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## School engagement trajectories in adolescence: The role of peer likeability and popularity



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### ABSTRACT

This accelerated longitudinal study examined how peer status (i.e., peer likeability and popularity) is involved in adolescents' school engagement trajectories. A large sample of students was followed from Grades 7 to 11 ( $N = 1116$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 13.79$  years). Students' school engagement and peer status were assessed using self-reports and peer nominations, respectively. Latent growth curve modeling revealed that different engagement dimensions were differentially associated with peer status. Likeability was positively related to both behavioral and emotional engagement in Grade 7, but not to behavioral and emotional disaffection. In contrast, popularity was related to less behavioral engagement and more behavioral disaffection at the start of secondary education, but not to emotional engagement and disaffection. Moreover, students' aggressive behavior moderated the relation between popularity and behavioral engagement in Grade 7, denoting the risk of popularity in combination with average and high levels of aggression. Results suggest that adolescents' popularity may interfere with meeting academic demands in general and with showing engagement in particular.

Research suggests that student behavioral and emotional involvement in academic activities declines across their educational career (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). This places students at increased risk of school drop-out (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008), academic failure (Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2006), and internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Li & Lerner, 2011). Although several studies have tried to identify factors in students (i.e., gender) and their school environment (i.e., teacher-students relationships) that predict school engagement trajectories, only limited research has focused on students' peer relationships (Kindermann, 2007). However, in order to fully understand how school engagement develops during adolescence, more insight is needed regarding the role that peer relationships play in shaping students' school engagement trajectories. Especially in adolescence, peer relationships play a key role in students' life in general, and their academic development in particular (Li, Lynch, Kalvin, Liu, & Lerner, 2011). The current study aims to extend prior research by using a three-wave longitudinal design to investigate the role of peer status in shaping students' school engagement trajectories. Additionally, by taking a multidimensional perspective on school engagement (i.e., behavioral and emotional engagement and disaffection), as well as on peer status (i.e., peer likeability and popularity), this study aims to provide differentiated insights in the association between adolescents' school engagement and their peer social environment. These differentiated insights could be relevant for interventions, as engagement is found to be malleable and responsive to changes in the social environment (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Furthermore, this study examines how adolescents' aggressive behavior moderates the association between popularity and engagement.

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## 1. School engagement

For the purposes of this study, school engagement was defined as the quality of students' involvement with the endeavor of schooling (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008a). Using a motivational conceptualization of engagement, the current study focuses on students' behavioral and emotional involvement in learning activities (Skinner et al., 2008a). Whereas behavioral engagement is conceptualized in terms of students' action initiations, efforts, attention in class, and absorption of information, emotional engagement refers to students' emotional states during learning activities, such as interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm (Skinner et al., 2008a). In line with Skinner's conceptual model, the current study distinguishes between engagement and disaffection. Accordingly, disaffection not only refers to the absence of engagement, but also to behaviors and emotions that reflect maladaptive motivational states (Skinner et al., 2008a). Behavioral disaffection includes behaviors such as withdrawal, distraction, unpreparedness, and passivity during learning activities, whereas emotional disaffection refers to emotions such as boredom, disinterest, anxiety, and frustration (Skinner et al., 2008a).

Recently, research showed that these engagement dimensions have differential educational outcomes, thus emphasizing the importance of investigating both behavioral and emotional, as well as positive and negative dimensions of engagement (Wang, Chow, Hofkens, & Salmela-Aro, 2015). For instance, research has consistently shown associations between behavioral engagement and achievement-related outcomes (e.g., standardized tests and grades; Wang & Eccles, 2012a). For emotional engagement, research remains inconclusive regarding this association (Fredricks et al., 2004); though, it is possible that the effect of emotional engagement is operating through behavioral or cognitive engagement (i.e., investment in learning) (Archambault et al., 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012a). In contrast, both behavioral (e.g., absenteeism) and emotional (e.g., feelings of estrangement, alienation, social difficulties and isolation) disaffection have been related to school dropout (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Finn, 1989; Janosz et al., 2008).

The engagement dimensions are not only distinct in predicting educational outcomes, but in their longitudinal trajectories as well. For instance, a study by Wang et al. (2015) showed that emotional engagement significantly declined between Grades 9 and 11, whereas emotional disaffection (i.e., school burnout) remained stable over time. Previous research has found that these trajectories are characterized by variation within and between individuals (Janosz et al., 2008; Wylie & Hodgen, 2012). Nevertheless, prior research has predominantly focused on student (i.e., gender) and school (i.e., school size) characteristics as predictors of these trajectories. For instance, researchers have shown that during secondary education, girls often display higher levels of and less steep decreases in behavioral and emotional engagement compared to boys (Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2012a). At the classroom level, positive and supportive relationships with the teacher can increase students' engagement (Engels et al., 2016; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Besides teachers, peer relationships play an important role in the development of students' engagement (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012; Li et al., 2011). This is particularly true in adolescence, a period characterized by a normative decline in engagement, as well as increasing importance of peer relationships. Yet, only limited research has examined the relationship between adolescents' peer status and their engagement trajectories in a differentiated manner.

### 1.1. Peer status

Peer status is one area in the field of peer relationships that remains understudied in relation to school engagement (Kiefer & Wang, 2016). Peer status is a multidimensional construct that reflects the social position of an individual in his or her peer group (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). This study focuses on two interrelated, but distinct aspects of peer status: likeability and popularity. Peer likeability describes a person's degree of acceptance by his or her peer group. It is often determined by the difference between acceptance (i.e., being liked) and rejection (i.e., being disliked) (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Students with a high degree of likeability display, on average, higher levels of prosocial behavior and lower levels of aggression (Rubin et al., 2006), and are described by their peers as more cooperative, helpful, considerate, and socially outgoing (Asher & Coie, 1990). In contrast, popularity expresses a person's social visibility or prominence in the peer group, and can be conceptualized as the difference between popularity (i.e., being seen as popular) and unpopularity (i.e., being seen as unpopular) (Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011). Students with a high degree of popularity are often described as highly prominent and manipulative to maintain their high position in the social hierarchy (Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, & Hamm, 2011). Especially in adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly complex as adolescents differentiate more between being liked and being popular (Rubin et al., 2006; van den Berg, Burk, & Cillessen, 2015).

The different behavioral patterns of popular and well-liked students could also be differentially predictive of the school engagement dimensions. For instance, the positive social and academic behaviors of highly liked students may contribute to positive teacher-student relationships (De Laet et al., 2014), which could contribute to their behavioral and emotional engagement (Roorda et al., 2011). On the other hand, popular students, on average, tend to show more dominant, aggressive, and disobedient behavior (Gorman, Kim, & Schimmelbusch, 2002), which may increase the level of teacher-student conflict (De Laet et al., 2014). In turn, this negative teacher-student relationship could place more popular students at risk for becoming behaviorally disaffected from school (Engels et al., 2016).

### 1.2. Peer likeability and engagement

Research has revealed that peer likeability is positively associated with academic motivation, satisfaction with school, pursuit of goals to learn, interest in school, perceived academic competence, and grades (Wentzel, 2009). More specifically, being accepted in the peer group helps students to develop a sense of commitment to school and engagement in learning activities, as accepted students

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