

# Relations of reading skills and motivation with teaching styles in first grade

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## Summary

Learning to read is one of the most important objectives during the first school years. Various cognitive and linguistic skills (see Cain, 2009; Oakhill & Cain, 2007) and motivational factors (see Aunola et al., 2002; Guthrie et al., 2000; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Wilson & Trainin, 2007) are prerequisite to reading comprehension. During the past few decades, studies on reading have focused attention on teacher's activities in class which also has a significant effect on children's development (e.g. Connor et al., 2009a, 2009b; Lerkkanen et al., 2012b; Wigfield et al., 2004). However, few observation-based longitudinal studies have been conducted.

## The objectives and hypotheses of the study

The aim of the study was to analyse whether first grade students' reading skills and motivation differed in the classes where teachers used child-centred, teacher-centred and child-dominant teaching styles and how. The following hypotheses were posed:

1. Regarding connections between the teachers' teaching styles and students' word reading skills, we posed two alternative hypotheses. First, we expected (Hypothesis 1a) that the teacher-centred teaching style is positively related to children's word reading skills, as the teacher focuses on practicing the students' technical skills, i.e. fluency and accuracy of reading (Gettinger & Kohler, 2011); the relations between child-centred style and children's skills are weaker because the teacher does not pay as much attention to practicing word reading skills as to comprehension (Stipek & Byler, 2004), and the child-dominant style relates negatively to the child's skills (Walker, 2008). Alternatively, we expected (Hypothesis 1b) that both child-centred and teacher-centred teaching styles are positively associated with children's word reading

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- skills – as the teacher-centred activities direct the child to practicing, children's motivation is enhanced by child-centred activities, which in turn may make children work harder (Connor et al., 2004, 2009b; Gettinger & Kohler, 2011; Perry et al., 2007); child-dominant teaching style is negatively connected to children's development (Walker, 2008).
2. We expected (Hypothesis 2) that the child-centred teaching style is positively related to reading comprehension as the teacher emphasises developing children's comprehension skills in general and encourages them to make an effort (McCombs, 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004; Wentzel, 2010); reading comprehension is less supported by the teacher-centred style which gives the priority to mechanical training of basic skills (Stipek & Byler, 2004), while the child-dominant teaching style relates negatively to the development of children's comprehension skills (Walker, 2008).
  3. We expected (Hypothesis 3) that only the child-centred teaching style is positively associated with children's motivation, as the teacher values the children's interests, and encourages and supports them in studies emotionally; the teacher-centred and child-dominant styles relate negatively to children's motivation, because emotional support and the consideration of the children's interests is scarce from the teacher's part (McCombs, 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004; Wentzel, 2010).

## Method

First grade students ( $N = 440$ ) and their teachers ( $N = 21$ ) participated in the study. Children's word reading skills and motivation were assessed at the beginning and the end of first grade; reading comprehension was assessed at the end of first grade. In each class, three lessons were observed and class activities were coded by means of the ECCOM coding measure (Stipek & Byler, 2005). The teachers were divided according to their approach as practising child-centred ( $n = 8$ ), teacher-centred ( $n = 7$ ) and child-dominant ( $n = 6$ ) styles based on the observation.

In the data analyses, variable-oriented methods (one-way ANOVA) were combined with person-oriented methods (Configural Frequency Analysis, CFA, see Bergman & El-Khoury, 2002).

## Results and conclusions

*Teaching styles and students' word reading skills.* While there were no differences in word reading skills in classes of teachers with different styles at the beginning of the first grade, at the end of the year these skills

were better in the classes of teachers with a child-centred style compared to teachers practicing the other styles. CFA revealed differences in the relative incidence of poor readers between the groups of teachers: in child-centred classes, there were relatively few poor readers, but relatively many in teacher-centred classes. Although previous research has pointed out that it is the weak students that need to be taught specific elementary skills and practice them, and this is offered by teacher-centred methods (see Connor et al., 2004, 2009b; Stipek & Byler, 2004), our results rather show that it is the child-centred style that has a favourable influence on children's word reading skills. The child-dominant style linked negatively to students' word reading skills, which confirms previous results (Walker, 2008).

*Teaching styles and students' reading comprehension.* The child-centred teaching style associated positively with students' reading comprehension. The children's results were significantly better at the end of the school year in the classes of teachers practising predominantly child-centred teaching activities compared to the classes of teachers with teacher-centred and child-dominant styles. CFA also revealed a relatively large number of students with good reading comprehension skills and less with poor comprehension skills in the student-centred classes, but the tendency was the contrary in the classes of teachers with teacher-centred and child-dominant styles. It may be assumed that the positive relationship between the teacher's child-centred teaching style and children's reading comprehension derive from the teacher's concentration on comprehension skills (McCombs, 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004). Our study showed that the dominance of the teacher-centred style in teacher's activities does not favour the children's development. Low results in children in child-dominant classes confirm the understanding that such a learning environment does not contribute to the development of children's skills (Stipek & Byler, 2004; Walker, 2008).

*Teaching styles and students' reading motivation.* As expected, only the child-centred teaching style related positively to children's interest in reading. While there were no differences in the level of reading interest in the classes of teachers with different teaching styles at the beginning of the first grade, the level was the highest in the classes of child-centred teachers by the end of the grade. CFA also revealed that there were relatively few students with a low level of reading interest in the classes of child-centred teachers, in contrast to the child-dominant classes,

where the frequency of children with low reading interest was high and few children were interested in reading. Continuously high interest in reading can be explained by the activities of a child-centred teacher which are characterised by valuing the children's interests, applying interest-provoking educational activities and supporting children emotionally in learning (McCombs, 2010; Stipek & Byler, 2004). The results are consistent with the findings of Lerkkanen et al. (2012b) – compared to the teacher-centred style, a dominance of child-centred activities in the teacher's behaviour positively influences children's reading interest. Results show that in primary school, the child-dominant style does not support children's internal motivation. Results of the study did not show associations between teaching styles and children's self-efficacy. It appeared that at the end of first grade self-efficacy was homogeneously high in the classes of teachers with all teaching styles. It may be presumed that differences in students' self-efficacy will become apparent during a longer period of time.

*Conclusion.* The study concentrated on the relationships of teaching styles with children's reading skills and motivation in the first grade. The results revealed that teaching styles are significantly related to children's skills and motivation. The development of children's reading skills and motivation is supported by the child-centred teaching style that is inspired by the child's individual needs and is oriented to comprehension and shaping the learning behaviour that is directed towards attracting interest and masterfulness. The dominance of teacher-centred and child-dominant activities in the teacher's behaviour, on the contrary, tend to hinder the development of primary school students' reading skills and fail to support interest in reading. The results of the study are also applicable in teacher education programmes.

*Keywords:* teaching practices, teaching styles, reading, motivation, interest, self-efficacy