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Teacher-child relationships and interaction processes: Effects on students' learning behaviors and reciprocal influences between teacher and child

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Summary

Guided by an extended attachment approach and social-motivational perspectives, researchers have paid increased attention to the importance of affective teacher-student relationships for students' school engagement and achievement. Most of this research has supported the link between the affective quality of the teacher-student relationship and students' learning behaviors. Individual studies considerably varied, however, in the strength of the reported associations between teacher-student relationships and students' learning. Furthermore, most of these studies have focused on either teachers' (in lower grades) or children's (in higher grades) perceptions of the relationship. Research into actual interaction processes between teachers and children and possibilities to change teacher-child relationships has been scarce. The present thesis had two main goals (see *Chapter 1*): In the first part, we aimed to gain more insight in the actual associations between affective teacher-student relationships and students' learning behaviors by integrating the findings of previous studies in a meta-analysis. In the second part, we performed empirical studies to obtain knowledge about negotiation processes in interactions between teachers and kindergartners and to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention based on interpersonal theory.

In *Chapter 2*, we combined the findings of 99 studies (in total 129,423 students) in a meta-analysis. Students from preschool to twelfth grade were included. We distinguished between positive and negative aspects of the relationship and between children's engagement and achievement. Overall, associations of both positive and negative relationships with engagement were medium to large, whereas associations with achievement were small to medium. In contrast with previous research, negative aspects of the relationship (e.g., conflict) did not have more effect on students' engagement and achievement than positive aspects of the relationship (e.g., closeness, emotional support). When we distinguished between primary and secondary school studies, associations with negative relationships were stronger in primary school, whereas associations with positive relationships were stronger in secondary school. In addition, relationships with teachers seemed to be especially important for certain groups of students: Unexpectedly, teacher-student relationships appeared to be more important for older compared to younger students. Furthermore, relationships appeared to be relatively important for students with a low socioeconomic status, for students with learning problems (for negative relationships only), and for boys (for engagement only). These findings support the academic risk hypothesis, which states that teacher-student relationships are especially relevant for the school adjustment of students at risk for academic maladjustment. Finally, some associations were smaller, but still statistically significant, after correction for methodological biases in the individual studies.

Chapters 3 to 5 are part of a larger research project which aimed to investigate the usefulness of interpersonal theory and the complementarity principle for studying negotiation processes in teacher-child interactions and as a basis for teacher training. According to interpersonal theory, interpersonal styles and interactive behaviors can be captured by two dimensions: control (the degree of power and influence in the interaction) and affiliation (the degree of proximity, warmth, and support during interactions). The complementarity principle, which is a central notion in interpersonal

theory, states that a person's interpersonal behaviors tend to evoke a particular set of responses from the interaction partner. Interactive behaviors are considered as complementary if they are opposite on the control dimension and similar on affiliation. As we found that affective teacher-student relationships and students' learning behaviors were associated at a meta-analytic level, it seemed important to intervene in negative teacher-student relationships and to promote positive relationships at an early stage. *Chapter 3* investigated the usefulness of interpersonal theory and the complementarity principle as a basis for a teacher training (the Interpersonal Skills Training; IST) targeted at changing teacher-child interactions. The sample consisted of 65 kindergartners who scored highest on social inhibition in their classroom and their 35 regular teachers. Teachers' and children's interactive behaviors were observed on three occasions (pretest, posttest, and follow-up) in a dyadic setting outside the classroom. The training elicited a decrease in teacher control at follow-up, seven weeks after the intervention. This postponed effect indicated that the IST could have a meaningful impact on teachers' behaviors on the long run. The IST did not produce a change in the overall level of teacher affiliation, and, unexpectedly, elicited an increase in teachers' interpersonal complementarity on the affiliation dimension, especially in interactions with highly inhibited children. The significance of this increased complementarity for the quality of teacher-child relationships is still unclear. We did not find intervention effects on children's interactive behaviors. Yet, the decrease in teacher control indicates that interpersonal theory may offer important starting points to break negative interaction cycles and to promote positive interactions between teachers and socially inhibited children in a dyadic setting.

Chapters 4 and 5 focused on teacher-child interactions in a small group setting within the classroom. Because the observation scales for teachers' and children's interactive behaviors (control and affiliation) were originally developed and validated for use in a dyadic setting outside the classroom, we first examined the validity of the adapted teacher scales in *Chapter 4*. Associations in the expected direction with teachers' relationship perceptions and children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors provided support for the validity of the teacher scales for use in a group setting. Implicit support for the validity of the child scales was found in *Chapter 5*. The main aim of *Chapter 5* was to examine the applicability of the complementarity principle to teacher-child interactions in a small group setting within the classroom. The sample consisted of 179 kindergartners with a variety of externalizing and internalizing behaviors and their 48 teachers. We found that both teachers and children reacted complementarily on the control dimension (they reciprocated dominance with submissiveness and vice versa), whereas they did not respond complementarily on affiliation (they did not return friendliness with friendly behaviors or hostility with hostile behaviors). Furthermore, we found that teachers displayed less affiliation toward children with high levels of externalizing behaviors, whereas these children did not show less affiliation themselves. In addition, relatively externalizing children did not differ from typical children (with low levels of both externalizing and internalizing behavior) with regard to the degree of control they displayed toward their teacher. However, both teachers and relatively externalizing children reacted less complementarily on the control dimension than typical children and their teachers. As complementarity has been associated with

positive evaluations of the interaction partner, these lower levels of complementarity may explain why both teachers and externalizing children usually perceive their relationships as more conflictual and less close than typical children and their teachers. Finally, teachers showed more control and more affiliation toward children with higher levels of internalizing behavior, whereas relatively internalizing children (without comorbid externalizing problems) were more passive and submissive during interactions with teachers than typical children.

In *Chapter 6*, the main findings of the previous chapters were highlighted. We discussed how teachers' and children's interpersonal reactions differed across settings (i.e., a dyadic setting outside the classroom versus a small group setting within the classroom). In addition, we mentioned remaining issues for future research and implications for school practice. Future research could investigate how teachers' and children's complementarity tendencies relate to teacher-child relationship quality. *Chapter 2* provided evidence on a meta-analytical level for the importance of affective teacher-student relationships for students' learning behaviors. Furthermore, this meta-analysis identified groups of students for whom teacher-student relationships seemed to be especially relevant (e.g., students with a low socioeconomic status, students with learning problems, and boys). Teachers should invest in their relationships with these students as much as possible to protect them from maladjustment. Furthermore, *Chapters 3 and 5* provided first indications that the interpersonal theory and the complementarity principle could be useful for providing teachers with insight in interaction processes and helping them to break negative interaction cycles with children and to promote positive interactions. More research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the IST in changing teacher-child interactions within the classroom in samples of children with varying levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior.