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### Spot the difference

*A cross-cultural comparison of affective teacher-student relationship quality and associations with shyness between the Netherlands and China*

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# Chapter

1

## General Introduction





# General Introduction

Recall a scene where you were with one of your teachers. How does it look? It may not be surprising that everyone pictures the scene more or less differently. Furthermore, these scenes about experiences with a teacher may especially look different when pictured by people from different countries. This is partly because cultural values can shape people's ideas and thoughts about how the relationship between teachers and students should be.

Dyadic, affective teacher-student relationships (i.e., the emotional bond between teachers and individual children) have long been found to be important for students' academic and behavioral adjustment (Li et al., 2016; 2018; Roorda et al., 2011; 2017). Albeit the importance of teacher-student relationship quality for students' school adjustment, research about teacher-student relationships has been mainly conducted in Western, individualistic countries, whereas less is known about the relationships between teachers and students in Eastern, collectivistic countries (Bear et al., 2014; Jia et al., 2009). The way how teachers and students form their mutual relationships, however, can be affected by cultural values and differ across countries (Pianta et al., 2003). Hence, research findings from Western, individualistic countries may not necessarily generalize to teachers and students in Eastern, collectivistic countries.

Furthermore, students' individual characteristics also appear to play an important role in shaping the quality of teacher-student relationships (see Nurmi, 2012 for a meta-analysis). This link may be affected by cultural values and differ across countries as well (Pianta et al., 2003). One student characteristic that may especially impact teacher-student relationship quality in different ways across countries, is students' shyness. More specifically, shyness is often regarded as maladaptive and socially incompetent in Western, individualistic countries, whereas in Eastern, collectivistic countries, shyness is traditionally valued and deemed as being humble, well-behaved, and socially adaptive (Chen, 2019; Chen et al., 1992, 1997). Therefore, shyness may have more positive influences on teacher-student relationships in Eastern, collectivistic countries than in Western, individualistic countries.

Not much research has explored whether the quality of teacher-student relationships, as well as the impact of shyness on teacher-student relationships, differ across countries. This dissertation, therefore, employed a cross-cultural perspective to look at the affective quality of dyadic teacher-student relationships across the Netherlands (a

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Western, individualistic country) and China (an Eastern, collectivistic country). The first aim was to explore whether the quality of teacher-student relationships differed across the Netherlands and China. As teachers and students tend to have different opinions and views about their mutual relationships (Hughes, 2011; Jellesma et al., 2015; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Zee & Koomen, 2017), we investigated both teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions about the quality of their mutual relationship. Furthermore, students may reflect their feelings and thoughts about the relationship both at a conscious level (i.e., conscious relationship perceptions) and at an unconscious level (i.e., unconscious relationship perceptions; Harrison et al., 2007). Conscious relationship perceptions are often measured with relationship questionnaires (e.g., Koomen & Jellesma 2015), whereas students' unconscious relationship perceptions can be measured by the Student-Teacher Relationship Drawings (Harrison et al., 2007; McGrath et al., 2017; Zee et al., 2020). Students' conscious and unconscious relationship perceptions may each provide unique information about their relationship experience with teachers (Harrison et al., 2007). Hence, for students' relationship perceptions, we measured their views of the relationship both at a conscious level (with questionnaires) and at an unconscious level (with drawings).

As a second aim, this dissertation explored whether the link between students' shyness and teacher-student relationships differed across the Netherlands and China. Similar to the first aim, we investigated how shyness was linked to teachers' perceptions, students' conscious perceptions, and students' unconscious perceptions of teacher-student relationships across countries. Finally, as teacher-student relationship quality, as well as the impact of shyness on children's social relationships appeared to change as children grow older (Jerome et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2021), we explored both the first and second research aims in both upper elementary school (third-to-sixth grade) and in the early school years (kindergarten and first grade).

