



Considering child effortful control in the context of teacher effortful control: Implications for kindergarten success



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ABSTRACT

Children's effortful control (EC) has been consistently predicts academic and social adjustment; however, researchers have not yet examined children's EC in conjunction with the EC of their teachers. Using membership to EC similarity/dissimilarity pairings, we examined whether the alignment of kindergarten children's EC levels and their teachers' EC levels (e.g., high child EC/high teacher EC, low child EC/high teacher EC) was associated with math and reading performance, school liking, and closeness and conflict in student–teacher relationships. Results from multilevel regression models indicated that high-EC children who had high-EC teachers tended to have better basic math and reading scores and enjoy school more than their peers in other pairings. Low-EC children who had high-EC teachers had the least close and most conflictual relationships with their teachers. Findings have implications for professional development aimed to help teachers better understand and respond to students temperamentally similar or dissimilar to themselves.

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1. Introduction

Children's effortful control (EC) is a robust predictor of adaptive functioning across developmental domains in early schooling (Blair & Razza, 2007; McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2010; Valiente et al., 2011). EC, defined as “the ability to inhibit a dominant response to perform a subdominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors” (Rothbart & Bates, 2006, p. 126), is a set of temperamentally based skills that form the basis of self-regulation. As with children, teachers' self-regulatory ability appears to play a role in children's early school adjustment (Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2001); however, investigators have yet to examine children's EC in the context of their teachers' EC, and whether child–teacher EC similarities or dissimilarities have implications for children's early school success.

These associations may be particularly salient during kindergarten, when children are transitioning to formal schooling and developing academic competencies, attitudes toward school, and relationships that affect their educational and social trajectories (Duncan et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Kindergarten is many children's first exposure to formal schooling (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), where the groundwork is laid for future cognitive and socio-emotional maturity

(Ray & Smith, 2010). Teachers play a particularly influential role during this transition (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992), as evidenced by the multitude of teaching practices and characteristics contributing to early school success (Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000); however, teachers' temperamental characteristics remain largely understudied.

This study extends existing research by examining variability in children's academic (math and reading performance; school liking) and relational (teacher–child closeness and conflict) adjustment in kindergarten as a function of similarities or dissimilarities between children's EC and that of their teacher. Knowledge of whether and how children's EC operates on early school adjustment in the context of teachers' EC may inform teacher training and professional development toward building understanding of student–teacher dynamics.

1.1. Child EC, teacher EC, and children's school adjustment

1.1.1. The role of children's EC

EC typically encompasses dimensions of inhibitory control and attention-focusing (Posner & Rothbart, 2000); individuals high in EC can control a negative impulse to a particular stimulus (e.g., grabbing a toy from a peer, giving up on a difficult task) in favor of a more socially acceptable response (e.g., asking to share a toy, persisting with a difficult task; Rudasill, Niehaus, Buhs, & White, 2013). In the classroom, children high in EC are better able than children low in EC to follow teachers' instructions, process task-related information, sit still, remain focused on classroom activities (Rothbart & Jones, 1998; Sektan,

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McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2010), and refrain from behavioral disruptions (Blair, Deham, Kochanoff, & Whipple, 2004; Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005).

The neural network responsible for EC and other higher-order cognitive functions develops rapidly between the ages of 4–7 years and is susceptible to environmental influence, making EC an important characteristic to consider in the context of children's early school adjustment (Carlson, 2005; Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Indeed, a growing literature has linked children's EC to academic performance and engagement in school, likely because EC enables children to focus on tasks without getting distracted by competing stimuli (Duncan et al., 2007; Raver, 2002; Valiente et al., 2011). Poor regulatory skills in kindergarten have predicted difficulty with reading and math through sixth grade, as well as other measures of academic success, including low grades and absenteeism (Duncan et al., 2007; McClelland et al., 2006; NICHD, 2003; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008). Furthermore, EC is associated with school liking concurrently and longitudinally across elementary grades (Iyer, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eisenberg, & Thompson, 2010; Valiente et al., 2008), likely because children high in EC are better able to participate in and focus on classroom tasks and activities, and regulate their responses to the sometimes stressful demands of the classroom (Valiente et al., 2011). EC is also consistently associated with social functioning (Cumberland-Li, Eisenberg, & Reiser, 2004), including the formation of positive relationships with adults in the classroom (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). Children high in EC tend to have closer and less conflictual student–teacher relationships across elementary grades and samples (Rudasill, 2011; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Swanson, Valiente, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012). Despite the importance of children's EC for early school adjustment, little is known about how children's EC operates in the context of the EC of primary socializers, such as teachers. This study represents an important first step toward addressing this gap.

