



Changing interactions between teachers and socially inhibited kindergarten children: An interpersonal approach

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ABSTRACT

In a short-term longitudinal intervention study, it was investigated whether a short teacher training in interpersonal theory and the complementarity principle could be used to break negative interaction cycles between teachers and socially inhibited kindergartners. Sixty-five children and their 35 regular teachers were observed in a dyadic task setting, on three occasions. In the training, it was explained that teachers could elicit more initiative from children by being less dominant and more friendliness by being more affiliative. Independent observers rated teachers' and children's interactive behaviors in 5-second episodes. Teachers reported on children's social inhibition. Multilevel analyses showed that the training elicited a decrease in teacher control at follow-up. Unexpectedly, the training increased teachers' complementarity on the affiliation dimension, especially in interactions with highly inhibited children. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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Since the early 1990s, a growing body of research has demonstrated that the affective quality of relationships between teachers and individual children influences aspects of children's school functioning, such as engagement in school activities (e.g., Hughes, Luo, Kwok & Loyd, 2008), academic achievement (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and social skills (e.g., Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Recently, Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) provided evidence for the association between affective qualities of teacher–child relationships and children's school engagement and academic achievement on a meta-analytic level. Some children tend to be more at risk for developing negative school trajectories than others. One group of children who seem to be at risk for developing disengagement with school and academic underachievement is socially inhibited children (e.g., Coplan & Arbeau, 2008). Positive, supportive relationships with teachers may protect these children from academic malfunctioning (Thijs & Koomen, 2008). Unfortunately, inhibited children often share less optimal relationships with teachers than average children (e.g., Arbeau, Coplan & Weeks, 2010). Interventions specifically targeted at promoting positive teacher–child relationships have been scarce (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). Therefore, we developed a short-term teacher training program that was based on interpersonal theory (Leary, 1957) and designed to improve interactions between teachers

and socially inhibited children. The present study is intended as a first step in evaluating the efficacy of this teacher training by observing teacher–child interactions under controlled conditions outside the classroom. If the intervention proves to be effective to some extent, it can be further expanded and investigated.

Socially inhibited children and their school functioning

Social inhibition can be defined as the tendency to be anxious and withdrawn in novel or challenging social situations (Kagan, 1997; Thijs, Koomen, de Jong, van der Leij & van Leeuwen, 2004). From kindergarten to sixth grade, inhibited children have been found to report higher levels of loneliness and school avoidance and less school liking, scored lower on math and reading tests, had lower school grades, and received lower teacher ratings of math and reading ability and academic engagement (Baker, 2006; Hughes & Coplan, 2010; Weeks, Coplan & Kingsbury, 2009).

Inhibited children also are at risk for developing less supportive relationships with their teachers (for teacher reports, see Arbeau et al., 2010; Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, van Damme & Maes, 2008; Thijs & Koomen, 2009; for observations, see DeMulder, Denham, Schmidt & Mitchell, 2000). Furthermore, socially inhibited children tend to be more passive and withdrawn during interactions with teachers than their average peers (e.g., Asendorpf & Meier, 1993; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, Thijs & Oort, 2013; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Their passiveness and lower verbal participation are considered to place inhibited children at risk for academic underachievement, lower academic self-esteem, and social-emotional problems (see Coplan & Arbeau, 2008; Rubin, Coplan & Bowker, 2009 for reviews).

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Teachers often try to stimulate inhibited children's active participation by asking them more questions (Evans & Bienert, 1992). For example, Coplan and Prakash (2003) found that teachers primarily initiated interactions (i.e., asked more questions and intervened more often) toward anxious/withdrawn preschool children compared to non-anxious children. Likewise, Roorda et al. (2013) found that teachers displayed more controlling and dominant behaviors toward inhibited children than toward their average peers. In contrast to teachers' intentions, these high rates of questioning and teacher dominance seem to elicit more passiveness and withdrawn behaviors in inhibited children (Evans & Bienert, 1992; Roorda et al., 2013). Similar effects of caregivers' overcontrol have been observed in research on parent–child interactions (Pianta, Nimetz & Bennett, 1997; Rubin, Burgess & Hastings, 2002). Therefore, suggestions have been made in the literature that teachers should refrain from high levels of questioning and controlling behaviors toward inhibited children, and instead use more confirmative utterances (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008; Evans & Bienert, 1992) and offer more activity choices (Henderson & Fox, 1998).

Considering the serious consequences of social inhibition and the impact of negative teacher–child relationships in kindergarten on children's long-term school adjustment (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), we tried to improve relationships between teachers and inhibited children at an early stage. Therefore, we implemented a teacher training in kindergarten. Our sample consisted of children who scored highest on social inhibition compared to their classmates in regular kindergarten classes, which means that not only children with clinical levels but with a larger range of scores on social inhibition were included. For ease of formulation, we will talk of *inhibited children* in the remainder of this paper.

