



# Associations between teacher–child relationships and children’s writing in kindergarten and first grade

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## ABSTRACT

When children experience conflict in relationships with their teachers during early education, they perform more poorly on measures of language development and overall academic competence. Whereas children who have close relationships with teachers, often perform better on these measures. A close teacher–child relationship may be important for children learning to write, given the complex and personal nature of writing. Yet, scholars have not examined associations between teacher–child relationship quality and children’s early success in writing. The current study examined associations between quality of the teacher–child relationship (defined as teachers’ perceptions of closeness and conflict and children’s feelings about teachers) and children’s writing quality in kindergarten and first grade. Children’s receptive language was also investigated as a moderator of these associations. Results indicated teacher–child conflict was significantly associated with children’s writing quality, after accounting for grade level, initial reading status, and type of instruction. Findings of the study have important implications for future research and practice. Attention to the importance of conflict in teacher–child relationships and its influence on children’s literacy learning and development should be included in future research studies.

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The early years of school are an important time in children’s early literacy development. Early experiences with reading and writing in classrooms shape children’s understanding of both the purpose and power of literacy. The academic demands of the kindergarten and first grade literacy curriculum can be challenging, particularly for children with few literacy experiences prior to entering school (Juel, 1988; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). For years, researchers have sought to better understand how children successfully acquire literacy skills. While much attention has been paid to children’s early reading development, less attention has been paid to children’s early writing development (Clay, 2001). Yet, writing is a complex and demanding task for young children (Lienemann, Graham, Leader-Janssen, & Reid, 2006) because it involves a great deal of cognitive effort, attentional control, and self-regulation (Graham & Harris, 2003) as children must use and integrate a variety of skills and processes, while also attempting to make their writing meaningful for the intended audience. Given this complexity, children often need instructional, as well as emotional support from their teachers in order to create coherent, well-written texts.

According to the emotional security hypothesis, an extension of attachment theory, feeling secure in one’s environment is

important for a child’s direct interactions and relationship with the teacher, but is also important for the child’s general functioning in the classroom (Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006). The emotional security felt by a child helps to organize experiences and actions in the child’s environment, as well as to make appraisals of self (Davies et al., 2006). Also, maintaining a sense of security is important for the child’s concentration in a task (Koomen, van Leeuwen, & van der Leij, 2004). When stressed, a child’s regulatory system is activated and strategies are employed to maintain the child’s sense of security (Davies & Cummings, 1994). These strategies may include approaching an adult for help or visually checking-in. Therefore, a child who feels emotionally secure with (or highly connected to) his teacher may experience more comfort when facing the complex task of writing. For example, the child may be more motivated to ask questions about writing or bounce ideas off the teacher.

This study is also informed by self-systems theory which argues children are most engaged in school when their basic psychological needs are met. These include the need to feel socially connected and valued (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Particular emphasis is placed on students’ feelings of relatedness to teachers, which is measured by the students’ perceptions of emotional security with teachers. The more positively connected children feel with their teachers, the more engaged they will be in school and the more motivated they will be to learn. Close relationships with a teacher increase students’ engagement

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in school likely because these relationships foster more positive attitudes about school in general. Consequently, children who feel disconnected from teachers become disengaged in school and lack motivation to learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000) impacting their overall performance and satisfaction with school. One might assume then that students who feel connected to their teachers will be more motivated to learn to write and may associate more positive feelings with learning to write given the teacher's positive appraisal of writing as an important skill to learn. Alternatively, students who feel less connected with teachers may be less motivated to learn and therefore make less progress in learning to write.

The goal of the teacher–child relationship is one of providing emotional security to children while learning to write so it would be important to consider children's feelings of security with teachers and how it impacts their writing ability. Yet little research exists on how teacher–child relationship quality impacts children learning to write. The current study measured both the teacher's and children's perceptions of closeness and conflict felt in relationships in an attempt to investigate associations between closeness, conflict, and children's writing in kindergarten and first grade.

