



## Child engagement in the transition to school: Contributions of self-regulation, teacher–child relationships and classroom climate



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### ABSTRACT

Framed by a systemic-ecological model of engagement, this study examined cross-grade patterns of behavioral engagement in learning over kindergarten and first grade and the contributions of child inhibitory control and facets of the classroom context (i.e., teacher–child relationship quality, perceived peer–teacher conflict, and classroom organization) to behavioral engagement over this period. Participants were 145 children. Behavioral engagement was rated by teachers in kindergarten, and it was both observed by independent observers and rated by teachers in first grade. At the beginning of kindergarten, inhibitory control was observed and kindergarten teachers reported on teacher–child relationship quality. In first grade, observers rated the quality of classroom organization. Multilevel analyses indicated that inhibitory control, closer teacher–child relationships and lower levels of perceived peer–teacher conflict contributed to higher levels of behavioral engagement in kindergarten, which in turn combined with the quality of classroom organization in first grade to predict both observed and teacher-reported engagement in first grade. The results suggest that multiple contributors at the individual, dyadic, and classroom-level are relevant for behavioral engagement over the important period of transition to school.

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### Introduction

The transition to primary school has been considered a critical developmental period with important implications for child school success (Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Over the transition to school, children experience developmental changes as well as changes in their learning environments that pose particular social and academic challenges (Perry & Weinstein, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). For most children, changes involve moving from a relatively unstructured environment to a more formal, academically oriented one that usually expects them to sit still and to focus on academics for extended periods of time (La Paro, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2006; Sink, Edwards, & Weir, 2007). It has been suggested that how well children are coping with these changes is linked to behavioral engagement in learning (Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006). Behavioral engagement can be defined as student's active involvement in

the classroom tasks, including complying with classroom rules and routines, completing tasks responsibly, persisting and concentrating on tasks, and exhibiting self-directed behavior (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Hughes & Kwok, 2006). Several studies have consistently demonstrated that behavioral engagement is associated with school achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, & Curby, 2009). Given the critical importance of behavioral engagement, it seems important to identify processes that promote it during the school transition. However, there is relatively little research on the potential antecedents of behavioral engagement across both the kindergarten and first-grade years. Available evidence has examined engagement antecedents within one school year and little is known about how behavioral engagement evolves from kindergarten to first grade and what fosters behavioral engagement in this cross-grade period. In view of these limitations, the purpose of this study is to examine how individual child characteristics (i.e., self-regulation) and facets of the classroom context (i.e., teacher–child relationship quality, classroom organization) combine to predict behavioral engagement across kindergarten and first grade. Understanding the contributions of child and contextual antecedents to behavioral engagement in this

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two-years transition period can be critical for fully understanding child school success.

### *Behavioral engagement as a key indicator of learning*

Over the past years, research has consistently pointed out that engagement in learning is a key contributor to children's school success (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Several studies have shown that behavioral engagement predicts students' learning and achievement in elementary school. For instance, in one study, Ladd and Dinella (2009) found long-term associations between early school engagement and academic progress from first to eighth grades. In another study, findings showed that engagement was an important prerequisite for achievement in kindergarten (Ladd et al., 1999). Findings have additionally shown that children who are engaged in learning were likely to benefit more from classroom instruction and to elicit more positive responses from teachers and peers (Ladd et al., 1999). Several studies have also consistently pointed out that behavioral engagement is crucial for successful participation in school and identification with school (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The ability to stay engaged in classroom is important because theoretically it encompasses processes directly linked to learning, and it is conceptualized as a learning-related process (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Practically, behavioral engagement is often a concern reported by kindergarten teachers (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Thus, engagement is not only relevant for improving achievement outcomes but also to foster learning across academic, social-emotional, and behavioral domains (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Because engagement is so closely linked to outcomes of interest, researchers have increasingly recognized that engagement is, in itself, a relevant outcome of schooling (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Although there are many conceptualizations of engagement, there is general agreement that it encompasses multiple dimensions (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). At a more global level, engagement refers to the quality of child's involvement with the learning activities and represents a direct pathway to learning (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Conceptually, according to the systemic-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), engagement is a proximal process that involves children's interactions with materials, teachers, and peers that produce learning and promotes development (Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2007). This study focuses on the behavioral dimension of engagement, in specific the child's engagement in learning, which refers to child's attention and persistence in the learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). In the early school years, this dimension is seen as particularly relevant (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012) as it refers to active, goal-directed, persistent, and focused interactions with academic activities. Research has shown a decline in levels of engagement throughout school (Skinner et al., 2008), making the early years of schooling even more important for understanding and enhancing engagement. While the links between behavior engagement and achievement are well established, the examination of its predictors is less well investigated (Ladd & Dinella, 2009). In the present study, we sought to understand how individual child characteristics and classroom context factors jointly shape behavioral engagement during the school transition.