1.1.2. *The role of teachers' EC*

Teachers bring their own unique temperamental characteristics to the classroom, which can affect their interactions with students and the classroom climate (Keogh, 2003). Given the number of competing tasks teachers must balance throughout the school day, teachers' ability to regulate behavioral responses likely helps them successfully supervise their classrooms, manage frustration, and promote student success (Raver, Blair, & Li-Grining, 2012). Despite the expected influence of teachers' self-regulation on student functioning, there are few examinations of teachers' self-regulatory competence and even fewer examining EC specifically. Moreover, researchers have only recently begun to conceptualize how teachers' self-regulatory abilities relate to their students' outcomes (Raver et al., 2012). In support of theorized links, limited empirical evidence suggests optimally regulated teachers can more effectively manage classroom behavior and respond to children in constructive ways (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Other preliminary research has linked teachers' self-regulation with positive student–teacher interactions, relationships, and overall classroom quality (Brown et al., 2010; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999). This emerging line of inquiry highlights the importance of extending empirical examinations of teachers' EC.

1.2. *Considering child and teacher EC in the classroom*

Clear links exist between children's EC and positive adjustment in early schooling, and theoretical and preliminary empirical research exists regarding the influence of teachers' EC on formative classroom processes. Still, extant research has typically focused on children's EC in isolation, or in conjunction with other child characteristics or aspects of the socialization context that do not include the temperament of the socializers themselves (Bates & Pettit, 2007; Iyer et al., 2010; Valiente et al., 2010, 2011; Zetner & Bates, 2008). As a result, data on whether

and how child EC supports school adjustment differentially for children with low- or high-EC teachers remains elusive. Guided by a goodness-of-fit theoretical framework (Thomas & Chess, 1977), we sought to address this gap.

The goodness-of-fit perspective suggests the influence of a particular temperamental trait on a child's functioning depends partly on the features of the environment within which the child is developing, including the sociocultural context, socialization practices, and temperamental characteristics of primary socializers (Wachs, 2000). As such, particular environmental conditions may be beneficial or detrimental for an individual child dependent on the child's temperamental profile, regardless of whether those temperament traits are typically viewed as risk or protective factors. For example, in the classroom context, it might be expected that a child would have added difficulty adjusting to school if both the student and teacher were low in EC; however, it could be that a low-EC child would feel comfortable and function well in a class led by a low-EC teacher because this pair connects on a temperamental similarity (e.g., a low-EC teacher might less frequently implement structures and expectations that would be stressful for a low-EC child). In this light, the interplay between children and teachers both low in EC, for example, might benefit relational outcomes, such as closeness and conflict in the student–teacher relationship, compared to academic outcomes.

Alternatively, a low-EC child may benefit from a teacher high in EC, who presumably may be better able than a low-EC teacher to structure, scaffold, and constructively respond to the behavioral tendencies of a low-EC child. This latter hypothesis is consistent with the broad body of evidence indicating that supportive environments may be particularly important for the most at-risk students (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Morrison & Connor, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002). The interplay between a low-EC child and high-EC teacher may be particularly salient to academic outcomes, as teachers high in EC may be better able than their low-EC counterparts to model regulatory competencies and show greater patience with struggling students, ultimately boosting academic skills. Still, it seems unlikely that these children would perform at or above the ability of their high EC peers. In sum, the potential for low- and high-EC children to demonstrate similar adjustment dependent on their teachers' EC levels suggests value in comparing outcomes across all possible child–teacher EC pairings.

1.3. *The present study*

We examined whether children's membership in child–teacher EC pairing groups (i.e., high-high, high-low, low-high, and low-low) was related to kindergarten adjustment (i.e., basic math and reading, school liking, and closeness and conflict in student–teacher relationships) beyond the influences of other child and classroom characteristics. Considering teachers' influence on children's school adjustment, an investigation of the interplay between children's and teachers' EC may illuminate nuances in relations between children's EC and adaptive early school functioning that may differ across outcomes. Whereas high child EC might be most important for academic outcomes (irrespective of EC-similarity to the teacher), a match between child and teacher EC might be more important for building close student–teacher relationships. We hypothesized that high-EC children paired with high-EC teachers would demonstrate stronger basic math and reading skills and would enjoy school more than all other groups, followed by pairings in which either children or teachers were high in EC, and then by low-EC children paired with low-EC teachers. For relational outcomes, we hypothesized that children with similar levels of EC to their teachers (i.e., high-EC children with high-EC teachers or low-EC children with low-EC teachers) would have closer and less conflictual relationships with their teachers than would children in pairings with teachers who differ from them.

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