



# Teacher-child interactions and kindergartners' task behaviors: Observations based on interpersonal theory



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## ABSTRACT

The present study examined how teachers' interpersonal behaviors (control, affiliation) and complementarity tendencies (i.e., return low control with high control and high affiliation with similar affiliation) were related to children's task behaviors (engagement, performance). Furthermore, we investigated whether the strength of these associations depended on children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Our sample included 48 teachers and 179 kindergartners (94 boys; mean age = 66.75 months) who were selected to represent a variation of externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Independent observers rated teachers' interpersonal behaviors and children's task behaviors. Teacher control was negatively related to both children's task engagement and performance, whereas teacher affiliation was not associated with children's task behaviors. Furthermore, associations between teachers' complementarity tendencies on control and children's task performance depended on the level of control that children displayed themselves. To conclude, teachers should be made aware that controlling behaviors could be detrimental for children's task behaviors.

## 1. Introductions

There is ample evidence that teachers' perceptions of their relationships with individual children predict children's school engagement and performance (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Far less is known, however, about teachers' interpersonal behaviors towards individual children and how these behaviors relate to children's task behaviors (i.e., task engagement and performance). Interpersonal theory (Leary, 1957) offers a framework to observe teachers' interpersonal behaviors, by displaying them on two dimensions, affiliation (i.e., the degree of friendliness versus hostility in interactions) and control (i.e., the degree of leadership/initiative versus passiveness). Furthermore, this theory provides opportunities to understand how interaction partners influence each other during interaction processes (i.e., complementarity tendencies; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, Thijs, & Oort, 2013).

In the present study, we used very specific observations of teacher-child interactions to examine how teachers' interpersonal behaviors and complementarity tendencies were associated with children's engagement and performance on a story completion task in kindergarten. We investigated how teachers' affiliation and control behaviors and complementarity tendencies were associated with kindergartners'

engagement with and performance on an ecologically valid small group task. Furthermore, as teacher-child relationships seem to have more impact on children at risk for school maladjustment (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005), we investigated whether teachers' interpersonal behaviors and complementarity tendencies were more strongly related to the engagement and performance of children who were at risk due to relatively high levels of externalizing or internalizing behavior.

### 1.1. Interpersonal theory and the complementarity principle

According to the interpersonal theory (Leary, 1957), interaction processes can be described on two orthogonal dimensions: control and affiliation. Affiliation, which measures the affective quality of interactions, refers to the degree of proximity, warmth, and support in the interaction and varies from friendliness to hostility. Control, on the other hand, describes the degree of power and influence in the interaction and ranges from leadership/initiative to passiveness (Gurtman, 2001; Kiesler, 1996). As such, control refers to interpersonal qualities, such as initiative and leadership during interactions, instead of intrapersonal qualities, such as self-control and self-regulation (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010; Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

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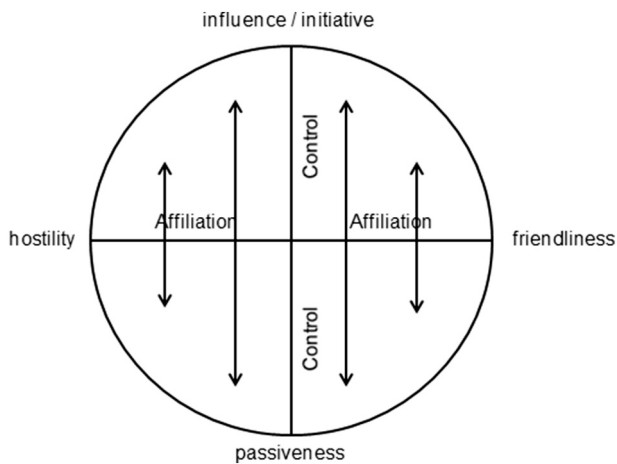


Fig. 1. Interpersonal circumplex. The arrows represent complementary behaviors.

