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Do children's perceptions of themselves, their teachers, and school accord with their teachers' ratings of their adjustment to school?

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Abstract

This paper examines child and teacher reports of school adjustment. Of interest is the match, or mismatch, between children's perceptions of themselves and their feelings about school, and the classroom teachers' ratings of their school-related problem behaviours and competencies. The effects of child gender and age of starting school were also considered. Data included children's self-rated cognitive and physical abilities and acceptance by peers, school liking and avoidance and feelings about their teachers, and descriptions of what they liked about school. Teachers provided ratings of children's adjustment problems (acting out, shy/anxious, learning difficulties) and competencies (task orientation, frustration tolerance, confidence in class, peer social skills). Analyses showed little effect of age, but a significant effect of gender. Girls were more positive about school, and teachers rated boys as having more problems of adjustment. Comparative analyses of relations between child- and teacher-reported adjustment also showed gender differences. Boys who liked school and their teachers had better learning and social strengths, and fewer behaviour problems. Girls who said they enjoyed schoolwork activities had higher ratings on school competencies. Counter-intuitively, perceived social acceptance by peers and enjoyment of social play (for girls) were negatively correlated with teachers' ratings of school adjustment. Implications for teachers' expectations of adjustment and gender are discussed.

Introduction

Adjustment to school is recognised as a multi-faceted process that draws on children's internal resources and prior learning, family support mechanisms, and qualities of the school environment to generate the behaviours, dispositions, and skills that are used to describe the "well adjusted child." Researchers such as Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, and Cox (1999) and Dunlop (2003) underline the inter-relatedness of child, family, and school factors on adjustment in their models of school transition. Pianta and colleagues, for example, describe how school adjustment is facilitated by positive relations between teachers, children, and parents, and by "ready schools" (p. 5). Similarly, Dunlop illustrates the interconnections between and across levels of close and more distant factors on the child in her adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and her examination of the systems that impact on children, families, teachers, and the school.

In concert with this new modelling of school adjustment processes has been a renewed focus on defining and measuring "school readiness" as a determinant of

the behaviours, dispositions and skills of adjustment to school. In reviewing this field of research, Meisels (1999) discusses the move away from "skills-based" expectations of readiness, such as problem-solving or identifying shapes and colours, to broader "approaches to learning" that include "confidence, curiosity, intentionality, self-control, relatedness, capacity to communicate, and cooperativeness" (p. 62). This change was confirmed in a large-scale survey of teachers in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort about their views on indicators of readiness. Lin, Lawrence, and Gorrell (2003) found that greater emphasis was given to social expectations for learning (eg., "tells needs/thoughts", "is not disruptive," "follows directions") whereas academic expectations (eg., "counts to 20 or more," "knows most alphabet") were seen as less important. Similarly, a small-scale study using teacher interviews also stressed the importance of social and emotional development as a requirement for school readiness (Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

In keeping with these developments, many recent studies of school adjustment have included measures that tap social and emotional characteristics of children's classroom behaviour. Such measures commonly rely on parent and teacher reports of child social behaviour. For example, Gresham and Elliott's (1990) Social Skills Rating Scale has been used to assess children's response to kindergarten and first grade in the large National Institute of Child Health and Development Study of Early Child Care (NICHD ECCRN, 2003, 2004) and in a smaller Australian study (Margetts, 2003). There is a concern, however, that whilst teachers and parents can provide meaningful and valid information on children's adjustment and response to school, reliance on these measures alone ignores the views or direct experiences of the child. As Einarsdóttir (2003) points out, "there is a growing recognition of the importance of listening to children's views about what they think starting school will be like and the experiences and perceptions of children when they start school" (p. 38). New programs that address issues of school transition, such as the Starting School Project (Dockett & Perry, 2002, 1999), underline the importance of including the perspective of the child along with information from parents and early childhood educators. Findings from the New South Wales Starting School Project and European studies (eg., Einarsdóttir, 2003; Griebel & Niesel, 2003) have generated new understandings about the processes of school adjustment by elucidating children's concerns about school and the coping strategies that they use to deal with such issues. My concern, however, is that whilst this work has given the field a greater clarity about the child's point of view, it has not provided empirical evidence to link children's views to teachers' assessments of adjustment. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the similarities and dissimilarities between children's perspectives of themselves and their school environment, and teachers' assessments of their behaviour in class. My aim, in examining the relations between these two sources of information, is to provide a broader understanding of relatedness across child- and teacher-perspectives in the process of school adjustment.

