



## Student–teacher relationships in elementary school: The unique role of shyness, anxiety, and emotional problems

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the unique contributions of students' self-reported internalizing behaviors (shyness, anxiety, and emotional problems) to teachers' perceptions of the quality of student–teacher relationships (closeness, conflict, and dependency). In total, 269 third-to-sixth grade students (50.9% girls) and 35 teachers (74.7% females) from 8 Dutch regular elementary schools participated in this study. Teachers filled out questionnaires about their background characteristics and the affective quality of their relationship with individual students, and students answered questions about their demographics and internalizing behaviors. Multilevel models revealed significant negative associations of student-perceived shyness with teacher-perceived closeness and conflict in the student–teacher relationship. Additionally, students' anxiety was positively associated with conflict and dependency in the relationship. Students' emotional problems, however, were not associated with student–teacher relationship quality. These findings suggest that different types of internalizing student behavior may play a differential role in the quality of the student–teacher relationship.

### 1. Introduction

There is no shortage of evidence supporting the view that the affective quality of the relationship between teachers and individual students may play a role in students' school adjustment (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, & Koomen, 2017). Various empirical studies have indicated that student–teacher relationships marked by high levels of warmth and closeness are weakly to moderately associated with students' behavioral, emotional, and academic development (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). In contrast, relationships filled with conflict or excessive dependency have been evidenced to pose risks to students' adjustment, hampering their sense of well-being and engagement, and affecting their concurrent and future achievement in the classroom (Baker, 2006; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Portilla, Ballard, Adler, Boyce, & Obradović, 2014; Roorda et al., 2011, 2017).

Although most students are likely to develop an emotionally close and conflict-free bond with their teacher, for others, such high-quality relationships may not come naturally (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Among the students who may experience difficulties forming relationships with their teacher are those with internalizing behaviors. Such problems generally refer to a basic disturbance in intropunitive emotions and

moods (Zahn-Waxler, Klimes-Dougan, & Slattery, 2000). To date, a broad spectrum of internalizing behaviors, including shyness, social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression, has been linked to the relationship between teachers and individual students (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Ladd & Burgess, 1999; Mejia & Hoglund, 2016; Rudasill, 2011; Rydell, Bohlin, & Thorell, 2005). Notably, though, in most research on student–teacher relationship quality, these types of internalizing behavior have typically been explored in isolation from one another (e.g., Rudasill, 2011), or have been combined to form a broadband factor of internalizing behavior (e.g., Murray & Murray, 2004). As such, relatively little is known about the *unique* role that various types of internalizing student behavior may play in the quality of student–teacher relationships.

In the present study, therefore, we sought to explore the unique contributions of different forms of internalizing student behavior (i.e., shyness, anxiety, and emotional problems) to aspects of the student–teacher relationship (i.e., closeness, conflict, and dependency). Empirical knowledge in this direction may advance understanding of the types of internalizing student behavior that are most likely to increase the risk of poor-quality student–teacher relationships and add to our ability to develop interventions to improve such relationships in class.

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### 1.1. Teachers' relationships with students who display internalizing behavior

Empirical studies on the role of internalizing student behavior in the quality of student–teacher relationships have been largely motivated by an extended attachment framework (Bowlby, 1969; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). This framework is based on the notion that warm and affectionate relationships between children and teachers may promote feelings of emotional security in the child. Specifically, teachers, like responsive parents, have been suggested to provide children with a secure base from which they can explore their classroom environment, and a secure haven that helps children maintain proximity to their teachers in times of stress or need (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Charalampous et al., 2016; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999). Conceivably, warm and emotionally secure student–teacher relationships may be particularly important for the usually hesitant and wary internalizing students, who may frequently seek proximity to teachers when faced with unfamiliar people or novel situations.

Previous studies based on an extended attachment framework suggest that the extent to which teachers provide emotional security to children may depend on the degree of closeness, conflict, and dependency in the relationship (Pianta, 1999; Wentzel, 2010). Generally, close relationships characterized by warmth, trust, and open communication are believed to provide students with a secure support system that enables them to explore the classroom environment and seek help when needed (Pianta, 1999). In conflictual or dependent relationships, in contrast, students may feel less emotionally secure and are less likely to have confidence in the availability and responsiveness of the teacher in times of stress or need. Such relationships are filled with negativity, tension, and hostility (*conflict*), or characterized by clinginess and an overreliance on the teacher (*dependency*; Verschuereen & Koomen, 2012).

