



Links between preschoolers' literacy interest, inattention, and emergent literacy skills



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ABSTRACT

There is strong evidence that inattention and interest are associated with academic-related skills in school-age children. However, less research has examined the unique and overlapping relations between these constructs in early childhood. This study examined the relations between inattention, literacy interest, and early literacy development in 169 preschool-age children. Inattention was assessed with both teacher reports and a continuous performance test. Literacy interest, as a component of motivation for literacy, was assessed with parent reports, and early literacy skills were assessed with the Test of Preschool Early Literacy. Inattention and literacy interest uniquely related to each other and to early literacy skills in regression analyses. Mediation analysis indicated that the relation between inattention and early literacy skills was partially mediated by children's interest in literacy. These findings indicate that literacy interest and inattentive behaviors contribute individually, directly, and indirectly to the development of early literacy skills.

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1. Introduction

Emergent literacy, defined as the “skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to reading and writing” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 848) begins to grow during preschool and is predictive of later reading skills (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008). Both a lack of interest in literacy activities (Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000; Martini & Senechal, 2012; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994) and inattentive behaviors such as those associated with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; Sims & Lonigan, 2013; Walcott, Scheemaker, & Bielski, 2010) have been linked to less development of these emergent literacy skills. Young children's interest in literacy activities may lead to better attention during literacy activities and facilitate the learning of reading and writing skills.

Although little is known about how both inattentive behaviors and a lack of literacy interest may jointly contribute to emergent literacy skills deficits, there is some evidence that interest and inattention are related (Baroody & Dobbs-Oates, 2009; Carlson & Tamm, 2000; Renninger & Wosniak, 1985; Volpe et al., 2006). Children who exhibit inattentive behaviors, such as difficulties staying focused, resisting distractions, and sitting still for extended periods of time may dislike many literacy-related activities requiring these behaviors. They may engage in these activities less often which could negatively impact emergent literacy skill development. This study examined how both interest and inattention individually as well as jointly contribute to emergent literacy skills in preschoolers. This knowledge may lead to the development of

curriculum, teaching practices, and preschool programs better able to enhance literacy skill development in children who exhibit inattention.

1.1. Literacy interest and emergent literacy skills

Literacy interest refers to how often children choose to engage in literacy related games, toys, or activities and how much they enjoy these types of activities (Frijters et al., 2000; Hume, Lonigan, & McQueen, 2012; Mason, Stewart, Peterman, & Dunning, 1992; Sperling & Head, 2002; Thomas, 1984). Literacy interest has been shown to be related to both emergent literacy skills and later reading achievement (Frijters et al., 2000; Martini & Senechal, 2012; Morrow, 1983; Scarborough, Dobrich, & Hagar, 1991; Thomas, 1984). It is thought that literacy interest contributes to emergent literacy skills by increasing children's exposure to literacy (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Children lacking literacy interest may be less willing to learn initial reading skills or to hone these skills by engaging in literacy-related activities (Hume et al., 2012).

Numerous studies have demonstrated how literacy interest is linked to literacy skills both concurrently and across time. Concurrently, parent reported reading interest was significantly correlated with a variety of early literacy skills in a study of preschoolers in Head Start programs (Bracken & Fischel, 2008) and direct measures of children's interest in literacy activities were related to alphabet knowledge and emergent reading in 4- and 5-year-old children (Baroody & Diamond, 2012; Martini & Senechal, 2012). Children's positive attitudes towards literacy activities significantly correlated with letter-name and letter-sound knowledge in kindergarteners (Frijters et al., 2000). Furthermore,

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parent reports of children's interest and involvement in reading activities at the beginning of kindergarten predicted reading comprehension through 3rd grade (Mason et al., 1992). In fact, it has been estimated that roughly 14% of the variance in language and literacy outcomes could be accounted for by early interest in literacy (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994).

In the current study, literacy interest was conceptualized as an aspect of motivation for literacy and measured by parents reporting on questions regarding how often children chose to engage in literacy-related activities and how much they enjoyed literacy activities. The wider construct of motivation for literacy is multidimensional and includes aspects of literacy interest, competence and efficacy beliefs, and the value/importance children place on literacy (Baker & Scher, 2002; Wigfield, 1997; Wilson & Trainin, 2007). However, literacy interest was the focus of the current paper because it may be the most relevant aspect of motivation for literacy for pre-readers. Many aspects of literacy motivation measured in older children may not have developed in preschoolers who are just beginning to engage in reading-related activities. For example, preschool children may not understand the importance of these skills to long-term development or have accurate perceptions of their own reading ability levels. Interest, however, is thought to already begin developing in preschool-age children (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010).

