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# Teacher and child perceptions of relationship quality and ethnic minority children's behavioral adjustment in upper elementary school: A cross-lagged approach



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## ABSTRACT

In this study, cross-lagged longitudinal modeling was used to examine associations between teacher-child relationship quality and children's behavioral adjustment in a sample of sixth grade ethnic minority children. In comparison to previous cross-lagged studies, children were older and cross-informant models were used. Both teachers ( $N = 12$ ) and children ( $N = 226$ ) reported on the relationship quality (Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency or Negative Expectations), and children's behavioral adjustment (Externalizing Problems, Internalizing Problems, and Prosocial Behavior) at the beginning and the end of the school year. Children's externalizing behavior at the beginning of the school year was consistently and positively associated with conflict at the end of the school year. Interestingly, dependency at time 1 was associated with children's behavioral adjustment at time 2, whereas for closeness and conflict associations were the other way around (i.e., children's behavior at time 1 was associated with teacher-child closeness and conflict at time 2). Taken together, our results seem to indicate that bidirectional associations between teacher-child relationships and behavioral adjustment apply to older, ethnic minority children as well.

## 1. Introduction

Many studies have found that the affective quality of teacher-child relationships is a predictor of children's behavioral adjustment (e.g., Buyse, Verschueren, Verachert, & Van Damme, 2009; Graves & Howes, 2011), whereas other research has shown that children's behavioral adjustment predicts teacher-child relationship quality (TCRQ; e.g., Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Rudasill, 2011). Taken together, these unidirectional studies suggest that associations between the TCRQ and children's behavioral adjustment will be bidirectional. The few existing cross-lagged studies provided further evidence that bidirectional associations do exist (e.g., Doumen et al., 2008; Mejia & Hoglund, 2016). However, previous cross-lagged studies focused on relatively young children (i.e., preschool to third grade), whereas a recent meta-analysis revealed that the TCRQ becomes more important for children's school engagement and academic achievement as they grow older (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Therefore, we examined cross-lagged associations between TCRQ and behavioral adjustment in a sample of sixth graders. Furthermore, and different from previous cross-lagged studies, we used both teacher and child reports of TCRQ and behavioral adjustment, to prevent shared-informant bias. Finally, we focused on an at-risk group (i.e., ethnic minority students), because previous studies suggested that TCRQ might be particularly important for students at risk of negative school adjustment (Roorda et al., 2011).

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### 1.1. Theoretical framework

With regard to associations between TCRQ and children's behavioral adjustment, different models can be distinguished: the relationship-driven model, the child-driven model, and the transactional model (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016). The relationship-driven model assumes that it is the TCRQ that influences children's behavioral adjustment, whereas the child-driven model assumes that it is children's behavioral adjustment that influences the TCRQ. Finally, the transactional model hypothesizes that TCRQ and children's behavioral adjustment are reciprocally related, that is, they influence and strengthen each other over time (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016).

Studies investigating a relationship-driven model are often based on an extended attachment perspective. According to an extended attachment perspective (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012), positive teacher-child relationships will help children to feel emotionally secure and, hence, enable them to adjust to the classroom environment in a healthy way (Pianta, 1999; Thijs & Koomen, 2008). Alternatively, negative teacher-child relationships let children believe that they are unworthy of fair and caring treatment and, hence, make them respond in an aggressive and hostile way to others as well (Doumen, Buyse, Colpin, & Verschuere, 2011). Studies based on attachment theory usually distinguish between three relationship dimensions: closeness (i.e., the degree of warmth and openness in the relationship), conflict (i.e., the degree of negative and coercive teacher-child interactions), and dependency (i.e., clingy and overtly dependent behaviors of the child; Pianta, 2001).

