

Child and teacher reports of teacher–student relationships: Concordance of perspectives and associations with school adjustment in urban kindergarten classrooms

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Abstract

This investigation examines child and teacher perceptions of teacher–child relationships among 157 children (M age = 6.1) who attended 12 full-day kindergarten classrooms in a large urban school district. Children and teachers completed comparable assessments designed to measure perceptions of social support from teachers and they also completed comparable measures of school adjustment. Findings indicated that some aspects of children’s reports of their relationships were reliable but their reports of some dimensions of support had low internal consistency. There was minimal concordance between child and teacher reports of teacher–student relationships suggesting that rater perceptions differed. Analyses of associations between children’s and teachers’ perceptions of support *and* their reports of school adjustment indicated stronger within-rater associations than cross-rater associations. Lastly, analyses of demographic variables indicated that student race as well as teacher–student ethnic match was related to teacher but not to student perceptions of teacher–student relationship quality. The implications of these findings for research and practice efforts are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Kindergarten teachers play a unique role in young children’s lives. They guide children in the transition from home to school and serve as the adults to whom children must turn when they need help or want to share their fears and accomplishments while at school. For some children, kindergarten is their first school experience as well as the first time they are cared for by people other than their primary caregivers. Kindergarten also represents a time of change for children with daycare and preschool histories. Compared to preschool, kindergarten classrooms place more emphasis

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on structured activities and often there are higher adult–child ratios (Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993). Kindergarten teachers are primarily responsible for introducing children to academic settings, for making children feel safe, and for teaching children how to interact with other children in positive ways. Positive relationships between teachers and young children can help facilitate the transition to school and can promote positive social–emotional health among young children (Pianta, 1999).

The vast majority of prior research on early teacher–child relationships has focused on the implications of these relationships for children’s social and emotional development (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992; Pianta, 1994; Sroufe, 1983). These investigations have approached teacher–child relationships from an attachment perspective and have examined how cognitive perceptions of warmth, trust, open communication, and conflict within relationships relate to children’s social competencies, emotional health and behavioral adjustment (Davis, 2003; Howes et al., 2000; Pianta, 1994). Several researchers have also examined how these relationships affect children’s school adjustment during kindergarten (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pianta, 1997; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Pianta and Steinberg (1992) reported a positive association between conflict in teacher–child relationships and teachers’ subsequent decisions to retain children in kindergarten. Similarly, Birch and Ladd (1997) examined teacher–child relationships during kindergarten and found that relationships characterized by conflict and dependency were associated with poorer academic performance, greater negative school attitudes and less school involvement.

Individual child characteristics such as sex and race appear to be related to *teacher* ratings of the quality of their relationships with young children. A number of investigators have reported that girls form closer, less conflictual relationships with teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Ladd, Birch and Buhs (1999) found that children from non-minority, advantaged backgrounds formed closer, less conflictual relationships with teachers than did students of color from lower SES backgrounds. Hughes, Gleason and Zhang (2005) found that teachers rated Hispanic and Anglo-American first graders as higher in closeness than African-American children.

Several investigations have explored how teacher–child racial match affects teacher–child relationship quality. Saft and Pianta (2001) reported that teachers’ ratings of teacher–student relationships were more positive among students who were the same race as their teacher than among students who were a different race than their teacher. Interestingly, the most pronounced differences in this study were found for African-American children. Although teachers of all races rated relationships with African-American students as higher in conflict, ratings among non-African-American teachers were approximately one standard deviation higher (on Conflict) than ratings of African-American teachers (Saft & Pianta, 2001). Similarly, Kesner (2000) found that child race influenced pre-service teachers’ reports of dependency in relationships with students. In this investigation, African-American children received poorer ratings on a measure of dependence in teacher–child relationships than did Anglo-American children and “other” minority children regardless of teacher race. These findings suggest that it is important to develop further understanding about teacher–child relationships among students of color, particularly among African-American children because these children are consistently rated as having poorer quality teacher–child relationships than are Anglo-American children.

Although prior research on teacher–child relationships from an attachment perspective has established that the affective aspects of these relationships have important implications for children’s adjustment, there are a number of conceptual and methodological issues related to studying teacher–child relationships that remain unresolved. The focus of the current investigation is on issues related to the measurement of teacher–child relationships. Virtually all prior research on teacher–child relationships among kindergarten children has focused exclusively on the use of teacher-report instruments of teacher–child relationships (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Howes et al., 1994; Hughes et al., 2005; Kesner, 2000; Ladd et al., 1999; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992; Pianta, 1994; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Saft & Pianta, 2001; Sroufe, 1983). Although this work provides an important foundation for understanding these relationships, an over-reliance on teacher reports of teacher–child relationship quality is problematic for several reasons.

The first issue pertains to the potential for rater biases among teachers. Because teacher perceptions of children appear to be influenced by children’s demographic characteristics, ratings of their relationships with students as well as their ratings of children’s social–emotional and school adjustment may reflect biases that are unrelated to relationship quality or true adjustment status (Kesner, 2000; Pigott & Cowen, 2000; Rong, 1996; Saft & Pianta, 2001).

Second, many prior investigations have utilized teacher reports to assess teacher–child relationship quality *and* outcome variables (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes et al., 2000; Ladd et al., 1999; Murray & Murray, 2003; Pianta, 1994). This reliance on teacher reports to assess both predictor and criterion variables has undoubtedly led to inflated estimates of the importance of these relationships.

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