### *Behavioral engagement, self-regulation and inhibitory control*

Among individual characteristics and skills, self-regulation can be especially influential to behavioral engagement in learning. There has been growing evidence suggesting that children's self-regulation is associated with classroom adaptive behavior and academic performance (Blair & Razza, 2007; Howse, Calkins,

Anastopoulos, Keane, & Shelton, 2003; Liew, Chen, & Hughes, 2010; Valiente et al., 2011; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2010). Self-regulation from a behavioral/temperament-based approach refers to the ability to voluntarily inhibit some behaviors, activate others, and focus or shift attention as needed (Blair & Razza, 2007; Kochanska, Murray, & Coy, 1997; Liew, 2012; Smith-Donald, Raver, Hayes, & Richardson, 2007). An increasing number of research findings show positive links between self-regulation and academic skills and school achievement (Blair & Razza, 2007; McClelland et al., 2007). Self-regulation has also been positively linked to school liking and social adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Castro, 2007). Children's self-regulation is likely to be important for behavioral engagement as well, because in order to act appropriately in classroom activities, children need to be able to manage their behavior and modulate their attention (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010).

Although there are some studies showing links between self-regulation and behavioral engagement (Brock, Rimm-Kaufman, & Nathanson, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009), the results warrant further investigation because these links were generally examined within one school year. For instance, Brock et al. (2009) found that self-regulation predicted observed behavioral engagement, but the study was conducted within the kindergarten year. There is a clear need to investigate whether self-regulation continues to be an important contributor to engagement in first-grade when other variables, namely the classroom processes that children experience directly, come into play. One aim of this study is to elucidate the associations between self-regulation and cross-grade patterns of behavioral engagement while considering relational and classroom antecedents of engagement as well. To operationalize self-regulation, we consider a central aspect of children's self-regulation—their inhibitory control (Blair & Razza, 2007)—which refers to the ability to deliberately inhibit a dominant response in order to enact a subdominant one (e.g., slowing motor activity) (Kochanska et al., 1997; Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000).

### *Teacher-child relationships and engagement in learning*

In addressing the classroom social context, scholars have argued for the importance of considering both dyadic or relational and classroom-level facets (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). The affective quality of dyadic teacher-child relationships is a dimension of the social context that has received increased attention and can play an important role in behavioral engagement. Consistent with the attachment perspective, positive teacher-child relationships can be characterized as warm, close, and supportive (Pianta, 1999). These kinds of relationships are likely to provide a context in which children feel emotionally secured and confident, which encourages active exploration of the learning environment. A positive relationship with the teacher may be particularly important in the school transition to help children cope with novel academic and social situations (Hughes & Kwok, 2006). Research has consistently indicated that positive teacher-child relationship predict a higher academic and social competence (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2006). In contrast, relationships characterized by high levels of conflict and negativity have been found to be associated with higher levels of child externalizing behavior and lower levels of achievement (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Buyse et al., 2009; Doumen et al., 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005).

There is also evidence suggesting positive links between the quality of teacher-child relationships and teacher-reported

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