The underlying hypothesis of the child-driven model (children's behaviors impact the TCRQ) can also be found in, for example, socialization theory (Bell, 1968; McHale & Crouter, 2003; Mejia & Hoglund, 2016). According to this theory, it is not only teachers who influence children's behaviors and development but children themselves can be considered as active agents of change as well. That is, children's behaviors can also affect how teachers view them and behave towards them. More specifically, the degree to which children display externalizing, internalizing, and prosocial behaviors in the classroom context will partly determine how teachers behave towards children (Bell, 1968; McHale & Crouter, 2003; Mejia & Hoglund, 2016).

Finally, studies examining a transactional model, as is the case in the present study, may be inspired by the developmental systems theory (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). According to this theory, the teacher-child relationship is conceptualized as a dyadic microsystem, in which teachers' and children's personal and behavioral characteristics influence the way in which they view and experience their mutual relationship and vice versa (Pianta et al., 2003). Children's behavioral adjustment is considered to be one of the most significant factors influencing TCRQ and is, in turn, also theorized to be influenced by the quality of the relationship.

### 1.2. Unidirectional associations between TCRQ and behavioral adjustment

According to the relationship-driven model, positive relationships with teachers (i.e., high levels of closeness, and low levels of conflict and dependency) will lead to better behavioral adjustment (i.e., less externalizing and internalizing behavior, and more prosocial behavior), whereas the child-driven model implies that children's positive behaviors will lead to more positive relationships with teachers (Mejia & Hoglund, 2016). Unidirectional longitudinal studies frequently found support that the TCRQ influences children's behavioral adjustment and that children's behavioral adjustment impacts TCRQ. This evidence has been most convincing for teacher-child conflict and children's externalizing behavior (e.g., Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Jerome et al., 2009; O'Connor, Collins, & Supplee, 2012), whereas associations between closeness and both externalizing and internalizing behavior as well as between conflict and internalizing behavior have been supported by some longitudinal studies but not by others (e.g., Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Henricsson & Rydell, 2006; Jerome et al., 2009; Rudasill, 2011). With regard to internalizing behavior as a predictor of conflict, there was disagreement between studies in whether this association would be positive (Jerome et al., 2009) or negative (Rudasill, 2011). Associations between dependency and behavioral adjustment and between TCRQ and prosocial behavior were less frequently investigated but seem to be supported by existing studies (Arbeau et al., 2010; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004, 2006; Myers & Morris, 2009). In general, findings of unidirectional studies thus offer support for both the relationship-driven model and the child-driven model but it depends on the specific relationship dimension and the specific behavior whether associations occur regularly in longitudinal studies, with most consistent evidence being found for the association between conflict and externalizing behavior.

### 1.3. Bidirectional associations between TCRQ and behavioral adjustment

There also exist a few studies that used a cross-lagged design to examine the transactional model. With regard to conflict, Zhang and Sun (2011) found positive, bidirectional associations between conflict and externalizing behavior in their cross-lagged study with two measurement occasions focusing on Chinese preschool children, whereas internalizing problems at time 1 were positively associated with conflict at time 2 but not the other way around. In a study with three measurement occasions focusing on Belgian kindergartners, Doumen et al. (2008) revealed positive associations from aggressive behavior at time 1 to conflict at time 2 and from conflict at time 2 to aggressive behavior at time 3 but not the other way around. In another study with three occasions, focused on preschool boys at risk for developing externalizing problems, Roorda, Verschuere, Vancraeyveldt, Van Craeyveldt, and Colpin (2014) revealed positive, bidirectional links between conflict and both externalizing behavior and internalizing behavior but only from time 1 to 2 and not from time 2 to 3. Furthermore, negative associations from conflict at time 1 to prosocial behavior at time 2 and from prosocial behavior at time 2 to conflict at time 3 were found but not the other way around (Roorda et al., 2014). Finally, in a study among children from kindergarten to third grade including three time points, Mejia and Hoglund (2016) found that externalizing problems positively predicted conflict both from time 1 to 2 and time 2 to 3 but not the other way around.

With regard to closeness, both Zhang and Sun (2011) and Mejia and Hoglund (2016) did not find significant cross-lagged

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