## Theoretical Framework

Research about teacher-student relationships is often guided by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Pianta, 1999) and the developmental systems model (Pianta et al., 2003). According to attachment theory, favorable teacher-student relationships can provide students with a secure base to freely explore the school environment and a safe haven where students can seek comfort in stressful times (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2003; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Students sharing positive relationships with teachers are prone to feel confident exploring the learning environment and become competent in later life. In contrast, negative teacher-student relationships are believed to hamper students'

opportunities to use the teacher as a safe haven and secure base, which prevents them from comfortably exploring the learning environment and harms their well-being (Pianta et al., 2003; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Research based on attachment theory often distinguishes between two dimensions of teacher-student relationships: closeness and conflict. Closeness describes the degree of warmth, openness, and trust between teachers and students. It is a positive dimension that shows teachers' availability for students as a secure base and safe haven in times of need (Spilt et al., 2022; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Conflict is a negative dimension referring to the level of discordance, quarrels, and fights in the relationship. Experience of conflict evokes insecurity in students and prevents them from using the teacher as a secure base and safe haven.

A second theory that is especially relevant for the present dissertation, is the developmental systems model (Pianta et al., 2003). This model provides more insight into the different factors that play a role in the formation of teacher-student relationships. According to the developmental systems model, an important factor that may shape the quality of teacher-student relationships is cultural values. Cultural values refer to collective beliefs and ideas about how individuals should behave and interact with others in a society (Oyserman, 2017). These values may influence the way teachers and students act toward each other, how they interpret and feel about these interactive behaviors and, hence, affect the quality of their mutual relationship (Pianta et al., 2003). For instance, in Western, individualistic countries, interpersonal independence is valued and people are expected to be independent of others and act mainly for their personal goals (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hence, teachers and students may form relationships that contain adequate distance and detachment, to preserve individual independence. In contrast, in Eastern, collectivistic countries, interpersonal interdependency and social connectedness are highly advocated. In these countries, teachers and students tend to have intimate interactions with each other, in order to enhance interpersonal connections. As such, teacher-student relationships in Eastern, collectivistic countries may contain higher levels of closeness and dependency than those in Western, individualistic countries. Furthermore, to deal with interpersonal conflict, direct and assertive strategies are preferred in Western, individualistic countries, whereas disengagement and avoidance are often favored in Eastern, collectivistic countries (Chen & French, 2008). Hence, conflict between teachers and students may be more visible and extensive in Western, individualistic countries than in Eastern, collectivistic countries.

Another factor that influences teacher-student relationship quality, according to the developmental systems model, is students' individual characteristics, such as temperament and behaviors (Pianta et al., 2003). Furthermore, this link may be shaped by cultural

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values and vary across countries as well (Pianta et al., 2003). A student characteristic that may especially have different connotations across countries, is shyness (Chen, 2010, 2019). Shyness refers to children's reticence and wariness on social occasions due to fear of social evaluations (Rubin et al., 2009). Shy children are situated in the so-called approach-avoidance conflict, where they desire social interactions but at the same time tend to refrain from interactions with teachers and others because they are afraid to engage in such interactions. How teachers (and others) interpret and value these shy behaviors, may depend on the specific cultural context in which these behaviors take place (Chen, 2010, 2019). In Western, individualistic countries, shyness is often interpreted as socially immature, incompetent, and hard to relate to (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008; Rubin et al., 2009). As such, teachers in these countries may have more difficulties establishing warm and close relationships with shy children than with typically developing children. In contrast, in Eastern collectivistic countries, shyness was traditionally appreciated and interpreted as humble, well-mannered, and socially mature (Chen, 2010, 2019). Hence, teachers in Eastern countries may favor shy children and find it even easier to form warm and close relationships with them than with other children. As such, shyness may have more positive influences on teacher-student relationships in Eastern, collectivistic countries than in Western, individualistic countries.

A final component as mentioned in the developmental systems model that is relevant for the present dissertation, is the concept of mental representations (Pianta et al., 2003). Mental representations refer to so-called internal working models (Bowlby, 1984) that include teachers' and students' thoughts and feelings about themselves, the relationship partner (i.e., teacher or student), and the mutual relationship (Pianta et al., 2003). Teachers and students are considered to form mental representations of their mutual relationship based on repeated daily interactions with each other. Once established, these mental representations will guide future interactions between teachers and students (Pianta et al., 2003). Furthermore, teachers' and students' mental representations are affected by their previous relationship histories with important others, such as parents, friends, and previous teachers or students (Pianta et al., 2003). As teachers and students have unique relationship histories, they are likely to have different views and perceptions about their mutual relationships as well. Supporting this idea, previous research often found that the agreement in teachers' and students' perceptions about their mutual relationships was only weak to moderate ( $r_s < .59$ ; Hughes, 2011; Jellesma et al., 2015; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Rey et al., 2007; Zee & Koomen, 2017).

