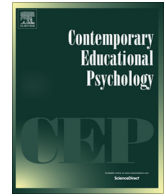




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The cross-lagged associations between classroom interactions and children's achievement behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the cross-lagged associations between the quality of classroom interactions and children's behaviors in achievement situations. The achievement behaviors in challenging test situations of 166 Finnish children from 70 classrooms were rated by trained testers in grades 1 and 2. The quality of classroom interactions in terms of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support were observed in 25 classrooms (out of 70) in grades 1 and 2. The results of multilevel modeling showed that classroom teachers' low emotional support predicted children's subsequent high passive avoidance, whereas high classroom organization and instructional support predicted children's high social dependence. Furthermore, the more children showed active task avoidance, the more emotional and instructional support and classroom organization teachers showed later on in the classroom. The findings emphasize the importance of warm and supportive classroom interactions for children's adaptive achievement behaviors. The results also suggest that teachers adapt their classroom interactions with respect to children's active task avoidance.

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1. Introduction

Children differ regarding their affective and behavioral responses in the face of academic challenges. Whereas some children react to challenging and demanding achievement situations with enthusiasm and by focusing on the task at hand, others become anxious, passive, and helpless, or try to actively avoid challenging tasks (Pekrun, 2006; Ziegert, Kistner, Castro, & Robertson, 2001; for a review, Turner et al., 2002). Some children, in turn, lean on adults and seek help and social acceptance in achievement situations more than other children (Lepola, Salonen, & Vauras, 2000). As these kinds of achievement behaviors have been found to be strongly linked with academic outcomes, the role of teachers in evoking achievement-related emotions and promoting adaptive ways to cope with challenging learning situations becomes a central issue. Although previous studies have shown that teaching practices play an important role in students' emotions (Goetz, Lüdtke, Nett, Keller, & Lipnevich, 2013) and achievement behaviors

(Anderman et al., 2001; Turner et al., 2002; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998; for a review see, Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006), research in the field has at least three limitations. First, previous studies have mainly used questionnaire data on teaching practices and, thus, less is known about the role of observed classroom interactions in children's achievement behaviors. Second, because most of the previous research on achievement behaviors focused on older students, little is known about the classroom-related antecedents of achievement behaviors among children in early school years when maladaptive behaviors begin to emerge (Eccles, 1999). Third, because of the lack of cross-lagged research on children's achievement behaviors and teacher-child interactions, it is not known whether it is teacher-child interactions that impact children's behavior or rather vice versa. Consequently, the present study aimed to examine the cross-lagged associations between classroom interactions and children's achievement behaviors during grades 1 and 2.

1.1. Children's behaviors in achievement situations

Several theoretical frameworks have described the factors and mechanisms that influence students' achievement behaviors, such as the expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and the control-value theory of

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achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). The expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) suggests that students' expectancies of success and reasons for engaging in tasks influence their achievement-related efforts, choices, and persistence in learning situations. The expectancies and values originate from previous learning experiences and related affects and beliefs (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The control-value theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006), in turn, emphasizes the role of emotions in the learning process by suggesting that achievement emotions originate from students' control and value appraisals in achievement situations (Pekrun, 2006). Those emotions then have consequences for students' achievement behaviors, motivation, and academic outcomes.

In the present study, the focus was on three forms of maladaptive achievement behavior, namely, children's active task avoidance, passive avoidance (or helpless behavior), and social dependence. Two kinds of avoidance patterns were introduced in previous literature. Passively avoidant students lack belief in their ability to control the outcomes of their learning behavior. Therefore they feel hopeless regarding their ability to succeed, which leads to passivity and withdrawal in learning situations (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986; cf. Pekrun, 2006). In turn, active forms of avoidance, such as self-handicapping or a blunting type of coping, are fueled by anxiety and fear of failure, which then lead to a low level of effort and active attempts to avoid a challenge by doing something else (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002). In the self-handicapping pattern, students engage in active task avoidance as they make an effort to create behavioral excuses for expected failure (Jones & Berglas, 1978). In blunting types of coping, individuals actively avoid a task as a coping effort to reduce their anxiety (Miller, 1989). Social dependence on adults has also been described as one form of maladaptive pattern in achievement situations, because it leads to low levels of self-directedness and academic readiness in the classroom (Lepola et al., 2000; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Although looking for the support of teachers is a natural part of the teacher–student relationship, excessive social dependence leads to learning behavior that lacks autonomy and self-directedness when facing challenging learning tasks. In the present study, we were interested in whether these three forms of maladaptive achievement behaviors (active avoidant, passive avoidant, and social dependent) would be differently related to classroom interactions, as they may partly originate from different teacher practices (Goetz et al., 2013), as well evoke different reactions from teachers (Nurmi, 2012).

