SOCIAL INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL

By

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ABSTRACT

Children's social relationships have been linked with various indicators of their school engagement. This overview of the current literature examines evidence concerning the processes through which children's relationships with teachers, parents, and peers positively or negatively contribute to children's engagement in school. In this paper, we advance the argument that peers have a more direct and substantial influence on children's school engagement than either teachers or parents. Moreover, we contend that the influence of parents and, to a lesser extent, teachers on children's school engagement is more often circuitous than direct. Specifically, we argue that parents and teachers impact children's peer relations, which, in turn, bear on children's school engagement.

Keywords: school engagement, teachers, parents, peer rejection, friendship, victimization

INTRODUCTION

Children's engagement in school is an influential predictor of their overall school adjustment and academic achievement (see Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Recently, researchers have explored children's social relationships as predictors of their school engagement and adjustment. This is not surprising considering the many modes of instruction which require the students' engagement with teachers and peers in social interaction. As a result, considerable investigative attention has been devoted to the hypothesis that children's social relationships may influence their engagement in the classroom.

In past years, researchers have examined how children's relationships with teachers, parents, and peers bear on children's school engagement. Generally, evidence suggests that supportive teacher and parent relationships positively influence children's school engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Connell, Spencer, & Abner, 1994). Along these lines, positive peer relations (i.e., friendship) appear to promote children's successful school adjustment (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996), whereas negative peer experiences (i.e., peer rejection, victimization) have been linked with school disengagement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).

The premise extended here is that peers, in particular,

have the potential to exert considerable influence on agemates because of the large quantities of time they spend with one another (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996). In fact, it is our contention that (1) peers have a more direct influence on children's school engagement than either parents or teachers, and (2) the influence that adults (i.e., teachers, parents) have on children's classroom engagement is through their influence on children's social development. That is, teachers and parents impact children's peer relationships and peers, and in turn, impact children's engagement in school. The goal of the current paper is to provide an appraisal of extent evidence regarding the contribution of children's relationships (with teachers, parents, and peers) to their school engagement, with a particular focus on the contributing role of children's peer relations.

Teachers' Influence on Children's Classroom Engagement

The relationships that children form with their school teachers have the potential to impact their engagement in the classroom. On the one hand, there is evidence that teachers directly influence children's academic engagement by establishing positive, supportive relationships with their students (see Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Close teacher-child relationships may provide young children with resources (e.g., emotional security,

guidance) that facilitate a positive orientation toward school. Teacher-child relationships that are characterized by conflict, however, may decrease children's classroom participation and promote negative school attitudes (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

On the other hand, teachers may indirectly impact children's engagement in school by shaping children's peer relationships within the classroom. For example, Harrist and Bradley (2003) implemented a classroom wide policy in which teachers enforced peer inclusion. Findings revealed that when the classmates are included with one another in activities, their feelings toward one another is also improved. Other findings reveal that teachers, who implement classroom activities where peer interaction occurs and collaborative learning takes place, have students who are better prepared academically and more engaged in the classroom (Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). These findings suggest that perhaps teachers' impact on children's classroom engagement is an indirect process. That is, teachers influence on their students' social relations and in turn, students' classroom engagement increases. In sum, available evidence implicates the teacher-child relationship as a potential precursor to children's school adjustment, both directly and indirectly.

Parents' Direct and Indirect Influences on Children's Classroom Engagement

Researchers have rarely investigated the premise that parents have a direct bearing on children's engagement in school. The existing research suggests, that emotional bonds with parents and parental availability are two factors that may affect children's school success. For example, Connell, Spencer, and Abner (1994) reported that children who perceived their parents as emotionally and socially supportive demonstrated greater interest in school. Moreover, findings from another study indicate that students from single-parent homes are more likely to disengage from the classroom and drop-out of school (Rosenthal, 1998). Although results from these investigations imply that parents have the potential to shape children's engagement in the classroom, an accumulating body of evidence suggests that parents

more likely affect children's academic success in indirect ways.

There is consistent support for the hypothesis that child-rearing practices predict peer relations. For example, Schwartz and colleagues (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates; 1997, 2000) have investigated longitudinal associations between punitive parenting and children's victimization. In one study conducted by this team of researchers, preschoolers whose parents utilized restrictive discipline and overly punitive parenting were more often victimized by their grade school peers. In their later study, Schwartz and colleagues found that, for children with few friends, early restrictive discipline predicted later victimization.

A second hypothesis that the nature of parent-child relationships influences children's academic engagement has also received empirical support. For example, overly close and dependent parent-child relationships appear to place youth at risk for peer victimization and rejection (Ladd & Ladd, 1998). It has been reasoned that enmeshed parent-child relations discourage children's autonomy (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994), which has the potential to interfere with their ability to establish social ties with peers. In sum, although there is some evidence that parents directly impact children's school functioning, it is our contention that, more often, parents affect peer relations, which, in turn, influence children's school achievement.