Furthermore, mental representations of teacher-student relationships can be measured at different levels: the conscious level and the unconscious level (Fury et al.,

1997; Harrison et al., 2007). Mental representations at the conscious level refer to the feelings and thoughts about the relationship that students and teachers are directly aware of. Students' conscious mental representations are often measured with questionnaires, in which students are asked to indicate how well a statement applies to their relationship with their teacher (e.g., "I feel at ease with my teacher"; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015). In contrast, mental representations at the unconscious level refer to the feelings and thoughts about the relationship that students and teachers are not directly aware of. One way to capture students' unconscious mental representations is by employing the Student-Teacher Relationship Drawings (Harrison et al., 2007; McGrath et al., 2017; Zee et al., 2020). With this method, students are asked to draw a picture of themselves and their teachers, which are then coded by independent, trained raters. As questionnaires and drawings evoke students' mental representations at different levels of consciousness, they may provide unique information about students' relationship experiences with teachers. In support of this idea, students' conscious perceptions and unconscious perceptions of teacher-student relationship quality were found to be only moderately correlated ( $r = -.44$ ), with each having a unique contribution to students' school adjustment as rated by teachers (Harrison et al., 2007).

### **Cross-Cultural Differences in Teacher-Student Relationship Quality**

In line with the theoretical assumption that the quality of teacher-student relationships may differ across countries (Pianta et al., 2003), some preliminary evidence has shown that cross-cultural differences existed in teacher-student relationship quality. With regard to closeness, findings based on students' perceptions of the relationship tended to be in line with theoretical expectations. More specifically, elementary and middle school students in China were found to experience higher closeness with teachers than students in the United States (Jia et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2013). Studies focusing on teachers' relationship perceptions, however, revealed mixed findings. Consistent with the theory, Beyazkurk and Kesner (2005) found that teachers in Turkey experienced *higher* closeness with young children ( $M_{age} = 6$  years old) than teachers in the United States. Unexpectedly, however, Acar et al. (2019) showed that Turkish teachers perceived *lower* closeness with 3-to-6-year-old children than American teachers. Surprisingly, in a study that included both teachers' and third-to-sixth-graders' perceptions, students in China and America did not differ in the degree of closeness they experienced with teachers, whereas teachers in China perceived less closeness with students than American teachers (Bear et al., 2014). Thus, cross-cultural differences in teacher-student relationships may depend on whether teachers' or students' relationship perceptions are concerned.

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As far as we know, only two cross-cultural studies looked at teacher-student conflict and revealed inconsistent results. In line with the theory, Acar et al. (2019) found Turkish teachers to report less conflict with young children than American teachers. In contrast, Beyazkurk and Kesner (2005) showed that teachers in Turkey and America experienced equal levels of conflict with young children.

As such, cross-cultural studies about teacher-student relationships appeared to be scarce and findings tended to be inconsistent. These mixed results might be due to different informants of the relationship quality (Bear et al., 2014) or because the studies focused on teachers and students at different grade levels (e.g., upper elementary grades in Bear et al., 2014 versus the early school years in Beyazkurk & Kesner, 2005). The present dissertation, therefore, aimed to investigate cross-cultural differences in both teachers' and students' perceptions of the relationship quality. Furthermore, we looked at the relationship between teachers and students both in upper elementary school (third-to-sixth grade) and in the early school years (kindergarten and first grade).

### **Relationship Drawings as a Way to Measure Unconscious Relationship Perceptions**

The abovementioned studies all employed relationship questionnaires to assess teachers' and students' conscious perceptions of teacher-student relationships. In making cross-cultural comparisons, relationship questionnaires need to be translated into different languages and the questions may be formulated and interpreted (slightly) differently across countries. Unlike questionnaires, the Student-Teacher Relationship Drawings is a non-verbal method that rarely includes verbal statements (Harrison et al., 2007 McGrath et al., 2017; Zee et al., 2020). With this method, students are asked to draw a picture of themselves and their teacher, which is later coded by independent raters. As such, this method may not suffer from biases caused by different translations and interpretations of questions across countries. Moreover, whereas relationship questionnaires mainly evoke students' mental relationship representations at a conscious level, relationship drawings capture students' unconscious feelings and thoughts about the relationship (Zee et al., 2020). Hence, relationship drawings may provide unique information about how students' relationship perceptions differ across countries. Moreover, students' unconscious relationship perceptions are reflected on eight dimensions, and thus, may provide a more detailed measurement of students' relationship perceptions than existing relationship questionnaires (Zee et al., 2020).

