



Teacher characteristics, social classroom relationships, and children's social, emotional, and behavioral classroom adjustment in special education ☆

L.D. Breeman ^{a,b,*}, T. Wubbels ^{c,1}, P.A.C. van Lier ^{d,2}, F.C. Verhulst ^{b,3}, J. van der Ende ^{b,4}, A. Maras ^{a,5}, J.A.B. Hopman ^{a,b,6}, N.T. Tick ^{a,b,5}

^a Yulius Mental Health, Yulius Academy, Mathenesserlaan 202, 3014HH Rotterdam, The Netherlands

^b Erasmus MC-Sophia, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry/Psychology, PO Box 2060, 3000CB Rotterdam, The Netherlands

^c Utrecht University, Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, PO Box 80140, 3508TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

^d VU University Amsterdam, Department of Developmental Psychology, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to explore relations between teacher characteristics (i.e., competence and wellbeing); social classroom relationships (i.e., teacher–child and peer interactions); and children's social, emotional, and behavioral classroom adjustment. These relations were explored at both the individual and classroom levels among 414 children with emotional and behavioral disorders placed in special education. Two models were specified. In the first model, children's classroom adjustment was regressed on social relationships and teacher characteristics. In the second model, reversed links were examined by regressing teacher characteristics on social relationships and children's adjustment. Results of model 1 showed that, at the individual level, better social and emotional adjustment of children was predicted by higher levels of teacher–child closeness and better behavioral adjustment was predicted by both positive teacher–child and peer interactions. At the classroom level, positive social relationships were predicted by higher levels of teacher competence, which in turn were associated with lower classroom levels of social problems. Higher levels of teacher wellbeing were directly associated with classroom adaptive and maladaptive child outcomes. Results of model 2 showed that, at the individual and classroom levels, only the emotional and behavioral problems of children predicted social classroom relationships. At the classroom level, teacher competence was best predicted by positive teacher–child relationships and teacher wellbeing was best predicted by classroom levels of prosocial behavior. We discuss the importance of positive teacher–child and peer interactions for children placed in special education and suggest ways of improving classroom processes by targeting teacher competence.

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* Corresponding author at: Yulius Mental Health, Yulius Academy, Mathenesserlaan 202, 3014HH Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 884056974.

E-mail addresses: l.breeman@yulius.nl (L.D. Breeman), t.wubbels@uu.nl (T. Wubbels), pac.van.lier@vu.nl (P.A.C. van Lier), f.verhulst@erasmusmc.nl (F.C. Verhulst), jan.vanderende@erasmusmc.nl (J. van der Ende), a.maras@yulius.nl (A. Maras), j.hopman@yulius.nl (J.A.B. Hopman), n.tick@yulius.nl (N.T. Tick).

ACTION EDITOR: Kathy Moritz Rudasill.

¹ Tel.: +31 302533910.

² Tel.: +31 205988735.

³ Tel.: +31 107036213.

⁴ Tel.: +31 107036091.

⁵ Tel.: +31 884056950.

⁶ Tel.: +31 884056972.

1. Introduction

From a developmental systems perspective, information on all dynamic classroom processes is needed to understand children's social, emotional, and behavioral classroom adjustment (Lerner, 2006; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). Pianta et al. (2003) stated that next to children's and teachers' demographic attributes and characteristics, children's social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment in the classroom is mainly the result of the reciprocal interplay between social interactions, such as teacher–child and peer interactions. Although it is important to understand this dynamic interplay of classroom processes, most research has focused solely on the impact of teacher characteristics, teacher–child relationships, or peer interactions, when examining children's classroom adjustment. Likewise, although classroom processes may differently impact individual students compared to the class as a whole (Morin, Marsh, Nagengast, & Scalas, 2014), there is not much research examining the impact of classroom processes at both the individual and classroom levels. Finally, although children with severe emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) placed in special education may have more to gain from positive classroom interactions than children in general education, most research on classroom processes has been conducted in general education. Therefore, the goal of this study was to advance knowledge on classroom processes in special education by examining the associations between teacher characteristics, social classroom relations, and children's adjustment at both the individual and classroom levels in a sample of children with EBD placed in special education.

1.1. Social classroom relations and children's adjustment

It has been widely acknowledged that the teacher–child relationship plays an important role when it comes to children's social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment. From an attachment perspective, it has been proposed that children who develop secure attachments with parents will also develop more positive teacher–child relationships, which may increase their classroom psychosocial adjustment (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Empirical studies have indeed shown that a positive teacher–child relationship is associated with a variety of positive child outcomes such as the development of children's social skills (Cornelius-White, 2007), children's psychosocial adjustment in school (Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009), and children's school motivation (Maulana, Opdenakker, den Brok, & Bokser, 2011). In addition, a negative teacher–child relationship is also associated with undesirable outcomes such as peer dislike (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001), loneliness and depression (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011), and disruptive student behavior (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Next to teacher–child interactions, peer relationships may also impact children's classroom adjustment as these friendships provide children with a social mirror that is used to validate their developing self-image (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Studies have demonstrated that especially negative peer interactions impact children's social, emotional, and behavioral classroom adjustment. For example, children's victimization by peers in the classroom has been associated with emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression (Snyder et al., 2003; Vuijk, Van Lier, Crijnen, & Huizink, 2007), behavioral problems, such as antisocial and aggressive behavior (Snyder et al., 2003), and social problems, such as loneliness (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997).

However, it is important to note that because classroom processes are dynamic, associations may be bidirectional. Therefore, children's characteristics, such as prosocial and antisocial behaviors, may also impact the development of social relations in the classroom. For example, longitudinal studies suggest that children's aggressive behavior increases future peer rejection and reduces future teacher preference (Mercer & DeRosier, 2008). Similarly, children who show more externalizing behaviors may be less preferred by peers in the next school year (Leflot, Van Lier, Verschueren, Onghena, & Colpin, 2011). It is thus important to study these associations in both directions.

1.2. Teacher characteristics and children's adjustment

Given that social classroom relationships are important for children's classroom adjustment and that teachers can be considered authority figures who have a responsibility in facilitating these positive interactions, it is important to include teacher characteristics when examining classroom processes. For example, a lack of teacher competence may hamper a teacher's attempts to provide necessary care and education, which may directly impact children's classroom adjustment (Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008). A lack of teacher competence may also indirectly affect children's classroom adjustment as teacher's emotional competence may affect the emotional support they provide to their students and thus teacher–child relationship quality (Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Tom, 2012), which in turn may impact children's adjustment (Buyse et al., 2009; Hamre et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2001; Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011).

Likewise, teacher stress may also be both directly and indirectly related to classroom adjustment of children such as the level of teacher-perceived classroom behavioral problems. Directly because teachers' stress levels may affect teachers' experience of a child's behavior and thus their report on the child's behavior. For example, stress reductions in teachers have shown to heighten tolerance levels for disruptive classroom behavior (Barbaresi & Olson, 1998). With regard to indirect effects, the lower teachers' stress levels and the higher their tolerance levels tend to be, the less critical and punitive they are towards children (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008), which may lead to the formation of close instead of conflictual teacher–child relationships (Yoon, 2002). Close relationships may in turn decrease existing adjustment problems (Leflot et al., 2011; Mercer & DeRosier, 2008).

Thus, teachers' sense of competence and wellbeing may be directly and indirectly associated with children's classroom adjustment through their influence on social classroom relationships and in particular the establishment of a positive teacher–child relationship. Yet, children's classroom behavior, especially in special education, may also impact teachers' outcomes directly. Children with EBD often show out-of-seat behavior, verbal disruptions, and aggressive behavior that disrupts the educational process and which may

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