

Children's drawings provide a new perspective on teacher–child relationship quality and school adjustment

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Abstract

A growing literature points to the importance of children's relationships with their teachers as a factor influencing attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of school adjustment. However, such data may be confounded when the same teacher rates school adjustment as well as relationship quality. The present study sought to address this problem by investigating direct (self-reported feelings about the teacher) and indirect (representations through drawings) procedures to assess children's perspectives on the relationship. Self-report questions were adapted from measures of school liking and maternal acceptance. Drawings applied Fury's system for describing relational negativity in child–family drawings. Results, based on a sample of 125 six-year-olds, showed significant associations between children's reports/drawings and teacher-rated relationship quality and school adjustment. Negativity in child–teacher drawings was a particularly salient correlate, suggesting that children's representations of relationships can provide a useful independent means of identifying relationship or adjustment difficulties at school.

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1. Introduction

A growing literature points to the importance of children's relationships with their teachers as a factor influencing children's early school adjustment and subsequent social and academic outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1996, 1997; Howes, 2000; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). The consensus from these reports is that a relationship that is characterized by more positive qualities, such as closeness, affection, and open communication, and fewer negative qualities, such as conflict and dependency, has benefits for children's personal, social, and academic adjustment in the early years of school. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are beginning to show that early relationship quality is important in laying the groundwork for children's future school career (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Closer, less conflicted relationships with teachers have been associated with children having more positive feelings toward school (Birch & Ladd, 1997), fewer problem behaviors (Pianta et al., 1995), fewer discipline problems (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), less aggressive and asocial peer interaction (Ladd & Burgess, 1999), better social skills (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), better work habits (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), better academic performance in visual and language skills (Birch & Ladd, 1997), basic concepts (Pianta et al., 1997), basic skills, language arts, and mathematics

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(Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and less chance of being retained in grade (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Studies have also shown that early relationship closeness and conflict have considerable continuity over time (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Ladd & Burgess, 1999) and that early relationship quality continues to affect students' academic and behavioral outcomes throughout the following years of school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000). In this paper, we examine ways that relationships between children and teachers are assessed and, more particularly, measures that take account of the child's perspective on this relationship.

1.1. Measuring child–teacher relationship quality

For the most part, studies of child–teacher relationships have used measures that are derived from attachment theory or adapted from child–parent attachment measures to describe and assess non-parental relationships. These include observational measures of dyadic interaction, the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and the Attachment Q-Sort (AQS) (Waters, 1990), and teacher-rated measures derived from the student–teacher relationship scale (STRS) questionnaire (Pianta, 1992, 1994). Observational measures have been used effectively in prior-to-school settings. For example, the SSP has been used to assess attachment security between preschool-aged children and their *metaplot* (primary caregiver) in Kibbutz-reared children (e.g., Oppenheim, Sagi, & Lamb, 1988; van IJzendoorn, Sagi, & Lambermon, 1992), and the AQS has been used in child care and preschool settings to provide ratings of security and dependency in child–caregiver and child–teacher relationships (e.g., Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006; Howes, Galinsky, & Kontos, 1998; Howes & Smith, 1995). However, to our knowledge, the SSP and AQS have not been applied to school environments or student–teacher relationships. Once children enter school, researchers have tended to measure relationship quality using the STRS (e.g., NICHD ECCRN, 2003), which asks teachers to rate the degree to which conflict, dependency, warmth, and open communication characterize their interactions and feelings about a child.

1.1.1. Teacher-rated relationship quality

Reliance on teacher ratings on the STRS as the sole indicator of teacher–child relationship quality raises a number of methodological concerns. First, researchers have noted that data are likely to be confounded when the same teacher provides ratings of relationship quality and child social and academic adjustment. The NICHD ECCRN (2003) study, for example, reports moderate correlations between first-grade teachers' ratings of students' behavior problems, social skills, and closeness and conflict in their relationships with students. Similarly, Howes (2000) comments “it is not surprising that second-grade measures of behavior problems and relationship quality are intercorrelated” (p. 202). When the STRS is used in longitudinal studies, teacher ratings at different year levels are independent, and links between ratings of student behavior and student–teacher relationships are more compelling. However, cross-sectional research studies would benefit from alternate or additional, independent measures of relationship quality. Second, unlike the SSP and AQS, which are based on observations of dyadic interaction, the STRS describes relationships from one perspective, that of the teacher, and thus does not give a complete picture of the child–teacher relationship. Researchers using the STRS have noted that other forms of measurement are needed, particularly ones that tap relationship quality from the child's perspective (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Our aim, in the present study, was to investigate new mechanisms that would provide an appropriate measure of children's perceptions of the student–teacher relationship. We considered direct (self-report) as well as indirect (representational) approaches to tap children's perceptions of their relations with the teacher.

1.1.2. Child self-report measures

Lynch and Cicchetti (1992) were among the first to investigate school-age children's perceptions of their relationship with their teachers by asking direct questions. Their study of 7 to 13-year-olds used the “relatedness” items in the Rochester Assessment Package for Schools, which included emotional items, such as feeling happy, sad, scared, or important, and items tapping psychological proximity seeking, such as wishing the teacher paid them more attention. Relatedness was felt to be consistent with attachment and self-system theories. Valeski and Stipek (2001) also drew on self-system theory in developing their Feelings About School (FAS) scale, which includes a 3-item subscale asking children to rate their perceptions about the teacher (i.e., how much teacher cares; how teacher feels) and feelings about the teacher (i.e., how much child likes teacher). Valeski and Stipek compared student ratings with teacher ratings on

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