Peers' Influence on Children's School Engagement

Of all the social relationships in which children engage, the relationships they form with peers are arguably the most influential in shaping children's attitudes towards school (e.g., Ryan, 2000). Three forms of peer relationships (i.e., peer group rejection, friendship, peer victimization) have been most extensively investigated as potential predictors of children's school engagement.

Peer group rejection: Peer rejection is defined as how a child is being disliked by his or her peer group (see Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Empirical evidence has shown that being rejected by one's peer group predicts a plethora of problems in school (i.e., disengagement,

underachievement; Ladd, 2005; Ladd, Herald-Brown, & Reiser, in press). Recently, researchers have explored several explanations for the link between peer rejection and school engagement.

One hypothesis is that children who are rejected by their classmates have fewer opportunities to engage in classroom learning activities. In fact, current evidence suggests that rejected children are often excluded from classroom activities (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006) and that children who are exposed to longer periods of rejection show greater disengagement from the classroom (Ladd et al., in press). A second premise is that being exposed to peer rejection impacts children's perceptions of themselves as academically and socially competent (Boivin & Begin, 1989; Boivin & Hymel, 1997). Preliminary evidence indicates that how children view themselves socially and academically have the potential to impact their engagement and achievement in school. For example, in one study, children who viewed peers as untrustworthy tended to be less accepted by peers and performed more poorly in the classroom (Betts & Rotenberg, 2007). Thus, evidence suggests, that a) rejection limits children's opportunities for classroom engagement and, b) rejection impacts the way children view themselves and others and thus these negative views may have a detrimental effect on their school engagement. Evidence reviewed thus far implies that the negative experience of peer rejection is what drives disengagement from the classroom; however, peer groups are not the only context for children's relationships.

Friendship: In contrast to peer group relations, friendships are dyadic in nature. Friendships occur between pairs of children and are created and maintained by mutual agreement (Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1990). Recently, researchers have begun to examine what processes within friendships influence children's school engagement.

One premise that has been advanced is that friends offer children various forms of support, such as help with social or academic problems, emotional security, and physical aid (Wentzel, 1998). Several researchers have argued that these varied forms of support are important to promote

classroom engagement (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999; Ladd et al., 1996). For example, Ladd and colleagues (1996) found that children who perceived their friendships as supportive also viewed their classrooms as environments conducive to learning. Another study revealed that children who felt supported by their peers were more engaged in the classroom (Wentzel, 1998). This research implies that participation in friendships makes children feel supported, which, in turn, promotes engagement in the classroom.

In contrast, a second premise is that friendships may be a source of conflict rather than support. Researchers studying this hypothesis have found that children who have high levels of conflict within their friendships have negative attitudes toward school and are often disengaged from the classroom (e.g., Ladd et al., 1996). This line of work indicates that friendships don't always contribute positively to children's engagement in the classroom, especially when the friendship is characterized by conflict.

A third hypothesis is that children may model their friends' academic goals. Evidence from one study supports this claim by showing that children whose friends had high academic standards altered their own behaviors in ways that promoted high achievement (Wentzel, Filisetti, & Looney, 2007). Therefore, modeling may be one way that friends affect peers' classroom engagement. Together, these hypotheses imply that friendships both positively and negatively influence children's engagement in school.

Peer victimization: Peer victimization is traditionally conceptualized as a child's repeated exposure to negative actions inflicted by one or more peers (Olweus, 2001) and is understood to encompass both face to face confrontation (e.g., physical aggression, verbal abuse, etc.) and social manipulation through a third party (i.e., relational aggression, spreading rumors; Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Not surprisingly, victimization has been linked with various problems in school (e.g., low grades, poor academic readiness, school avoidance; Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Ladd et al., 1997; Lopez & DuBois, 2005) and; therefore,

researchers have begun examining the processes through which peer victimization impacts children's classroom engagement.

There is accruing support for the hypothesis that victimization incites psychological and physical distress, which, in turn, interferes with classroom engagement. On the one hand, Ladd and colleagues (1997) found that victimized, as compared to non-victimized, children frequently avoided school and reported higher levels of loneliness (i.e., psychological distress) in school. On the other hand, Greco et al. (2006) reported that the combination of peer victimization and chronic abdominal pain (i.e., physical distress) was predictive of poor academic competence (i.e., decreased cooperation in the classroom). In another study, peer victimization forecasted gains in *both* physical and psychological health problems, which, in turn, predicted school functioning (e.g., absences, poor GPA; Nishina et al., 2005). In sum, extent research appears to corroborate the view that victimization contributes to poor psychological and physical health, both of which have the potential to adversely affect children's school engagement.

Conclusions

The premise explored within this review is that peers are arguably the most influential social relationship for shaping children's attitudes towards their engagement in school. It is our contention that, while teachers and parents are vital in shaping children's orientation towards school, peers are often the catalyst through which adults influence children. We can recognize the importance of teachers and parents, but should stress the contributions of peers in developing and maintaining children's engagement in the classroom. In light of these findings, greater research is needed to explore the processes through which peers influence children's adjustment to school.

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