Literacy interest and reader self-concept when formal reading instruction begins

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A B S T R A C T
The present study examines the associations among literacy interest, reader self-concept and emergent literacy skills at the very start of formal reading instruction in 1171 five- and six-year-olds. The results indicate that emergent literacy skills are directly related to reader self-concept but not to literacy interest. Further, interest moderated the relationship between emergent skills and self-concept. School starters with high literacy interest demonstrated strong reader self-concept, even if their emergent literacy skills were poor. These results suggest that the early motivational dynamics associated with the emergence of reading skill may be more complex than previous research has found them to be. The observed dynamics may have implications for the emergence of reading skill during this specific period of changing developmental context.

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1. Introduction

Having adequate reading skills is a prerequisite for text comprehension and hence for success in school, at work and in everyday life (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). The development of reading skills, as a prerequisite to becoming literate, represents one of the most significant academic tasks that children undertake during their primary school years. As children engage in learning tasks at school, they develop an awareness of their own performance (i.e., reader self-concept) and comparison with classmates begins (Ames, 1992). Once these evaluative processes are in place, failure in accomplishing reading tasks can harm the development of a sense of competence. Given that learning to read is the first academic task encountered in school, a lack of success in learning to read will often entail severe consequences for a student’s overall self-image (Bandura, 2002; Stanovich, 1986). In order to protect that overall self-image, students may reduce the level of value or interest that they assign to tasks associated with poor performance on their part (Covington, 1998; Harter, 1982; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-kean, 2007). Given that students who are struggling with learning how to read often need extensive time on task in order to acquire adequate reading skills, being interested in literacy and having high levels of self-efficacy might be especially important for the reading development of these students.

One major limitation of research specifically addressing interest in and motivation for reading is a relative lack of studies carried out at the point in time when reading skill emerges: at the very start of children’s school careers. While previous research has shown that school starters generally have a strong interest in reading, several studies also show that, only a few months into the first grade, the poorest readers already have a weaker reader self-concept than their peers (Chapman, Tunner, & Prochnow, 2000; Morgan, Fuchs, Compton, Cordray, & Fuchs, 2008). However, we know little about how early the forming of students’ reader self-concept begins and about whether such differences in self-concept are already evident when formal reading instruction starts. Having information about students’ level of interest and their reader self-concept at this developmental stage may make teachers better able to adapt their reading instruction to the individual student. To our knowledge, no previous large-scale study has specifically investigated both interest in reading-related activities and reader self-concept at this developmental stage. The present study addresses literacy interest and reader self-concept at the very start of formal reading instruction in school in a sample of 1171 first-graders. First, we investigate whether children’s interest and self-concept are associated with their level of emergent literacy skills. Second, we investigate associations of skill and interest with reader self-concept for different groups of readers.

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1.1. Previous research in the field

Perceptions of competence are associated with the amount of interest taken in, or the value placed on, tasks or activities within the same domain (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Eccles, 1983; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002). However, research also suggests that even if children think that they are competent at an activity and are able to perform it efficaciously, they may still not engage much in that activity if they are not much interested in it or do not value it highly (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Interest in reading is important for reading acquisition, because children who are interested driven tend to spend more time reading for leisure, are likely to devote more effort to literacy tasks and are, for this reason, more likely to become skilled readers than their peers who are less interested in reading activities (Ecalle, Magnan, & Gibert, 2006; Malloy, Marinak, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2013).

In the expectancy-value model of motivation, children’s self-concept in a given domain is directly associated with their expectations to succeed in that domain as well as with the value that they place on activities related to that domain (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfield, 1993). This aspect of the expectancy-value model is in line with results from a Finnish longitudinal study (Nurmi & Aunola, 2005) where task value—defined as the level of children’s interest in a particular school subject during their first school years—reflected changes in the children’s feeling of competence relating to the subject in question. On the basis of that finding, the Finnish researchers suggest that task value (i.e., interest) may be a driving force behind changes in children’s self-concept during their first years of school (Nurmi & Aunola, 2005). In studies on older students, the development of interest has been claimed to provide a basis for children’s feeling of competence in relation to different subjects in school, and there is evidence that the initial development of interest precedes the development of children’s feelings of competence, and that once both have developed, there is a reciprocal association between them (Renninger, Hidi, & Krapp, 2014; Renninger & Hidi, 2016).

