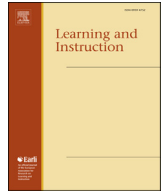




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Emotionally supportive classroom interactions and students' perceptions of their teachers as caring and just[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Emotionally supportive classrooms represent an important interactional context for the development of positive perceptions of student–teacher relationships. The present study investigated how students' perceptions of teacher care and justice develop over the upper elementary grades. Moreover, we studied to what degree teachers' observed emotional support predicts changes in perceptions of teacher care and justice in students with and without risks for academic failure. The study consisted of 1209 upper elementary grade students who were followed from grade five (T1) to grade six (T2, 1009 students). Multilevel analyses revealed that, over the year, student perceptions of their teacher as caring decreased in classrooms with low-quality teacher–student interactions in the emotional domain. Moreover, high emotional support from teachers protected students with high academic disengagement from developing negative perceptions of teacher justice. These results suggest a protective function of teacher's emotional support.

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1. Introduction

Students' perceptions of teacher care and teacher justice represent important dimensions of student–teacher relationships (Wentzel, 2002). Even though teachers feel strongly committed to the relational aspects of the teaching profession (Gasser & Althof, 2017), children and adolescents often experience unjust treatment and low emotional care in schools (Pianta, Hamre, & Mintz, 2012; Ruck & Wortley, 2002). The perception of low teacher care and low teacher justice can have serious implications for students' future academic and social-emotional adjustment, such as depression, conduct problems or school failure (e.g., Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010; Wentzel, 1997, 2002; Zee, Koomen, & van der Vee, 2013). Importantly, the developmental significance of perceived student–teacher relationships increases as students progress through the elementary grades (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011).

In particular, the upper elementary grades represent a challenging period with regard to the formation of positive perceptions of student–teacher relationships because classroom interactions tend to become less personal and more focused on academic performance (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Maldonado-Carreo & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). Moreover, in several European nations such as Germany or Switzerland, secondary school is organized according to a tracking system. Consequently, upper elementary grade teachers decide which ability level students will transition to in secondary school. This high pressure to academically perform during the upper elementary grades can negatively affect students' wellbeing and classroom social relationships (Gasser, Grütter, Torchetti, & Buholzer, 2017; Grütter, Gasser, Zuffiano, & Meyer, 2017).

However, children and adolescents differ in their risk for negative perceptions of the relationship with their teachers (Nurmi, 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). For example, students with high academic risks (e.g., low academic achievement and engagement) are more likely to develop negative perceptions of the relationships with their teachers than students with low academic risks (Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015). Therefore, classroom conditions that prevent these children from developing negative relational outcomes over time are of particular importance (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Recent research suggests that teachers' quality of emotional support, such

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as their warmth or responsiveness to students' individual needs, may protect children from developing negative relational outcomes (O'Connor, 2010). Accordingly, the goal of the present study was to investigate whether teachers' emotional support moderated the risk for negative changes in students' perceptions of teacher care and justice during the upper elementary grades. In addition, we investigated if this moderation hypothesis particularly applied to students with high academic risks (e.g., whether students with high academic risks in classrooms with high emotional support would show less or no decline of perceived teacher justice compared to students with high academic risks in classrooms with low emotional support).

1.1. Students' perceptions of the teacher as caring and just

This study focused on two key aspects of perceived student–teacher relationships: teacher care and teacher justice. The perception of teacher care includes students' experience with whether the teacher provides individual support and shows genuine interest and empathy towards the individual student (e.g., “My teacher really cares about me”). In contrast, perceptions of teacher justice include the experience of equal treatment by the teacher (e.g., “My teachers generally treat me fairly”). While teacher care has been subject to intensive research (also referred to as “emotional care” or “personal support”) (e.g., Patrick et al., 2007; Wentzel, 1998), the perception of teacher justice has received less attention. However, care and justice represent two complementary principles that characterize the ethical dimension of human relationships (Frankena, 1973; Gibbs, 2003): equal treatment without affection and attention to a person's individual needs is perceived as being “cold”, whereas the uneven distribution of affection and attention is perceived as being unjust.