Existing interventions and theoretical perspectives

Interventions specifically focused at improving teacher–child relationships have been scarce. Two existing interventions are My Teaching Partner (Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre & Justice, 2008) and Banking Time (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010; Driscoll, Wang, Mashburn & Pianta, 2011). My Teaching Partner, however, mainly focuses on teachers' relationships with the class as a whole, and may therefore not be the most appropriate method to change interactions with specific children with special needs. Banking Time does focus on teachers' relationships with individual children, however, it targets relationships with 'disruptive' rather than inhibited children. Banking Time is based on an attachment perspective which states that sensitive teachers can serve as a secure base from which children can explore the school environment and become engaged in learning activities (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta et al., 1997). Studies inspired by attachment theory often distinguish between the degree of closeness (i.e., the degree of warmth and openness in the relationship), conflict (i.e., discordant and coercive interactions), and dependency (i.e., overly dependent and clingy behaviors of the child) in teacher–child relationships (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012).

Another theoretical approach that has been influential in guiding research on teacher–child relationships is the self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). This theory describes how teachers can fulfill children's basic psychological needs (i.e., the need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy) by showing emotional involvement (i.e., caring for and expressing interest in the student), providing structure (i.e., setting clear rules and being consequent), and supporting autonomy (i.e., giving students freedom to make their own choices), to support their engagement in learning activities and, hence, their academic achievement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner, Wellborn & Connell, 1990).

Our intervention program was based on another theoretical perspective, which originates from research on therapist–client interactions: interpersonal theory (Leary, 1957). Whereas attachment theory and self-determination theory focus on underlying motivational processes and internal working models, interpersonal theory directly focuses

on actual behaviors in interactions and how interaction partners more or less automatically influence each other's behaviors during interactions. It explains how people's interactive behaviors can elicit specific, predictable behaviors from their interaction partner and, hence, offers concrete clues about how to intervene in negative interaction cycles (see Kiesler, 1996). Such a focus on actual interactive behaviors and concrete ideas about how to change interaction processes may be easier to understand and to implement for teachers than the more 'abstract' notions from attachment and self-determination theory. In addition, reflection on actual behaviors toward children may be less threatening for teachers than reflection on their personal thoughts and feelings about children.

Interpersonal behaviors and complementarity

Although interpersonal models have been conceptualized in different ways, they share a few basic notions: two dimensions to categorize interpersonal behaviors (e.g., Kiesler, 1983; Leary, 1957) and the principle of interpersonal complementarity (Sadler & Woody, 2003). The first dimension, control, represents the degree of power, dominance, and influence in the interaction, and ranges from dominance to submissiveness. The second dimension, affiliation, expresses the degree of proximity, warmth, and support displayed during interaction cycles, and varies from friendliness to hostility (Gurtman, 2001; Kiesler, 1996). These dimensions are usually displayed on two orthogonal axes, forming an interpersonal circumplex (see Fig. 1), with control at the vertical dimension and affiliation at the horizontal dimension.

The complementarity principle states that a person's interpersonal behaviors tend to invite a predictable set of responses from the interaction partner (Sadler & Woody, 2003). Interpersonal complementarity has been conceptualized in different ways (cf., Markey, Funder & Ozer, 2003), among which Carson's (1969/1972) is most common. According to Carson, interactive behaviors are complementary if they are similar at the affiliation dimension and opposite on control. Thus, friendliness will lead to friendly reactions and hostility to hostile responses, whereas dominant behavior will elicit submissive responses and vice versa (Kiesler, 1983). Sadler and Woody (2003) found important support for the conceptualization of Carson (1969/1972) in research with unacquainted university students.

Although interpersonal complementarity is considered as essential for the continuance of relationships (Carson, 1969/1972; Kiesler, 1983), it may also lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and the escalation of maladaptive interaction patterns (Kiesler, 1996). For example, a person's hostile behavior tends to elicit similar hostility in his or her

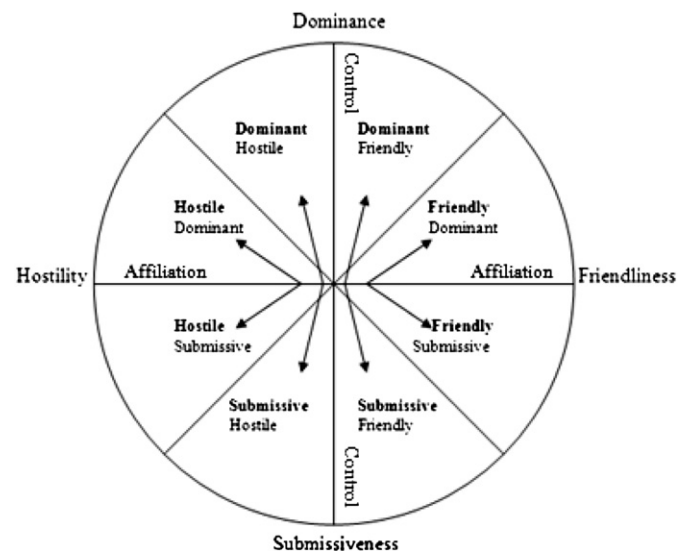


Fig. 1. Interpersonal circumplex. The arrows represent complementary behaviors.

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