The present study operationalized children's behavioral responses in achievement situations as observer-rated active avoidant, passive avoidant, and social dependent behaviors (see also Hirvonen, Aunola, Alatupa, Viljaranta, & Nurmi, 2013; Zhang, Nurmi, Kiuru, Lerkkanen, & Aunola, 2011). Although most of the previous research has used teacher-ratings of children's task-avoidant versus task-focused behaviors (e.g., Aunola et al., 2002; Georgiou, Manolitsis, Nurmi, & Parrila, 2010; Hirvonen, Georgiou, Lerkkanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2010; Stephenson, Parrila, Georgiou, & Kirby, 2008) or students' own ratings (e.g., Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991; Mägi, Häidkind, & Kikas, 2010), observer ratings of children's achievement behaviors have been suggested in order to provide more objective information on the phenomena as the observers do not know the children in advance (e.g., Hirvonen et al., 2013; Mägi et al., 2010). The observer ratings provide information about children's actual behavioral responses in achievement situations that are not biased, for example, by teachers' expectations and beliefs concerning children. Children's own ratings, in turn, might reflect more the way in which they think teachers and parents would like them to behave.

The cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses and reactions children display in the face of challenging achievement situations are important because they have been found to influence their academic skills and performance (Aunola et al., 2002; Kikas, Peets, Palu, & Afanasjev, 2009; Onatsu-Arvilommi, Nurmi, & Aunola, 2002). In general, adaptive motivational and behavioral patterns characterized by positive affect, high success expectations, task-focused behavior, and high effort and persistence in tasks (e.g., Cain & Dweck, 1995; Onatsu-Arvilommi & Nurmi, 2000) have been shown to predict positive learning outcomes (Aunola et al., 2002; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Onatsu-Arvilommi et al., 2002). In turn, maladaptive patterns typified by anxiety, failure expectations, helplessness beliefs, lack of effort, and task avoidance when facing challenges (e.g., Carr et al., 1991; Onatsu-Arvilommi & Nurmi, 2000) have been related to poor learning outcomes, low school performance (Carr et al., 1991; Onatsu-Arvilommi & Nurmi, 2000; Onatsu-Arvilommi et al., 2002), and learning disabilities (Poskiparta, Niemi, Lepola, Ahtola, & Laine, 2003). Similarly, high levels of social dependence on adults have been related to low levels of academic readiness and self-directedness in the classroom (Pianta et al., 1995), as well as to low pre-reading skills measured in kindergarten (Lepola et al., 2000).

When studying the development of children's achievement-related behavioral patterns, the first school years, in particular, might be assumed to be an important period. First, during the transition to formal schooling, children confront various new challenges and rapid changes not only in their cognitive abilities but also in their self-concepts (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Entwisle, Alexander, Pallas, & Cadigan, 1988), changes which might be assumed to be reflected also in the development of children's achievement-related motivational and behavioral patterns. In addition, classroom environments set multiple demands on children's behavior. For example, they are expected to be able to control their attention and behavior, follow multiple task instructions, switch between tasks, and direct their focus to tasks while ignoring external distractions. Second, because achievement-related behaviors and performance start to form cumulative cycles already from the very beginning of schooling (Onatsu-Arvilommi & Nurmi, 2000; Onatsu-Arvilommi et al., 2002; Ziegert et al., 2001), it is important to focus on the factors contributing to this development already during the first school years. In addition, teacher instruction is strongly focused on enhancing children's working habits and motivation for learning during the first school years.

1.2. Classroom interactions and children's achievement behaviors

It has been suggested that teacher–child interactions play a key role in the development and maintenance of interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-oriented competencies that support adjustment in classrooms (Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; see also Archambault, Pagani, & Fitzpatrick, 2013). For example, teachers may either encourage children's engagement and enthusiasm in learning activities or, alternatively, discourage their efforts and inadvertently augment their anxiety and task-avoidant behavior. Teaching also plays a central role in evoking achievement emotions in the classrooms (Goetz et al., 2013; Pekrun, 2006), and, thus, influences students' achievement behaviors. Moreover, self-determination theory (STD; Deci & Ryan, 2000) posits that students feel motivated to learn and confident in their abilities when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported in the classroom. In addition, achievement goal orientation literature suggests that students show adaptive achievement behaviors in classrooms where the atmosphere and teacher practices are focused on understanding, knowledge, and skills needed to master tasks instead of comparison and competition between classmates (Urduan et al., 1998). Hence, there is evidence to suggest that

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