The present study draws on child development literature on school adjustment, which has a history of including children's perspectives. For example, Ladd and Price (1987) developed a structured procedure to ask children about their feelings about school called the School Liking and Avoidance Scale (SLAS). This tool has been used in a number of studies of school adjustment, including studies that have tracked attitudes to school and achievement over time. Ladd, Buhs and Seid (2000) have shown that children's feelings about school liking and avoidance have moderate stability across the kindergarten year, and are predictive of classroom participation. School liking has also been associated with peer acceptance and mutual friendships (Ladd & Coleman, 1997) and school avoidance has been linked to peer victimisation (Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997). Other research has shown that children's perceptions about their friends and peer acceptance are linked to measures of school performance (Ladd et al, 1997). Children's feelings about

themselves have also been related to school adjustment and achievement (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996) and research into self-concept has provided a number of measures for kindergarten children that have been shown to tap children's perceptions of their own competence and achievements (eg. Harter, 1998; Harter & Pike, 1984; Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1998; Valeski & Stipek, 2001; Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefe, 1996).

The above constructs – children's feelings about school, perceptions of peer acceptance, and perceptions of self-competence – are accepted in the literature as valid indicators of children's school adjustment. Existing studies have shown, however, that children's self-perceptions and teacher-rated measures of adjustment to kindergarten often differ for boys and girls, and can also vary by age. For example, Marsh et al. (1998) reported that older children are less positive about their own competencies than younger children, and that boys and girls differ in their physical and maths/reading self-concepts. There is some suggestion that children who enter school at a younger age have more adjustment difficulties (Hughes, Pinkerton, & Plewis, 1979; Margetts, 2003) or social problems (Spitzer, Cupp, & Parke, 1995). Also, boys commonly receive lower scores for school adjustment than girls (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Margetts, 2003; NICHD ECCRN, 2003; Slee, 1986). Therefore, in seeking to examining relations between children's perceptions of themselves, their teachers, and school and their teachers' ratings of school adjustment, it was important to also account for possible effects of gender and children's age of starting school.

Method

Sample

The sample comprised 125 children (65 boys, 60 girls) who were participants in a larger study, called The Sydney Family Development Project (SFDP). The SFDP is a longitudinal study of parenting and child development in a sample of firstborn children and their families (see Harrison & Ungerer, 1997, 2002; Ungerer, Waters, Barnett, & Dolby, 1997). At the time of the present study, children ranged in age from 5.25 to 6.67 years ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 0.28$) and were all in their first year of formal school, referred to as Kindergarten in New South Wales. Most children were attending schools in New South Wales, although a small number were in school in other states including the ACT, Queensland, Victoria, and Western Australia. School authorities included the NSW Department of Education, the Catholic Education Office, and independent religious organizations.

Procedures

Parents were sent a letter during the third or fourth term of the child's first year of formal school inviting them to participate in the school-age follow-up study. Telephone contact then provided details of their child's school attendance and the name of the class teacher. Each child's classroom teacher was approached by letter and then by telephone, after parents and the relevant educational authority had given permission for the assessment to take place. A research assistant visited each child's school to distribute the questionnaire and answer any questions. Teachers undertook to return the completed questionnaires by mail. The research assistant also visited each child's home to interview the child.

Measures

Two sources of data were used to describe aspects of children's development and school adjustment. These were (1) children's self-reported feelings and perceptions about themselves, their teachers, and school, and (2) teacher ratings of children's classroom behaviour.

Child Self-Report

Self-concept. Harter and Pike's (1984) 24-item Pictorial Scale of Competence and Social Acceptance, Preschool-Kindergarten version (PSCS-PK) was used to assess children's perceptions of themselves and their social relations. Each question provides a rating from 4 (high) to 1 (low). The scale generates a total score and four subscale scores: cognitive competence (eg., counting, recognising letters), physical competence (eg., running, hopping, skipping) abilities, acceptance by peers (eg., number of friends, being asked to play), and maternal acceptance (eg. mom plays with child, cooks favourite foods). The fourth subscale was not used in this dataset. Harter and Pike report good internal consistency for the combined competence scales (alphas = .66 and .75 for kindergarten and first grade children, respectively), and for the single peer acceptance subscale (alphas = .75 and .78 for kindergarten and first grade). Thus, in the present study, two global scale scores were computed. Overall competence combined the 12 items assessing cognitive and physical competence, $\alpha = .65$. Peer social acceptance was based only on the six peer-related items, $\alpha = .72$.

