Peer assessments of normative and individual teacher–student support predict social acceptance and engagement among low-achieving children

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Abstract

This study used hierarchical linear modeling to predict first grade students' peer acceptance, classroom engagement, and sense of school belonging from measures of normative classroom teacher–student support and individual teacher–student support. Participants were 509 (54.4% male) ethnically diverse, first grade children attending one of three Texas School districts (1 urban, 2 small city) who scored below their school district median on a measure of literacy administered at the beginning of first grade. Peer nominations from 5147 classmates were used to assess both normative and individual levels of teacher support. Normative classroom teacher–student support predicted children's peer acceptance and classroom engagement, above the effects of child gender, ethnic minority status, and individual teacher–student support. Results are discussed in terms of implications for teacher preparation and professional development.
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Extensive research documents the influence of the quality of teacher–student relationships on children's current and future school adjustment and achievement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999;

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Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Primary grade students whose relationships with teachers are characterized by conflict are more likely to be retained in grade, to experience peer rejection, and to participate less in the classroom (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pianta et al., 1995; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). The association between teacher–student relationship quality and children's subsequent adjustment holds when previous levels of adjustment are statistically controlled (Hughes et al., 1999; Ladd et al., 1999; Meehan et al., 2003). Furthermore, an effect for teacher–student relationship quality assessed in kindergarten on achievement is found up to eight years later, controlling for relevant baseline child characteristics (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Conceptually, the level of teacher–student support for an individual student can be distinguished from the typical, or normative, level of support provided by the teacher to students in the classroom. Each child in a classroom has a unique relationship with the teacher; yet every child in the classroom experiences the same classroom climate. A teacher's typical level of warmth, or support, may be considered an aspect of the classroom climate.

Although considerable research has investigated normative levels of classroom teacher emotional support in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, much less research has been conducted on classroom-level teacher support in first grade and beyond, where the curriculum is more structured and standardized. At the preschool and kindergarten levels, teacher emotional support has been a component of constructs such as developmentally appropriate practices, teacher responsiveness, and teacher sensitivity (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003a; Stipek et al., 1998). For example, Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal (1997) reported that observed teacher sensitivity and responsiveness were associated with preschool children's cognitive and social–emotional functioning, although the magnitudes of the associations were low (mean $r = .12$). In a multi-site study of 223 public school kindergarten classroom, Pianta, Paro, Payne, Cox, and Bradley (2002) reported that global ratings of child-centered climate (defined at the high end by low classroom over-control, high positive emotional climate, low negative emotional climate, and high ratings on classroom management and supporting child responsibility) were associated with global ratings of child competence, observed on-task behavior, and teacher ratings of social competence and academic achievement.

The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2003b) assessed the associations between observed emotional quality of first grade classrooms and children's academic and socio-emotional competencies, after controlling for the quality of previous childcare and home environments as well as children's kindergarten competencies. Classroom emotional quality did not uniquely predict teacher report of child social or emotional competencies or mother report of child externalizing behaviors or social skills; however, first grade observed emotional quality did predict maternal reports of child internalizing behaviors and observed classroom self-reliance and engagement.

Both individual teacher–student support and normative classroom teacher support may be more predictive of differences in child competencies among children who are at risk