Teacher-child relationship and learning behavior of young children
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CHAPTER 5

Epilogue
Chapter 5: Epilogue

The studies reported in this thesis focused on the influence of the affective teacher-child relationship on the learning behavior of young children. It was argued that young children need a substitute caregiver when their primary caregivers are not present. The teacher is the most obvious person to turn to in a classroom setting. The extent to which children have a positive relationship with their teacher was believed to be important for children’s involvement with and their performance on learning tasks.

First, a meta-analytic study was performed to learn what previous research had revealed with regard to the influence of the teacher-child relationship on children’s learning behavior. From the meta-analyses performed, it appeared that the quality of the teacher-child relationship is important for children’s learning behavior. Children with warm, secure relationships with their teachers were more involved, and performed better on cognitive tasks. Children who had negative, conflictive relationships with their teachers were less involved and performed less well on cognitive tasks. The meta-analyses showed that the quality of the teacher-child relationship was especially important for the achievement of vulnerable children. It was argued that this was probably due to the fact that these children are, more than other children, dependent on the academic attention they receive from the teacher. The amount to which they receive the attention they need, may depend on the quality of the teacher-child relationship.

In the meta-analytic study, it was investigated whether the quality of the teacher-child relationship was of influence on children’s involvement and achievement. A note was made that the reversed position, i.e. that the relationship would be influenced by children’s learning behavior, was also defensible, and that most likely the relation between these variables would be reciprocal or transactional. In the studies following the meta-analyses, an experimental setting was used to examine the relations between these variables more precisely. Children were observed working on a task with either their own regular teacher or with an unfamiliar teacher. It was expected that the results of these experiments could shed some light on the direction of the relation between the teacher-child relationship and learning behavior. If the teacher-child relationship influenced learning behavior, children working with their own regular teacher were to be expected to profit from this existing relationship. Consequently, they would be more involved and perform better compared to children working with an unfamiliar teacher. If however the direction was reversed and the child’s behavior influenced the relationship, no difference in learning behavior was to be expected between children working with their regular teacher and children working with an unfamiliar teacher.

Another issue that was raised in the meta-analytic study concerned the relations between the teacher-child relationship, task involvement and achievement. Former studies and the results of the meta-analyses implied that the influence of the quality of the teacher-child relationship on achievement was not direct, but presumably mediated by children’s involvement. Involvement could then be regarded as an indicator of motivation. In the meta-
analytic study it could not explicitly be tested whether involvement actually preceded achievement. In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, a theoretical model, in which involvement was included as an antecedent of achievement, was tested in an experimental design to be able to draw conclusions on this subject.

Additionally, in the experimental studies, the concept of emotional security was included. According to attachment theory, a precondition for task involvement and performance is that children feel emotionally secure. The teacher as a substitute caregiver is the most obvious person for a young child to derive security from in the classroom. Therefore it is likely that the influence of the teacher-child relationship on learning behavior is mediated by emotional security. In the theoretical model that was examined in the next studies, the concept of emotional security was added as an antecedent of involvement.

In the experiment described in Chapter 3, children were trained on a categorization and recall task by either their own regular teacher or a less familiar teacher working at the same school. It was expected that children working with the regular teacher would feel relatively secure in the experimental task setting because they could rely on an existing relationship. Consequently, these children were expected to be more involved and achieve better results. Children working with a less familiar teacher were expected to feel less secure and, consequently, be less involved and perform less well. The study showed that emotional security was important for involvement, and that involvement was of influence on learning. However, no effects of teacher familiarity could be revealed. It was suggested that the less familiar teacher still was too familiar. Apparently, even little familiarity was enough for most children to enable them to derive security from this teacher. For this reason, a teacher who was totally unfamiliar to all children was introduced in the next experiments.

Hardly any learning effects could be revealed in the study described in Chapter 3. This was mainly attributed to the type of task that was used in this study. The categorization and recall task appeared to be very difficult for kindergarten children. The training didn’t influence the performance on the task. It was suggested that in future research a less difficult task should be used to examine the theoretical model. In addition, it was recommended to search for a more interactive task to study teacher-child interaction in more detail.

An interesting finding of the study in Chapter 3 was that children who behaved rather inhibited in normal every day classroom situations, felt relatively insecure in the experimental situation. Inhibited children, as compared to children without the tendency to react with internalizing behavior, may feel insecure easily, and consequently their involvement and performance may suffer more frequently from emotional insecurity. For this reason, it was decided to focus explicitly on children with internalizing behavior in the next studies. Internalizing children were believed to feel relatively insecure in general, and the impact of a stressful situation such as the confrontation with a strange teacher was expected to be greatest in this group of children.