Feelings about school. The 14-item School Liking and Avoidance Scale (SLAS), which was an adaptation of an earlier measure, the School Sentiment Inventory (Ladd & Price, 1987), was administered by asking children to respond to questions about their feelings about school. Responses are recorded on a three-point scale: 3 = "yes," 2 = "sometimes," 1 = "no." Prior to administering the test items, children were trained to respond to the "yes, no, sometimes" format. The SLAS generates two subscales: school liking (9 items, eg., "is school fun?," "do you like being in school?") and school avoidance (5 items, eg., "do you wish you didn't have to go to school?"). Ladd and Price report good internal reliability for the two factors in a large sample of kindergarten children, alphas ranged from .87 to .91 for school liking, and from .76 to .85 for school avoidance.

Data from the present study were subjected to factor analysis to confirm the structure and internal consistency of the subscales. The 5-item school avoidance subscale was reliable, Eigen value = 1.5, $\alpha = .78$. For the school liking factor (Eigen value = 6.18), eight items loaded on the factor; however, the question "does school make you feel like crying?" was not part of the factor structure. Therefore, the school liking subscale was computed from eight items ($\alpha = .91$).

Feelings about the teacher. Three additional questions were included that asked children about their feelings towards the teacher. These were: "Do you like to see your teacher when you get to school?," "Is your teacher nice to you?," and "Does your teacher smile at you?" The SLAS three-point format (yes = 3, sometimes = 2, no = 1) was employed to code children's responses. The construct, positive feelings towards the teacher, achieved reasonable internal consistency ($\alpha = .61$).

What child liked about school. After completing the SLAS and questions about the teacher, children were asked an open-ended question about what they liked to do at school. Responses were recorded and categorised as follows. Positive categories included play activities, schoolwork, being with friends, praise and rewards, and teacher-related activities. Categories were also formed for passive or negative responses and for non-classroom activities, such as "having morning tea."

Teacher Ratings

Developmental outcomes. Each child's teacher completed the 38-item Teacher-Child Rating Scale (TCRS) (Hightower, Spinell, & Litczewski, 1989). This measure uses a 5-point likert scale to rate 18 identified problem behaviours (1 = not a problem, 2 = mild, 3 = moderate, 4 = serious, 5 = very serious problem) and 20

statements about school-related strengths and competencies (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = moderately well, 4 = well, 5 = very well). Seven empirically derived subscales are generated. Three subscales describe problems: *acting out* assesses aggression, disruptiveness, and impulsivity; *shy/anxious* measures the degree to which children are timid, withdrawn, worried, and unhappy; *learning skills* assesses problems in school-related skills, such as poor work habits, lack of motivation, and difficulty following directions. Four subscales describe the child's strengths: *frustration tolerance* assesses adaptability to the school environment or the child's own limitations, eg., "copes well with failure" or "ignores teasing;" *assertive social skills* measures qualities of leadership and confidence in classroom interactions with peers; *task orientation* assesses the child's functional effectiveness in the classroom, eg., "works well without adult support" or "completes work;" and *peer social skills* measures popularity or likeability among peers. Hightower, Work, Cowen, et al (1986) report good internal consistency for the subscale structure and good test-retest reliability; eg., Cronbach's alphas for a large sample of children from kindergarten to 3rd grade ranged from .88 to .95.

For the present sample, internal reliability coefficients were similar to those reported by Hightower and colleagues; alphas ranged from .83 to .91. Problem subscales were as follows: acting out (6 items, $\alpha = .91$), shy/anxious (6 items, $\alpha = .83$), and learning difficulties (6 items, $\alpha = .92$). Child strengths subscales were: tolerate frustration (5 items, $\alpha = .88$), task orientation (5 items, $\alpha = .92$), assertive social skills (5 items, $\alpha = .86$), and peer social skills (5 items, $\alpha = .92$).

Results

Children's Perspectives of School Adjustment

Self-concept. Children's views about themselves as learners and social beings were generally positive, although there was considerable variation amongst the sample. Mean scores for the two measures of self-concept, overall competence and peer social acceptance, were $M = 42.25$, $SD = 3.35$, and $M = 17.47$, $SD = 3.65$, respectively, which correspond to 3.52 and 2.86 on a 4-point scale. These results were similar to those reported by Harter and Pike (1984) for kindergarten children: competence $M = 3.5$; peer acceptance $M = 2.9$.

