Received: 13 March 2024 | Accepted: 25 September 2024

DOI: 10.1002/jad.12419

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Foundation for PSA WILEY

Developmental trajectories of students' beliefs about social success: Differences between students with and without a middle school transition

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Abstract

Introduction: Attaining social success is a significant concern during early adolescence. The characteristics that youth believe will bring social success are known to change over time and vary across contexts, especially over the transition to middle school.
Methods: The analytic sample included 614 students (52% girls, 48% boys; 53% Black, 47% White) from the Midwestern United States. At yearly intervals during grades 6–8, participants completed self-report surveys assessing their endorsement of five characteristics (sincerity, academic responsibility, dominance, disingenuity, athleticism/attractiveness) that described peers in their grade who have lots of friends and get along well with others (i.e., social success). The sample included students who attended the same school from kindergarten-eighth grade (K8) and students who made a transition from an elementary to a middle school after 6th grade (ESMS).
Results: Multigroup longitudinal growth models revealed some concerning trends over time. For both ESMS and K8 students, their endorsement of sincerity decreased, their endorsement of disingenuity increased, and their endorsement of athleticism/attractiveness was high and stable. ESMS students' endorsement of academic responsibility decreased over time and their endorsement of dominance showed increasing trends. K8 students' endorsements of academic responsibility and dominance were stable. However, across contexts, compared to the other characteristics, sincerity was most often ranked the highest.
Conclusions: The findings highlight that some changes in students' beliefs about social success may be unique to students who experience a school transition whereas others may be developmentally normative. Implications for the education of young adolescent students are discussed.

KEYWORDS

adolescence, peer relations, school context, school transitions, social success

Peers represent an important proximal context that influences development at school during early adolescence (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019). Yet, peers of early adolescents do not have equal power for influencing school beliefs and behaviors; rather, some of the greatest power lies with their peers who are viewed as socially successful—those that are popular, well-liked, and have lots of friends (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Gommans et al., 2017). A large body of research has investigated the reputations of socially successful youth during early adolescence, finding that compared to younger children, they are more aggressive, dominant, and less academically inclined (e.g., Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Closson, 2009). The middle school transition has been described as a potential culprit for creating an environment that allows negative behaviors to flourish and garner status during early adolescence (Galván et al., 2011; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). However, the inclusion of a comparison group of students that did not transition to a middle school is needed to clarify its' role in defining the characteristics of social success.

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Thus, the present study included a longitudinal sample that contained students who transitioned from elementary to middle school after sixth grade (ESMS) as well as students who remained in the same school from kindergarten—eighth grade (K8). With an emphasis on comparing the experiences of ESMS and K8 youth, the present study examined the developmental trajectories of students' perceptions of their socially successful peers. That is, the extent to which youth believed their *sincere*, *academically responsible*, *dominant, disingenuous, and athletic/attractive* peers were the individuals in their grade who have lots of friends and get along with others (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011).

1 | CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL SUCCESS DURING EARLY ADOLESCENCE

In the present study, *social success* refers to having ample friends and getting along with others. We use the generic term, *social success*, to align with prior literature (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011) and because this definition draws on several widely studied social phenomena like *social status* and *social competence*. For instance, social success cuts across the two prominent dimensions of social status—popularity (i.e., being well-known and having high visibility in a peer group) and likeability (i.e., being well regarded in a peer group)—that although distinct, do overlap during early adolescence (van den Berg et al., 2020). Social success also encompasses social skills; the ability to get along with others and form friendships are important indicators of an individual's social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Thus, our review of the traits that characterize social success in early adolescence is informed by several areas of work.

Social success is a contextually based phenomena; different behaviors tend to garner status across different settings and stages of development based on the unique demands, norms, and values perceived by members of that social setting (Boor-Klip et al., 2017; Galván et al., 2011). The degree to which different behaviors are associated with social success—referred as status norms or norm salience—have important implications for students' behavior (Rambaran et al., 2013). Typically, norm salience is calculated as the correlation between students' peer nominations for popularity and peer nominations for behavioral reputations like aggression or prosocial behavior with a strong, positive correlation implying that high status youth often engage in that behavior (Dijkstra & Gest, 2015). The present study assesses this relation directly by asking students to rate the extent to which they agree that five traits (sincerity, academic responsibility, dominance, disingenuity, and athleticism/attractiveness) describe their peers who have a lot of friends and get along with others (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011).

Different developmental patterns have emerged for the different traits that commonly define social success. For example, compared to elementary school, popularity in middle school is characterized by more aggression (Bowker et al., 2010; Bukowski et al., 2000; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) and antisocial behaviors (Galván et al., 2011; North et al., 2019). At the same time, positive academic behaviors like engagement and getting good grades become less likely to accrue status (Galván et al., 2011; North et al., 2019; Véronneau et al., 2010). Though some studies have found that prosocial behavior becomes less likely to accrue status in adolescence (Dawes & Xie, 2017; van den Berg & Burk, & Cillessen, 2015), many studies support a social-skills model (Stormshak et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1986), which suggests that prosocial traits like sincerity, trustworthiness, and cooperation, are necessary prerequisites of social success throughout the lifespan (Bowker et al., 2010; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Further, physical attractiveness and athleticism are strong indicators of social status during early adolescence (Dijkstra et al., 2010) and some research finds that not having these characteristics can put youth at risk for antisocial outcomes (Leggett-James et al., 2023).

