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Beginning and experienced secondary school teachers' self- and student schema in positive and problematic teacher–student relationships

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HIGHLIGHTS

- In teachers' accounts of positive and problematic relationships, student schemas differ more than self-schemas.
- Especially student agreeableness, motivation and interpersonal behaviour differ in positive and problematic relationships.
- Novices and experienced teachers mainly differ in their accounts of positive relationships.

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ABSTRACT

The quality of teacher–student relationships is important for teachers' well-being in schools. In this interview study we investigated which cognitions comprise secondary school teachers' self- and student schema in positive and problematic teacher–student relationships. Frequency analyses of these cognitions showed that especially student schema differed in teachers' talk of positive and problematic relationships. When combining cognitions of the self- and student schema, a HOMALS analysis revealed two types of positive and two types of problematic relationships. Differences between novices and experienced teachers were apparent for positive relationships. These findings raise questions about teachers' attributions for the quality of teacher–student relationships.

1. Introduction

The quality of teacher–student relationships is important for both students' and teachers' wellbeing in schools. Some researchers even claim that the heart of classroom teaching and learning lies in the relationships between teachers and individual students (Lyons, 1990). For students, positive teacher–student relationships correlate, among other things, with students' motivation, grades, and school success (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Wentzel, 1998). For teachers, these relationships correlate with job satisfaction (Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans & Wubbels, 2013), teacher wellbeing (Gu & Day, 2007), and low levels of stress (Yoon, 2002). In the literature, high quality relationships have been described as warm and open; in these relationships the teacher creates a structured environment with clear expectations whilst simultaneously conveying a message of empathy and mutual respect (e.g., Wubbels et al., 2014). Low quality relationships on the other hand, are characterised by high conflict and discordance between teacher and student and described by teachers as disrespectful, conflictual, or distant (e.g., Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Because of the impact these relationships can have on student and teacher outcomes, it is important to understand their fundamentals. In the present study we aim to enhance our understanding of teacher–student relationships by investigating teachers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships.

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Interpersonal relationships are formed and influenced not only by the actual behaviours and qualities of both actors involved, but also by the individual's mental representation, or working models of the relationship (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). In the context of education, the influence of this idiosyncratic mental representation has also been recognised: "teacher–student relationships can be understood as the generalized interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other" (Wubbels et al., 2014, p. 364). Behaviour and mental models operate in a reciprocal manner because these meanings are not only based on these interactions but also shape the interactions themselves.

Previous studies of teacher–student relationships demonstrate this connection between teachers' mental representations of the relationship and their behaviour. For instance, based on an interview study with teachers, Silberman (1969) divided teacher–student relationships into four categories according to the attitude of the teacher towards the student: (1) attachment, (2) concern, (3) indifference, and (4) rejection. Teachers' tended to respond warmly to the attachment group, were supportive and helpful towards the concern group, had very few interactions with the indifferent group, and developed conflictual responses towards the rejection group (Brophy & Good, 1970; Good & Brophy, 1972).

More recent studies also illustrate the importance of teachers' mental representations in the formation and maintenance of teacher–student relationships (e.g., Saft & Pianta, 2001; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002). Based on teachers' perceptions, Pianta (2001) proposes a framework of relationship quality based on dimensions rather than on discrete types of relationships. In this model high quality relationships are defined by high levels of closeness, low levels of conflict, and low levels of dependency. Research on teachers' narratives and observed teacher–student interactions shows that negative affect in teachers' narratives correlated with the expression of negative affect in classroom interactions with particular children (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002).

Although these studies show that teachers' mental representations of relationships correlate with subsequent teacher behaviour towards particular students, they tell us little about what constitutes these mental representations themselves, in other words: what cognitions are teachers' mental representations of teacher–student relationships built upon? Theory on people's mental representations or working models of relationships may provide clues as to the sorts of cognitions involved in relationship perception.

1.1. Relational schemas

Theories on interpersonal or relationship cognition conceptualise relationships in terms of mental representations of the self and significant others (e.g., Andersen & Cole, 1990). According to the relational schema theory (Baldwin, 1992) people develop mental maps of relationships with individuals, so called *relational schemas*, which guide their behaviours in subsequent interactions. A relational schema is an interconnected web of knowledge that people hold and may use when interacting with another person, or, as Baldwin states: "a cognitive structure representing patterns of interpersonal relatedness" (Baldwin, 1992, p. 33). Relational schema theory assumes that the relational schemas people hold guide their attention and behaviour according to information processing principles. Schemas are activated when in an interaction with a person, guiding attention towards specific aspects of these interactions and guiding subsequent behaviour. However, this is a reciprocal process since repeated associations when interacting with other people also form relational schemas themselves.

Mental representations of a relationship such as relational schemas, influence subsequent behaviour in interaction with a specific other through cognitions called scripts. Scripts can be defined as a set of expected action patterns associated with relationship partners. By their nature, interpersonal scripts specify procedures as well as semantic knowledge defining the situation and the elements within it (Baldwin, 1992). Two elements of importance in the formation of scripts are representations of self and other.

Self and other schema can be regarded as generalisations or theories about self and other in a particular relational context that are used to guide the processing of social information. In research on self-perception in relationships, Ogilvie and Ashmore (1991) suggest a self-with-other unit, defined as "a mental representation that includes the set of personal qualities (traits, feelings, and the like) that an individual believes characterizes his or her self when with a particular other person" (p. 290). Self-with-other is also known as the relational self (Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006). In line with theory on the self-schema, the other-schema can be thought of as an associative network of declarative knowledge consisting of expectations about attributes or traits, thoughts, goals, behavioural tendencies, specific facts, and feelings (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; Chen et al., 2006).

1.2. Teachers' perceptions of students and of self

Previous studies of teachers' perceptions of students and of themselves can provide expectations about the content of teachers' self-schemas and other schemas. A qualitative study by Connell (1985) of Australian secondary teachers' perceptions of students yielded four categories of teachers' comments about students: (1) pupil success in formal learning situations, (2) pupil enthusiasm, energy, or motivation, (3) pupil's disruptive or compliant classroom behaviour, and (4) unique personality attributes. A later American study on primary and secondary teachers, by Kagan and Tippins (1991), extended this list with the categories: physical appearance, motor skills, social interactions with peers, family life and favourite activities. Mayer and Marland (1997) interviewed five highly effective teachers about the knowledge they had of their students and ways in which they used this knowledge in their classroom teaching. They also found knowledge of students to cluster in the areas of: abilities, work habits or attitudes, personality and family background.

Quantitative studies have identified student characteristics from these categories as either enhancing or undermining positive teacher–student relationships. Teachers mainly form positive relationships with students who perform at a high level as compared to peers (Willis & Brophy, 1974), who show effortful control (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), who they view as conforming to classroom rules, who show dependent and acquiescent behaviour (Brophy & Good, 1974; Feshbach, 1969; Willis & Brophy, 1974), and who are less shy than their classmates (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Wentzel (2000) found similar results to the above studies, claiming that teachers' descriptions of students reflect three types of desired outcomes: performance outcomes (e.g., achieving good grades), motivational qualities (e.g., being persistent), and social outcomes (e.g., being responsive to rules). These social outcomes also involve sharing and being helpful to others. Research has shown that this type of behaviour, especially when expressed towards the teacher, is also indicative of teachers' perception of the teacher–student relationship. For instance, Willis and Brophy (1974) have found that both the perceived degree to which students reward teachers in their personal contact with them, as well as perceived students' openness to contact with the teacher, are predictive of positive teacher–student relationships.

Teacher beliefs about themselves have also been found to