Teachers' conflict management styles: The role of attachment styles and classroom management efficacy[☆]

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Abstract

Constructive conflict management strategies are important in maintaining a positive classroom environment yet little is known about interpersonal or school variables associated with teachers' use of such strategies with students. Teachers high in self-reported classroom management efficacy (CMEFF) and security of attachment (low on avoidance, anxiety) were predicted to endorse use of positive classroom management strategies (e.g., integrating, compromising) more than insecure teachers and those low in CMEFF. Teachers ($N=283$) from eleven schools (seven elementary), largely female and white, responded to a questionnaire in their boxes (29.4% response rate). School and teacher demographic variables were included in a multivariate regression after preliminary analysis suggested that ignoring the multilevel structure of the data made little difference in results; school variances were small compared with teacher variances. CMEFF and years teaching had positive, significant effects on use of integrating and compromising strategies, while avoidance had negative effects on both and anxiety on integrating strategies. Implications for teacher development are discussed.
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Novice and veteran teachers alike cite classroom management as a major concern (Goyette, Dore, & Dion, 2000) and teacher–student conflict as a frequent characteristic of difficult to manage classes (Diamond, 1992). It is the primary reason that new teachers leave the profession after only a few years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003) and it has been related to experienced teachers' high levels of stress and burnout (Schottle & Peltier, 1991).

Despite the importance of constructive conflict management strategies in the maintenance of a positive classroom environment, much of the research in the area of classroom management has emphasized what teachers are doing in the classroom to maximize student engagement and compliance (for example, by modifying the classroom setting) and how they are doing it (with respect to both instructional and emotional support) (Rimm-Kaufman, LaParo, Downer, & Pianta, 2005). The literature has failed to address the possible reasons why teachers tend to rely on certain approaches to classroom and conflict management; specifically, few studies have examined the intrapersonal variables that are associated with teachers' use of specific conflict management strategies, and none have investigated the role of teachers' attachment styles and classroom management efficacy in predicting their use of specific conflict management styles.

The limited research that has investigated the impact of attachment styles upon conflict management strategies has been primarily conducted within the context of romantic relationships (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; Pistole, 1989) and has failed to consider the potential impact of self-efficacy as a possible predictor, despite the fact that a number of studies have indicated that secure individuals are highly self-efficacious (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Florian, 1995) and the degree of self-efficacy influences behavior (Bandura, 1991).

The attachment literature suggests that adult attachment styles, perhaps because they reflect fundamentally different internal working models of relationships, may determine differences in conflict style (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, & Parson, 1992; Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, & Fleming, 1993). Conflict and other stressful situations are believed to increase an individual's need for psychological support from his or her attachment figure, resulting in increased accessibility, and salience of that individual's internal working models (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994; Pistole & Arricale, 2003).

Attachment theory is derived from Bowlby's (1969) contention that infants construct working models based on their interactions with attachment figures, which provide a framework for later personality organization. Internal working models consist of "generalized expectations, beliefs and goals about the self, others, and the relationship between the two. These working models are thought to guide how people perceive, interpret, and respond to their social interactions" (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997, p. 1409).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) described a model of four attachment styles (secure, dismissing, preoccupied and fearful) that individuals may approximate to varying degrees, in which two types of internal working models are postulated; namely, a model of the self and a model of others. These internal working models can be dichotomized as positive (self as worthy of love and attention; other as trustworthy, caring and available) or negative (the self as unworthy of love; the other as uncaring, rejecting and distant). The four prototypes can be distinguished from each other by their unique internal working models of self and other which delineate characteristic patterns of behavior and emotional