Using the same measure of social success as the present study, Kiefer and Ryan (2011) found that, across the transition to middle school, students' endorsement of dominant, disingenuous, and athletic/attractive peers as socially successful increased over time, while their endorsement of sincere and responsible peers decreased. However, sincerity was strongly endorsed by students throughout this study; sincerity was the most strongly endorsed trait for social success at the beginning of the study before the middle school transition and sincerity was the second highest ranked trait, behind athleticism/attractiveness, at the end of the study, post-transition. Dominance and disingenuity were consistently the least endorsed traits despite increasing over time (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011).

This negative shift in behaviors that confer social success during early adolescence may reflect tension resulting from the "maturity gap." The "maturity gap" represents the tension that adolescents feel as they try to gain independence from their families, but are not yet mature enough to have full rights and responsibilities from society (Moffitt, 1993, 2006). As a result, adolescents who engage in behaviors that are perceived as rebellious against adult authority, such as aggression and disruptive behavior, become more attractive whereas compliant behavior like trying hard in school becomes less attractive (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Upon the transition to middle school, when adolescents are thrust into a new environment with many new peers and need to re-establish social hierarchies, aggression and dominance may be viewed as particularly effective means to gain power among one's peers (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Though K8 students do not experience the disruption of a school transition, there is evidence, albeit quite limited, that there may also be a negative shift in perceptions of social success in K8 contexts (Brass & Ryan, 2021; Farmer, Hamm, et al., 2011); but, the negative trends of changes in social adjustment are not as severe as those common among ESMS students (Harter et al., 1992; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Taken together, the

maturity gap framework provides hypotheses regarding the developmental patterns of social success characteristics—that students will increase their endorsement for negative behaviors and lessen their endorsement for positive behaviors.

2 | ROLE OF SCHOOL CONTEXT IN DEFINING SOCIAL SUCCESS

The stage-environment-fit framework posits that maladjustment can arise when there is a mismatch between the affordances of a school environment and the students' developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993). In early adolescence, when youth desire consistent, intimate relationships, they are often thrust into a middle school environment with many new peers, the need to reestablish social hierarchies, and less contact with a consistent group of peers as they transition between subject-specific courses. As such, the transition to middle school from elementary school has been associated with negative academic consequences like losses in engagement, school achievement, and self-concept (e.g., Coelho et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2013) and negative social-emotional consequences like greater friendship instability and lower self-esteem (Hardy et al., 2002; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

Importantly, we examined another group of young adolescents who did not make a transition between elementary and middle school, but rather remained in the same school from kindergarten-eighth grade. Some work suggests that the K8 school environment may be better equipped to serve adolescents' social needs because they typically have lower student enrollment, a close-knit community of familiar students and families, strong teacher-student relationships, and overall greater level of school intimacy (Anderman, 2002; Offenberg, 2001). To this end, when compared to middle school or junior high students, K8 students have been found to have greater self-esteem (Simmons et al., 1979; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006), greater social belonging (Anderman, 2002), and they observe a more positive school social climate than middle schoolers (Kim et al., 2014). Unlike middle school students who may be inclined to use hostile means in response to a new school organization and social hierarchy (Juvonen & Ho, 2008), K8 students mostly go through their schooling with the same core group of students (Schwartz et al., 2011). Considering these contextual differences, we expected that K8 students may not experience as negative of shift in their beliefs about social success to the degree of transition students.

3 | GROUP DIFFERENCES IN REPORTS OF SOCIAL SUCCESS

In addition to examining potential school context differences, we also considered how students' gender and race might contribute to the development of their beliefs of social success. In general, much of the existing research has yielded inconsistent findings about the nature of such group differences; however, these factors should be considered because gender and ethnic-racial identity are particularly salient during adolescence (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). For instance, regarding beliefs of social success and social status, girls have been found more likely to endorse sincerity whereas boys are more likely to endorse dominance as a characteristic of social success (Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996; Kiefer & Ryan, 2011). Yet, other studies have not found these differences between girls' and boys' reports (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). Further, some studies have found that perceived beliefs of social success vary by students' ethnicity and race (Dawes & Xie, 2017; Taylor & Graham, 2007), whereas other studies find no differences in reports between students from different ethnic-racial backgrounds (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011; Rodkin et al., 2013). The mixed state of the literature warranted further investigation of gender and race in the present study.

4 | OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY & STUDY HYPOTHESES

Two aims comprised the present study. First, we sought to assess the developmental trajectories of students' beliefs about the characteristics of social success (*sincerity*, *academic responsibility*, *dominance, disingenuity, and athleticism/attractiveness*) across 3 years, spanning the middle school transition. By following students for 2 years after the transition, the current study can provide unique insight of how students' beliefs about their peers evolve across early adolescence. In line with findings from Kiefer and Ryan (2011), the maturity gap framework (Moffitt, 1993, 2006), and social skills models (Wright et al., 1986), we hypothesized that students' endorsements of academic responsibility would decline over time, their endorsements of sincerity and athleticism/attractiveness would be mostly stable over time, and their endorsements of dominance and disingenuity would increase over time.