In Chapter 4, two studies are described, in which internalizing and non-internalizing children worked with either their own regular teacher or an unfamiliar teacher on
a picture-book reading task. These studies were based on the same theoretical model as the former study. Essentially the same design was tested in two different settings. In study I, children worked with two other children and either their own or a strange teacher in a small group, in study II, one child interacted with either their own or a strange teacher in a dyad. In both studies, half of the children showed internalizing behavior and half of the children showed no internalizing behavior. In study I, teacher familiarity appeared to have an effect on children’s emotional security. Children working with their own teacher, felt relatively secure compared to children working with an unfamiliar teacher. In addition, internalizing children were found to feel more insecure than non-internalizing children. Emotional security again appeared to be a relevant concept for children’s involvement and achievement. The effect of emotional security on involvement appeared to be of similar strength for both internalizing and non-internalizing children.

In study II of Chapter 4, the dyadic setting was introduced because in the study described in Chapter 3 as well as in study I of Chapter 4, no effect of supportive presence was found. Hardly any variation between teachers in supportive presence could be revealed. It was unclear whether the measuring-instrument was not appropriate for observing teacher-child interaction, or whether there really was little difference between teachers in this respect. The possibility was suggested that the lack of variation in supportive presence could be explained by the fact that teachers worked with several children at the same time. In a group, teachers might not be able to adjust their emotional support to the needs of each individual child and support the whole group on an averaged level instead.

Study II showed that there indeed was considerable variation between teachers in supportive presence in the dyadic setting. For internalizing children, the supportive presence of the teacher was of influence on their emotional security in the dyad. In addition, it appeared that in contrast to study I, teacher familiarity was not of influence on children’s emotional security. It was argued that the dyadic situation possibly enabled teachers to compensate their unfamiliarity by being extra emotionally supportive. In the small group situation, however, teachers could not adjust their support to the needs of an individual child. Consequently, unfamiliar teachers in the small group settings were not able to compensate their unfamiliarity and children felt relatively insecure with unfamiliar teachers.

Earlier in this epilogue the direction of the relation between the teacher-child relationship on the one hand and involvement and achievement on the other was discussed. It was stated that if the relationship influenced learning behavior, children would do less well with the strange teacher. If the direction was the other way around, children would do just as well with both teachers. In the study described in Chapter 3, no effect of teacher familiarity was revealed. In Study I of Chapter 4 the familiarity of the teacher had no influence on involvement and achievement. The familiarity of the teacher, however, did influence children’s emotional security, which in turn was related to involvement and achievement. Apparently, the influence of teacher familiarity on involvement and achievement is indirect, mediated by
emotional security. These findings suggest that the teacher-child relationship indeed influences learning behavior, although indirectly, through emotional security. However, these findings don't rule out the possibility that the relation between these variables is reciprocal. It is still possible, and most likely, that children's learning behavior also influences the teacher-child relationship.

In addition, the issue was raised whether involvement was in fact a mediator between emotional security and achievement. In the study described in Chapter 3, involvement appeared to mediate the influence of emotional security on achievement. In study 1 in Chapter 4, rather strong relations between emotional security and involvement were detected. For internalizing children, a relation between involvement and achievement was revealed as well. However, in this subgroup of internalizing children, emotional security also appeared to have a direct relationship with achievement. The picture-book reading task used in this study was more appealing to the children than the categorization and recall task in Chapter 3. Therefore in study 1 of Chapter 4, children who felt secure, almost automatically were also involved with the task. Because of this, emotional security and involvement had strong relations with do show that these variables are all connected to each other and are important concepts for each other as well as with achievement. The results from these studies are not conclusive about involvement as a mediator between emotional security and achievement. However, they studying and understanding young children's learning behavior. Figure 5.1 summarizes the results of this thesis concerning the relations between emotional security, involvement and achievement.

**Figure 5.1 Representation of (Partly) Confirmed Relationships**

*Teacher*  

*Child*  

![Diagram of relationships between teacher, child, emotional security, involvement, and achievement.](image-url)
The three experimental studies described in Chapter 3 and 4 all underlined the importance of emotional security for learning behavior. Emotional security appears to be a necessary precondition for children to be able to be involved with and perform well on school tasks. Following Cummings and Davies, emotional security was regarded as an internal state of children that is influenced by several factors, internal and external to the child. In accordance with this, both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 revealed a relation between children’s internalizing behavior and emotional security. Furthermore, it appeared from study I and II of Chapter 4 that emotional security was influenced by teacher familiarity and teacher support, respectively. Emotional security, in turn, influenced children’s task involvement and performance. Taking these findings into consideration, emotional security deserves attention in nowadays education. It is important that children can work and learn in a safe climate in which there is no space for excluding and bullying, and in which the teachers are understanding and warm towards the children.

