



# The effects of teachers' efficacy beliefs on students' perceptions of teacher relationship quality



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if teacher efficacy beliefs would predict middle school students' perceptions of relationship quality when controlling for gender, teacher expectations of student success, and student perceptions of parent relationship quality. Using hierarchical linear modeling techniques, we found that teachers' who had high expectations for success tended to have students who perceived closeness and low conflict at the beginning of the year. Over time, teachers' general efficacy was a significant predictor of students' increased reports of teacher closeness, while teachers' personal efficacy was a significant predictor of students' perceptions of increased conflict and decreased dependency on their teacher during the school year. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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## 1. The effects of teachers' efficacy beliefs on students' perceptions of relationship quality

There is a rich history in the field of motivation of exploring how teachers' beliefs, and the resultant instructional contexts, support students' motivation and learning (Chang & Davis, 2009; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006; Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, & Davis, 2009). Yet, few studies have examined the extent to which teachers' instructional beliefs matter at the classroom level (see Woolfolk Hoy & Davis, 2005 for review). One of the challenges of studying the impact of teacher beliefs is the trying to determine the appropriate level of analysis. On the one hand, several qualitative studies of teacher beliefs have demonstrated how teachers enact their belief during their individual interactions with students (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Bolshakova, Johnson, & Czerniak, 2010; Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003; Zohar, Degani, & Vaaknin, 2001). That is, teachers frequently report drawing on their beliefs about students' ability and their personal capability to meet students' relational needs when determining how to respond to student interactions. These beliefs, in turn, tend to predict differential outcomes. Individual interactions with students, however, operate within a larger classroom context. Teachers may also enact beliefs at the 'class level'; that is, teachers' beliefs about their class, as a whole, may affect their planning, delivering content, and interactions within the class. In keeping with this body of work, the broad purpose of the current study was to explore the relationships

between teachers' instructional beliefs and student-teacher relationships. The specific instructional beliefs examined were teachers' sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). The outcomes assessed were students' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with teachers (Pianta, 1996).

The purpose of this project was to examine the extent to which differences in teachers' efficacy beliefs accounted for differences between relationship quality at the beginning and the end of an academic term. For this project, we drew from a longitudinal data set (Davis, 2006) that examined changes in students' and teachers' perceptions of relationship quality through an academic year. Our hypotheses were as follow:

Homeroom teachers reporting higher sense of efficacy will predict positive student perceptions of their relationship at the beginning of the term.

Homeroom teachers reporting higher sense of efficacy will predict positive student perceptions of their relationship over the course of one year.

In the following sections we briefly review the literature on teachers' efficacy beliefs, teacher-student relationship quality, and additional variables (teachers' expectations and students' perceptions of parent relationships) that may affect the relationship between teacher efficacy and students' relationships with their teachers.

### 1.1. Teachers' efficacy beliefs

Over 60 years of research has documented the impact of teachers' beliefs on their professional practice and student outcomes (Chang &

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Davis, 2009; Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2006, 2009). At the most proximal level, teachers hold beliefs about themselves – who they are in relation to their curriculum, colleagues, and students; their perceived strengths and weaknesses; values; self-efficacy; and things about which they feel responsible. These beliefs may be domain specific (Chang & Davis, 2009). For example, teachers may hold beliefs about who they are as instructors that are different from their beliefs about themselves as classroom managers or as content experts. Teachers' beliefs form a type of subjective reality in the classroom; what they believe is experienced as real and true. Their beliefs guide their decision-making, behavior, and interactions with students and, in turn, create an objective reality in the classroom, what students experience as real and true. Teachers' beliefs shape their planning and curricular decisions in effect determining what should be taught and what path instruction should follow.

One of the most powerful predictors of teachers' pedagogical decisions and effectiveness (at both the individual and collective level) is a teacher's sense of efficacy for the profession and their instruction (Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2006, 2009). Teaching efficacy is defined as “the teacher's belief in her and his ability to organize and execute the courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Davis, 1998, p. 233). Over the last 20 years, researchers have formulated complex, multidimensional models of teacher efficacy, calling simultaneously for both clarification and broadening of the construct (Ho & Hau, 2004; Labone, 2004; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2009). However, two dimensions appear to be foundational for capturing the construct: General Teaching Efficacy and Personal Teaching Efficacy (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Silverman & Davis, 2009; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). Consistent with Bandura's (1986, 1997) conceptualization of teaching efficacy general teaching efficacy items attempt to capture teachers' outcome expectations about the consequences of instruction, in general. Whereas personal teaching efficacy items attempt to capture a teacher's task- or class- specific judgments about his or her ability to bring about specific outcomes.

### 1.2. Teacher efficacy and students' perceptions of relationship quality

For 30 years, a growing body of literature has documented the importance of students' perceptions of teacher relationship on their classroom motivation, learning, performance and school completion (Davis, 2003; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In a recent meta-analysis, Cornelius-White (2008) found students' perceptions of supportive teacher relationships were correlated, on average, between 0.25 and 0.55 with academic and social outcomes including participation, satisfaction, self-efficacy, critical thinking, standardized achievement in math and language, increasing attendance, reducing disruptive behavior, and higher grades. Conversely, findings suggest students' motivation and adjustment to school may be adversely affected when their relationships with teachers are distressed (Cornelius-White, 2008; Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

Classroom relationships have been conceptualized in many ways (Davis, 2003; Wentzel, 2009); however, for the purpose of this study, we drew from an attachment framework for understanding relationship quality between students and teachers (Pianta, 1996, 1999). Perhaps the most significant contribution of attachment theory to the study of student-teacher relationships has been to provide a framework for how to evaluate the quality of an adult-child relationship. From the attachment perspective, good (or secure) relationships with non-parental adults (i.e., teachers) are defined by low levels of conflict with accompanying high levels of closeness and support.

To our knowledge, few researchers have explored the relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and relational outcomes in the classroom. Thus, this paper was specifically interested in broadening the discussion of the potential outcomes of teaching efficacy. In the classroom, the majority of teachers' successes and failures depend on their ability to cope with the ‘in-the-moment,’ decision-making problems of

managing their classrooms and interacting with their students (Davis, 2006). To be successful, teachers must feel confident in their abilities to read and interpret students' verbal and nonverbal communications; to identify, express, and cope with their own emotions; and to help their students to learn to manage and cope with the emotions they experience in the classroom. Teachers who feel confident in their ability to meet students' instructional needs generally focused more on the task of teaching and less on their sense of self (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). From this perspective, a greater sense of efficacy for teaching may free emotional resources teachers need to for coping with students' interpersonal and intellectual needs.

Ultimately, we hypothesized that teachers with a strong sense of efficacy may be more likely to assume responsibility for working with ‘problem’ students (Brophy, 1986; Chang & Davis, 2009). If teachers' sense of efficacy is not threatened by the challenges and confrontations of their students, teachers may be less likely to feel the need for control and more likely to listen to students. If these teachers are confident in their teaching and managerial capabilities, they may be less ego-involved, angered, or insulted by students' misbehaviors and more willing to solve problems rather than punish their student. Further, efficacious teachers may feel freer to appropriately express unpleasant emotions such as frustration or disappointment, to help students to co-regulate their own unpleasant emotions, and to respond with warmth instead of hostility when students express frustration with an activity or question its relevance. In brief, a sense of efficacy may free teachers to care about their students without being overwhelmed by student behaviors they cannot understand or control (Woolfolk Hoy & Davis, 2005).

Specifically, we hypothesized that teachers with higher general and personal efficacy would also have students who reported feeling closer and less dependent on their teachers. We were uncertain as to whether teachers with a stronger sense of personal or general teaching efficacy would have students who reported experiencing less conflict. Lastly, we hypothesized teachers who felt more efficacious would report greater positive change in their relationships with students across the academic year. The following provides a brief review of variables that have historically been a subcomponent of teacher efficacy (expectations of student success; Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004) or played a significant role in students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers (parent relationships quality; Pianta, 1997), and were therefore included as variables in this study.

### 1.3. Controlling for additional relationship dynamics

#### 1.3.1. Expectations of student success

A sub-component of teachers' efficacy beliefs examined in this study were teachers' expectations for student success. In a seminal study, Alvidrez and Weinstein (1999) documented the consequential role teachers' beliefs about student ability play in predicting achievement outcomes. When teachers believe students have the ability to learn, they act on those beliefs and tend to deliver more rigorous instruction. Teachers' judgments of student ability play an important role in shaping their efficacy beliefs. In the cyclical model of teachers' efficacy judgments developed by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), the teacher makes two kinds of task-specific assessments that affect efficacy. The first is an analysis of the task. Teachers must ask themselves: What must be accomplished in a particular teaching situation, how difficult will that be, and what resources are available?

The second type of task-specific assessment involves teachers' judgments of personal competence to succeed in mastering the task. In other words, given the difficulty level of the task and the resources available to them, teachers must ask themselves: Do I have the skills to be successful? Together these two types of assessments determine a teacher's sense of efficacy. Because these task-specific judgments are part of the efficacy judgment process, the judgments teachers make about the challenge of their class may have instructional, motivational, and relational consequences for the students in their class. In the 1960s, Robert

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