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Autism spectrum disorder and the student teacher relationship: A comparison study with peers with intellectual disability and typical development

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ABSTRACT

This study examined relations among behavior problems, social skills, and student–teacher relationships within a sample of children (mean age 8) with autism spectrum disorders or ASD ($n = 36$) and comparison samples of children with typical development ($n = 91$) or with intellectual disability ($n = 38$.) Student–teacher relationships (STRs) for children with ASD appeared to be qualitatively different from those of similarly aged children with ID or typical development. The STRs for children with ASD were considerably poorer, with less closeness and more conflict, than in the two comparison groups. Within the group with ASD, teacher-reported child externalizing behavior and social skills accounted for significant variance in the total score on the Student Teacher Relationship Scale. Conflict was predicted only by externalizing behavior, whereas closeness was predicted by social skills; level of autistic mannerisms negatively related to the teacher's perception of closeness. Findings address the implications for transition to early schooling for children with ASD.

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1. Introduction

Children's relationships with their teachers during the early school years can be pivotal in their subsequent academic, behavioral, and social adjustment in school (e.g. Alexander and Entwistle, 1988; Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), with teacher–child conflict having specific implications for the subsequent trajectory of child externalizing behaviors (Doumen et al., 2008). While there is now considerable research indicating the value of early student–teacher relationships (STRs), this has focused almost exclusively on typically developing children. There has been very little study of the student–teacher relationship and its correlates for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

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Understanding this construct for students with ASD is especially important due to the challenges associated with adapting to social and academic behavior patterns in order to fit the demands of the school environment (Alexander and Entwistle, 1988; Calkins, 1994). Research has shown that children's ability to adapt and function in the school environment has important implications for children's long-term academic success (Basil & Reyes, 2003; McConnell, 2002), behavioral adjustment, and, for students with autism, social engagement (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). For children with ASD, cognitive, social, adaptive, self-regulatory, and communicative deficits are likely to make this adaptation process especially challenging.

The STR is an important construct conceptualized from multiple perspectives such as shared attachment, motivational impact, and socio-cultural influences (Davis, 2003). This study investigated the STR as defined through the domains of closeness, conflict, and dependency as these components of the STR have emerged as important predictors of children's concurrent and long-term adjustment (Cederlund, Hagbern, Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg, 2008; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Teacher perceptions of both conflict and closeness, in particular, have been shown to have moderate stability from kindergarten through sixth grade (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009).

1.1. The student–teacher-relationship and typically developing children

When specifically investigating the STR in reference to typically developing children, research has shown that positive STRs seem to play a strong role for children at risk for adverse outcomes. Evidence indicates that conflictual and dependent STRs in the early school years are strong predictors of behavioral challenges over time. Hamre and Pianta (2001), following 179 children from kindergarten to eighth grade, found that, even after controlling for baseline behavior problems, students in kindergarten with high levels of conflictual or dependent STRs were more likely to receive disciplinary infractions and suspensions in upper elementary grades. Additional longitudinal studies reported that students who received high ratings of problem behaviors were predicted to have poorer STRs throughout elementary school and junior high (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Jerome et al., 2009).

Interestingly, student–teacher closeness may have a protective effect for students entering school with behavior problems. In their study of kindergarten and first grade outcomes, Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, and Essex (2005) found that student–teacher closeness was most strongly linked to decreases in externalizing behavior problems for the group of children who began kindergarten with high levels of externalizing behaviors. Finally, in a study more relevant to children with developmental delays, Pianta, Steinberg, and Rollins (1995) examined STR quality among kindergarten children who were at high risk for grade retention or special education placement. Those who had more positive, closer, and less conflictual relationships with teachers were ultimately less likely to be retained or placed in special education by the end of the school year, even after controlling for classroom noncompliance and behavior with peers (Pianta et al., 1995).

1.2. The student–teacher-relationship for children with ID and ASD

Prevalence rates categorize autism as an increasingly common disorder in children aged 2–17 years (Croen, Grether, Hoogstrate, & Selvin, 2002; Gillberg, Cederlund, Lamberg, & Zeijlon, 2006); indeed, the Center for Disease control suggests a rate of 1 in 88 (CDC, 2012). Naturally, the rise of autism has been accompanied by a surge in service needs. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Education reported a 1260% increase in children with autism aged 6–21 receiving Special Education services from 1992–93 to 2004–5 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Parent-reported ASD based on the National Survey on Children's Health, indicated prevalence changes in school children from 1.16% in 2007 to 2.00% in 2011–2012 (Blumberg et al., 2013). The question is no longer whether public school teachers will encounter a child with autism, but what they will do when this inevitably occurs.

Once in the classroom, children with ASD are likely to be less successful in building positive relationships with their teachers than children with typical development. Yet these relationships may be particularly important as compensatory resources for children with ASD, and may protect them against school adjustment problems over time (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). Indeed, there is evidence that positive STRs play a particularly strong role for children with other risks, including behavioral or academic problems, by deflecting the course of their adjustment in school (e.g. Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Pianta et al., 1995; Silver et al., 2005). There is little known about the STRs of children with ASD, and there is virtually nothing known about STRs in children who attend non-public school settings exclusively for children with autism. We examined such a group of children against the backdrop of STRs in a similarly aged group of children with intellectual disability and a group of children who were typically developing.

Teachers' relationships with children with ASD or ID have received very little study, and we hypothesized that such relationships would be especially pivotal for these children who are at such developmental risk. There is some evidence that children with developmental disabilities experience poorer STRs than typically developing children. Ladd, Birch, and Buhs (1999) reported that children's level of cognitive maturity at school entry was positively related to STR quality and peer acceptance in kindergarten, based on behavioral observations of STR quality. Consistent with this, we have found significantly poorer STR quality for kindergarten children with developmental delays than typically-developing children (Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2007; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006). Moreover, the poorer STR quality continued across the early school years and with different teachers (Blacher, Baker, & Eisenhower, 2009). The poorer STRs for children with

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