As children progress through the school years, there seems to be a substantial correlation between the development of their interest, self-concept and reading skill; some studies have even found reciprocal relationships between these constructs (Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron, Linnenbrink-Garcia, & Tauer, 2008; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2005). Students who are good at reading tend to think of themselves as good readers, they engage more frequently in reading activities, and they make rapid progress as readers. Analogously, students with a weak reader self-concept are often poor readers, are more likely to avoid reading activities, and as a consequence often remain low-performing readers. Children who have entered this vicious circle of low interest in reading and negative expectations about their own performance often struggle to find ways to develop proficient reading skills (Poskiparta, Niemi, Lepola, Ahtola, & Laine, 2003; Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 1994).

1.2. Components of reading motivation

While early reader self-concept has been conceptualized as a motivational component (Möller & Bonerad, 2007), interest is rather considered a psychological state and a motivational predisposition (Renninger & Hidi, 2016; Renninger & Su, 2012). Literacy interest and reader self-concept are both crucial to students’ learning and have been extensively studied as the driving forces in the development of early and emergent reading (e.g., Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Baker & Scher, 2002; Baroody & Diamond, 2014; Frijters, Barron, & Brunello, 2000).

1.2.1. Literacy interest

Interest is closely related to the concepts of intrinsic motivation and task value (Eccles, 1983; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Schiefele, 2009). All three concepts share the assumption that a person is drawn to a task for reasons inherent in the task, independent of any future consequences. In the present study we define interest in line with Ainley (2006): “Interest is conceptualized as an affective state that represents students’ subjective experience of learning; the state that arises from either situational triggers or a well-developed individual interest” (Ainley, 2006, p. 392). Within the lines of this definition we recognize that “learning”, does not only involve formal instruction, but includes developmentally relevant literacy experiences that children have outside of the school context.

According to Renninger and Su (2012), the development of interest involves the three components of feelings, value and knowledge. In the earliest phases, interest may be considered an emotion and is minimally dependent on knowledge (Ainley, 2007; Renninger & Su, 2012). However, as interest develops and deepens, the desire for knowledge and value develop concurrently: increased knowledge enables the development of value and, as value develops, it will lead the person to search for additional understanding (Ainley, 2007; Renninger & Hidi, 2016).

The development of interest through an interplay between feelings, value and knowledge is reflected in studies reporting on children’s interest in literacy and reading in kindergarten and through the school years. While the evidence is mixed, most studies have documented a generally positive disposition towards literacy activities among beginning readers (Baker & Scher, 2002; Nurmi & Aunola, 2005). It has been suggested that children’s literacy interest and their later tendency to engage in reading activities are formed by the literacy environment in their homes and influenced by the literacy practices of their parents (Frijters et al., 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014)—in addition to the literacy experiences and activities in kindergarten (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Mata, 2011; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002).

There is evidence that interest in reading decreases through the school years (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Since sustained interest in reading requires reading skill development, children who experience difficulties in language activities and struggle with learning how to read will often tend to lose interest and begin to avoid engaging in literacy activities (Onatsu-Arivilommi & Nurmi, 2000; Poskiparta et al., 2003). Engagement is associated with active participation (Baroody & Diamond, 2014) and has been referred to as the visible manifestation of motivation (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In their proposed heuristic model, Guthrie and Klauda (2016) suggest that avoidance, which includes minimizing effort and disconnecting from reading tasks, represents the negative dimension of reading engagement. According to some researchers, avoidance is the key problem that must be overcome before children will be able to address their difficulties in learning how to read (Eklund, Torppa, & Lyytinen, 2013).

1.2.2. Reader self-concept

Self-beliefs typically relate to performance-specific beliefs rather than to the actual skill required to perform the task or activity in question. Two widely studied components of students’ beliefs about their competence with regard to academic achievement are self-efficacy and self-concept. In line with Bong and Sakalvik (2003), we define self-efficacy as task-specific beliefs and self-concept as general beliefs about one’s competence and ability, meaning that we see self-efficacy as a precursor of self-concept in academic achievement settings (Bong & Sakalvik, 2003). Hence, in this study we define reader self-concept as a student’s beliefs about his or her competence and ability as a reader, specifically at the start of formal instruction in school. It has been shown that the most influ-
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