The Impact of Teacher-Child Relationships on Social Adjustment and Behaviour in Schools

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Abstract
This literature review examines the significance of teacher-child relationships on social adjustment and behaviour in school contexts. It draws on a range of research to explore the impact of the quality of teacher-child relationships. It identifies factors that enhance positive outcomes, such as high quality professional relationships, closeness (for girls in particular) and courteous behaviour. In addition it considers factors that detract from positive outcomes for both teacher and children. These include problem behaviour, conflict (especially for boys) and dependency. Suggestions for future research identified in the studies reviewed were included with an emphasis on the contributions of both teacher and child.

Keywords: Teacher-Child Relationships, Teacher-Child Interactions, Relationship Quality, Closeness, Conflict, Dependency, Gender

Introduction
Professional relationships are important in education because children develop in relational contexts. Professional relationships have a positive impact on children. Considerable research has been conducted on the topic of the relationship between the teacher and child. The relationship between the teacher and child is a special one that is similar to, but also different from, that of a child and parent or caregiver (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Research on teacher-child relationships was mainly prompted by Robert Pianta’s (1992) work, which focused on the relationships between children and adults who were not their parents (as cited in Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). It is important that these relationships are built on trust and respect. Teacher-child relationships have been shown to correlate with many constructs, such as school adjustment and behaviour outcomes, in particular problem behaviour. School adjustment is commonly defined in terms of children’s academic progress and performance in school (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

However, several researchers have sought to use a broader definition, one which incorporates children’s affective experiences associated with school, as well as how involved or engaged they are with the school environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Murray, Murray & Waas, 2008). Behaviour outcomes are frequently linked to, or researched alongside, school adjustment. Problem behaviour is defined in terms of externalizing behaviour, such as aggressive or hyperactive behaviour, and internalizing behaviour, such as asocial or anxious-fearful behaviour (Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Damme, & Maes, 2008; O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011). If ākonga exhibit problem behaviours, this creates conflict in their relationships with their peers and their kaikō, thus leading to a decrease in the quality of their relationships.

It has been established that teacher-child relationships are important, thus it is necessary to understand how to develop high-quality relationships that will benefit the child (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Gaining a greater understanding of the effect that the quality of these relationships has in children’s lives can be a useful way to begin establishing high-quality relationships. Therefore, the aim of this review is to examine the extent that the quality of teacher-child relationships can have a positive impact on children. In the existing literature, the quality of these teacher-child relationships is often correlated with attachment theory. Several studies use the aspects of closeness, conflict and dependency to characterise the relationship quality (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Schuengel, 2012).

Close is defined as the degree of security, warmth and openness that is present between the teacher and child. Dependency can be described as an unhealthy degree of overreliance on the teacher for support. This can be observed when a child displays clingy or possessive behaviours. Conflict is another construct which can act as a stressor for children and may impair their school adjustment and exacerbate problem

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behaviours. Conflict consists of discord, and lack of trust and respect between the child and teacher (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015). A complex longitudinal study conducted by O’Connor et al. (2011), which explored teacher-child relations, followed children from birth through to adolescence across a number of American states. This study supported the notion that high quality teacher-child relationships prevented children from developing both externalising and internalising behaviours in later schooling, thus demonstrating the significance of positive teacher-child relationships on school adjustment and behaviour outcomes.

Several studies have defined high-quality, or positive teacher-child relationships, as having high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict and dependency (Birch & Ladd, 1997; O’Connor, 2010). Consequently, low-quality teacher-child relationships consist of low levels of closeness and high levels of conflict and dependency. High-quality relationships between the teacher and child are desirable because they have beneficial effects (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015). For example, they have been shown to support school adjustment and may serve as a protective factor for children at risk of developing problem behaviour (Buyse et al., 2008; Rudasill, 2011). This is because children are provided with emotional support and security in high-quality relationships but low-quality relationships end up as stressors for children. However, a longitudinal study conducted across various locations within the United States of America with children from first to third grade identified gender bias, in that girls had closer relationships with teachers in both first and third grades (Rudasill, 2011). Significantly, Rudasill (2011) also found that earlier relationship quality influences later relationship quality. One example shows how boys that are more conflictual in first grade are more likely to have conflict with teachers in third grade. Interestingly, a further extensive study (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015) in the Netherlands that focussed on 586 children from 26 classrooms, detected an unforeseen gender bias, which was identified as a methodological limitation in the research, possibly due to an uneven distribution of sample children across grade levels but which may have been a significant factor that required further research.