Prior studies have found parent reports to be a useful way of examining children's literacy interest (Baroody & Dobbs-Oates, 2009; Bracken & Fischel, 2008; McCormick & Mason, 1986; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005). It is possible that parents' reports may not completely isolate the construct of literacy interest and parents also may be reporting on additional characteristics of their child (such as the literacy skills of their child) or their own values or interests on such measures. However, parent reports of literacy interest are correlated with observations of children's interest (Ortiz, Stowe, & Arnold, 2001) and have been shown to be related to literacy skills but not to other characteristics of parents or children (Baroody & Dobbs-Oates, 2009; Hume et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2005). Bracken and Fischel demonstrated that parent reports of their child's reading interest were separate from their reports of their own reading interest and reading interactions with their children in a principal component analysis (Bracken & Fischel, 2008). Parent reports of literacy interest are also shown to be stable across time (Hume et al., 2012; Ortiz et al., 2001). Further, few well-established observational or direct measures of literacy interest are available for young children and the validity of these measures has been questioned (see Baroody & Dobbs-Oates, 2009; Hume et al., 2012; Ortiz et al., 2001).

1.2. Inattention and emergent literacy skills

Inattention is a term often used to describe a set of problem behaviors that are typically associated with ADHD such as distractibility, avoidance of tasks that require effort, forgetfulness, difficulty listening, failure to follow through with tasks, and difficulty sustaining attention over time. In school-age children, inattentive behaviors are associated with a variety of academic difficulties, ranging from general achievement deficits (Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2005) to specific Reading Disability (Dykman & Ackerman, 1991; Pennington, Groisser, & Welsh, 1993; Willcutt & Pennington, 2000). Evidence for this pattern has been found through categorical examinations of diagnosed children (Willcutt, Pennington, & DeFries, 2000) and dimensional investigations of children with normative ranges of both inattentive behaviors and reading difficulties (Zumberge, Baker, & Manis, 2007).

Studies conducted with preschool-age children also support the linkage between inattentive behaviors and literacy skills. For example, Lonigan et al. (1999) reported that inattentive behaviors in preschool were negatively correlated with emergent literacy skills. In a study by Sims and Lonigan (2013), measures of inattention (but not hyperactivity) were associated with early literacy skills in preschoolers. Inattentive

behaviors in preschool also have been linked to early literacy skills, including phonemic awareness and letter naming, measured one year later (Walcott et al., 2010). Thus, there is evidence that inattentive behaviors are associated with reading-related skills in both early and middle childhood. Further, the relation between inattentive behaviors and academic skill development appears to emerge before the beginning of formal education (see Spira & Fischel, 2005, for review).

1.3. Inattention and interest

Inattentive behaviors may be associated with reading-related difficulties because they contribute to a lack of interest in literacy activities. Children who avoid tasks that require effort, are forgetful, have difficulty listening, and have difficulty sustaining attention may have little interest in activities related to literacy. For example, they may not enjoy being read to, attempting to write words, looking at picture books independently, or attempting to decode printed materials. These children would then have less engagement during literacy activities and possibly less exposure to literacy activities, leading to fewer opportunities to develop literacy skills.

There are only a few studies in which children's behavior problems and levels of interest have been examined simultaneously. Baroody and Dobbs-Oates (2009) examined children's literacy interests and problem behaviors of preschoolers from low-income families and found that literacy interest was negatively related to teacher reports of attention problems. Results of other studies suggest that children may display reduced levels of inattentive behavior when engaged in activities they are interested in. For example, one study reported that preschool children fixated their attention and shifted their attention more toward an object they were interested in than to a comparison item (Renninger & Wozniak, 1985). Also, children with ADHD diagnoses more often prefer highly interesting content than do children without ADHD (Carlson & Tamm, 2000; Zentall, Moon, Hall, & Grskovic, 2001).

Several studies have investigated the relations between motivation and inattentive behavior by examining how children with ADHD approach tasks. In these studies, contingencies designed to enhance motivation have been manipulated to examine resultant changes in the performance of children with ADHD along with examining associated neurological structures (Carlson, Booth, Shin, & Canu, 2002; Holroyd, Baker, Kerns, & Muller, 2008; Howse, Lange, Farran, & Boyles, 2003; Volpe et al., 2006). Children with ADHD have difficulty maintaining effort during specific cognitive and behavioral tasks (e.g., Wilkison, Kircher, McMahon, & Sloane, 1995). Other research demonstrates that behavioral techniques employing reward and cost contingencies—and presumably enhancing interest and other motivational factors—are effective at improving behavior in children with ADHD (Baer & Nietzel, 1991; Pelham et al., 2000). Increasing motivation with external contingencies also has been shown to improve the performance of children with ADHD on cognitive tasks (Corkum, Schachar, & Siegel, 1996; Pelham, Milich, & Walker, 1986) and attenuate the differences between the performance of children with and without ADHD. Further, studies have found that similar neurologic structures (Holroyd et al., 2008) and chemicals (Rubia et al., 2009) relate both to ADHD symptoms and to motivation.

Research also supports the link between the broader constructs of behavior problems, motivational variables, and academic skills in school-age children. In kindergartners, teacher-rated motivation and self-regulation measures are correlated with each other and both are correlated with reading ability (Howse et al., 2003). A study of 1st through 4th graders with ADHD and academic problems provides evidence for a possible mediating effect of interest on academic skills (Volpe et al., 2006). In this study, a path model indicated that ADHD symptoms' effects on both reading and math achievement were through motivation, which directly impacted study skills and engagement. Motivational factors may even begin to impact performance on

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