Feelings about school. School liking scores ranged widely, from a low of 8 to a high of 24, $M = 20.78$, $SD = 4.46$. School avoidance scores were similarly varied, ranging from 5 to 15, $M = 10.43$, $SD = 3.31$. These equate to scores of 2.6 for school liking and 2.1 for school avoidance on the 3-point SLAS scale.

Feelings about the teacher. Child responses to questions about the teacher also covered the full range of scores (3 to 9) but were generally positive; the mean, $M = 7.98$, $SD = 1.46$, corresponded to 2.7 on a 3-point scale.

What child liked about school. When asked about what they liked to do at school, 102 children (81.6%) gave a short answer, usually naming one or two activities; 23 children (18.4%) did not answer this question. Most of the children gave positive responses. Play activities, including unstructured play or play with toys as well as structured activities such as sport and games, were identified by 69 children (55.2%). Activities related to schoolwork were mentioned by 41 children (32.8%); these included doing stencils, writing, drawing, painting, making things, maths, reading, music, and television. Seeing or playing with friends at school was mentioned by 13 children (10.4%). Praise and rewards were mentioned by 4 children (3.2%); for example, "getting stickers and stamps" and "being good - you get a lollipop." Three children (2.4%) mentioned the teacher, eg., talking to or listening to the teacher.

Table 1. Child-reported School Adjustment Measures: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

	C	PA	SL	SAv	PT	Play	M	SD
Competence (C)							42.25	3.95
Peer acceptance (PA)	.54***						17.47	3.65
School liking (SL)	.17†	.16†					20.78	4.46
School avoidance (SAv)	-.18*	-.22*	-.56***				10.43	3.31
Positive to teacher (PT)	.14	.09	.70***	-.31*			7.98	1.46
Like play (Play) ^a	-.05	.01	.17†	-.10	.09		68%	
Like schoolwork ^a	.06	-.04	.04	-.09	-.07	-.37***	40%	

Notes: *** $p = .001$; ** $p = .01$; * $p = .05$; † $p = .10$

^a 'Like play' and 'like schoolwork' were scored as follows: 1 = gave this response, 0 = did not give this response.

Food-related aspects of the normal school day were identified by 10 children (8%), and 4 children (3.2%) mentioned other activities, such as birthday parties, borrowing library books, and tidying up. Four children (3.2%) gave passive or negative responses to the question, such as "nothing" and "going home." Because of the small numbers of children who gave responses for the latter aspects of school, only the first two categories – 'like play' and 'like schoolwork' – were used in subsequent analyses.

Inter-relatedness of child-rated school adjustment measures. Relations among children's ratings of self-concept, school liking and avoidance, feelings about the teacher, and nominations of play and schoolwork as favourite activities were examined by correlating scores. Results, presented in Table 1, show moderate to strong correlations between the measures within each of the three domains. Perceived competence and peer acceptance were strongly correlated, $r(125) = .54$, $p < .001$. School liking was negatively correlated with school avoidance, $r(124) = -.56$, $p < .001$; positive feelings towards the teacher was positively correlated with school liking, $r(123) = .70$, $p < .001$, and negatively correlated with school avoidance, $r(123) = -.31$, $p < .05$. Children's nominations of 'like play' and 'like schoolwork' were negatively correlated, $r(102) = -.37$, $p < .001$.

Associations were also noted across domains. Child self-concept was correlated with feelings about school, having a weak positive correlation with school liking ($r_s = .17$ and $.16$, $p_s < .10$) and a significant negative correlation with school avoidance ($r_s = -.18$ and $-.22$, $p_s < .05$). School liking and nominations of 'like play' as a favourite activity at school were weakly correlated, $r = .17$, $p < .10$.

Relations with child characteristics. The possibility that variations in the five child-rated and two child-nominated indicators of school adjustment were related to child age and gender was assessed using t-test and bivariate correlation analysis. Age was marginally associated with self-perceptions of competence, $r(125) = -.15$, $p < .10$. Older children rated themselves being less cognitively and physically competent, overall. Child age (older) was also associated with children saying they 'like play' at school, $r(125) = .23$, $p < .05$. Child gender was the most consistent factor differentiating adjustment scores. In all cases, girls had more positive feelings about themselves, their teachers, and school than boys, but t-test and chi-square results showed that differences were slight and significance levels were marginal. Girls had higher scores for competence self-concept, $t = -1.97$, $p = .05$, lower scores for school avoidance, $t = 1.84$, $p = .07$, more positive feelings towards the teacher, $t = -1.75$, $p = .08$, and were more likely to mention 'like schoolwork' as something they like to do at school, $\chi^2 = 3.30$, $p = .07$.

Teachers' Ratings of School Adjustment

Teachers' ratings of child problem behaviours and school strengths showed wide variation in the sample. Means and standard deviations for each of the subscales are presented in Table 2. Summary subscale scores for problems of acting out, shy/anxious, and learning difficulties ranged from a low of 6 to a high of 27, which corresponded to the full 1 to 5 range on the 5-point scale. However, mean scores were relatively low, ranging from 8.05 to 8.29 for the three problems subscales, which corresponds to approximately 1.3 ("not a problem" to "mild") on the 5-point rating scale. Similar variations were noted for the four strengths and competencies subscales. Scores ranged from 6 to 25 for frustration tolerance, task orientation, and assertive social skills, and from 9 to 25 for peer social skills. Mean scores ranged from 17.36 to 20.20, which corresponds to approximately 3.5 to 4.0 ("moderately well" to "well") on the 5-point scale.

Table 2. Teacher-rated Problems and Strengths: Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

	AO	S/A	LD	FT-S	AS-S	TO-S	M	SD
Acting out (AO)							8.29	3.76
Shy/anxious (S/A)	.19*						8.26	3.00
Learning difficulties (LD)	.75***	.40***					8.05	3.67
Frustration tolerance (FT-S)	-.69***	-.36***	-.53***				17.36	4.02
Assertive social skills (AS-S)	-.37***	-.57***	-.60***	.49***			17.57	4.71
Task orientation (TO-S)	-.71***	-.32***	-.79***	.70***	.67***		18.98	5.06
Peer social skills (PS-S)	-.49***	-.34***	-.49***	.69***	.59***	.59***	20.20	4.14

Notes: *** $p = .001$; ** $p = .01$; * $p = .05$

Intercorrelations between subscale scores ranged from $r = .19, p < .05$ to $r = -.79, p < .001$. The strongest correlations ($r_s > .7$) were between problems of acting out, learning difficulties, and task orientation. Frustration tolerance was also strongly correlated with acting out and task orientation, $r_s = -.69$ and $.70$, respectively. Weaker correlations were noted between shy/anxious problems and learning difficulties, task orientation, and frustration tolerance (r_s from $.32$ to $.40$). Shy/anxious behaviour had a moderately strong negative correlation with assertive social skills, ie., confidence in speaking out in class, $r = -.57$. Teachers' ratings of peer acceptance/social skills were strongly correlated with children's ability to tolerate frustration in response to the challenges of peer teasing and difficulties in class, $r = .69$.

Relations with child characteristics. The possibility that variations in the teacher-rated and indicators of school adjustment were related to child age and sex differences was assessed using *t*-test and correlation analysis. Age of the child was only marginally associated with one of the subscale scores, learning difficulties, $r(122) = -.16, p < .10$. Split-file correlations showed that this was relationship only held for boys, $r(64) = -.21, p < .10$. The corresponding correlation coefficient for girls was close to zero. This suggests that the older boys had fewer problems associated with learning. Gender was a strong factor in a number of aspects of teacher-rated adjustment. Problems of acting out, shy/anxious, and learning difficulties were rated significantly higher for boys than for girls, $t_s = 3.47, 2.87, \text{ and } 3.99, p_s < .001$, respectively. Boys were also rated lower than girls on task orientation, $t = -3.13, p < .001$.

Correspondence between Child and Teacher Ratings of School Adjustment

Bivariate correlation analysis was used to examine the relations between the two sets of school adjustment measures: child perceptions and teacher ratings. Child-reported self-concept, feelings about school and the teacher, and nominations of 'like play' and 'like schoolwork' were correlated with teacher-rated problems and strengths. Because preliminary analyses had identified important gender differences in both child perceptions and teacher-rated outcomes, correlation analyses were conducted separately for boys and girls. Results are presented in Table 3. For each of the child-reported measures, the first line gives the correlation coefficients for boys (in bold), and the second line gives the coefficients for girls.