Teacher reports were often used to gain data about the quality of relationships and the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) developed by Pianta was used as a measure of teachers’ perceptions of closeness, conflict and dependency with a particular child in several studies (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Cadima, Doumen, Verschuuren & Leal, 2015; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015) with similar results. While STRS and other teacher reports are helpful and reliable, they only provide one perspective. The perspectives of both teacher and child are important for gaining a better understanding about teacher-child relationships and their quality (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015). As a result, Koomen and Jellesma (2015) and Mantzicopoulos (2005) sought to gain the child’s perspective, discovering that teachers and children had different observations regarding relationship quality and school adjustment status. Although limited studies have integrated both teacher and child perspectives, several researchers (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Mantzicopoulos, 2005; Murray et al., 2008), have conducted studies that investigated both perspectives that serve to extend the literature and fill the gap. They examined relationship quality and school adjustment using both perspectives. Two of the studies examined gender and ethnicity in order to discover whether these factors impacted teachers’ and children’s perception of the relationship. Koomen and Jellesma (2015) discovered that girls generally had closer and less conflictual relationships with the teacher than boys. Also, while teachers’ observations were influenced by racial match, children were not. These results have implications for positive teacher-child relationships and the influence of social adjustment and behaviour in schools

School adjustment

The transition from early childhood to primary school is dependent on numerous contextual factors and the development of positive relationships, or not, can have a substantial impact on school adjustment. Birch and Ladd (1997) explored how school adjustment is frequently defined by measuring variables such as academic performance and progress. Murray et al. (2008), sought to extend the research in this area stating that these variables often led to the focus being on the acquisition of cognitive skills rather than relational factors. They therefore altered the definition of school adjustment to become more encompassing, by including children’s engagement and involvement in school, along with their attitude regarding school. Furthermore, they suggested that one main factor that can facilitate these transitions and school adjustment, is the quality of the relationships between the teacher and children.

School adjustment is also contingent on whether closeness or conflict are initially established. Cadima et al., (2015) explored conflict and closeness in teacher-child relationships across both a collectivist (Portugal) and individualist (Belgium) country through the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS). They found differences in teachers’ perceptions of closeness and conflict between countries and argue that it is critical to children’s future school success that the factors related to their early behavioural and academic abilities are understood as they impact children’s developmental trajectories.

Acknowledgement of the significance of the quality of teacher-child relationships and their effect on school adjustment (Mantzicopoulos, 2005; Murray et al., 2008) changed the focus of research in this area from a reliance on academic performance and progress in isolation, as assessed by Birch and Ladd (1997) to a greater emphasis on the relational aspects of teaching and learning, based on conflict and closeness. For example, it is now clear that relationships between the teacher and child that are characterised by high levels of conflict and dependency are correlated with poor school adjustment, negative attitudes, and reduced academic performance and involvement (Murray et al., 2008), whereas high-quality relationships were found to foster and provide a context for children to feel secure socially and emotionally with corresponding improvement in academic areas (Cadima et al., 2015). This security enables children to have a sense of belonging, thus increasing their exploration and risk-taking, which, in turn, is beneficial for their learning. These relationships provide support for children’s experiences at school and influences their perceptions and attitudes towards school. This can be observed when the children are more engaged and involved in their learning, which frequently leads to better academic progress. Therefore, high-quality teacher-child relationships are correlated to positive school adjustment.

Behaviour Outcomes

Our behaviour impacts the way we socialise and relate to one another. The way other people behave affects our perceptions of them. The way we interpret other people’s behaviour may lead us
to make assumptions about them. This occurs within education. Children can be labelled as challenging or well-behaved. This may occur either consciously or subconsciously by the teacher, and predicts how they will interact with the children. Challenging children become priority learners, which may result in more conflict in the teacher child relationship. Often closer relationships are formed with well-behaved children (Buyse et al., 2008). In concurrence, O’Connor et al. (2011) found that behaviour also impacts and correlates with school adjustment. For example it was discovered that problem behaviour manifested through externalising behaviour can increase children’s negative perceptions and experiences of school. This in turn means that they are less likely to achieve well academically and are more disengaged in school (O’Connor et al., 2011). Externalising behaviours, such as hyperactivity and aggression, and internalising behaviours, such as anti-social or anxious-fearful behaviour were used by both Buyse et al. (2008) and O’Connor et al. (2011) as measures of problem behaviour.