Two dimensions (pride/happiness and vitality/creativity) usually reflect positive teacher-student relationships. Pride/happiness describes the degree of warmth, happiness, and togetherness between teachers and students (e.g., smiling faces, the teacher and

student enjoying activities together). As such, this dimension is theoretically related to the closeness dimension in relationship questionnaires (Harrison et al., 2007; Zee et al., 2020). Vitality/creativity evaluates students' emotional involvement in the relationship, by looking at the inclusion of colors and details in the drawing. Vitality/creativity is often considered to be a positive dimension as well (Harrison et al., 2007; McGrath et al., 2017), although a high score on vitality/creativity can sometimes be indicative of high degrees of disharmony in the relationship (e.g., detailed picture of anger toward the teacher).

The other six dimensions measure several aspects of negative teacher-student relationships. Anger/tension describes the level of quarrels, irritation, and frustration in the relationship (e.g., angry faces, scratches, and a scene where the teacher and student try to attack each other). Bizarreness/dissociation looks at students' hostility and resentment towards teachers (e.g., unusual symbols such as devils, monsters, and sharp teeth in the drawing), which captures students' dissatisfactions about the relationship at a more unconscious and extreme level than anger/tension. Anger/tension and bizarreness/dissociation are related to the conflict dimension in relationship questionnaires (Zee et al., 2020). Three other dimensions capture negative aspects of the relationship that are not explicitly covered by most relationship questionnaires: Role reversal reflects the degree to which students have problems with accepting their teacher's authority, by drawing themselves larger and more powerful than their teacher. Emotional distance/isolation shows students' worries about being emotionally isolated from the teacher, as indicated by a barrier or a large distance between the student and teacher in the drawing. Vulnerability looks at students' fear of the teacher and feelings of anxiousness in the relationship, as shown by figures bunched in a corner of the paper and disproportionate sizes of the figures (e.g., very small student figure versus very larger teacher figure).

Finally, there is a global dimension, global pathology, assessing the overall quality of the relationship. This dimension considers the overall levels of disharmony included in the drawing, for example, by looking at whether the general tone of the drawing is gloomy and sloppy. As far as we know, relationship drawings have never been used for making cross-cultural comparisons of teacher-student relationship quality before. As relationship drawings may capture information about students' relationship perceptions that is unique to those captured by relationship questionnaires, in the present dissertation, we also employed relationship drawings to investigate cross-cultural differences in students' unconscious relationship perceptions. As such, we strived to obtain a more complete picture of how students' relationship experiences with teachers may differ across countries.

### **Shyness and Teacher-Student Relationship Quality in Cross-Cultural Contexts**

In line with the theoretical assumption that shyness may harm the quality of teacher-student relationships in Western, individualistic countries (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008; Rubin et al., 2009), previous Western studies have frequently found shyness to be associated with less closeness between teachers and students (Nurmi, 2012), both in cross-sectional studies (Justice et al., 2008; Koles et al., 2009; Sette et al., 2019) and longitudinal studies (Arbeau et al., 2010; Rudasill, 2011; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). For instance, preschoolers' shyness was longitudinally associated with lower closeness with teachers in the first and third grades (Rudasill, 2011). Findings about the association between shyness and teacher-student conflict, however, seem to be less consistent. Most previous studies showed that shyness was not significantly associated with the degree of conflict in teacher-student relationships (Arbeau et al., 2010; Justice et al., 2008; Koles et al., 2009). Other studies, however, found that students' shyness was sometimes linked to more conflict (Sette et al., 2014) and sometimes linked to less conflict with teachers (Rudasill, 2011; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Consistent with most studies, in a meta-analysis of six studies conducted in Western countries (Nurmi, 2012), shyness appeared to be associated with less closeness in teacher-student relationships, whereas the association between shyness and teacher-student conflict was not significant.