Student–teacher relationships have been assessed from both the teachers' and students' perspectives (Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008). Whereas measures from the teachers' perspective have mainly included dimensions such as closeness and conflict (e.g., Jerome et al., 2009), student measures are more likely to focus on the experience of individual care and support (e.g., Wentzel, 1997). Although both information sources capture relevant aspects of student–teacher relationships, students' perceptions represent a more proximal predictor of students' motivation and classroom behavior. Consequently, students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers consistently relate to a wide range of cognitive and social outcomes (e.g., Donat, Umlauf, Dalbert, & Kamble, 2012; Rueger et al., 2010).

Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman (2003) conceptualized students' perceptions of the teacher as representations through which students experience their relationships with their teachers. Based on developmental system theory (Lerner, 1998), these researchers proposed a model of student–teacher relationships where perceptions of student–teacher relationships are influenced by multiple proximal and distal systems that interact with each other in complex ways. Features of student–teacher interactions (e.g., affective classroom climate), individual characteristics of students and teachers (e.g., students' academic achievement), or external influences such as structural aspects of the educational system (e.g., smaller versus larger classes, one versus several teachers) reciprocally influence how students perceive their relationships with their teachers. In this study, we assumed that teachers' concrete and observable practices in the emotional domain constitute proximal mechanisms that contribute to students' formation of positive perceptions of student–teacher relationships. Reciprocal interactions between students and teachers that are characterized by respect, warmth, sensitivity and responsiveness lay the foundation for the formation of positive perceptions of relationships

(Brock & Curby, 2014; O'Connor, 2010; Pianta et al., 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). These primary mechanisms may function as protective factors against contextual and individual risk factors, and they may decrease the likelihood of dysfunctional relational outcomes (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2005; O'Connor, 2010).

1.2. The upper elementary grades in Switzerland

In this study, we followed students from the fifth to the sixth grade, which represent the upper elementary grades in Switzerland. Specifically, we focused on the time before the transition to secondary grades. Longitudinal research has revealed that the quality of student–teacher relationships decreases over the elementary school years (e.g., Jerome et al., 2009; Spilt et al., 2012), which is a trend that continues into middle school (Eccles et al., 1993) and in part explains why older children or adolescents are less academically engaged and develop higher levels of problem behavior (Maldonado-Carreo & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Researchers have suggested that transformations in the teacher's role (i.e., a stronger focus on instruction and less on emotional support) and the educational context (e.g., increased teacher-student ratio, several teachers per class) are possible reasons that student–teacher relationships become more distant (Jerome et al., 2009). Moreover, factors related to early adolescence, such as students' growing interests in peer relationships and autonomy development, might explain why the quality of student–teacher relationships declines as students enter the upper elementary grades (Zee et al., 2013). Finally, the upper elementary grades in Switzerland represent a transitional phase between elementary (first to sixth grade) and secondary school (seventh to ninth grade), which has crucial implications for students' future academic and occupational careers. Whereas elementary schools in Switzerland are inclusive (i.e., students with different academic abilities are educated in the same classroom), the secondary school is structured according to a tracking system (i.e., students with different academic abilities are educated in different schools). During the upper elementary grades, teachers decide on the basis of students' academic achievement which secondary level students will attend. Consequently, the upper elementary grades in Switzerland are characterized by increasing academic expectations, which might result in more negative classroom relationships (Gasser et al., 2017) and more internalizing and externalizing problems (Ball, Lohaus, & Miebach, 2006). Consequently, some upper elementary grade students might be more likely to perceive the teacher as a source of increasing academic demands rather than as a source of emotional care.

1.3. Academic risk factors and students' perceptions of teacher's care and justice

In this study, we included two academic risk factors as individual predictors for upper elementary grade students' perceptions of teacher care and justice: low academic achievement (teacher ratings) and academic disengagement (student ratings). Teacher-rated academic achievement is an important indicator for students' academic risk because teachers' evaluations of students' academic performance determines which ability level students will be assigned to in secondary school. In addition, self-ratings of students' academic disengagement reflect elementary grade students' difficulties in coping with the pressure to academically perform (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014).

Various studies showed that academic achievement and (dis)engagement relate to students' perceptions of teacher care and justice during early adolescence (e.g., Košir & Tement, 2014; Murray et al., 2008; Patrick et al., 2007; Quin, 2017; Wentzel, 1997). Nurmi

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