Our second aim was to expand current understanding about the role of school context and individual differences in shaping young adolescents' beliefs about social success. Of the existing longitudinal studies, most work has included only students who made a transition from elementary to middle school (Bowker et al., 2010; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Kiefer & Ryan, 2011). The present sample included a comparison group of adolescents who did not experience this transition, but rather stayed in the same school from kindergarten-eighth grade (K8). Thus, all analyses utilized a multigroup approach to assess differences between school contexts; we expected that K8 students would experience less drastic declines in beliefs of

social success given the absence of a disruption (i.e., school transition) during their schooling. Within each school context, we also considered how students' gender and race may contribute to differences in students' beliefs of social success. We did not have specific hypotheses regarding gender or race given the complex and mixed findings in prior work.

5 | METHODS

5.1 | Participant sample

Data were collected as part of the School Transitions and Early Adolescent Development (STEAD) project. Approximately 680 students participated in at least one wave of data collection. Each year we recruited all students in our target grade in participating schools. Two thirds of students attended an elementary school in sixth grade (ESMS group, $N = 6$ schools) and transitioned to one of two middle schools for seventh grade. The other third of students attended the same school from kindergarten to eighth grade (K8 group, $N = 5$ schools). The sample was split evenly by gender (52% girls, 48% boys), was economically diverse (75% of students qualified for free/reduced price lunch), and the Ethnic/Racial demographics were 48% Black, 42% White, 5% Hispanic/Latinx, 5% other. These percentages were similar across all schools and waves. Since 90% of the sample included White and Black students and there was insufficient statistical power to meaningfully examine other ethnic groups, the analyses utilized a subsample of 614 Black ($N = 325$) and White students ($N = 289$).

At the first wave of data collection when students were in sixth grade and approximately 11–12 years old, 338 students participated (54% ESMS). Of this original sample, 78% of participants ($N = 265$; 53% ESMS), continued to wave 2 in seventh grade. New students ($N = 228$; 87% ESMS) also joined the sample at wave 2, rounding out the wave 2 sample to 493 students (69% ESMS). At wave 3 when students were in eighth grade, 80% of the wave 2 sample had continued ($N = 397$; 66% ESMS) and new students joined the sample at this final wave ($N = 63$; 57% ESMS), rounding out the wave 3 sample to 460 students (65% ESMS). Of the original wave 1 sixth grade sample, 63% of students ($N = 214$; 50% ESMS) participated at all three waves. Sample instability was due to two factors: mobility rates and school participation. Regarding school participation, we gained some students from nonparticipating elementary schools when they joined the middle school at wave 2 in seventh grade (note the high percentage of ESMS students joining the sample at wave 2). Our sample instability was comparable with the mobility rates reported by the state for these schools as well as samples from other studies with a high percentage of mobile families (Rastogi & Juvonen, 2019). To retain as much of our sample as possible and accommodate for missing data, we employed full information maximum likelihood (FIML) for our analyses which allows for the inclusion of all students who participated in at least one wave (Total $N = 614$).

5.2 | Procedure

Students completed annual surveys in the middle (~ January) of their sixth, seventh, and eighth grade school years. At the beginning of each school year, teachers were given consent forms to deliver to their students' families. During survey administration, students with parental or guardian permission (93%, 92%, and 95% for waves 1–3, respectively) were informed that the purpose of the survey was to learn about their experiences at school, that their participation was voluntary, they could choose to stop at any point if they wanted to, and that their answers would be kept confidential. Students needed to sign an assent sheet before beginning the survey. The research team read all instructions and items aloud while students read along and responded to the questions. Students were provided with a blank sheet of paper to cover their answers to keep them private. At the conclusion of survey administration, students were given the opportunity to choose two small gifts from a basket filled with a variety of school supplies and prizes.

All data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois (study title: *Changes in Motivation and Adjustment in Early Adolescence: Exploring Differences Between Students in K–8 Schools and Students Who Transition to Middle School*; Protocol Number: 10036).

6 | MEASURES

6.1 | Beliefs of the causes of social success (BCSS)

Students responded to 20 items that assessed their beliefs of the causes of social success (BCSS) on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all true, 3 = somewhat true, 5 = very true). Items were developed by Jarvinen and Nicholls (1996) and validated with early adolescents by Kiefer and Ryan (2011). All questions followed the stem, "The students who have lots of friends and get along well with others are the ones who…" Four items measured *academic responsibility* (e.g., "work hard at school"). Four items

measured *sincerity* (e.g., "take time to listen to others' ideas") Four items measured endorsement of *dominance* (e.g., 'like to push people around'). Three items measured endorsement of *disingenuity* (e.g., 'pretend to like everyone') and five items measured endorsement of *athleticism and attractiveness* ('are really good looking,' and 'are good at sports'). The calculation of Cronbach's alphas indicated acceptable internal consistency on average for endorsement of sincerity (α's range = 0.68–0.74), academic responsibility (α's range = 0.80–0.86), dominance (α's range = 0.71–0.74), disingenuity (α's range = 0.68–0.79), and athleticism/attractiveness (α's range = 0.81–0.83).