The general expectation, based on previous findings by Ladd and Coleman (1997) and Ladd et al (2000), was that positive feelings about school, that is, more school liking, less school avoidance, and more positivity to the teacher, would be associated with enhanced peer relations and more effective engagement in classroom activities. Results were in keeping with this expectation, evidenced by a consistent pattern of correspondence between positive feelings on the part of the child and more effective adjustment to the expectations of the classroom, but with noticeable gender differences. For boys, more school liking/less school avoidance and more positive feelings toward the teacher were associated with less acting out behaviour ($r = -.22, p < .10; r = .21, p < .10; r = -.15, ns$, respectively), more tolerance of frustration ($r = .26, p < .05; r = -.24, p < .10; r = .25, p < .05$), and more task orientation ($r = .26, p < .05; r = -.31, p < .01; r = .19, ns$). In addition, boys' lower ratings for school avoidance was linked to less learning difficulty ($r = .21, p < .10$) and more assertive social skills ($r = -.25, p < .05$). The corresponding correlations between girls' school liking, avoidance and positive feelings to the teacher, and teachers' ratings, however, showed minimal or no relation ($r_s = -.03$ to $.16, ns$) with none of the coefficients achieving significance, even at a marginal level. Notably, in two cases, the correlation coefficients for girls was in the opposite direction to those obtained for boys, that is, in contradiction to the expected pattern: school avoidance and acting out, $r_{boys} = .21$ versus $r_{girls} = -.14$; school avoidance and learning difficulties, $r_{boys} = .21$

versus $r_{\text{girls}} = -.11$. For girls, teacher-rated aggressive behaviour and learning problems were not associated with feelings of preferring to be at home rather than at school.

Relations between teacher-rated adjustment and children's reported enjoyment of play activities and schoolwork showed mixed results, again moderated by gender. The expected pattern was evident for girls who said they like schoolwork, which was associated with higher teacher ratings for assertive social skills and for task orientation ($r = -.30, r = .32, ps < .05$, respectively). However, the reverse was noted for girls who said they like play, which was associated with lower ratings by teachers for assertive social skills and task orientation, ($r = -.23, ns$, and $r = -.30, p < .05$). The corresponding patterns for boys showed no correlation between like schoolwork and assertive social skills and task orientation ($rs = .05$ and $.00, ns$, respectively), and correlations in the opposite direction between like play and assertive social skills and task orientation ($rs = .16$ and $.20, ns$, respectively).

Child-reported perceptions of peer social acceptance were also related to teacher-rated outcomes, but counter-intuitively. Using correlation analyses for the whole sample, positive associations were noted between perceived peer acceptance and teacher's ratings of acting out behaviour ($r (122) = .17, p < .10$) and learning difficulties ($r (124) = .17, p < .10$). In addition, for boys, higher self-ratings of acceptance by peers were associated with lower teacher-rated strengths, including frustration tolerance ($r = -.20, p < .10$), assertive social skills ($r = -.22, p < .10$), and peer social skills ($r = -.21, p < .10$). The corresponding results for girls showed only weak, nonsignificant correlation coefficients. Figures showed that perceptions of academic competence were also counter-intuitively related to teachers' ratings for acting out, learning difficulties, and frustration tolerance, but these associations were weak and not significant.

Table 3. Intercorrelations between Child-reported School Adjustment Indicators and Teacher-rated Problems and Strengths for Boys and Girls

		AO	S/A	LD	FT-S	AS-S	TO-S	PS-S
Competence	(boys)	.20	-.00	.11	-.11	.04	-.00	.05
	(girls)	.11	.01	.18	-.19	-.04	-.17	-.11
Peer acceptance	(boys)	.21[†]	.07	.19	-.20[†]	-.22[†]	-.14	-.21[†]
	(girls)	.16	-.12	.19	-.04	-.09	-.22	-.05
School liking	(boys)	-.22[†]	.00	-.09	.26*	.13	.26*	.17
	(girls)	.07	-.13	-.07	.11	.10	-.03	.04
School avoidance	(boys)	.21[†]	.09	.21[†]	-.24[†]	-.25*	-.31**	-.17
	(girls)	-.14	.13	-.11	-.01	-.04	-.03	.07
Positive to teacher	(boys)	-.15	-.10	-.07	.25*	.05	.19	.04
	(girls)	-.08	-.19	-.19	.16	.09	.05	.18
Likes to play ^a	(boys)	-.12	.02	-.06	.13	.16	.20	.18
	(girls)	-.17	.14	.14	.06	-.30*	-.23	-.06
Likes schoolwork ^a	(boys)	-.08	.15	-.16	-.01	.05	.00	.06
	(girls)	-.20	-.06	-.04	.12	.32*	.30*	.15

Notes: * $p = .05$; [†] $p = .10$

Problems were: AO, acting out; S/A, shy/anxious; LD, learning difficulties;

Strengths were: FT-S, frustration tolerance; AS-S, assertive social skills; TO-S, task orientation; PS-S, peer social skills.

