



Review

Who, when, why and to what end? Students at risk of negative student–teacher relationships and their outcomes



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 May 2014

Revised 18 November 2014

Accepted 1 December 2014

Available online 10 December 2014

Keywords:

Attachment

Teacher–student relationships

At-risk children

Adjustment

Behaviour problems

ABSTRACT

The student–teacher relationship is critically important: influencing children's academic, social, behavioural and emotional development. While much research has examined the predictors and consequences of the student–teacher relationship across the school years, no review to date has focused specifically on the characteristics and outcomes of students who are already at a heightened risk of experiencing a negative student–teacher relationship. This review explores the characteristics that place students at such risk, the periods throughout schooling when students are most at risk, the influence of previous attachment relationships, including those with other teachers and parents, and the impact that a positive or negative student–teacher relationship can have. It concludes by examining the predictive and protective functions of student–teacher relationships: both for students in mainstream cohorts and for students who are at risk.

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1. Introduction

Student–teacher relationships are a highly influential aspect of a child's school experience: impacting development across social, emotional, behavioural and academic domains (Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, & Hamm, 2011; Murray & Zvoch, 2011; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). Importantly, given the powerful role that student–teacher relationships play, emerging research also suggests that some students are at heightened risk of experiencing a negative relationship (e.g. Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Griggs, Gagnon, Huelman, Kidder-Ashley, & Ballard, 2009; Murray & Zvoch, 2011). Paradoxically, however, these same students have arguably more to gain or to lose from their student–teacher relationship than do other students. It is therefore critical that researchers and educators alike understand who is most likely to experience a negative student–teacher relationship, when it is that the student–teacher relationship is particularly important, why relationships differ in quality, and what these differences equate to.

Earlier reviews have investigated the associations between teacher variables (such as warmth) and affective and behavioural student outcomes (e.g. Cornelius-White, 2007), and between student–teacher relationship quality and student engagement¹ and achievement (e.g. Roorda et al., 2011). Additionally, conceptual and methodological frameworks used to describe the student–teacher relationship have been assessed (e.g. Kennedy, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012), with some attention given to relationship-oriented interventions (e.g. Sabol & Pianta, 2012). To date however, no review has focused specifically on the plight of students who are already at risk of negative student–teacher relationships. We discuss who these students are, when they are most at risk, and why. We then discuss the specific impact that such relationships have on students who are at risk, relative to other students. Rather than focusing on the interpersonal styles of teachers or the quality of the learning environment, we discuss student–teacher relationships as dyadic constructs.

1.1. Theoretical orientation and definitions

The literature in this field is largely informed by three theories: attachment theory, self-determination theory (and other motivational theories), and ecological systems theory. While it is beyond the scope of our review to discuss these theories in depth, the most frequently discussed in the field is attachment theory. Attachment theory describes that caregivers in significant adult–child relationships act as a 'secure base' from which children can explore the world and return to when seeking comfort, safety or reassurance (Bowlby, 1969). While children's initial attachment is to parents, later-emerging relationships with teachers are also important. Children form internal working models (psychological representations) of these relationships, which are then used to interpret and predict the caregiver's behaviour and their own responses (e.g. see Sections 3.4 and 5). Self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000), in turn, describes that motivation² within the school environment is contingent upon three innate, universal and psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (or self-determination). Of particular relevance to the student–teacher relationship is the

¹ Student engagement is multifaceted, with several components of student engagement discussed in the literature (e.g. Lee, 2012). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) define three types of engagement: emotional, behavioural and cognitive. Consistent with Fredricks et al. (2004), we see school engagement as being akin to cognitive engagement, and academic engagement as a subcomponent of behavioural engagement. A limitation of reviewing literature in this field is the inconsistency by which these definitions have been applied.

² While motivation and engagement are undoubtedly related, the complexities of their definitions and inherent terminology suggest they should not be viewed synonymously.

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