

Teachers' Supports and Children's Engagement: Testing for Bidirectional Associations¹

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Our recent study examined links between teachers' supports for learning and children's engagement over the course of a typical preschool day. Two aspects of teachers' behaviors were explored: emotional and organizational supports. Four aspects of children's engagement were examined: positive engagement with teachers, peers, and tasks, as well as negative engagement. We found teacher-provided supports were related to children's engagement later in the school day. In two instances, there was a bidirectional relationship in which children's behaviors influenced teachers' later provision of emotional and organizational supports.

There has been long-standing recognition that classrooms can best be understood in terms of the bidirectional exchanges between teachers and children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). However, to date, most research has studied teachers' effects on children, with little research that examines children's effects on teachers, and even less that explicitly examines the bidirectional behavioral exchanges between teachers and children.

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We hypothesized that higher emotional support and classroom organization earlier in the day would be linked with more positive engagement with teachers, tasks, and peers and less negative engagement later in the day. We also expected effects of children's engagement on teachers' later emotional and organizational supports but that these effects would be smaller in magnitude.

The Study

This study used data from the second year of the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCRECE) Professional Development Study. 314 teachers and 606 preschool children were

observed in the classroom. Of the children in the subsample, 48% of students were Black or African American and 31% were Hispanic or Latino, and the sample had an average income-to-needs ratio of 1.15 (a ratio of 1 indicates a family at the poverty line).

Teachers were observed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) providing information about their Emotional Support and Classroom Organization. Children's engagement was observed using the Individualized CLASS (inCLASS; Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010). During a day of observation, each teacher was observed with the CLASS, followed by one child with the inCLASS, and then another child with the inCLASS. This sequence was repeated 3-4 times.

Findings

Both Emotional Support and Classroom Organization were tested for bidirectional effects with Positive Engagement with Teachers, Tasks, and Peers as well as Negative Engagement. This resulted in 8 models for which results are summarized in Figure 1. Figure 1A presents results for Emotional Support. Figure 1B presents results for Classroom Organization.

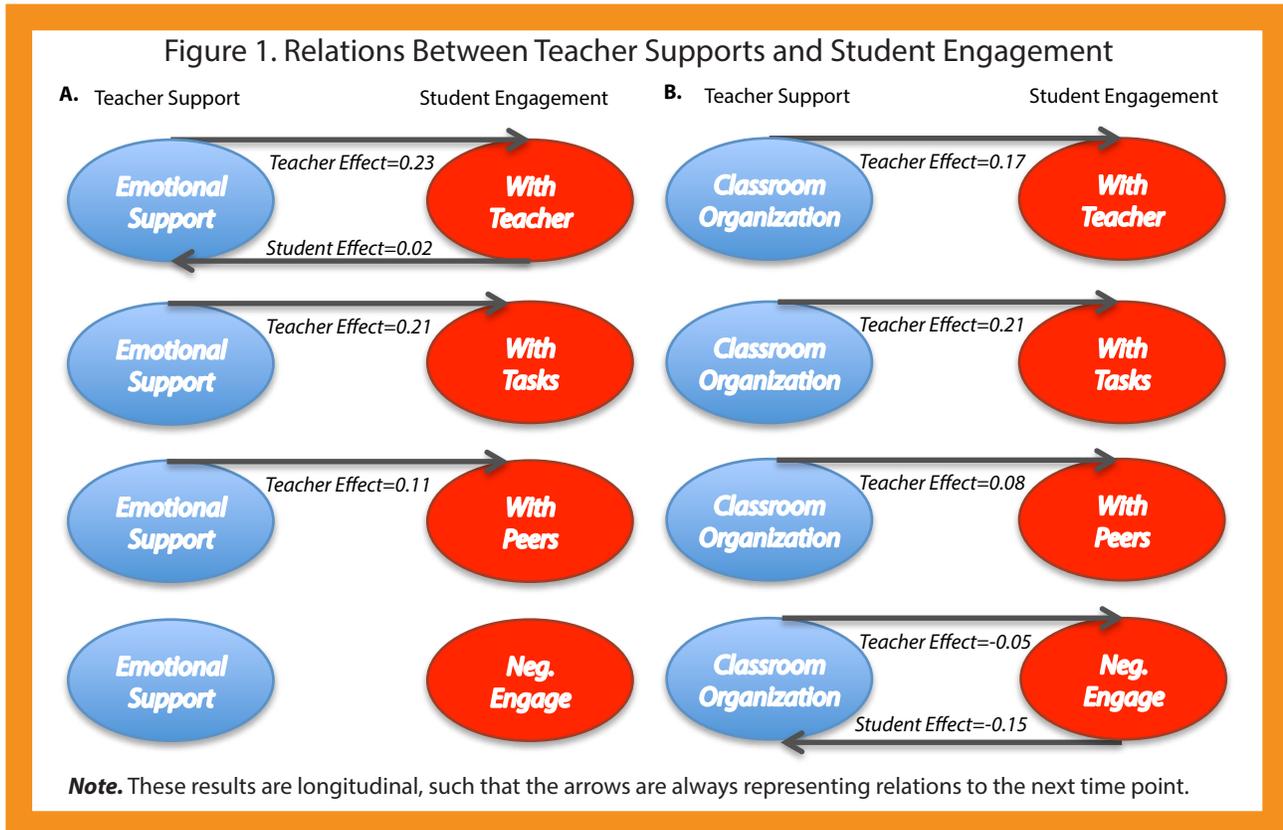
Readily apparent are that teacher behaviors [blue] were related to later child behaviors [red] in 7 of the 8 models. Also apparent is that children's behavior was related to teachers' behavior in 2 of those 7 models, indicating bidirectional associations. Finally, the

¹This research brief is based on the following published study: Curby, T. W., Downer, J. T., & Booren, L. M. (In Press). Behavioral exchanges between teachers and children over the course of a typical preschool day: Testing bidirectional associations. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.01.002>

magnitude of the teacher-to-child effects tended to be larger than child-to-teacher effects.

The results suggest that while students sometimes influence their teachers' behaviors, teachers tend to have the largest influence on students. Classrooms with emotionally supportive teachers appeared to facilitate children's later engagement with each other, with the teacher, and with tasks.

associations indicate that addressing children's social-emotional needs is an effective way to help children positively engage. The classroom organization associations suggest that orderly classrooms provide a framework for children to positively engage with their environment, perhaps helping to foster classroom-based self-regulation. Interestingly, emotional support may not be



Organizational supports in the classroom were related to a smaller degree to all three aspects of students' positive engagement, and higher levels of organization tended to result in lower levels of negative engagement. Children's behaviors were reciprocally associated with teacher supports in two areas of engagement: specifically, students' negative engagement potentially interfered with the overall classroom organization later provided by the teacher, and to a lesser extent, students' positive interactions with their teacher encouraged a higher degree of emotional support.

Implications

Teacher support in the preschool classroom matters for how children later engage with teachers, tasks, and peers. In particular, the emotional support

an effective way to head off children's negative engagement, but classroom organization does seem to help. Together, these patterns of associations provide further evidence of the powerful role that teachers play within preschool classrooms and suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing teachers' emotional and organizational support may ultimately help children engage positively as well.

However, there were also signs that children's engagement under some circumstances may serve as a key contributing factor to teachers' provision of classroom supports. This indicates the need to recognize the complexity of classroom dynamics, particularly when considering classroom management and children's negative, challenging behaviors