



Reading achievement and reading self-concept – Testing the reciprocal effects model



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ABSTRACT

Although there is a vast amount of research on reading motivation, evidence for bidirectional associations between reading self-concept and reading achievement is still missing, whereas there is compelling empirical evidence that suggests reciprocal effects between academic self-concept and achievement in other domains. This paper aimed to rigorously test reciprocal effects between reading self-concept and reading achievement within a longitudinal design comprising four waves of data collection. Drawing on a sample of $N = 1508$ secondary school students, results of structural equation modeling yielded support for reciprocal effects between reading self-concept and reading achievement. Strong support was found for the skill-development hypothesis, i.e. achievement predicting self-concept. Moreover, the self-enhancement hypothesis (self-concept predicting achievement) was corroborated in early years of secondary school. Thus, to best support poor readers, reading skills should perhaps be fostered by boosting the reading skill itself and reading self-concept, the latter particularly at the beginning of secondary school.

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1. Introduction

Proficient reading is a vital element in the life of most members of modern societies. It is not only essential for students' academic achievement in school, but is also a fundamental prerequisite for successful participation in many areas of adult life such as tertiary education, workplace learning, and everyday life. Thus, learning to read is an important developmental task. The importance of reading motivation for this task has been emphasized and extensively investigated (e.g., Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012). However, there is still a lack of longitudinal studies investigating the importance of reading motivation. Recently, Morgan and Fuchs (2007) identified competency beliefs as one core dimension of reading motivation. This is in line with the definition from Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) who understand reading motivation as “the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading” (p. 405). This concept of reading motivation draws on two core dimensions from expectancy-value theory—a person's subjective task value, which mainly addresses goals and values (“Will I enjoy reading and why?”) and her or his expectancy

value, which mainly addresses beliefs (“Can I be a good reader?”). The latter is closely related to academic self-concept. Academic self-concept in turn is one of the most important constructs in the field of motivational research (Marsh & Craven, 2006) and is valued as a desirable outcome in many disciplines of psychology. Furthermore, it is regarded as an important factor that is predictive of people's behavior, and of emotional and cognitive outcomes (Marsh & Martin, 2011). Self-concept can broadly be defined as a person's self-perceptions that are formed through experience with and interpretations of one's environment (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). The relation between self-concept and academic achievement is one of the most intriguing questions of self-concept research. This relation has been extensively studied over the past decades (e.g., Marsh & Craven, 2006; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004 for overviews). Although a reciprocal relation between these constructs is widely accepted and empirically evident, this relation has not been examined sufficiently within the domain of reading (cf. Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). However, since academic self-concepts are highly domain-specific (Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2006; Möller, Retelsdorf, Köller, & Marsh, 2011), more research is needed to examine the generalizability of a reciprocal relation between self-concept and achievement across domains. Moreover, none of the few existing studies within the domain of reading followed the methodological guidelines for testing reciprocal effects presented

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by Marsh and his colleagues (Marsh, Byrne, & Yeung, 1999; Marsh & Martin, 2011). In the present investigation, we wanted to evaluate hypotheses about the bidirectional relation between reading self-concept and reading achievement among secondary school children following these guidelines for a rigorous test of the reciprocal effects model. In the following section, we will first give a brief overview of research on reciprocal effects between academic self-concept and academic achievement in general before then presenting the review of this relation in the domain of reading. We will then present our research questions in detail.

1.1. Relation between academic achievement and academic self-concept

The question of whether there are reciprocal effects between academic self-concept and academic achievement has inspired a long scientific debate, different theoretical models, and a large number of empirical studies. One main focus of this debate has been the question of whether self-concept is causally dominant over achievement or whether achievement is causally dominant over self-concept. More than 30 years ago, Calsyn and Kenny (1977) contrasted the self-enhancement and skill-development hypotheses. In the self-enhancement hypothesis, self-concept is considered to be a primary prerequisite of achievement, which may be caused by more engagement and effort in domain-specific activities, which may then result in higher achievement (Marsh & Yeung, 1997). Support for this hypothesis could therefore imply that the

