



# Behavioral exchanges between teachers and children over the course of a typical preschool day: Testing bidirectional associations



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## ABSTRACT

In the present study, 314 preschool classrooms and 606 children were observed to understand the behavioral exchanges between teachers and children. Teachers' emotionally and organizationally supportive behaviors and children's engagement were explored for longitudinal associations throughout a day. Observations were conducted in each classroom wherein emotional and organizational supports were assessed, followed by observations of two children's positive engagement with teachers, tasks, and peers as well as negative classroom engagement. Cross-lagged autoregressive models were used to test for time-lagged associations which, if present, could be unidirectional or bidirectional. Results indicated teachers' emotionally and organizationally supportive behaviors were related to later child engagement in seven of eight models. Furthermore, in two of those seven models, we found evidence of bidirectional associations whereby children's engagement was associated with later teacher emotional and organizational supports. Findings are discussed in terms of understanding classroom processes over the course of a day in preschool.

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## 1. Introduction

There are rising concerns about the persistent academic achievement gap that exists at the start of school. For early childhood education, this has led to increased attention to and emphasis on providing young, at-risk children with explicit learning opportunities for academic content such as literacy, language, mathematics, and science (Clements & Sarama, 2011; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). However, in juxtaposition to this movement, there is a growing literature to suggest that it is the behavioral exchanges and interactions that occur between teachers and children in preschool classrooms that contribute significantly to early learning and development (Burchinal et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). The socially mediated nature of early learning calls for a rich understanding of classroom interactions that support developmental progress, which to date has largely been explored by studying the unidirectional link between what teachers do in the classroom (e.g., emotional support, classroom organization) that directly supports children's outcomes (e.g., social skills, self-regulation) (Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010; Mashburn et al., 2008; Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009). An alternative, but less frequently studied dynamic

involves children as active agents in the classroom environment, seeking out and initiating engagement with teachers and tasks to learn. For example, limited research has examined how aspects of children or the class as a whole are associated with differing teacher behaviors (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Although each perspective often acknowledges the other, there is little work that incorporates both perspectives.

In the current study, we aim to understand better the behavioral exchanges between teachers and children that past work has shown to be conducive to learning and development. We do so by taking a closer look at the reciprocal exchanges between teachers' supportive behaviors and children's engagement in the classroom through longitudinal, dynamic modeling of a typical preschool morning in over 300 classrooms across eight different states. These observational data allow us to examine the whether there were lagged associations between teachers' and children's behaviors and determine the directionality (i.e., unidirectional/bidirectional) of any lagged associations.

Understanding the nature of bidirectional behavioral exchanges is consistent with developmental theory. In fact, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) explicitly hypothesize that bidirectional processes drive development. Practically speaking, studying these processes as they play out in a classroom over the course of a day may help identify potential areas of leverage in these dynamic relations. For example, if classroom organization is related to reductions in later problem behaviors, and problem behaviors are

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also related to less classroom organization, then it suggests that efforts to improve classroom organization will help reduce problem behaviors, which, in turn, will help sustain improvements to classroom organization. The present study tests for these types of associations across teachers' emotional support and classroom organization with children's engagement with teachers, tasks, and peers.

### 1.1. Bidirectional behavioral exchanges within the preschool classroom

A key idea in the developmental literature is the bidirectional (or transactional) nature of the interactions between a person and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003). The existence of this bidirectional process is well established in studies of families and parent–child relationships (Kochanska, 1997; Maccoby, 1992; Patterson, 1982), such as Besnard et al.'s (2013) recent findings of both reciprocal and unidirectional links between children's disruptive behavior and parenting across the early grades. Although classrooms have long been seen as a context exemplifying the bidirectional nature of interactions (Fiedler, 1975; Howes & James, 2002; Klein, 1971; Pianta & Walsh, 1996), there have been few observational studies in classrooms that take these bidirectional relations into account (Arnold, McWilliams, & Arnold, 1998; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). One recent exception comes from the field of language acquisition, whereby Justice, McGinty, Zucker, Cabell, and Pianta (2013) observed child–teacher talk patterns within preschool classrooms and found that teachers' and children's complex syntactic use were interdependent. However, we still have little understanding about the ways in which processes may unfold between teachers and children when looking at broader patterns of teacher supports and children's engagement in early childhood classrooms. Furthermore, not all processes may, in fact, be best characterized as bidirectional, as noted previously in the Besnard et al. (2013) study of parenting and child behavior. Although theoretically we can think of any child affecting the classroom environment, it is likely that certain domains of child and teacher behavior exert stronger influences on one another. For example, child disruptive behavior (captured herein as negative engagement) may have stronger influences on subsequent teacher behavior compared to children's positive engagement in tasks, which may not exert much influence on teachers' behaviors at all. Additionally, because of the nature of classrooms, classroom-to-child effects may be stronger because there is one classroom to affect each child as opposed to child-to-classroom effects whereby one child is likely to hold less sway over the entire class. Thus, if behavioral exchanges are not bidirectional, we expect to find unidirectional associations from teachers' supportive behaviors to children's engagement.

