



A longitudinal study of psychological functioning and academic attainment at the transition to secondary school



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ABSTRACT

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Gender differences

This longitudinal study of adolescents in the first year of secondary school, examined the relationship between psychological functioning at the beginning of year 7 (mean age 11.25 years) with attainment at the end of year 7 (mean age 11.78 years). Depressive symptoms, school liking and conduct problems predicted lower attainment across time having controlled for the temporal stability in psychological functioning and attainment. School concerns predicted lower attainment for boys only, and the effects of depressive symptoms on later attainment were significantly stronger for boys compared to girls. School liking – and school concerns for boys – remained significant predictors of attainment when controlling for conduct problems. The transition to secondary school may represent a window of opportunity for developing interventions aimed at improving both pupil psychological functioning and attainment.

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Periods of transition are often stressful and can influence short and long-term psychological functioning (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2008). The World Bank World Development Report (2007) identifies the transition from primary or elementary to secondary or middle/junior high school as one of five transitions related to positive health outcomes for young people. This transition involves simultaneous changes in school environments, social interactions and academic expectations and involves a degree of anxiety for most pupils (Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011). This transition usually occurs at the age of 11 years and coincides with other biological and social changes associated with the transition from childhood to adolescence. The primary–secondary transition can negatively affect pupils' adjustment in a number of ways, as shown by lower grades, low attendance, increased anxiety and conduct problems (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgeber, 2000; Benner & Graham, 2009; Galton, Morrison, & Pell, 2000; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). However, the relationship between psychological functioning and academic attainment during and immediately after school transition is unclear.

Transition periods have been suggested as potentially useful points to introduce intervention programs (Vitaro & Tremblay, 2008). Moreover, the school environment and the connection of parents and children to their school are implicated in positive health outcomes and therefore, schools have been identified as offering an opportunity for effective intervention (Viner et al., 2012). Most schools implement formal programs to support pupils through school transition, although these vary considerably in content and focus (Evangelou et al., 2008). One important marker of transition success is academic attainment as measured by school grades. Academic attainment has well established associations with outcomes later in life such as occupational status, income and health (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). We set out to test if academic attainment

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following transition is predicted by psychological functioning (emotional problems; affect towards school; conduct problems) at the start of secondary school. If psychological functioning does predict attainment following transition, it is a potential target for interventions rather than, or in addition to, academic attainment. Although there is literature that examines the association of psychological functioning with academic attainment (e.g. Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Burt & Roisman, 2010; Hinshaw, 1992; van Lier et al., 2012; Miech, Caspi, Moffitt, Wright, & Silva, 1999; Moilanen, Shaw, & Maxwell, 2010) little, if any, focuses on associations around the period of transition to secondary school. We focus on the first year of secondary school as an important period of vulnerability during which schools may be able to implement interventions. Nearly all pupils express some concerns about moving to secondary school. For most, however, worries about transition appear to be temporary and decline during the first year (Galton et al., 2000; Lucey & Reay, 2000; Rice et al., 2011). Thus, pupils with persistent difficulties across the first year of secondary may represent a vulnerable group.

Psychological functioning and academic attainment

Emotional problems

Research on the relationship between emotional problems and academic attainment has yielded inconsistent findings (e.g. Richards & Abbot, 2009). One possible reason for inconsistency is that emotional problems have been conceptualized and measured in different ways across studies. Considering emotional problems as a whole, a number of studies have failed to find significant associations with on-going academic attainment or competence both in childhood and through adolescence (e.g. Ansary & Luthar, 2009; Burt & Roisman, 2010; van Lier et al., 2012; Moilanen et al., 2010).

Specifically regarding depression, a number of studies have found an association between depressive symptoms and attainment across adolescence both within and across time, controlling for baseline attainment (e.g. Fröjd et al., 2008; Steele, Armistead, & Forehand, 2000). However, the temporal direction of effects remains unclear with other studies reporting that lower attainment predicts increases in depressive symptoms (Pomerantz, Altermatt, & Saxon, 2002). Most research focuses on adolescent depression and examines academic outcomes in late adolescence or early adulthood. Given that there are developmental differences in the prevalence, risk factor profile and aetiology of depressive symptoms during childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Jaffee et al., 2002; Rice, 2010), examining the relationship between depressive symptoms and attainment in early adolescence may give a different pattern of results which are more directly relevant to transition.

For anxiety, again, there is an inconsistent pattern of association. Several studies have found associations with lower academic attainment, but these have often investigated social anxiety rather than general anxiety (e.g. Van Armeringen, Mancini, & Frarvolden, 2003; Weeks, Coplan, & Kingsbury, 2009). One study which looked at different kinds of anxiety in childhood found generalized anxiety to be associated with a greater likelihood of graduating from high school (Borges et al., 2011). Indeed, a study of university students found that anxiety was associated concurrently with *better* academic performance, suggesting that worrying does not adversely affect attainment (Svanum & Zody, 2001). Instead, fear and apprehension associated with attainment during school transition may be best captured by affect or anxiety about school rather than a general index of anxiety. Separate examination of the effects of general anxiety, school anxiety and depression on academic attainment may help to clarify temporal associations. We hypothesized that depressive symptoms would show association with poorer academic attainment over time but that general anxiety would not.

Affect towards school

Research illustrating the importance of school for psychological well-being includes evidence that interventions to change the school climate have positive effects on pupil psychological functioning and attainment (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004). Sense of school community, including factors such as liking school and concerns about moving to secondary school are found to be associated with measures of mental health (Rice et al., 2011; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; West et al., 2008). These may, therefore, also be an important target for transition interventions. However, findings regarding the relation between affect towards school and academic achievement have not been as conclusive and prospective, longitudinal research is needed (Hagborg, 1994; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Despite the relative lack of prospective longitudinal research, on the basis of prior research, we hypothesized a bi-directional relationship between school affect and academic attainment. Pupils doing well academically are likely to have greater connectedness to school; positive school affect, in turn, is likely to promote greater engagement and motivation in school activities and work.

Conduct problems

Evidence suggests that conduct problems have a stronger and more consistent influence on academic attainment at school in comparison to emotional problems (Kessler, Foster, Saunders, & Stang, 1995; Richards & Abbot, 2009). Studies have shown that conduct problems increase the likelihood of underachievement from childhood through adolescence and young adulthood (Hinshaw, 1992; Miech et al., 1999; Moilanen et al., 2010). Unlike for emotional problems, the association between conduct problems and later academic attainment is well documented. However, the relationship has not specifically been examined at the transition to secondary school. Nonetheless, we expected to observe a similar association whereby conduct problems at the transition would be associated with poorer subsequent academic attainment.

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