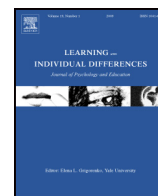




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## Effects of teacher's individualized support on children's reading skills and interest in classrooms with different teaching styles

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine whether teacher's individualized support affects students' reading skills and interest in classrooms with different teaching styles. Groups of teachers with child-centered, mixed child-centered/teacher-directed, and child-dominated teaching styles were differentiated based on observed teaching practices. The participants were 552 children (273 boys) and their 21 homeroom teachers. Teaching practices were assessed in Grade 1, teacher individualized support and students' reading skills and interest in reading were assessed twice - at the end of Grades 1 and 2. The results showed that relations between individualized support and students' later reading comprehension skills and interest differed between classrooms with different teaching styles. While individualized support enhanced interest in reading in classrooms employing mixed child-centered/teacher directed style, it inhibited interest in classrooms with child-dominated style. Also, in the classrooms with child-dominated teaching style, higher individualized support was related to lower reading comprehension skills.

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### 1. Introduction

Outside of home, teachers constitute the most proximal environmental context for young children's academic and motivational development (Hamre & Pianta, 2010), yet they differ in teaching practices, teaching styles (Hamre & Pianta, 2010; Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003; Rasku-Puttonen et al., 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004) and how they individualize their teaching (Connor et al., 2013). Several researchers have differentiated between child-centered, teacher-directed, and child-dominated teaching practices (Lerkkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, & Nurmi, 2013; Perry, Donohue, & Weinstein, 2007), and emphasized that teachers apply some combination of these practices (Stipek & Byler, 2004). So far, teaching styles as preferred combinations of teaching practices have rarely been examined. Exceptionally, Rasku-Puttonen et al. (2010) described subgroups of kindergarten teachers with child-centered (i.e., who applied dominantly child-centered practices), teacher-directed, child-dominated, and mixed child-centered/teacher-directed teaching styles. Moreover, while studies have shown differential impact of separate teaching practices on children's scholastic development (e.g. Lerkkanen et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2007), the possibility that children develop differently in classrooms with different teaching styles has not been analyzed. Also, findings on the effects of individualized practices on children's scholastic development have been inconsistent.

While some studies have shown that increased individualized instruction has a positive impact on children's skill development (Connor et al., 2013), others have not found this positive effect (Nurmi, Viljaranta, Tolvanen, & Aunola, 2012). Thus, more research is needed to clarify the contexts in which individualized support enhances or inhibits development. Although a few studies have examined how student characteristics relate to the success of individualized support (Silinskas et al., 2016), the role of teaching styles is yet to be examined in such context. As teachers with different teaching styles may conceptualize and provide individualized support differently, this knowledge is paramount for better understanding how teaching styles are applied in real classrooms.

Thus, the study aimed to examine whether the effects of individualized support on reading skills (i.e., reading fluency and comprehension) and interest differ between children in classrooms of teachers with different teaching styles. We limited our research to reading because it is among the most important skills to be acquired at the beginning of school and the skill levels at the start of the first grade vary significantly (Soodla et al., 2015). Reading fluency was analyzed because it is an important prerequisite for the ultimate aim of reading – reading comprehension (Verhoeven & van Leeuwe, 2008).

#### 1.1. Teaching practices, teaching styles and students' academic development

Based on the active, leading roles of teachers or children, three dimensions of teaching practices – child-centered, teacher-directed, and

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child-dominated – have been described. Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure (ECCOM) was developed to specifically evaluate these dimensions in teaching (Stipek & Byler, 2005; see also Lerkkanen et al., 2013). When employing child-centered practices, teachers actively organize children's learning activities. At the same time they take into account children's interests, allow children to construct their knowledge, and provide emotional support and encouragement (McCombs, 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011). When engaging in teacher-directed practices, teachers give detailed tasks and frequent feedback, praise children for correct answers rather than effort, and children have to usually follow teacher directions (Gettinger & Kohler, 2011; Stipek & Byler, 2004; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011). Unlike the first two practices, teachers remain quite passive when using child-dominated practices. They respond to children's questions and interrupt only when violations of discipline occur, give feedback when asked but rarely provide emotional support (Lerkkanen, Kikas, et al., 2012; Lerkkanen et al., 2013; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011).

Previous studies have examined either separate effects of child-centered, teacher-directed, and child-dominated practices (Kikas, Peets, & Hodges, 2014; Perry et al., 2007; Stipek & Byler, 2004) or the effects of the composite score of child-centered and teacher-directed practices (Hauser-Cram et al., 2003; Lerkkanen, Kiuru, et al., 2012). Studies have consistently indicated the benefits of child-centered practices for academic and motivational development, especially for literacy (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Guthrie, Wigfield, & von Secker, 2000; Lerkkanen, Kiuru, et al., 2012; Pakarinen et al., 2010). It has also been shown that teacher-directed practices are effective in kindergarten and primary school for students with poorer academic skills, and/or when acquiring basic skills (Huffman & Speer, 2000; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995); however, these inhibit motivation (Lerkkanen, Kiuru, et al., 2012; Stipek et al., 1995). A few studies that have examined child-dominated practices indicated that these practices tend to hinder social development (Valeski & Stipek, 2001). However, Kikas et al. (2014) found that the negative effect of child-dominated practices on literacy skills and task-persistent behavior was visible only in classrooms with low initial math skills.

One observational study with ECCOM has identified four subgroups of kindergarten teachers with child-centered, teacher-directed, child-dominated, and mixed child-centered/teacher-directed teaching styles (i.e., preferred combinations of respective teaching practices; Rasku-Puttonen et al., 2010). However, so far, no studies have explored the effects of teaching styles on children's academic development.

### 1.2. Individualized teacher support and students' academic development

Besides providing activities for the whole class, teachers also support students individually. Empirical findings on the effect of individualized support have been inconsistent: Some studies have found a positive effect of adapting reading instruction to students' literacy skills (Connor et al., 2013) whereas others have failed to find these effects (e.g. Kikas, Silinskas, & Soodla, 2015; Nurmi et al., 2012; Torgesen, 2000). Several factors were found to evoke the frequency and the type of individualized support. For instance, some studies (Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) have shown that teachers provide more support for students who are more engaged in learning (i.e., put more effort into learning activities) while other studies (e.g., Sarrazin, Tessier, Pelletier, Troulloud, & Chanal, 2006) have found that more support is given to students whose level of motivation (conceptualized as a student's effort and autonomous work) was expected to be low. From one side, it might be more enjoyable and easier for a teacher to support a child who is interested in reading. From another side, the teacher may be cognizant that higher support can increase motivation and consequently provide more support to students with lower interest (Deci & Ryan, 2000). One of the important components of learning motivation is interest, which plays a role in literacy development as early as in

the first grade (Ecalte, Magnan, & Gibert, 2006). However, a study that evaluated the role of interest in evocating higher teacher support did not find any effect (Kikas et al., 2015).

Teachers with different teaching styles may differ in the emphases and ways of providing individualized support. Teachers with child-centered style are sensitive to students' individual needs and provide multifaceted emotional and instructional support with encouragement and personal feedback (McCombs, 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011). Teachers with teacher-directed style pay attention to student's skill level, praise children for correct answers and give specific instructions on how to solve a task, but rarely provide emotional support (Gettinger & Kohler, 2011; Stipek & Byler, 2004; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011). Individualized support is not emphasized in the child-dominated style, but teachers may respond individually to each child's questions (Lerkkanen, Kikas et al., 2012; Lerkkanen et al., 2013; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011). Thus, it is possible that teachers with different teaching styles both react differently to students' low skills and interest and vary their levels of individualized support. So far, no studies have compared the effects of individualized support in classrooms with teachers who employ different teaching styles.

### 1.3. The current study

This study examined whether the effects of individualized support on reading skills and interest differ depending on the classrooms (i.e., teachers utilizing different teaching styles). Teachers with child-centered, child-dominated, and mixed child-centered/teacher-directed styles participated in the study. We expected individualized support in child-centered and mixed classrooms to have a positive effect on both skills and interest. Child-centered teaching emphasizes autonomy and choice, and studies have shown the supportive role of child-centered practices on academic and motivational development (Curby et al., 2009; Guthrie et al., 2000; Lerkkanen, Kiuru, et al., 2012; Pakarinen et al., 2010; Perry et al., 2007). A mixed style also includes didactic teacher-centered practices, which can enhance reading fluency (Huffman & Speer, 2000; Stipek et al., 1995). Finally, we expected the individualized support in child-dominated classrooms to have a negative effect on all studied outcomes (reading fluency, comprehension, and interest). Child-dominated practices are characterized by paying no attention to individual needs (Lerkkanen, Kikas et al., 2012; Lerkkanen et al., 2013; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2011), and these teachers might only occasionally provide individualized support in literacy.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

In total, 552 children (273 boys; mean age at the beginning of the study 88.31 months;  $SD = 3.95$ ) from seven schools and 21 classrooms (mean size = 23.48 children;  $SD = 2.46$ ) and their homeroom teachers (all female, age range 24–57 years; teaching experience from less than a year to >15 years) participated in the study. A total of 7.0% of mothers and 9.3% of fathers had nine years or less of formal education, 45.6% of mothers and 51.7% of fathers had high school education, and 43.9% of mothers and 33.3% of fathers had a higher level of education. The same teachers taught literacy (and all main subjects) in the participating classrooms throughout the first two school years.

### 2.2. Procedure

First, the researchers contacted school principals and teachers to inform them about the project and invited them to participate. Second, parents were asked to sign informed consent for their children. The consent rate was 93.5%.

Children's reading skills and interest were assessed at the end of Grade 1 and Grade 2 (April–May) by research assistants. A group-

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