6.2 | Analytic plan

First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the measurement model was performed to examine the fit of a five-factor structure with observed indicators that assess students' BCSS at all three waves. Next, correlations were computed between all study variables separately for ESMS and K8 students. Fisher's r-to-z tests were used to assess whether the associations significantly differed between groups. We then turned to structural equation modeling to conduct linear growth curve analyses for each BCSS. Then, gender and race were added as covariates to the latent intercepts and slopes.

To assess differences between ESMS and K8 students in these analyses, we utilized multi-group models. First, a fully unconstrained multigroup model was examined to note the baseline for each model fit. Next, all pathways were constrained to be equal across ESMS and K8 students and a chi-square difference test was conducted. If the constrained model had worse fit than the unconstrained model, each path in the model was constrained one a time, with chi-square difference tests to evaluate whether there was a worse fit to the unconstrained model. Paths that could be constrained to be equal and did not yield a worse fit were retained whereas the paths that yielded a worse fit were allowed to freely vary. Standard criteria were used to evaluate model fit (i.e., nonsignificant chi-square test, RMSEA < 0.05, CFI > 0.95, and TLI > 0.95 for very good; Kline, 2015). Analyses utilized maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) to account for slightly skewed distributions of social success beliefs. Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML), which allows each participant to contribute their available data to the likelihood function.

7 | RESULTS

7.1 | Confirmatory factor analyses

The initial measurement model at wave 1 when participants were in sixth grade did not show acceptable fit [$\chi^2(160) = 365.87$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.87]. Modification indices suggested that item 1 in the endorsement of dominance subscale ('are the toughest') might load better onto the athleticism/attractiveness subscale. This item's loading onto the dominance subscale was lower (0.44) than its' loading onto the athleticism/appearance subscale (0.66). It is plausible that students interpreted "toughness" as being strong, physically fit, and having superior ability in sports. Switching this item to the athleticism/attractiveness subscale also improved model fit [$\chi^2(160) = 288.49$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.05, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92], so all subsequent analyses proceeded with this modified structure. Adequate fit indices for the modified measurement model were found at wave 2 when students were in seventh grade [$\chi^2(160) = 402.49$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = 0.056, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90] and at wave 3 when students were in eighth grade [$\chi^2(160) = 414.51$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90].

7.2 | Correlations and descriptives

Table 1 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations between all study variables. Patterns were similar for ESMS and K8 students; Fisher's r-to-z comparisons revealed no significant differences. Among the different BCSS, moderate positive correlations were observed between endorsement of sincerity- academic responsibility and between dominance, disingenuity, and athleticism/attractiveness. Negative relations were found between sincerity-dominance, sincerity-disingenuity, academic responsibility-dominance, and academic responsibility-disingenuity. Associations between athleticism/attractiveness and sincerity and academic responsibility were null or weakly positive.

7.3 | Unconditional growth curve models for BCSS

First, unconditional LGMs (longitudinal growth model) were estimated to examine changes in students' BCSS between waves 1 and 3 (i.e., from grades 6 to 8). Each model included an intercept factor (centered at wave 1) and a linear slope (rates of change over time). Model fit indices are presented in Table 2. Initial unconditional LGMs showed acceptable fit for all five

TABLE 1 Correlations and descriptive information for all study variables for ESMS and K8 students.