### 1. Research on teacher–child relationships and child outcomes

Teacher–child relationship quality is often defined and measured as the amount of closeness and conflict teachers perceive in relationships with students. In a *close* teacher–child relationship, the teacher values his/her relationship with the child and feels in tune with the child's feelings (Pianta, 2001). The child may seek comfort from the teacher when upset and is described as eager to share exciting news with the teacher. In a *conflictual* relationship, the teacher generally feels anxious or frustrated when interacting with the child (Pianta, 2001). The teacher may struggle to connect with the child and may feel unable to help the child out of a difficult mood. The child in a *conflictual* teacher–child relationship may not feel cared for or liked by the teacher and may be uncomfortable when shown physical affection by the teacher. The child may anger easily when interacting with the teacher or be unpredictable in mood (Pianta, 2001).

Research on closeness in teacher–child relationships has shown a variety of benefits for young children's social, behavioral, cognitive, and academic development. Supportive teacher–child relationships are associated with children's successful adjustment in the transition to school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Children in high-quality teacher–child relationships exhibit better social skills and peer relationships in preschool and kindergarten (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Ladd et al., 1999) and better work habits in elementary school (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

On the contrary, students who experience relationships regarded as high in conflict often do poorer academically, are less engaged, and report liking school less (Baker, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Klem & Connell, 2004; Ladd et al., 1999). These students are also rated by teachers as less cooperative and less self-directed (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Preschool children in teacher–child relationships reported as high in conflict, versus those in relationships reported as low in conflict, have poorer work habits and lower frustration tolerance (Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997). Elementary school students in relationships regarded as high in conflict are rated by their peers as less cooperative, more aggressive and are more commonly reported

as the students who are “liked least” (Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001). Conflict in relationships is also found to be associated with higher rates of externalizing behaviors in kindergarten (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005) and conflict in the preschool teacher–child relationship is associated with higher rates of child aggression later in elementary school (Howes, 2000).

Research has also documented associations between teacher–child relationship quality, children's engagement, and academic development in early schooling (preschool through grade five). Preschool and kindergarten children in teacher–child relationships regarded as high in closeness participate in classroom activities at higher rates (Ladd et al., 1999), exhibit better work habits (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001) and like school more (Birch & Ladd, 1997) than children in relationships regarded as lower in closeness.

Teacher–child relationship quality has important implications for children's literacy learning. At-risk children given little emotional support from teachers in first grade perform significantly lower on standardized reading measures (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Whereas those who are provided with emotional support from their teachers, perform similarly in reading to their classmates who are not at-risk (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Hamre and Pianta (2005) describe emotional support to include teacher sensitivity and the presence of a positive classroom climate (laughter, pleasant conversation, enthusiasm for learning). Teachers rated as emotionally supportive also have high expectations of students' performance and behavior, and are less controlling.

Specific associations between teacher–child relationships and children's reading grades have also been documented. Children in close teacher–child relationships have better reading grades and better work habits in elementary school than children in conflictual teacher–child relationships. Yet, conflict in the relationship is more salient in predicting children's reading grades and work habits (Baker, 2006). It seems for young children learning to read, a close teacher–child relationship is beneficial, but a relationship regarded as high in conflict is especially harmful.

While previous studies have addressed associations between teacher–child relationship quality and children's reading, research has yet to address associations between teacher–child relationship quality and children's writing. This may be particularly important given the complexity of learning to write.

Furthermore, while research has shown the teacher–child relationship to be important for a variety of developmental areas, some studies have shown differential effects of the relationship when accounting for particular child characteristics. The present study investigated the presence of language as a moderator of teacher–child relationship quality given the connection between children's language ability and teacher–child relationship quality. Children in higher quality teacher–child relationships perform better on language measures than peers in low-quality teacher–child relationships (Burchinal et al., 2002). Children in higher quality relationships continue to be more advanced in their receptive language ability over a period of five years (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001).

Yet, to date no studies examined associations between children's relationships with teachers, children's language, and children's writing ability in kindergarten and first grade. To address this gap in the literature, this study examined the moderating effect of receptive language on associations between teacher–child relationship quality (in terms of closeness, conflict, and children's feelings about teachers) and children's writing. Language ability was expected to moderate the association between teacher–child relationships and writing quality. Specifically children with lower language ability were expected to benefit more from a high-quality teacher–child relationship than children with high language ability in developing writing skills.

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