enhancement of self-concept should be a main focus of educational interventions. In contrast, the skill-development hypothesis suggests that academic self-concept is a consequence of achievement, which can be explained by social comparisons (e.g., Möller & Pohlmann, 2010; Möller, Pohlmann, Köller, & Marsh, 2009): High-performing students have opportunities for downward social comparisons with weaker classmates and thus develop high self-evaluations in the particular domain. For low-performing students, it is the other way around; these students mainly have opportunities for upward comparisons and thus develop low self-evaluations. Support for this effect could therefore imply that educational programs should focus on the development of stronger academic skills. Following these contradictory assumptions, many empirical studies have investigated the relation between self-concept and achievement. To date, many researchers have worked with an assumption of an integrated model: the reciprocal effects model (Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Craven, 2006). This model postulates that self-concept and achievement are reciprocally related, i.e. that both are cause and effect of each other. In Fig. 1 the assumptions of the reciprocal effects model are demonstrated. First, a strong positive relation is expected between prior measures of achievement and self-concept, and subsequent measures of the same construct, which may be interpreted as evidence for the stability of these constructs. Second, a positive relation is expected between prior achievement and subsequent self-concept (skill-development hypothesis), and third, positive effects are expected from prior self-concept to subsequent achievement (self-

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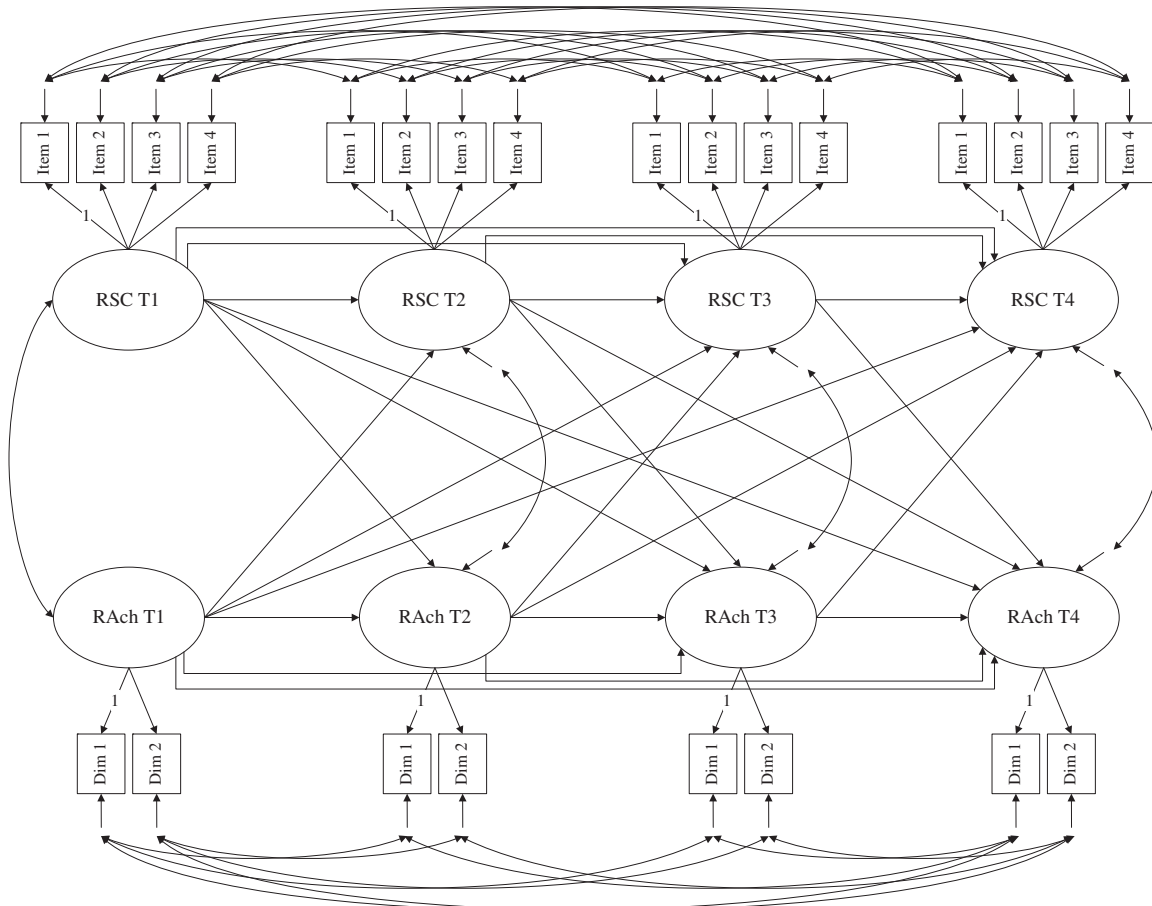


Fig. 1. Full forward structural equation model tested to estimate reciprocal effects between reading self-concept (RSC) and reading achievement (RAch).

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