	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]	[9]	[10]	[11]	[12]	[13]	[14]	[15]
1. W1 Sincerity	--	0.69**	-0.28**	−0.11	0.08	0.41**	0.34**	−0.02	0.10	0.11	0.16	0.17	−0.06	−0.07	0.12
2. W1 Responsibility	0.68**	--	-0.39**	−0.11	−0.02	0.30**	0.28**	−0.06	0.06	0.14	0.20*	0.23*	−0.18	−0.11	0.07
3. W1 Dominance	−0.23**	−0.30**	--	0.52**	0.56**	−0.19*	−0.16	0.25**	0.11	0.20*	−0.21*	−0.31**	0.29**	0.15	0.13
4. W1 Disingenuity	−0.20**	−0.21**	0.67**	--	0.28**	−0.10	−0.04	0.33**	0.27**	0.22*	0.06	−0.003	0.17	0.18	0.18
5. W1 Athletic/Att	0.19*	0.09	0.40**	0.27**	--	0.01	−0.02	0.19*	0.14	0.39**	−0.07	−0.20*	0.26**	0.22*	0.31**
6. W2 Sincerity	0.28**	0.16	−0.01	−0.011	0.08	--	0.66**	−0.35**	−0.10	0.04	0.26**	0.27**	−0.25**	−0.15	-0.08
7. W2 Responsibility	0.27**	0.29**	−0.16	−0.13	−0.08	0.63**	--	−0.30**	−0.10	0.05	0.23**	0.43**	−0.19*	−0.02	0.03
8. W2 Dominance	−0.18*	−0.18*	0.26**	0.32**	0.22*	−0.29**	−0.27**	--	0.47**	0.35**	−0.17*	−0.19*	0.44**	0.39**	0.24**
9. W2 Disingenuity	−0.09	−0.16	0.17*	0.29**	0.12	−0.19**	−0.14*	0.53**	--	0.40**	−0.05	−0.10	0.37**	0.42**	0.26**
10. W2 Athletic/Att	0.001	0.01	0.26**	0.18*	0.42**	0.11*	−0.004	0.39**	0.20**	--	−0.06	−0.02	0.08	0.22*	0.40**
11. W3 Sincerity	0.46**	0.30**	−0.11	−0.23*	0.07	0.36**	0.28**	−0.18**	−0.01	0.03	--	0.67**	−0.35**	−0.31**	0.20*
12. W3 Responsibility	0.30**	0.16	0.03	−0.04	0.17	0.28**	0.35**	−0.11	0.05	0.003	0.62**	--	−0.36**	−0.24**	0.08
13. W3 Dominance	−0.12	−0.21*	0.28**	0.20*	0.11	−0.17**	−0.22**	0.38**	0.23**	0.25**	−0.20**	−0.25**	--	0.55**	0.33**
14. W3 Disingenuity	−0.18	−0.21*	0.28**	0.27**	0.14	−0.14*	−0.16*	0.20**	0.23**	0.19**	−0.14*	−0.07	0.52**	--	0.21**
15. W3 Athletic/Att	0.05	0.024	0.19*	0.11	0.42**	−0.06	−0.07	0.17**	0.10	0.42**	0.15*	0.04	0.42**	0.29**	--
ESMS *M* (SD)	3.40 (1.20)	3.17 (1.14)	2.54 (1.23)	2.52 (1.14)	3.12 (1.09)	3.24 (1.01)	2.85 (1.10)	2.78 (1.10)	2.81 (1.08)	3.37 (0.91)	3.17 (0.94)	2.73 (0.97)	2.77 (1.00)	2.96 (1.12)	3.47 (0.89)
K8 *M* (SD)	3.23 (0.99)	2.89 (1.12)	2.67 (1.26)	2.59 (1.12)	3.04 (1.04)	3.25 (0.88)	2.78 (1.02)	2.66 (1.12)	2.74 (1.14)	3.22 (0.93)	3.26 (0.98)	2.94 (1.03)	2.43 (1.06)	2.72 (1.15)	3.25 (0.95)

Abbreviation: ESMS, elementary to middle school after sixth grade.

*$p < 0.05$,; **$p < 0.01$.

Note: Correlations for ESMS students are reported below the diagonal; correlations for K8 students are reported above the diagonal. W1 refers to 6th grade; W2 refers to 7th grade; W3 refers to 8th grade. Responsibility refers to students' endorsement of academic responsibility.

TABLE 2 Multigroup longitudinal growth model fit indices and difference testing.

	X^2	*df*	*p*-value	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	Comparison	ΔS-B X^2	Δ*df*	*p*-value
Sincerity										
Unconditional	0.02	1	0.90	0.00	1.00	1.00				
M1: Baseline	6.28	10	0.79	0.00	1.00	1.00				
M2: Fully constrained, Final	15.06	16	0.52	0.00	1.00	1.00	M1 versus M2	9.09	6	0.17
Academic responsibility										
Unconditional	1.93	1	0.16	0.04	0.99	0.96				
M1: Baseline	6.84	6	0.34	0.02	0.99	0.97				
M2: Fully constrained	22.95	12	0.03	0.05	0.85	0.77	M1 versus M2	16	6	0.01
M3: Final	7.50	8	0.48	0.00	1.00	1.00	M1 versus M3	0.66	2	0.72
Dominance										
Unconditional	2.97	1	0.08	0.06	0.97	0.92				
M1: Baseline	7.20	6	0.30	0.03	0.98	0.95				
M2: Fully constrained	23.05	12	0.03	0.05	0.86	0.78	M1 versus M2	15.8	6	0.01
M3: Final	10.60	11	0.48	0.00	1.00	1.00	M1 versus M3	3.41	5	0.64
Disingenuity										
Unconditional	1.30	1	0.25	0.02	0.99	0.98				
M1: Baseline	8.23	10	0.61	0.00	1.00	1.00				
M2: Fully constrained, Final	18.18	16	0.31	0.02	0.96	0.96	M1 versus M2	9.88	6	0.13
Athleticism/attractiveness										
Unconditional	4.21	1	0.04	0.07	0.97	0.91				
M1: Baseline	9.43	6	0.15	0.04	0.97	0.92				
M2: Fully constrained, Final	18.86	12	0.09	0.04	0.94	0.92	M1 versus M2	9.43	6	0.15

Note: Baseline refers to the multigroup model with covariates added to the intercept and slope. Fully constrained refers to the multigroup models where all parameters were constrained to be equal between ESMS and K8 students. ΔS-B X^2 refers to the Sattora-Bentler chi-square difference test.