Apart from providing two dimensions on which interpersonal behaviors can be displayed, interpersonal theory also offers a way to describe and explain how interaction partners influence each other during interactions. This idea is formulated in the complementarity principle, which states that someone's interpersonal behaviors tend to elicit specific reactions from the interaction partner (Sadler & Woody, 2003). Interpersonal behaviors are complementary if they are opposite on the control dimension and similar on the affiliation dimension (Carson, 1969/1972). Thus, leadership/initiative will elicit passive behavior in the interaction partner and passiveness will lead to leadership/initiative. In contrast, friendliness will elicit friendly behaviors in the interaction partner and hostile behaviors will lead to hostility (see Fig. 1). Imagine, for example, that kindergarten children are given a task in which they have to place different sets of pictures in a logical chronological order and tell the corresponding story to the teacher (i.e., the task that was used in the present study). When the teacher asks the child to tell the story, the child could react in different ways. For instance, the child could do nothing and ignore the teacher (i.e., low control, low affiliation). The teacher may then respond with “You have to tell the story, I am not going to say it again” in an angry tone of voice (i.e., high control, low affiliation), which would be a complementary reaction. The child could also react in a different way, for example, “I don't want to tell that stupid story” (i.e., high control, low affiliation). In response, the teacher may just remain silent but look irritated (i.e., low control, low affiliation), which would be a complementary response. Some teachers, however, may respond as described above (i.e., “You have to tell the story, I am not going to say it again”), which would be an anticomplementary reaction as far as the control dimension is concerned. Interpersonal behaviors are considered to be anticomplementary if people respond with similar behaviors on the control dimension and with opposite behaviors on the affiliation dimension. Interpersonal complementarity is theorized to exist, because it confirms people's self-concepts and makes people experience their interactions as comfortable and anxiety-free (Kiesler, 1996; Tracey, 2004). As a consequence, interaction partners who respond complementarily on each other are expected to work more effectively together and to have higher performances than partners who react anticomplementarily (Estroff & Nowicki, 1992).

In the present study, we investigated whether higher degrees of complementarity in teachers' responses to young children's interpersonal behaviors were positively associated with children's performance on a school task. In addition to children's actual performance on the task, we also focused on their engagement with the task because teachers' supportive behaviors seem to affect children's performance through their effect on children's engagement (Skinner et al., 1990). Therefore, engagement is considered to be an important variable to take into account when studying children's task behaviors.

## 1.2. Teachers' interpersonal behaviors and children's engagement and performance

Interpersonal theory has frequently been used in research on teachers' interpersonal styles in secondary education (see Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005 for a review). These researchers traditionally measure students' perceptions (and sometimes teachers' perceptions) of the degree of proximity (or affiliation) and influence (or control) in teacher style by means of the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI; Wubbels & Levy, 1991). The QTI studies usually found positive associations between both teacher affiliation and control on the one hand and students' school engagement and performance on the other hand (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). Most of the QTI studies, however, focused on students in secondary education and not on young children. As far as we know, only Zijlstra, Wubbels, Brekelmans, and Koomen (2013) applied the QTI to the kindergarten setting. Just as in secondary school studies, they found that both teacher control and affiliation were positively associated with children's mathematics achievement. Still, the QTI studies mainly focused on students' perceptions of teachers' interpersonal behaviors towards an entire class and not on teachers' actual interactions with individual children.

With regard to the degree of affiliation in interactions between teachers and individual children, research based on other theories (e.g., attachment theory; Pianta, 1999) has mainly focused on the association between teachers' perceptions of the affective quality of the relationship and young children's school engagement and performance. Teacher reports of favorable teacher-child relationships (measured in terms of, for example, closeness, warmth, or support) were associated with more school engagement and better academic performance over time (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes et al., 2008). However, studies on the affective quality of teacher-student relationships did not take into account how teachers and children influenced each other during daily interactions and how these interaction processes influenced children's task behaviors. Studies that did observe daily interactions usually focused on teacher-child interactions at the classroom level (i.e., teachers' interpersonal behaviors towards the entire group of children) and not on interactions between teachers and individual children (e.g., Cadima, Doumen, Verschueren, & Buyse, 2015; Cadima, Leal, & Burchinal, 2010; Curby, Downer, & Booren, 2014; Downer et al., 2012; Pakarinen et al., 2014; Pakarinen, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, Siekkinen, & Nurmi, 2011). The few studies that did examine how interactions between teachers and individual children related to children's engagement and performance, found that teachers' positive behaviors towards the child (e.g., McDonald Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002) or an overall positive quality of the interaction (e.g., Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999) were positively associated with children's engagement and performance. Thus, in line with the QTI studies, these observational studies suggest that high levels of teacher affiliation towards individual children will be associated with more engagement and better performance in these children. These observational studies, however, did not observe how children's interpersonal behaviors elicited specific responses from their teachers (i.e., complementarity tendencies) and how these were associated with children's task behaviors. Furthermore, most of these previous studies used questionnaires and test scores or school grades as global indicators of children's engagement respectively performance. In contrast, the present study used independent observer ratings to measure children's engagement and performance on a specific school task. A few studies provided evidence that teachers' affiliation behaviors will also be associated with independent observer ratings of task behaviors (e.g., Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Doumen, Koomen, Buyse, Wouters, & Verschueren, 2012).

With respect to the degree of control in teachers' interpersonal behaviors towards individual children, associations with children's engagement and performance have hardly been examined. There is some evidence that high levels of teacher intrusiveness and overcontrol

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