Teacher-child relationship and learning behavior of young children
van Leeuwen, M.G.P.

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SUMMARY
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Teachers are trained to treat all children equally and to divide their attention fairly, but it is almost impossible to entirely rule out acting on personal preferences. This obviously will lead teachers to have better relationships with some children than with others. The affection that teachers feel for their students might influence the well-being and learning behavior of children at school. In this thesis, the influence of the affective teacher-child relationship on the learning behavior of children was regarded. A positive teacher-child relationship was believed to be important for children's well-being, involvement with learning tasks and task performance, especially for vulnerable groups of children.

In Chapter 2, the findings of previous research concerning the relation between the affective teacher-child relationship and learning behavior were integrated in four meta-analyses. The impact of both positive and negative affective teacher-child relationships on involvement with school tasks, as well as achievement on school tasks was regarded. The meta-analyses were limited to studies with children younger than 12 years. For the analysis regarding positive quality of the relationship and involvement, 13 studies were identified that together held 1873 subjects. The analysis of negative quality and involvement included 5 studies, together involving 1066 subjects. The analysis of positive quality of the teacher-child relationship and achievement bears upon 23 samples within 18 studies, together holding 2056 subjects. For the association between negative quality and achievement 7 samples within 6 studies were identified containing 656 subjects.

Associations were found between the quality of the relationship and both task involvement and achievement. The relation with involvement, however, was stronger than with achievement. It was suggested that involvement could be an antecedent of achievement.

The quality of the teacher-child relationship appeared to be especially important for young children, children with special educational needs and children from low social economical backgrounds. A positive affective relationship with their teacher could help these children to do well in school in spite of their difficulties.

Chapter 3 of this thesis, reported on an experimental study. In this study 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. It was examined whether children who worked with their own teacher felt more secure, were more involved with and performed better on the presented cognitive task as compared to children who worked with a less familiar teacher. The idea was that children could profit from an affective relationship with their own teacher, but not from a relation with the less familiar teacher.

Participants were forty-eight kindergarten children from regular primary schools, who had entered school several months before the experiment. Sixteen children were trained by their own regular teacher; sixteen children by a less familiar teacher that worked in the same school. The other sixteen children received no training and formed the control group. The
children from the experimental groups were trained in pairs on a new categorization and recall task. All children were tested several times during the experiment for their usage of a categorization-and-recall strategy. Children’s emotional insecurity and involvement, and teachers’ supportive presence were observed during the training. Moreover, spontaneous recall in training and test sessions and categorization during the tests were assessed. In addition, teachers rated inhibited behavior of the children in normal classroom situations. The data were analyzed with the longitudinal multilevel model. There was no effect of teacher familiarity or supportive presence of the teacher. Children who behaved relatively inhibited in class, showed more emotional insecurity during the experimental task. Moreover, they were also found to score lower on spontaneous recall in the test sessions. These findings suggest that inhibition hampers children to show their potential. Consequently, these children may have a disadvantage at school, independent from their cognitive abilities. In addition, it appeared that emotional insecurity during the training negatively affected children’s task involvement. Involvement, on its turn, influenced children’s spontaneous recall during the training. These results suggest that involvement is important for learning and that experiences of emotional insecurity can negatively affect involvement and eventually school performance.

The categorization and recall task used in Chapter 3 was not effective as a training task and therefore not the most suitable task for investigating the effect of familiarity and supportive presence of the teacher on the learning results of kindergarten children. Therefore, in the next study a less difficult task with ample opportunity for teacher-child interaction was used. In addition, the discrepancy in familiarity between teachers was increased.

Chapter 4 reported on two experimental studies. In both studies, internalizing and non-internalizing children from regular primary schools worked on an interactive picture-book reading task either with their own regular teacher or with a totally unfamiliar teacher. Both studies examined the learning behavior of internalizing children as opposed to non-internalizing children. In correspondence with Chapter 3, it was examined whether children who worked with their own teacher felt more secure, were more involved and performed better on the presented cognitive task, compared to children who worked with an unfamiliar teacher. In addition, the influence of the supportive presence of the teacher was measured. In study I, seventy-five children worked on the picture-book task in a small group with a teacher. Half of the children in this study had internalizing problems, the other half had no internalizing problems. The results revealed that internalizing children showed more insecurity than non-internalizing children. Children who worked with an unfamiliar teacher were more insecure than children who worked with their regular teacher. The supportive presence of the teacher was not of influence on children’s emotional insecurity. All teachers appeared to be rather supportive with little variation between teachers. There was a strong negative association between insecurity and task involvement. In addition, for internalizing children insecurity was significantly related to achievement. These findings emphasize the importance of the emotional security construct, especially for internalizing children. For these children, emotional security may be a necessary precondition for academic performance.
In both preceding studies little variation in teachers’ supportive presence was found. It was considered possible that in a group situation teachers are incapable of adjusting their support to the needs of each individual child and look after the whole group on an averaged level of supportiveness instead. Therefore in study II of Chapter 4 children were observed in a dyadic setting with either their own or an unfamiliar teacher. Apart from that the study fully corresponded with study I. Half of the twenty-four participating children had internalizing problems, the other half had no internalizing problems. In agreement with study I, internalizing children showed more insecurity than non-internalizing children. In study II, no effect of teacher familiarity could be revealed. The results did show an effect of supportive presence of the teacher on children’s emotional insecurity instead. With a more supportive teacher, children were less insecure. Presumably, working on a task with one child in a dyad better enables teachers to adjust their supportive presence to the needs of the individual child than working in a group setting. Possibly, teachers were even able to compensate their unfamiliarity with their supportive presence. Consistent with study I, a strong negative association between insecurity and task involvement was revealed. These findings indicate the importance of providing children, and especially internalizing children, with a learning environment in which they feel emotionally secure.

The results of the experimental studies described in Chapters 3 and 4 suggest that the influence of teacher familiarity on involvement and achievement is indirect, mediated by emotional security. This could mean that the teacher-child relationship indeed influences learning behavior, although indirectly, through emotional security. However, it is still possible, and most likely, that the association is reciprocal and that children’s learning behavior also influences the teacher-child relationship. The three experimental studies described in Chapters 3 en 4 all underlined the importance of the concepts emotional security, involvement and achievement in relation to each other. Emotional security seems to be a necessary precondition for children to be able to be involved with and perform well on school. It is important that children can work and learn in a safe climate with teachers being understanding and warm towards them.

In the studies described in this 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 other at risk groups were examined in comparison with non-risk groups. Based on the results it is reasonable to suggest that in order to become involved with school tasks, all children, regardless of their academic abilities, need a base level of security. In addition, the actual performances may vary considerably as a consequence of differences in their academic abilities. Vulnerable children need extra attention to perform well, and the amount to which they receive the attention needed may very well depend on their relationship with the teacher. A matter of concern, raised by the results of these studies, is that internalizing children appear to feel more insecure and to learn less in an instruction situation than non-internalizing children, independent of their academic abilities. Possibly, it is much harder for these children to achieve a base level of security. To
prevent them from falling behind teachers need to pay special attention to this group of children.

Variations in the supportive presence of teachers could only be revealed in a dyadic setting. However, a dyadic setting hardly occurs in regular education and examining the teacher-child relationship in dyads therefore lacks ecological validation. In consequence of these findings, it could be argued that for certain children individual education is the best way to promote security, and consequently, involvement and performance. Teachers should try to give as much individual attention and support as possible to vulnerable children and teacher changes should be kept to a minimum.