### 1.2. Teachers' emotionally and organizationally supportive behaviors

There is growing consensus that the moment-to-moment interactions occurring between teachers and the children in their early childhood classrooms are a major supporter of learning (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2007). These interactions can take many forms, but two central forms of teacher supports that are thought to contribute to children's engagement in the classroom are emotional support and classroom organization (Downer, Sabol, & Hamre, 2010). Emotionally supportive behaviors speak to teachers' social and emotional behaviors and include teachers' efforts at providing a warm and responsive presence, supporting children's autonomy, and valuing children's opinions and ideas. Conceptually, these emotionally supportive behaviors are expected to increase children's engagement by increasing their connectedness

to teachers and bolstering their motivation to learn (Bowlby, 1969; Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Classroom organization speaks to teachers' management of children's behavior and activities and includes teachers' proactively managing behavior, orienting and redirecting children's engagement toward learning, and reducing down-time and distraction. These teacher behaviors may help foster children's engagement by providing external regulation and structure to children's behavior, time, and attention (Emmer & Stough, 2001; Kounin, 1970; Pintrich, 2000).

Both emotionally and organizationally supportive behaviors are linked with positive engagement in early childhood classrooms. For example, teacher positivity and a child-centered environment were linked with more instances of observed on-task behavior in kindergarten classrooms across several states (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). Research also suggests that children in well-organized and managed classrooms exhibit greater engagement (Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Bruner, 1996; Kruif, McWilliam, Ridley, & Wakely, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009).

### 1.3. Children's classroom engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks

As a construct, engagement in classrooms has a long, rich history, beginning in the process–product literature of the 1970s (Brophy & Evertson, 1978) and moving to early childhood classroom applications in the 1990s through ecobehavioral analysis (Kontos & Keyes, 1999) and examination of preschool classroom experiences for children with disabilities (McWilliam & Bailey, 1995). For the purposes of this paper, we draw from Fredricks and colleagues' (2004) conceptual framework, which acknowledges the multi-dimensionality of children's classroom engagement and defines it as a child's capacity to interact with teachers, peers, and activities in a school environment. This definition provides a nuanced representation of children's engagement, recognizing that their connection to the classroom environment encompasses inter-related behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components (both positive and negative) that coalesce during observable interactions with teachers, peers, and tasks (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). The present study, investigates four aspects of preschool children's engagement: positive engagement with teachers, tasks, and peers, as well as negative classroom engagement. Although conceptually negative engagement could be delineated into negative engagement with teachers, tasks, and peers, as in positive climate, empirical work using the InCLASS measure used in this study only found evidence for one negative engagement factor across interactions with teachers, tasks, and peers (Bohlmann et al., 2013; Booren, Downer, & Vitiello, 2012; Vitiello, Booren, Downer, & Williford, 2012). Thus, we adopt the four aspects of engagement as measured by our instrument. The following is a brief summary of research that establishes the link between children's engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks in an early childhood classroom setting and an array of school readiness outcomes.

#### 1.3.1. Positive engagement with teachers

Children who display positive engagement with teachers demonstrate warmth and closeness in their interactions and conversations and, therefore, are better able to learn and develop in positive ways (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 1999). This positive and supportive teacher–child connection has been linked to several adaptive outcomes, including higher achievement and social competence in preschool and elementary school (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002), better social-emotional skills, and fewer problem behaviors (Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011).

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