

Student misbehavior and teacher well-being: Testing the mediating role of the teacher-student relationship

Karen Aldrup^{a,*}, Uta Klusmann^a, Oliver Lüdtke^{a,b}, Richard Göllner^{c,d}, Ulrich Trautwein^d

^a Leibniz Institute for Science and Mathematics Education, Kiel, Germany

^b Centre for International Student Assessment, Munich, Germany

^c Hector Research Institute of Education Sciences and Psychology, University of Tübingen, Germany

^d LEAD Graduate School & Research Network, University of Tübingen, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Asked about major job stressors, teachers consistently name classroom disturbances or disciplinary problems. Furthermore, student misbehavior has been linked to reduced occupational well-being. However, there is a pressing need to uncover the psychological processes explaining this association. In their model of teacher well-being, Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) suggested the teacher-student relationship as a mediator. To test this assumption, the present study used longitudinal data from $N = 222$ teachers who rated student misbehavior in their classroom, the teacher-student relationship, and their well-being in terms of emotional exhaustion and work enthusiasm. In addition, the teachers' students ($N = 4111$) were asked about behavior problems in their class. The results revealed links between teacher-rated student misbehavior, increased exhaustion, and decreased enthusiasm. Student-rated misbehavior was correlated with teacher well-being to a lesser extent. Furthermore, the teacher-student relationship was positively associated with teacher well-being and mediated the link between teacher-perceived misbehavior and enthusiasm.

1. Introduction

Teachers' occupational well-being, which includes for example, their emotional exhaustion and work enthusiasm, is a highly important topic from both a theoretical and practical perspective. It is related to student motivation and achievement as well as teacher attrition and teachers' general mental and physical health (Bauer et al., 2006; Klusmann, Richter, & Lüdtke, 2016; Scheuch, Haufe, & Seibt, 2015; Shen et al., 2015). An exhaustive number of studies investigating factors related to teacher well-being have found that teachers rate student misbehavior as particularly stressful and consistently report poorer well-being when they perceive elevated levels of inattentiveness, classroom disturbances, or disciplinary problems (Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014; Kyriacou, 2011). However, there is still a pressing need to examine the psychological processes that underlie this. Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) proposed the teacher-student relationship as a mediator. After all, student misbehavior has been found to make teachers feel rejected and to impede them from building affectionate relationships with students (Hargreaves, 2000; Newberry & Davis, 2008; Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015). Because building positive teacher-student relationships is a central goal for teachers, not meeting this goal is likely to harm teacher well-being (Butler, 2012; Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012).

To investigate the mediating role of the teacher-student relationship, we drew on longitudinal data from $N = 222$ teachers who evaluated their occupational well-being in terms of emotional exhaustion and work enthusiasm, as well as student misbehavior and the overall quality of their relationship with the students in their classroom. Student misbehavior was also rated by the teachers' students ($N = 4111$). This allowed us to investigate whether teachers' and students' perceptions of student misbehavior were similarly related to teacher well-being. Most prior research has relied on teacher self-reports of student misbehavior. Thus, it remains an open question whether it is behavior problems recognizable to others, such as students, that reduce teacher well-being, or problems exclusively perceived by the teachers themselves.

1.1. Teachers' occupational well-being: theoretical underpinnings and state of research

Teachers' occupational well-being, which refers to their optimal psychological functioning and experience at work (Ryan & Deci, 2001), has been described by the presence of positive aspects, such as job satisfaction and work enthusiasm, and the absence of negative experiences, such as stress and emotional exhaustion (Diener, Suh, Lucas, &

* Corresponding author. Leibniz Institute for Science and Mathematics Education, Olshausenstr. 62, 24118, Kiel, Germany.
E-mail address: aldrup@ipn.uni-kiel.de (K. Aldrup).

Smith, 1999; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The present study incorporated both the negative and positive dimensions of well-being by focusing on emotional exhaustion and work enthusiasm. Emotional exhaustion is the central quality of burnout and refers to its stress dimension (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). It includes feelings of strain and the depletion of emotional resources (Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion has negative implications for student outcomes because it reduces student engagement, school satisfaction, and achievement (Klusmann et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2015). In contrast, work enthusiasm refers to teachers' enjoyment, excitement, and pleasure in their work as teachers (Kunter et al., 2008). Teachers who feel enthusiastic about their work are able to foster higher student motivation and better learning outcomes (Keller, Goetz, Becker, Morger, & Hensley, 2014; Kunter et al., 2013).

