

Predictors of Children's Classroom Engagement and Educational Resilience across the Preschool-School Transition

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AEDI	Australian Early Developmental Index
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
BIC	Schwarz Bayesian Criterion
BRF-R	Behavior Rating Form-Revised
CD	Conduct Disorder
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CPRS	Child-Parent Relationship Scale
DECS	Department of Education and Children's Services
DFA	Discriminant Function Analysis
ECLS-K	Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten cohort
EFA	Exploratory factor analysis
FILE	Family Inventory of Life Events
GHQ-12	General Health Questionnaire (12-item version)
ISI	Item separation index
LBS/ PLBS	Learning Behaviors Scale/ Preschool Learning Behaviors Scale
LIS-YC	Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children
LSAC	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
LTE-Q	List of Threatening Experiences Questionnaire
MANOVA	Multivariate Analysis of Variance
NFI	Normed Fit Index
NICHD	National Institute of Child Health and Development
ODD	Oppositional Defiant Disorder
PSI	Person separation index
RAPS	Rochester Assessment Package for Schools engagement scale
RAPS-R	Rochester Assessment Package for Schools engagement scale - Revised
RCT	Randomised controlled trial
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SES-TV	Self-Efficacy Scale - Teacher Version

SES	Socio-economic status
SLSA	School Liking and School Avoidance Scale
SSRS	Social Skills Rating Scale
STRS	Student-Teacher Relationship Scale
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
TRSSA	Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment

ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis was to determine how three key preschool factors - children's relationships with adults, self-concept and mental health problems - predicted their classroom engagement during their first year of school. The preschool-school transition represents a 'window of opportunity' where appropriate intervention efforts may help enhance children's engagement, a critical aspect of adjusting to school. However, a major barrier in developing effective interventions is that little is known regarding the mechanisms by which key factors predict engagement in the early school years. To address this limitation, this thesis tested a social-motivational model which specifies that parent-child and teacher-child relationships indirectly promote children's engagement, by first strengthening their self-concept and mental health. Engagement was also examined from a resilience perspective, conceptualised as 'better than expected' engagement given children's experience of cumulative risk.

Participants were 575 young children recruited from the 27 preschools within one South Australian school district. Data were collected from their parents and teachers across three waves at yearly intervals, using a longitudinal prospective design. In preschool, both parents and preschool teachers completed questionnaires assessing the quality of children's parent-child and teacher-child relationships, self-concept and mental health problems. Parents also reported on several family risk factors (e.g., parental psychological distress and unemployment, single parent households). One year later, teachers rated children's classroom engagement levels in their first year of school. Additionally, a randomly selected sub-sample of children were interviewed and observed regarding their engagement during a normal school day. Finally, in the third study year, teachers reported on children's school progress, disciplinary action, absences and lateness. A range of path analytic techniques were used to test the hypothesised associations between these variables.

Results showed that good quality relationships with parents and teachers during preschool were indirectly associated with children's subsequent classroom engagement,

through their associations with preschool self-concept and mental health problems. With all predictor variables included in the model, only preschool mental health problems was uniquely related to children's engagement. Associations between mental health problems and engagement were similar for boys and girls. However, boys showed significantly higher levels of externalising problems and lower levels of engagement. Similar mediating mechanisms operated in contexts of risk, by predicting children's resilience (i.e., 'better than expected' engagement).

Children's relationships with parents and teachers, and their self-concept and mental health problems are important predictors of their subsequent classroom engagement. These preschool markers could be used to identify groups of children at risk of developing low engagement. Furthermore, interventions that target these factors may boost children's engagement, helping them start school ready and eager to learn. Although these interventions may benefit boys and girls equally, boys may need more intensive support to help them start school on more equal footing with girls. Furthermore, the same intervention efforts may help both high- and low-risk children. Such interventions may disrupt pathways leading to poor engagement among at-risk children, while also equipping other children with the strengths they need to cope with adverse circumstances *before* any such risk is experienced.

DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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