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Longitudinal trends and year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict and closeness: Associations with aggressive behavior problems[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Longitudinal research suggests that student–teacher relationships characterized by elevated (or increasing) conflict and low (or decreasing) closeness promote heightened aggression in elementary school. However, prior research has not explored fluctuations in the quality of student–teacher relationships across school years, which may also impact students. This study applied a new methodology to determine whether year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict or closeness also predicted increased student aggression. 154 children were followed from Head Start preschools through elementary school. Early elementary teachers (kindergarten through third grade) rated the quality of conflict and closeness with students. Fifth grade teachers rated student aggression. Regression analyses revealed that year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict, along with mean levels of student–teacher conflict, each made unique contributions to fifth grade aggression, controlling for baseline aggression. In addition, for students with low aggression at kindergarten entry, year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher closeness predicted increased aggression. Possible mechanisms accounting for the detrimental effects of fluctuations in student–teacher relationship quality are discussed, along with implications for practice.

1. Introduction

Children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often enter kindergarten without the self-regulation skills they need to successfully navigate the social and behavioral demands of school, increasing risk for aggressive behavior problems and long-term underachievement (La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Macmillan, McMorris, & Krutttschnitt, 2004). During the initial years in elementary school, the relationships these children establish with teachers may be especially influential, affecting the course of aggressive behaviors (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). From a conceptual standpoint, conflictual relationships with teachers may evoke and reinforce oppositional, hostile reactions, thus amplifying aggression (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). In contrast, close relationships with elementary teachers may promote feelings of emotional security and support the development of self-regulation skills, fostering aggression control (Baker, Grant, &

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Morlock, 2008; Hughes et al., 1999). To test these associations, prior research has explored longitudinal trends in student–teacher relationships, studying mean levels of closeness or conflict experienced over time and trajectories characterized by increases or decreases in closeness or conflict across grade levels (O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011; Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012).

The current study applied a new methodology designed to complement the exploration of longitudinal trends (means and slopes) in student–teacher relationship quality by examining developmental fluctuations that individuals experience from year-to-year (Ram & Gerstorf, 2009). These fluctuations represent the degree to which an individual's experience each year deviates from their general pattern predicted by longitudinal trends. As children get a new teacher every year, student–teacher relationship quality is only moderately stable across the elementary years (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). Longitudinal trends (means and slopes) are designed to “smooth out” year-to-year fluctuations to detect more general patterns over time. This study explored the hypothesis that year-to-year fluctuations in teacher socialization support increase risk for aggressive behavior, in ways that add beyond the effects of mean levels or trajectories of conflict and closeness. The following review includes the conceptual rationale and existing evidence that support this focus on fluctuations, followed by a description of the methodological approach.

1.1. Why fluctuations in student–teacher relationship quality might affect aggression

Elementary school children typically experience different teachers each school year and therefore establish new relationships with teachers annually. Year-to-year correlations reflect moderate stability in student–teacher relationship quality (Jerome et al., 2009; Ladd & Burgess, 1999), with some children experiencing considerable variability across different teachers and school years (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). The impact of this variability on child adjustment is unknown.

Evidence from a number of other areas suggests that experiencing instability in core developmental supports is stressful for children and undermines adaptive social-emotional development. For example, prior research has linked instability in areas of family structure, family income, caregiving, and residence with impaired child social-emotional adjustment (for reviews, see Hill, Morris, Gennetian, Wolf, & Tubbs, 2013; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Conceptually, instability (or inconsistency) in caregiver-child conflict or closeness might place children at particular risk for increases in aggressive behaviors. For example, social learning theory suggests that high rates of parent-child conflict, low levels of parent-child closeness, and inconsistency in parental discipline (within and between parents) are all linked with elevated child aggression (Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Carrasco, Holgado-Tello, & Serrano, 2015; Dwairy, 2008; Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, Lengua, & the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group [CPRG], 2000). Researchers postulate that when parents respond inconsistently to aggression, occasionally giving in to aggressive demands, it creates a variable reinforcement schedule that promotes future aggression (Dishion & Patterson, 2006). Researchers have also suggested that parental unpredictability distresses children, who may engage in aggressive behaviors in order to elicit predictable (even if negative) responses (Wahler & Dumas, 1986). Year-to-year fluctuations in teacher-child conflict may likewise create unpredictability for children, reflecting inconsistencies in behavioral expectations, reprimands, and consequences for aggression.

From the perspective of attachment models, student–teacher closeness facilitates self-regulatory development by enhancing felt security and positive internalized working models of the self (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992). Inconsistency in the provision of parental sensitive support undermines secure attachment and is associated with elevated emotional distress and behavioral acting out (Dwairy, 2008; Stormshak et al., 2000). Conceptualized within an attachment framework, the loss of a supportive teacher and adaptation to a non-supportive or unpredictable teacher might elicit feelings of insecurity, helplessness, and emotional dysregulation, reducing the child's ability to trust future teachers even when they are supportive.

In summary, from the perspectives of both social learning theory and attachment models, children should benefit emotionally and behaviorally when they experience greater stability and predictability in student–teacher relationships. In contrast, higher levels of year-to-year fluctuations in student–teacher conflict or closeness might increase emotional and behavioral dysregulation, amplifying aggression. The existing evidence base, reviewed briefly below, documents links between student–teacher relationship quality and aggression. It is possible that year-to-year fluctuations contribute to child aggressive behavior, in addition to the overall quality of student–teacher relationship, but these fluctuations have not yet been examined.

1.2. Longitudinal studies linking student–teacher relationship quality with aggression

Prior research has shown concurrent associations between the quality of a child's relationship with his or her teacher and social-emotional functioning in that classroom during the same school year (Baker, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Other research has found associations between the child's closeness and conflict with an early elementary teacher and behavioral outcomes in the following school year (Howes, 2000; Hughes et al., 1999; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). There are also long term effects of early student–teacher relationship quality; for example, student–teacher conflict in kindergarten predicts disciplinary infractions, including aggressive behavior problems when children are in eighth grade (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Elementary school children typically experience different teachers each school year and therefore establish new relationships with teachers annually. Longitudinal studies reveal moderate stability in the quality of student–teacher relationships, with early relational difficulties at the transition to kindergarten predicting relationship difficulties with teachers throughout the elementary years (Jerome et al., 2009; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). However, the quality of relationships with teachers can be quite variable for some children (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007), raising questions about the impact of variability in student–teacher relationship quality across multiple school years.

In an initial study spanning two years, Ladd and Burgess (2001) found that aggressive children who experienced two years of conflict in their relationships with teachers (kindergarten and first grade) were more likely to engage in problematic behaviors than

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