A number of models have been proposed to explain the origins of occupational well-being, such as the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) or the job demands-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Central to these models is the assumption that job stressors require the prolonged exertion of physical, psychological, or emotional effort, causing stress when a person's resources are exceeded (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). An extensive line of research has identified common stressors in the teaching profession (Kyriacou, 2011). Student misbehavior, including disturbances, disrespect, and disciplinary problems, is widely considered to be the most influential stressor (Aloe et al., 2014; Dicke et al., 2014). Student misbehavior has been linked to feelings of anger, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion as well as reduced enjoyment, job satisfaction, and work engagement (Aloe et al., 2014; Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Dicke et al., 2014; Frenzel, Goetz, Stephens, & Jacob, 2009; Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet, 2015; Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2008a; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Other typical stressors include extensive workload, a lack of support from colleagues or the principal, poor working conditions, and little recognition from the public (e.g., Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Kokkinos, 2007; Kyriacou, 2011). However, one central aspect of teachers' working environment has only rarely been investigated in research on teacher well-being—the teacher-student relationship (Klassen et al., 2012; Spilt et al., 2011).

1.2. The teacher-student relationship and teachers' occupational well-being

A positive teacher-student relationship is generally characterized by respect, warmth, and trust as well as low levels of interpersonal conflict (e.g., Davis, 2003; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and self-determination theory (Ryan

& Deci, 2000), these qualities can be considered vital for students' development because they provide a feeling of security and belonging (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Pianta, 1999). There is extensive empirical evidence showing that students who feel appreciated and supported by their teachers attain more positive affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007; Kunter et al., 2013; McGrath & van Bergen, 2015; Roorda et al., 2011; Vandenbroucke, Spilt, Verschuere, Piccinin, & Baeyens, 2018).

In contrast, potential associations between the teacher-student relationship and teacher outcomes have largely been neglected (Spilt et al., 2011). This is surprising because establishing a caring relationship with one's students is inherent to the teaching profession and at the core of teachers' professional identity (O'Connor, 2008; van der Want et al., 2014). In line with this, prior research has shown that teachers strive to connect with their students and to feel valued, respected, and liked (Butler, 2012; Hagger & Malmberg, 2011). Consequently, building a positive teacher-student relationship can be considered a central goal for teachers. According to the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), failing to meet this goal should be directly linked to higher stress and reduced well-being.

There is initial empirical evidence for the association between the teacher-student relationship and teacher well-being. Interview studies have shown that teachers' bonds with students make an important contribution to their emotional experience and job satisfaction (Hargreaves, 2000; Shann, 1998). Moreover, cross-sectional studies have found that teachers reporting a close, conflict-free relationship with their students, who felt appreciated and connected to them, had more positive emotions and work engagement as well as less anger and burnout (Gastaldi, Pasta, Longobardi, Prino, & Quaglia, 2014; Jo, 2014; Klassen et al., 2012; Milatz, Luftenegger, & Schober, 2015). Finally, a recent diary study showed that teachers experience more work enthusiasm when they feel more connected to their students; however, no links to daily emotional exhaustion were found (Aldrup, Klusmann, & Lüdtke, 2017). These studies indicate that research on teacher well-being could profit from considering the teacher-student relationship. This applies all the more given that the teacher-student relationship has been hypothesized as one possible psychological process underlying the widely found link between student misbehavior and teacher well-being (Spilt et al., 2011).

1.3. The mediating role of the teacher-student relationship

The model of teacher well-being by Spilt et al. (2011) strongly emphasizes the importance of the teacher-student relationship for teacher well-being (see Fig. 1). Drawing upon the theoretical arguments and empirical studies presented in the previous section, a direct

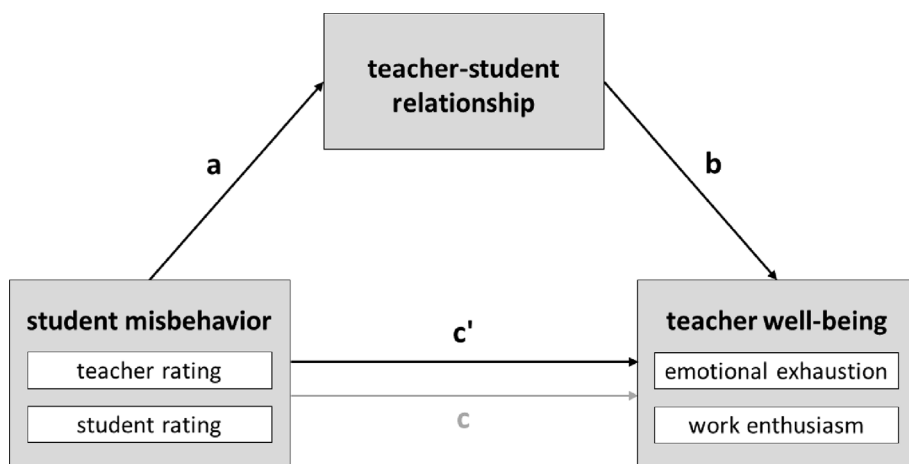


Fig. 1. Heuristic working model in which student misbehavior—as rated by students and teachers—is expected to reduce teachers' occupational well-being (path c; path c represents the total effect in our mediation model, i.e., $c = ab + c'$). Teachers' perceptions of their relationship with students are hypothesized to mediate this link because student misbehavior might make teachers feel rejected (path a) which could, in turn, reduce their occupational well-being (path b).

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