Unfortunately, students who enter the classroom environment with internalizing behavior have commonly been presumed to be at increased risk for developing relationships with their teachers that are marked by low levels of closeness and high levels of conflict and dependency (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 2003). Yet, empirical evidence regarding the role of these over-controlled and inwardly directed behaviors in student–teacher relationships seems to be inconsistent in both direction and magnitude. In some studies, for instance, students' internalizing symptoms, including shyness and emotional problems, were found to be modestly associated with kindergarten and elementary teachers' reports of closeness in the relationship, both positively (Roorda, Verschuereen, Vancraeyveldt, Van Craeyveldt, & Colpin, 2014) and negatively (e.g., Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Valiente, Swanson, & Lemery-Chalfant, 2012). In other longitudinal research on overall levels of parent-reported (Jerome et al., 2009) and teacher-reported (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016) internalizing behavior, such significant associations have, however, not been established.

Additionally, there seems to be considerable heterogeneity in the associations of internalizing behavior with negative relationship dimensions. Using overall measures of internalizing student behavior, some studies have shown that internalizing student behavior contributes to teachers' experiences of conflict and dependency in the relationship (Jerome et al., 2009; Murray & Murray, 2004; Roorda et al., 2014). Yet, studies that focused on specific types of mother-reported internalizing behavior revealed that behaviors such as shyness were associated with less conflict in the student–teacher relationship (Rudasill, 2011). To some extent, these discrepant findings in prior studies might be explained by methodological differences or specific sample characteristics. Whereas some studies were conducted among samples of regular students in the first grades of elementary school (Arbeau et al., 2010; Jerome et al., 2009; Valiente et al., 2012), other research focused specifically on preschool boys with externalizing behavior (Roorda et al., 2014), Chinese American immigrant children (Ly & Zhou, 2016), or children from high-need ethnically diverse schools (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016). Based on extended attachment theory,

however, these contradictory results may also raise questions about the extent to which children with various types of internalizing student behavior are able to seek proximity from their teachers and can use them as a secure base and haven. In the present study, we explore the unique contributions of different types of internalizing behavior (i.e., shyness, anxiety, and emotional problems) to teachers' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with individual students.

#### 1.1.1. Shyness

Among the types of internalizing behavior that potentially affect student–teacher relationships, shyness has probably been given the most research attention. Shyness generally refers to students' trepidation and wariness in the face of novel situations (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Shy students are likely to be hesitant and apprehensive toward unfamiliar people, events, and situations, and may feel self-conscious or even embarrassed when they feel they are being socially evaluated (Crozier, 2001). Following Asendorpf's (1990) work, such behavior is likely to arise from a so-called *approach-avoidance conflict*, within which students generally desire to interact with others, but tend to refrain from such interactions as a result of feelings of worry and fear. Due to this approach-avoidance conflict, shy students tend to initiate fewer interactions with their teacher, thereby increasing the risk of poor-quality student–teacher relationships (e.g., Coplan & Prakash, 2003; Rudasill, 2011).

Several empirical studies seem to support the supposition that shyness may be associated with the quality of student–teacher relationships. With respect to closeness, for instance, several primarily longitudinal studies conducted among relatively large samples of (pre) kindergarten and early elementary school children have indicated that teacher-reported (Justice, Cottone, Mashburn, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008), parent-reported (Arbeau et al., 2010; Koles, O'Connor, & McCartney, 2009; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), and observed (Rydell et al., 2005) shyness may be associated with less closeness in the student–teacher relationship. Moreover, this negative association between shyness and closeness has been confirmed in Nurmi's (2012) meta-analytical investigation.

The handful of studies on shyness and student–teacher dependency has generated relatively consistent findings as well (see Nurmi, 2012). Both longitudinal research conducted among young regular elementary children (Arbeau et al., 2010) as well as behaviorally at-risk samples (Ladd & Burgess, 1999) has indicated that students with shy behavior are, on average, more likely to be overly dependent on their teacher than their more exuberant peers. Only the evidence with regard to conflict seems to be less straightforward. In a Swedish sample of 112 preschoolers, for instance, Rydell et al. (2005) found that teachers experienced less conflict in their relationships with shy children, as observed by trained coders. Although this finding has been replicated in other longitudinal studies using parent-reports of internalizing behavior (e.g., Rudasill, 2011; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), non-significant (cross-sectional) associations of parent- and peer-reported shyness with conflict have been found as well (Justice et al., 2008; Nurmi, 2012; Zee & Koomen, 2017). Accordingly, it seems likely that shy children, by virtue of their wary and apprehensive behavior, are likely to have relationships that are low in closeness and high in dependency. Whether shyness also contributes to the degree of conflict in the student–teacher relationship remains to be explored.

#### 1.1.2. Anxiety

Despite burgeoning evidence for the predictive role of shyness, relatively little is known about relationships between teachers and anxious students. A possible reason might be that shyness and anxiety are sometimes considered as comorbid conditions. There are, however, important distinctions between these two internalizing symptoms. For instance, shy children's feelings of wariness may gradually subside as they become more familiar with their teachers, peers, and classroom context, whereas anxious students' negative emotions are likely to get

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