In Eastern, collectivistic countries, shyness is believed to be traditionally appreciated (Chen, 2010, 2019). In support of this idea, research conducted before the 2010s found children's shyness to be linked with more peer acceptance and more maternal acceptance in Eastern countries (Chen et al., 1992, 1997, 2006; Kim et al., 2008). In recent years, however, it is suggested that social changes have taken place in Eastern countries and shyness has been depreciated due to the influence of globalization and Westernization (Chen, 2019; Chen et al., 2005). Accordingly, recent studies found shyness to be linked with less peer preference (see Zhang et al., 2021 for a meta-analytic overview) and more harsh parenting (Liu et al., 2018) in Eastern countries.

To our knowledge, only four studies have explored how shyness was linked to teacher-student relationships in Eastern countries. Coplan et al. (2017) found that Chinese students' shyness was not significantly associated with the overall quality of teacher-student relationships. Unexpectedly, three other studies revealed that shyness was linked with less teacher-student closeness in China (Han et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015). In two studies that examined the link between shyness and teacher-student conflict, one study revealed a non-significant association between shyness and conflict (Wu et al., 2015), whereas the other study found shyness to be associated with even more

conflict in teacher-student relationships in China (Han et al., 2016). Thus, it appears that nowadays, shyness may harm teacher-student relationships in Eastern countries as well. However, other researchers have pointed out that in Eastern countries, teachers still think highly of children's obedience and behavioral management (Hu et al., 2017). As shy behaviors are often non-disruptive to teachers (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), shyness may still have more positive connotations in Eastern countries than in Western countries (Liu et al., 2020; Zhang & Xu, 2019). Therefore, it is likely that shyness still has more positive influences on teacher-student relationships in Eastern countries than in Western countries. Empirical research comparing the strength of these associations across countries, however, appears to be lacking.

The second aim of this dissertation was therefore to investigate whether the link between students' shyness and teacher-student relationships differed across the Netherlands and China. Just as for the first aim, we looked at how shyness was linked to teachers' relationship perceptions, students' conscious relationship perceptions, and students' unconscious relationship perceptions. Furthermore, it has been suggested that shyness may become increasingly harmful to children's social relationships as children grow older (see Zhang et al., 2021 for a meta-analytic overview). Thus, we investigated these associations both in upper elementary school (third-to-sixth grade) and in the early school years (kindergarten and first grade).

## **An Overview of This Dissertation**

This dissertation strived to advance insight into how teachers and students may perceive the quality of their mutual relationship differently across different countries. To this end, we focused on teachers and students from the Netherlands (a Western, individualistic country) and China (an Eastern, collectivistic country). The first aim was to explore cross-cultural differences in both teachers' and students' perceptions of teacher-student relationship quality across the Netherlands and China. This topic is covered in Chapters 2, 3, and 7. More specifically, we first investigated cross-cultural differences in teachers' and students' conscious relationship perceptions in upper elementary school (Chapter 2) and in the early school years (Chapter 3). Furthermore, we also employed relationship drawings to look at upper elementary students' unconscious relationship perceptions. As the drawing method has never been used for cross-cultural comparisons before, we first examined the psychometric properties (reliability, measurement invariance, and validity) of the relationship drawings across the Netherlands and China (Chapter 6). Subsequently, we compared upper elementary students' unconscious relationship perceptions across the two countries (Chapter 7).

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The second aim was to investigate whether students' shyness was associated with the quality of teacher-student relationships differently across the Netherlands and China. Again, we first examined how shyness was associated with teachers' and students' conscious relationship perceptions in upper elementary schools across the Netherlands and China (Chapter 4). Next, we investigated cross-cultural differences in the association between shyness and teachers' conscious relationship perceptions in the early school years (Chapter 5). Lastly, we also explored cross-cultural differences in how shyness was associated with upper elementary students' unconscious relationship perceptions as measured by drawings (Chapter 7).

Finally, Chapter 8 provides an integrative discussion of results from Chapters 2 to 7. In this chapter, we integrated and discussed results that were based on different informants and different methods. Furthermore, findings from upper elementary school and the early school years were compared and discussed together. As such, this chapter gives an overarching picture of how teacher-student relationship quality, and the link between shyness and the relationship quality, may differ across the Netherlands and China. This dissertation ends with suggestions for future research and school practice.