In addition, the quality of the relationship between teacher and child has an effect on, and is affected by, the behaviour of the child (Mantzicopoulou, 2005; O’Connor et al., 2011). If a child has externalising problem behaviours, for example, if they are aggressive or hyperactive, this can prove challenging for their teachers. Consequently, this increases the difficulty of forming a close, high-quality (Mantzicopoulou, 2005) and these kinds of behaviours can lead to conflicting and undesirable interactions. Thus, the importance of identifying children who are at risk for enhanced levels of problem behaviour is highlighted. O’Connor et al. (2011) took this further in their national longitudinal study of Early Child Care and Youth Development that explored 1,364 children from birth through to adolescence. They identified that early identification of these children greatly increases the likelihood of developing preventative interventions. Again, high-quality positive relationships between teacher and child were proven to be crucial to the success of such interventions. Conversely, teachers who have low-quality relationships with children tend to focus on controlling children’s behaviour, therefore limiting their ability to develop an environment that is supportive for children and hence children’s learning (O’Connor et al., 2011). There is evidence too that high-quality relationships correlate to lower levels of internalising and externalising behaviours. This is because they promote and support the development of children’s self-regulatory and social skills (O’Connor et al., 2011) thus impacting on social adjustment and behaviour in a school context.

Strengths and Limitations

A three-dimensional student measure Student Perception of Affective Relationship with Teacher Scale (SPARTS) was created and validated by Koomen and Jellesma (2015). The three factors were closeness, conflict and negative expectations of the student. The negative expectations factor was a new and unexpected factor that replaced dependency. This measure is noteworthy because there is a lack of evidence from child reports on teacher-child relationships and it is similar to the popular STRS teacher report. Also, Koomen and Jellesma (2015) assert that it is the only SPARTS that does not solely comprise of items that have been directly adapted from the STRS. Several studies demonstrated the importance of increasing awareness and understanding of the role that teacher-child relationships play as well as the importance of providing information on how to develop and support high-quality relationships (O’Connor et al., 2011).

A limitation was that there was no research accessed that was specific to the New Zealand context. As Cadima et al. (2015) discuss, some measures and results may be transferable across cultures, such as the STRS. However, as their research showed differences across cultures it is not possible to generalise with certainty about how effectively the STRS will perform. What occurs in one context may not necessarily generalise to other contexts because context specific factors will influence the findings. Sample characteristics in several of the studies contributed to the limitations; examples included small or varied group sizes, difficulties pertaining to recruitment techniques and under-representation of demographics of participants (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015).

Future research

There is a need to gain a better understanding of the factors associated with the contexts in which children experience positive social adjustment and behaviour outcomes (Mantzicopoulou, 2005). This would enable teachers to develop and maintain contexts that support positive social adjustment and behaviour outcomes. There is also a need for further research to explore the contributions of both teacher-child relationships and peer relationships to children’s school adjustment, as there is a possibility that the relationships contribute to different aspects. Cadima et al. (2015) initiated exploration into the role of culture on relationship quality. However, they suggest further research is necessary to study the cross-cultural variations and similarities of the STRS. This would be beneficial because the STRS is a widely used and popular teacher report, thus further research may determine how reliable and applicable it is in multiple contexts. O’Connor et al. (2011) suggest that the use of observational measures, in relation to problem behaviours and teacher-child relationship quality, may provide further research opportunities because the majority of the measures used were comprised of teacher and parent reports.

Conclusion

This review of literature has sought to find connections between, and summarise, the existing literature on the quality of teacher-child relationships. There has been a particular focus on their effect on school adjustment and behaviour outcomes. Relationships between the teacher and child that have high levels of closeness, and low levels of conflict and dependency, provide many benefits. High-quality relationships supported positive school adjustment and was characterised in terms of children’s engagement with the school environment, their academic performance and progress, and attitude towards school. High-quality relationships may also act as an intervening influence for children who display problem behaviours early on, because they support the development of children’s self-regulatory and social skills. Thus, they can facilitate the redirection of children’s developmental paths towards more positive outcomes which highlights the importance of identifying children who are at risk for increased levels of behaviour problems as early as possible. It is important to increase the awareness and understanding of the role of teacher-child relationships. Informing teachers on how to develop and support high-quality relationships is equally important.
References


