Waterman, & Fantuzzo, 2012).

Positive Approaches to Learning have been found to help compensate for less-than-optimal learning environments (Meng, 2015). Although these attributes sometimes are classified as part of social emotional school readiness, they encompass *attitudes and motivation* toward learning, rather than interpersonal or emotion regulation *competencies* or *skills* (e.g., Fantuzzo, Perry, & McDermott, 2004). They are therefore quite different from the usual characteristics that are characterized as Social Emotional Learning or Socioemotional Competence, such as emotion understanding, social skills, and ability to effectively regulate emotions.

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Disparities in all school readiness dimensions, based on early environmental differences such as those associated with low Socio-Economic Status (SES), can potentially lead to continued stratification of educational opportunity and attainment (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-Drzal, 2015; Józsa, 2016). As a result, both the United States government and many U.S. states are working to require schools to assess and intervene to enhance young children's school readiness, and one of the domains of school readiness that has been targeted is Approaches to Learning. However, although there is evidence that cognitive and instrumental Approaches to Learning are important in school-related competencies and school success (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Meng, 2015), there is a dearth of research on the role of social and emotional aspects of Approaches to Learning, and, in particular, the role of social and emotional aspects of mastery motivation, in school readiness and school success. Before discussing the present study in more detail, it is important to better define the topic on which it focuses, mastery motivation.

**What is mastery motivation, and what is the role of emotion in it?** Mastery motivation is a multifaceted psychological force that pushes individuals to try to master tasks or skills that are at least somewhat *challenging* (Barrett & Morgan, 1995; Morgan, Józsa, & Liao, 2017). The term, “multifaceted,” highlights the many different domains of development and contexts in which mastery motivation occurs, as well as the fact that mastery motivation may differ across these contexts and domains (Barrett & Morgan, 1995; Hwang et al., 2017; Józsa, 2014; Józsa, Kis, & Huang, 2017; Wang & Barrett, 2013). Morgan, MacTurk, and Hrnčir (1995) identified three main domains for mastery motivation: (1) cognitive, a child's motivation to persist at and master cognitive and school-related tasks; (2) gross motor, the motivation to master athletic skills; and (3) social, the motivation to master interpersonal relations with adults and with peers (a focus of the present study). More recently, Wang and Barrett (2013) added self-mastery as a further important domain.

Mastery motivation is not only multifaceted in terms of the domains and contexts in which it is observed and fosters development, but also the fact that it includes both expressive/affective aspects and instrumental aspects. Affective aspects include mild to moderate positive and negative emotions that promote approach and continued mastery attempts, including pleasure, interest, and enthusiasm in trying to master and/or mastering challenging tasks, as well as frustration/anger at perceived obstacles to that mastery. In addition, affective mastery motivation includes emotions that promote withdrawal and giving up, such as sadness and shame at less successful mastery (and/or anticipation of failure). Instrumental aspects include goal-directed persistence and inclination to control and/or have impact on the environment (Barrett & Morgan, 1995; Wang & Barrett, 2013).

Key features distinguishing the mastery motivation approach from other learning motivation approaches are its focus on challenging tasks and its inclusion of multiple mastery domains. Thus, although similar, mastery motivation is different from the concept of mastery *goals* in the literature on achievement goal orientations (e.g., Elliot, 2005). In this latter approach, people have a dominant approach to learning—either a *mastery* goal or a *performance* goal orientation. Those with mastery goal orientations focus on their own standards for achievement; in contrast, those with a performance goal approach seek to perform better than others. Although in both mastery motivation and achievement goal approaches, pursuit of mastery is associated with increased striving and persistence; in the achievement goal approach, one persists despite *failure*; in the mastery motivation approach, one persists despite *challenge/difficulty*.

Another related approach to motivation is Self-Determination Theory. According to Self-Determination Theory, people have three important needs – autonomy (volitional/agentive function-

ing), relatedness (feeling loved/valued), and competence (feeling effective). These fundamental needs form the basis for motivated behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to this approach, although autonomous striving *feels* intrinsic/self-motivated, it actually can originate in extrinsic processes such as parenting or teaching approaches (e.g., Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senécal, 2004). This suggests that whether the motivation truly is intrinsic or extrinsic in origin may be less important than whether it feels volitional versus controlled/anxiety-based. This is consistent with the mastery motivation approach, which focuses on persistence and emotions in different domains but does not try to determine the intrinsic or extrinsic origins of the motivation.

One of the needs specified by Self-Determination Theory, competence, has been the focus of most research on mastery motivation. Despite the true breadth of the mastery motivation conceptualization, most extant mastery motivation research has only studied instrumental mastery motivation in the cognitive domain, namely cognitive persistence. This research demonstrated that children's persistence at challenging cognitive tasks is an important predictor of school success (e.g., Gilmore, Cuskelly, & Purdie, 2003; Mercader, Presentación, Siegenthaler, Moliner, & Miranda, 2017; Mokrova, O'Brien, Calkins, Leerkes, & Marcovitch, 2013). Some studies indicated that cognitive persistence was a better predictor of cognitive development than intelligence (Józsa & Molnár, 2013; Yarrow, Klein, Lomonaco, & Morgan, 1975). A child's tendency to persist on cognitive tasks even when they become challenging would seem crucial for success in school and beyond. However, mastery motivation in other domains (such as the social domain), and affective aspects of mastery motivation may be just as important. Positive emotions and/or anger/frustration may motivate autonomous and persistent mastery attempts; whereas, negative withdrawal emotions such as shame and sadness are expected to motivate avoidance/giving up. Moreover, given evidence that socioemotional competencies are crucial aspects of school success (e.g., Denham, Bassett, Zinsser, & Wyatt, 2014), it is important to study the domains of motivational school readiness that are most relevant to socioemotional school success. The present study thus assesses the role of these less-studied aspects of mastery motivation in early school success in three domains: reading, math, and social skills. We are the first study to examine the role of mastery motivation in the peer context (social persistence) in longitudinally predicting social skills performance in the early years of school, and the first to longitudinally study the relation of affective aspects of mastery motivation to early school success in all three of these domains.

As alluded to earlier, research supports the importance of social competence in school readiness and both short-term and long-term success in school and in life (e.g., Denham et al., 2014; Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015; Schonfeld et al., 2015). However, the focus of research on social competence and school readiness has been on the importance of teaching such skills to children. Although effective interventions to teach social-emotional skills to children have been developed, children are differentially susceptible to such environmental influences on social competence (e.g., Lianos, 2015; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015). One potentially important factor in children's responses to socioemotional school readiness interventions could be their *motivation* to interact effectively with others. Yet, the role of affective and social aspects of mastery motivation in both academic and socioemotional school readiness has been under-researched.

Most research on similar types of motivation has focused on the role of being intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated in school performance, or on whether one has mastery goals versus performance achievement goals. More recently, this latter approach has considered also whether one is motivated to *approach* performance or mastery goals versus wanting to *avoid* negative per-

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