^a 'like play' and 'like schoolwork' were scored as follows: 1 = gave this response, 0 = did not give this response.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relations between child and teacher sources of information on kindergarten children's adjustment to school. Children's perceptions of themselves as learners, their social acceptance by peers, their feelings about school and their teachers, and the things they liked to do at school were collected in a structured interview, using standardised questionnaires as well as new measures. Results showed that the instruments provided a coherent set of constructs that described the child's experience of school. Correlations analyses indicated that children whose academic and social self-perceptions were more positive also had higher scores for school liking and lower scores for school avoidance. More positive feelings about school (higher school liking/lower school avoidance) were linked to a more positive view of the teacher. Conversely, poorer self-perceptions were associated with less positive feelings towards school and the teacher. Children who had higher school liking scores were also more likely to identify social play activities, such as sport or play with toys and games, as the things they liked to do at school, whereas those who had lower scores for school liking were less likely to see school as a place to enjoy play. These findings, which identified considerable variation in children's feelings about school, underline the value of including empirical measures when assessing school adjustment. Children's responses to 16 brief questions, coded on a simple 3-point score, provided a reliable, discriminatory measure of their feelings about school. Of further importance in the child-report data was the strong link that was seen between children's positive dispositions towards school and more positive relationships with their teachers and friends at school. Results were similar to previous research that has emphasised the role of friendships and peer acceptance (Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Coleman, 1997), as well as teacher-rated relationship quality (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), in school adjustment. The results are also similar to work by Valeski and Stipek (2001) in that children's own ratings of their feelings about the teacher were closely linked to feelings of school liking and avoidance.

Teachers' ratings of children's problem behaviours, learning difficulties, and learning competencies, were collected using a standardised questionnaire with a proven record in studies of school adjustment (Hightower, Work et al, 1986; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Subscale scores described problems of acting out and shy/anxious behaviour, as well as learning difficulties, and competencies related to school learning expectations. Competencies included tolerance of frustration related to limits, failure, and peer teasing, assertiveness as shown by confidence in expressing own ideas in class and leadership ability, task orientation and organization skills related to schoolwork, and peer social acceptance. Considerable overlap was noted across subscales. Children who were rated as having more acting out problems were also seen to have more learning difficulties, less ability to tolerate frustration, and poorer task orientation. Children with problems of shy/anxious behaviour were seen as less confident as leaders or in speaking out in class. Children who scored high on peer acceptance/social skills were seen as more able to tolerate frustration in response to the challenges of peer teasing and difficulties in class.

In keeping with other recent studies of school adjustment (Lim et al., 1995; Margetts, 2003; Spitzer et al., 1995), child age was found to have little relation to teacher-rated outcomes. Although children's age at assessment varied by more than a full year (5.25 to 6.67 years), meaningful correlations were noted for only one of the seven subscale scores, and this was only for boys. Nevertheless, it is interesting that learning difficulties were associated, albeit marginally, with a younger age of starting kindergarten. A similar finding was reported by Margetts (2003) in her study of Victorian children, where age was weakly correlated with teacher-rated academic competence. Taken together, these results suggest that further research should

consider following the progress of children who commence school at a younger age, particularly the case of younger boys. It may be, as Spitzer et al. (1995) have noted for disadvantage in the social area, that academic disadvantage associated with early school entry is overcome by first grade. Further research will be needed to ascertain any change over time. Child age was only marginally related to self-perceptions, and not related to feelings about school and the teacher. Older children were more likely, however, to provide examples of play activities when asked what they liked to do at school. This underlines the importance for older children of their social relations with peers at school.

The present study also noted gender differences, in both children's perceptions and teachers' ratings of school-related problems and competencies. Findings were similar to other reports on gender and school adjustment (eg., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd et al, 2000; Lim et al, 1995; Margetts, 2003; NICHD ECCRN, 2003; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). In terms of child-reported outcomes, girls were somewhat more positive than boys in their responses to questions about school. More evidence of gender effects was seen in teachers' ratings, where four of the seven subscales showed significant differences. Girls were rated lower on problems of adjusting to school, including acting out, anxiety, and learning difficulties, than boys. Girls were also seen as more task oriented than boys.

