

Teacher–student relationship quality type in elementary grades: Effects on trajectories for achievement and engagement

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Abstract

Teacher, peer, and student reports of the quality of the teacher–student relationship were obtained for an ethnically diverse and academically at-risk sample of 706 second- and third-grade students. Cluster analysis identified four types of relationships based on the consistency of child reports of support and conflict in the relationship with reports of others: Congruent Positive, Congruent Negative, Incongruent Child Negative, and Incongruent Child Positive. The cluster solution evidenced good internal consistency and construct validity. Group membership predicted growth trajectories for teacher-rated engagement and standardized achievement scores over the following three years, above prior performance. The predictive associations between child reports of teacher support and conflict and the measured outcomes depended on whether child reports were consistent or inconsistent with reports of others. Study findings have implications for theory development, assessment of teacher–student relationships, and teacher professional development.

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1. Introduction

Students whose relationships with their teachers are characterized by high levels of support and low levels of conflict obtain higher scores on measures of academic performance and

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behavioral adjustment than do students whose relationships with teachers are less positive (for review see Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Prospective studies find that a more positive teacher–student relationship is associated with a greater sense of school belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), lower levels of externalizing behaviors (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hughes, Cavell & Jackson, 1999; Meehan, Hughes & Cavell, 2003; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong & Essex, 2005), improved peer relationships (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2006; Taylor & Trickett, 1989), and higher achievement (Crosnoe, Johnson & Elder, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998). Furthermore, longitudinal meditational analyses find that the effect of a supportive teacher–student relationship on achievement is due to the direct effect of teacher–student relationship quality on students’ engagement in the classroom (Hughes, Luo, Kwok & Loyd, 2008; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007).

A supportive relationship with one’s teacher benefits children from preschool and kindergarten (Ladd et al., 1999; Howes, Hamilton & Matheson, 1994) through middle and high school (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1999). Drawing from research on attachment theory, which posits that children construct mental representations of relationships with adult caregivers that they carry forward to future relationships (Bretherton, & Munholland, 1999; Cassidy, Kirsh, Scolton & Parke, 1996) and from research on the long-term consequences of early risk and protective processes (Dodge, Greenberg, Malone, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2008), one might expect relationships in the elementary grades to be particularly important to students’ long-term school adjustment. Indeed, Hamre and Pianta (2001) found an effect for teacher–student relationship conflict assessed in first grade on achievement seven years later, controlling for relevant baseline child characteristics such as verbal intelligence and problem behaviors.

A positive relationship with one’s teacher may be especially important to the school adjustment of students at higher risk for school failure due to family background variables (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta & Howes, 2002; Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano & Fleming, 2008) or academic or behavioral problems (Baker, 2006; Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme & Maes, 2008). For example, in a study of first-grade students, children’s level of regulatory control moderated the association between teacher–student support and gains in reading, such that a supportive relationship buffered students with poor regulatory control from low reading achievement (Liew et al., *in press*).

1.1. Different perspectives on teacher–student relationship quality

Most of what is known about the effects of teacher–student relationship quality (TSRQ) on adjustment in the elementary grades is based on teacher report of TSRQ (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes et al., 2008; Ladd et al., 1999). Researchers investigating the validity of teacher reports of TSRQ report good correspondence with both direct observations of the teacher–student relationship (Doumen, Verschueren, Koomen, & Buyse, 2008) and peer ratings of teacher–student support (Hughes, 2009). Teacher ratings also demonstrate good test–retest reliability over periods of 3 to 4 months (Doumen et al., 2008).

Much less is known about the relationship between students’ perceptions of TSRQ and academic, social, and behavioral adjustment. Most studies employing child reports of TSRQ have used cross-sectional research designs (Decker, Dona & Christenson, 2007; Henricsson &

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