BCSS. Results revealed some maladaptive patterns over time; students' endorsement of sincerity showed a decreasing trend, academic responsibility decreased, dominance was stable, disingenuity increased, and athleticism/attractiveness increased. There was significant variance observed for the intercepts of sincerity [$\sigma = 0.36$, $p = 0.006$], academic responsibility [$\sigma = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$], disingenuity [$\sigma = 0.38$, $p = 0.013$], and athleticism/attractiveness [$\sigma = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$]. The variance for the intercept of students' endorsement of dominance trended toward significance [$\sigma = 0.31$, $p = 0.06$]. Significant variance at the intercepts indicates interindividual heterogeneity in initial levels of beliefs of social success. Only the variance for the slope of students' endorsement of academic responsibility was significant [$\sigma = 0.15$, $p = 0.028$]. This suggests that for the most part, youth showed similar rates of change on average.

7.4 | Multigroup growth models with gender and race as covariates

Next, multigroup growth models were conducted for each indicator of social success with gender and race added as covariates on the intercepts and slopes. See Table 2 for model fit and chi-square difference tests. See Table 3 for final results of multigroup models. Figure 1 displays the linear fixed effects from the final models.

A fully constrained model between ESMS and K8 students did not yield a significantly worse fit than the unconstrained model for sincerity, disingenuity, or athleticism/attractiveness. Thus, estimates were equivalent across groups. Students' endorsement of sincerity declined over time. Students' endorsement of disingenuity increased over time. Students' endorsement of athleticism/attractiveness did not significantly change over time, but the positive value of the slope trended toward significance. Demographic differences emerged only on the intercept for sincerity; in sixth grade, boys endorsed sincerity less than girls.

Regarding academic responsibility, multigroup analyses revealed significant differences between ESMS and K8 students. Further testing revealed significant differences at the intercepts, slope, and effect of race and gender on the slope (though the latter two differences pertaining to race and gender did not reach statistical significance). Specifically, endorsement of academic responsibility was greater among ESMS students than for K8 students at wave 1 in sixth grade. Over time, ESMS students' endorsement of academic responsibility significantly declined, yet there was no change among K8 students.

Regarding dominance, multigroup analyses revealed significant differences between ESMS and K8 students. Further testing revealed significant differences for the slope. The slope for changes in students' endorsement of dominance did not achieve significance in either ESMS or K8 settings; however, the slope was positive for ESMS students and negative for K8 students. Demographic differences were not statistically significant.

8 | DISCUSSION

The nature of the behavioral characteristics that define social success during adolescence has been a long-standing concern and the focus of decades of research (Adler & Adler, 1995; Kiefer & Ryan, 2011; Leggett-James et al., 2023). Being accepted by peers and having social success is a significant concern for young adolescents (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), so they are likely to be very aware of the behaviors of peers they view to be socially successful (Steinberg, 2014) and interpret these behaviors as a guide for themselves (Rambaran et al., 2013). The present study investigated patterns of social success in early adolescence for youth with different schooling experiences—specifically a group of students who made a transition from an elementary to a middle school after sixth grade (ESMS) and another group of students who remained in the same school from kindergarten—eighth grade (K8). Our results indicate that young adolescents report significant changes in their beliefs about social success over time, and that there are some important differences between students who did and did not make a transition to middle school.

8.1 | Longitudinal trends of the beliefs of causes of social success (BCSS) across school settings

Multigroup growth curve analyses indicated some maladaptive, but nuanced changes for BCSS across early adolescence. In both ESMS and K8 settings, students consistently endorsed athleticism/attractiveness as important features of social success, in line with prior research (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011). As suggested by the maturity gap framework, youth are often attracted to traits that indicate maturity (Moffitt, 2006); athletic ability and attractiveness can be indicative of physical maturity, making them robust predictors of social status (Dijkstra et al., 2010). Sincerity was one of the most highly ranked causes for social success when compared to other behaviors, lending support to the idea that prosocial skills are necessary to earn status among one's peers (i.e., social skills model; Wright et al., 1986). However, students' reports that their sincere peers were socially successful tended to decline over time. Concurrently, students' endorsement of disingenuity (pretending to care or

TABLE 3 Coefficients for multigroup longitudinal growth models for beliefs of social success.

	ESMS		K8	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Sincerity				
Intercept	3.45**	0.08	3.45**	0.08
Gender	−0.23*	0.10	−0.23*	0.10
Race	−0.07	0.09	−0.07	0.09
Slope	−0.12*	0.05	−0.12*	0.05
Gender	0.08	0.06	0.08	0.06
Race	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.06
Academic responsibility				
Intercept	**3.21****	**0.10**	**2.91****	**0.11**
Gender	−0.12	0.11	−0.12	0.11
Race	−0.09	0.11	−0.09	0.11
Slope	**−0.22****	**0.07**	**−0.08**	**0.07**
Gender	**0.06**	**0.08**	**0.12**	**0.09**
Race	**−0.01**	**0.08**	**0.18**	**0.10**
Dominance				
Intercept	2.68**	0.10	2.68**	0.10
Gender	−0.03	0.11	0.03	0.11
Race	0.01	0.12	0.01	0.12
Slope	**0.10**	**0.07**	**−0.08**	**0.07**
Gender	−0.02	0.07	−0.02	0.07
Race	−0.05	0.07	−0.05	0.07
Disingenuity				
Intercept	2.71**	0.09	2.71**	0.09
Gender	−0.19	0.11	−0.19	0.11
Race	−0.03	0.11	−0.03	0.11
Slope	0.19**	0.06	0.19**	0.06
Gender	−0.004	0.07	−0.004	0.07
Race	−0.09	0.08	−0.09	0.08
Athleticism/attractiveness				
Intercept	3.18**	0.08	3.18**	0.08
Gender	0.06	0.10	0.06	0.10
Race	−0.15	0.10	−0.15	0.10
Slope	0.08	0.05	0.08	0.05
Gender	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.06
Race	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.06

Abbreviation: ESMS, elementary to middle school after sixth grade.