Of greater interest, however, were gender differences in the relations between child-rated and teacher-rated measures of school adjustment. Although the numbers of boys and girls limited the power of the split-file analyses, results showed a consistent pattern of child- and teacher-ratings being matched for boys (correlations of $r > .20$, $ps < .05$), but not matched for girls (correlations of $r < .10$, *ns*). For boys, the results were in keeping with an expectation that more positive feelings about school (ie., higher scores for liking school and liking the teacher and lower scores for school avoidance), would be associated with higher ratings for school competencies and lower ratings for adjustment problems. Boys who felt more positive about school and their teacher were rated as more able to manage the day-to-day frustrations of classroom expectations and difficulties with peers, more organised in their schoolwork, more independent as learners, and more confident in speaking up in class or taking a leadership role. Boys' positive feelings towards school were also associated with lower ratings for school adjustment problems, such as disruptive aggressive behaviour, attention seeking, poor work habits, and learning difficulties. This relationship was not so evident for girls. There was only weak support for the expected direction in the correlation patterns and, furthermore, there were two indications of an opposite direction. For girls, lower self-rated school avoidance was associated with higher, rather than lower, teacher-ratings for acting out problems and learning difficulties. This indicated a mismatch between child perceptions and teacher assessment of adjustment in that girls who were more positive about being at school were rated as less well adjusted by their teachers. A similar result was noted for girls who said they liked to play at school, where their teachers rated them as less confident in class and having poorer task orientation skills. In contrast, boys who said they liked play were rated as more confident and more task-oriented.

The mismatch between girls' and teachers' views of school adjustment may have important implications for girls' adjustment to and subsequent achievement in school. Whilst simple tests showed gender differences on teacher-rated problems and competencies, it was only by comparing child perceptions about school with teacher assessments of school adjustment that more complex patterns were exposed. Although girls were seen by their teachers as being better adjusted, there was little evidence that teachers were responding to girls' positive feelings about school in making this assessment. Correlations were in the expected direction and significant only for the indicator 'like schoolwork'. Girls who named aspects of

schoolwork, such as writing, maths, or reading, when asked what they liked to do at school, were rated by their teachers as being more task-oriented and more confident in communicating in class and acting as a leader. For the other indicators of positive perceptions of school, girls and teachers' ratings did not match. The clearest evidence of this was the relation for the indicator 'like play', which was negatively correlated with school adjustment. In seeking an explanation for these results, I am drawn to arguments for the "invisibility" of girls and sex-stereotyping by teachers in their attitudes and expectations of girls (reviewed in Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). The present findings are consistent with an expectation that girls' "proper school behaviour" should be schoolwork-oriented, rather than play-oriented, which is consistent with sex-stereotyped attitudes for girls to be "bookish" and boys to like sport and games (Maccoby, 1980). Because children are particularly vulnerable to sex-typed expectations in the early childhood years, it is worrying that girls who like school because of the play connections they have with friends or formal sport or informal games are perceived by teachers as being less task oriented and less confident in class activities. Enjoyment of school as a social setting is an important source of motivation and a clear sign of adjustment (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996) and should be valued by teachers equally for girls and boys.

Although the match between boys' positive perceptions of school and teacher's ratings of lower problem and more competent behaviours is encouraging, it may also be explained by gender differences in teachers' interactions. Research has shown that boys receive more attention and praise from teachers than girls (reviewed in Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). It may be that teachers' greater focus on boys means they are more attuned to boys' feelings of liking and avoiding school, which could explain why, in the present study, teacher-rated problems and competencies were closely related to boys' perceptions of school. In considering the implications for teaching practice, is it important to note that this relationship showed a link between boys' negative perceptions of school and poorer ratings of adjustment as well as positive perceptions and higher ratings. Therefore, the match in rating scores does not necessarily point to teachers being more supportive of boys' adjustment to school. The research findings suggest that enhancement of boys' feelings of liking school and their teachers will have benefits for adjustment and achievement.

In sum, this study has provided new insights into the matches and mismatches between teachers' assessments and children's perceptions of school adjustment. The differences that have been noted for boys and girls are useful in identifying ways that teachers might support adjustment, in particular, by valuing and promoting girl's enjoyment of school as a place for friendships and social play, and by working to develop warm, supportive relationships with boys.

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