In the present thesis special attention was given to vulnerable children. In all studies, the focus was on young children who are regularly dependent on adults for their well-being. In addition, several vulnerable groups were examined. In the meta-analyses, children from different social economic backgrounds were considered, as well as children who were academically at risk. In the experimental studies, special attention was given to inhibited, internalizing children. The meta-analyses revealed that the quality of the teacher-child relationship was equally important for all children’s involvement, regardless of vulnerability. In agreement with this, study I of Chapter 4 showed that the relation between emotional security and involvement was just as important for internalizing as for non-internalizing children. The meta-analyses showed that the quality of the teacher-child relationship was of greater influence on the achievement of vulnerable children as compared to non-vulnerable children. Similarly, study I of Chapter 4 showed that emotional security was of influence on the achievement of internalizing children, but not of non-internalizing children. These different influences of teacher-child interaction and emotional security on involvement and achievement for vulnerable and non-vulnerable children could be explained by differences between the concepts involvement and achievement. Involvement is a state that all children, with or without certain vulnerabilities, can achieve. It is reasonable to suggest that to be involved with and to be able to concentrate on school tasks, all children, regardless of their academic abilities, need the same base level of security. A positive teacher-child relationship may provide this needed level of security. With this base security, children, in general, are likely to be involved enough to concentrate on their school tasks. The actual performances of these children, however, may vary considerably as a consequence of differences in their academic abilities. Vulnerable children in particular, are dependent on the teacher to perform well. They need extra attention, and the amount to which they receive the attention needed may very well depend on their relationship with the teacher, or the degree to which the teacher is supportive to the child. For this reason, emotional security and the quality of the teacher-child relationship are important for the involvement of all children in the same
amount, whereas with respect to achievement vulnerable children are more dependent on the interaction with the teacher than non-vulnerable children.

Concerning the learning results of internalizing children, some other interesting and rather alarming results were found. Before going into these findings, it needs to be emphasized that the group of internalizing children in these studies was non-clinical. The children were selected from regular primary schools and submitted to the internalizing condition based on a short questionnaire on their behavior at school, filled out by their regular teacher. It was no problem to select two internalizing children from each participating class. It is therefore safe to say that probably in each classroom in regular primary schools, one or two of these children will be present. In this non-clinical sample there was a clear difference in emotional insecurity between children with and without internalizing problems. In addition, in Chapter 3 it was revealed that inhibited children felt less secure during the training and performed less well than children who were not inhibited. In Chapter 3 the question was raised whether the relatively poor performance of inhibited children was caused by a lack of knowledge, that was the result of heightened insecurity during the training, or that they were simply too shy to answer the questions. In Chapter 4 we tried to control for this by counting the number of words spoken by the child during recall. It was argued that if a child was too shy to answer questions, it would probably speak less overall. It appeared that internalizing children did not speak significantly less than non-internalizing children during story recall. In addition, internalizing and non-internalizing children scored similar on a passive vocabulary test, which proved that these groups of children had comparable academic abilities. This suggests that internalizing children learn less in a training situation such as in Chapter 3 than non-internalizing children, independent of their academic abilities. If internalizing behavior also withholds children from learning from everyday school instruction, this may mean that they are at risk for falling behind. Future research should investigate this subject in more detail and develop recommendations for teachers to help internalizing children at school.

In this thesis the influence of two teacher factors on emotional security was examined in experimental studies: teacher familiarity and the supportive presence of the teacher. It appeared that a totally unfamiliar teacher made children feel less secure in small group situations. However, children did not feel more insecure with a teacher that was superficially familiar to them. In addition, in a dyadic situation, teachers seemed to be able to compensate for their unfamiliarity with their supportive presence. For the school practice this means that teachers should be attentive to children’s feelings of security. Especially with an unfamiliar class, for example when a teacher replaces a colleague, it is important to give individual attention and support to children. This should help children to feel more secure and to get used to the new teacher. As appeared from Chapter 3, children get used to strange teachers relatively easy. Future research should examine into more detail how much time passes before children feel secure with an unfamiliar teacher, and which factors facilitate this process.

Study II from Chapter 4 revealed that it is only possible to find variations in supportive presence towards the individual child, if this teacher behavior is measured in a
dyadic setting. This finding exposes a dilemma in educational research. Apparently, measuring the quality of teacher behavior with regard to individual children in ecological valid situations, i.e. group situations, hardly yields any differences between teachers. On the other hand, measuring the same behavior in a dyadic setting not only reveals differences between teachers, but also the expected relations with emotional security. However, a dyadic setting hardly occurs in regular education and examining the teacher-child relationship in dyads therefore lacks ecological validation. An answer to this research dilemma is hard to give. It may be best to acquire information in group settings, as well as dyadic settings.

In consequence of these findings, one could question the appropriateness of group education for some children. Apparently, in a group situation, the teacher is less capable of adjusting her support to each individual child and to make the child feel secure, than in a dyadic setting. It could be argued that for certain children individual education is the best way to promote security, and consequently, involvement and performance. However, in many schools individualized education on a regular basis is not an option. Still, teachers should try to give as much individual attention and support as possible to vulnerable children. In addition, schools should be cautious with teacher changes. If inevitable, vulnerable children should be enabled to interact with substitute teachers on an individual level to become familiar with this teacher and to derive security from him or her.