Note: Unstandardized estimates are reported. Boldface indicates paths that were freed to vary between ESMS and K8 students. Gender was coded (0 = girls, 1 = boys) and Race was coded as (0 = Black, 1 = White).

*$p < 0.05$,; **$p < 0.01$.

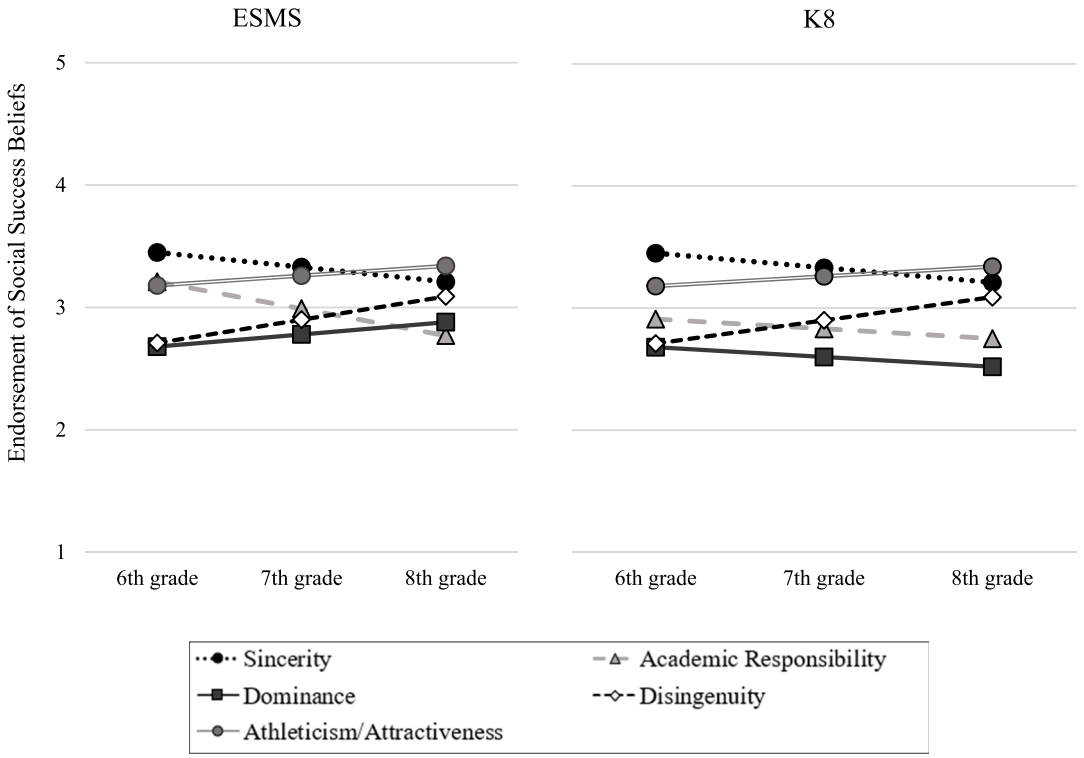


FIGURE 1 Linear Fixed Effects of Changes in the Beliefs of the Characteristics Associated with Social Success. Estimates for intercepts and slopes from the final models are displayed. ESMS is for elementary-middle school students and K8 is for students who attended the same school from kindergarten-eighth grade. ESMS, elementary to middle school after sixth grade.

like others) for social success increased significantly over time in both school contexts. This is aligned with trends that suggest that displays of relational aggression, which can include acting deceitful and mean, are increasingly linked with social status across the early adolescent years (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2005). Furthermore, in the present study, there were positive correlations observed between disingenuity and dominance at each wave (*r*'s: 0.47–0.67) across school contexts, suggesting that youth who pretend to care for others can also be forceful and push others around, which is representative of relational aggression (Boor-Klip et al., 2017). It is interesting that two opposing traits—sincerity and disingenuity—show inverse trends over time, suggesting that youth may begin to use some different skills to establish and maintain one's power at school (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019).

Some important differences emerged between ESMS and K8 students. For example, though elementary sixth graders reported stronger endorsement of academic responsibility than K8 sixth graders, ESMS students showed declines in their endorsement of academic responsibility over time, whereas these beliefs were stable among K8 students. This is in line with some work that documents academic declines across the middle school transition (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Wigfield et al., 1991). A lack of change among K8 students' perceptions perhaps reflects their more stable schooling environment without the disruption of a transition. In contrast, for transition students, where social hierarchies need to be re-established among a new peer group, rebellious behavior tends to garner more attention than behavior that complies with authority such as following rules or trying hard in school (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). The decline in students' endorsement of academic responsibility across the transition also supports our hypotheses concerning the maturity gap (Moffitt, 2006).

Further, students' endorsement of dominance was also sensitive to school context. Though K8 students endorsed dominance in sixth grade less than elementary students, trends over time were positive among ESMS students and negative among K8 students (though neither slope was significant). That there was not a significant increase in students' endorsement of dominance as they transitioned to middle school (as would be expected from a maturity gap framework) is encouraging. However, even more encouraging is that students' endorsement of dominance in K8 settings showed declining trends into eighth grade. Perhaps since K8 students mostly attend school with the same core group of peers (Schwartz et al., 2011), they do not need to use dominance to gain social success because they know each other well. Also, it is possible that dominance in intimate K8 settings can be interpreted as reactive aggression, which is typically not viewed favorably among adolescents (Stoltz et al., 2016).

8.2 | Few demographic group differences in students' beliefs of social success

Overall, there were few significant differences in reports between boys and girls and between students with different racial backgrounds. One significant difference emerged with respect to gender. Girls endorsed sincerity significantly more as a characteristic of social success than boys did in sixth grade, but there were no differences in how their endorsement of sincerity changed over time (slight declines observed for boys and girls). Girls tend to greatly value intimacy and trust in their friendships (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), whereas this is not as strong of a defining feature for adolescent boys' friendships, so it is not surprising that being sincere and honest might be perceived as a defining feature of social success for girls. Further, for the most part, patterns were similar between students' reports from different racial backgrounds. This may reflect the "balanced" nature of school ethnic-racial diversity in the present study. According to Kogachi and Graham (2020), when there is no clear numerical majority group (i.e., most students were Black or White), group differences may not be as pronounced if they exist at all. Future research should continue to build on examining the role of school diversity might shape students' experiences (Juvonen et al., 2006), especially across schools with different grade structures and among different ethnic groups.

9 | STUDY STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

In the present study, we sought to revisit and gain novel insight about adolescents' views of the behaviors that define social success. With a sample consisting of youth who made a transition to middle school and youth who remained in the same school from kindergarten-eighth grade, we were able to show that changes in students' beliefs of social success are not entirely limited to changes experienced around the transition to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993), but rather may reflect some normative changes in early adolescence. The present study utilized self-report items, which can provide a direct assessment of students' beliefs about the behaviors that define social success. For a complete picture of social success during adolescence, it is important to employ multiple methodologies. Our findings align with studies that have utilized peer nomination data, the predominant method to assess social status and norm salience, (Dijkstra & Gest, 2015), highlighting the validity of these different approaches (Kiefer & Ryan, 2011). Further research might consider using similar methodology to assess students' endorsement of traits associated with the different dimensions of social status (i.e., popularity and likeability; van den Berg et al., 2020), as well as assessing the *target* of certain behaviors (i.e., to whom is socially successful youth's sincere or dominant behavior directed toward?), which may reveal additional information (Andrews et al., 2017).

The present study has additional limitations that we acknowledge. First, although our study was longitudinal, students were only surveyed once per school year. Important changes have been documented in social status within a school year (Bellmore, 2011; North et al., 2019), so it is possible that some changes went undetected in our study. Likewise, there exists many different school contexts; the present study considered differences between K8 students and students who transitioned to a middle school from an elementary school after sixth grade. Results may vary based on when students make a school transition (Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010). Additionally, we were unable to account for the varying population sizes of schools in the present study given the small number of schools and our focus on investigating differences between ESMS and K8 contexts. However, the size of the peer reference group may be relevant; students from a large school may reference a larger pool of socially successful peers. Observing a behavior exhibited by more youth could lead to stronger endorsements than if the behavior is exhibited by only a few youth (Laninga-Wijnen et al., 2019). This is an important avenue for future empirical research.

10 | CONCLUSION

As achieving social success is a key concern for young adolescents (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010), understanding the behaviors that define social success is important for teachers, parents, and practitioners. At school, teachers can play an important role in shaping the behaviors that lead to social success (Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, et al., 2011) through several avenues including their own relationships with students (Hendrickx et al., 2017), their classroom management strategies (Gest et al., 2014), and seating arrangements (van den Berg & Cillessen, 2015). An important takeaway from this study is an optimistic message: despite some negative trends over time, students consistently endorsed sincerity as a defining feature of social success. Nonetheless, our results highlight the need for additional research and attention towards the potential precursors that precipitate students' beliefs about social success as well as *how* school structures can contribute to different social dynamics for better or for worse.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all of the students and teachers who took part in this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois (study title: Changes in Motivation and Adjustment in Early Adolescence: Exploring Differences Between Students in K–8 Schools and Students Who Transition to Middle School; Protocol Number: 10036).

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How to cite this article: Brass, N. R., Ryan, A. M. (2025). Developmental trajectories of students' beliefs about social success: Differences between students with and without a middle school transition. *Journal of Adolescence*, *97*, 278–291. https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12419