



# Elementary teachers' emotional and relational expressions when speaking about disruptive and well behaved students



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers use a negative emotional tone when speaking about disruptive students.
- Teachers express similar closeness to disruptive and well-behaved students.
- Critical comments provide evidence of damaged student-teacher relationships.
- Provides correlations between teachers' emotional and relational expressions.
- Greater expressed emotional intensity found at the end of a school year.

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## ABSTRACT

Elementary teachers' emotional expressions when speaking about disruptive students provide a previously unexamined source of classroom influence. The present study therefore examined how 47 elementary teachers spoke about their relationships with disruptive ( $n = 23$ ) and well behaved ( $n = 28$ ) students. Speech samples from classroom and support teachers were analysed for evidence of emotional and relational tone. Despite expressing similar relational closeness towards disruptive and well behaved students, classroom teachers expressed a more negative emotional tone (e.g. more frequent dissatisfactions) when speaking about disruptive students. Implications for the elementary classroom climate are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Elementary school teachers' relationships with their students are typically close; suggesting that a positive emotional bond exists. These positive bonds may be particularly important for disruptive students; predicting better behaviour (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005) and protecting against referral to special education settings (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Whilst teachers' emotions in the classroom and the quality of their relationships with students have each been widely researched (see Fried, Mansfield, & Dobozy, 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015 for reviews), with student behaviour identified as a catalyst for both (e.g. Hagenauer,

Hascher, & Volet, 2015; Murray & Zvoch, 2011), few studies investigate these topics concurrently (see Hagenauer et al., 2015; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999).

In a recent review of articles published in *Teaching and Teacher Education* over the last 30 years, Uitto, Jokikokko, and Estola (2015) found just 12 articles discussing the role of emotions in teachers' relationships with students, parents, other teachers and principals. Of those studies reviewed, only two directly examined elementary teachers' relationships with disruptive students. Both were single-participant case studies examining a specific student-teacher relationship from the teacher's perspective (see Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Newberry, 2010). The focus teacher in Isenbarger and Zembylas's (2006) case study reported personal satisfaction in teaching a disruptive student, despite also needing to manage unpleasant emotions resultant from the disruption. The focus teacher in Newberry's (2010) case study experienced a changing and highly volatile relationship that became much closer at the end

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of the school year. Together, these case studies provide valuable insights into the multifaceted and changing experiences of individual teachers when working with disruptive students. To date, however, no study has yet examined the emotional qualities of elementary teachers' relationships with disruptive students on a larger scale. We do not know if some teachers experience more emotionally positive relationships with disruptive students than others and, if so, how these relationships differ. Moreover, no study has examined elementary teachers' own emotional and relational expressions when speaking about multiple students in the same class. We do not know whether teachers talk differently about disruptive and non-disruptive students, or whether they typically express emotionally complex relationships with all students in the class. Although it may seem intuitive that teachers would express more emotional negativity and less relational closeness when speaking about disruptive students than when speaking about well behaved students, this assumption has not been tested.

Understanding teachers' emotional tone is particularly important given the intensity of elementary teachers' relationships with students (Hargreaves, 2000), the importance of teachers' emotional competence in developing positive student-teacher relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), and the behavioural, social, and academic implications of student-teacher relationship quality (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). The present study therefore sought to extend existing knowledge in the aforementioned distinct fields: employing a single quantitative measure to determine how elementary school teachers' emotional and relational expressions differed when speaking about disruptive and well behaved students. Specifically, verbal content analysis was used to examine how elementary teachers spoke about their students; with multiple teachers each speaking about the same students. Verbal content analysis provides a useful way of examining evidence of participants' internal psychological state (e.g. Calam & Peters, 2006; Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969). By assessing the emotional and relational aspects of the content that teachers themselves willingly offer about each student, information can be gleaned about the relationship factors that are more prominent or important to the teacher themselves. This information is different and complementary to that offered in other research in reaction to interviewer cues or to self-report rating scale prompts, which necessarily seek particular information of theoretical importance (e.g. the presence of conflict in the relationship). We expand on our chosen approach below.

### 1.1. Theoretical orientation and definitions

Given that the present study combines two distinct fields of study, we begin by making our theoretical approach and methodology explicit. We use the Five-Minute Speech Sample (e.g. Calam & Peters, 2006; Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969), in which emotions are constituted as individual experiences or personal reactions to stimuli (Zembylas, 2007). The theoretical assumption underpinning our approach is that the relative magnitude of emotion in verbal content is proportional to the frequency of thematic statements (Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969). Consequently, rather than examining specific emotions (e.g. joy, anger, or sadness), the present study investigates teachers' *expressed emotional tone* when speaking about their students. For example, positive emotional tone is characterised by more frequent positive remarks and less frequent dissatisfactions and critical comments, while negative emotional tone is characterised by more frequent dissatisfactions and critical comments and less frequent positive remarks (see method section).

Secondly, drawing on an extensive body of research investigating the student-teacher relationship, predominantly informed

by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), we examine expressed relationship quality based on closeness, conflict, dependency,<sup>1</sup> and overall tone. Using these dimensions, for example, a positive student-teacher relationship is characterised by higher ratings of closeness, a warm overall tone, and lower ratings of conflict and dependency. Whilst research investigating student-teacher relationship quality typically uses teacher-report rating scales that require teachers to respond to individual, pre-determined items (e.g. Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Spilt, Koomen, & Jak, 2012), other approaches have also been considered. Some researchers have used observer ratings of these same relational dimensions (Doumen, Koomen, Buyse, Wouters, & Verschuere, 2012; Ladd et al., 1999, see also; Hendrickx, Mainhard, Boor-Klip, Cillessen, & Brekelmans, 2016), whereas others have used a structured interview protocol to investigate, for example, elementary teachers' own conceptions of student-teacher closeness (Newberry & Davis, 2008). We instead examine these relational constructs using verbal content analysis. Our objective was to examine expressed relational tone from statements that were authentic, spontaneous and given freely by the teachers. We therefore build on the strong body of research using teacher-report rating scales, which enable the careful measurement and assessment of pre-defined constructs of interest (i.e. closeness, conflict and dependency) and code for these same relational constructs in teachers' own spontaneous relationship reflections. Doing so enables the examination of these constructs using an open-ended task that is not as heavily influenced by the demand characteristics inherent within self-report rating scales. Importantly, we note also that these relational constructs do not exist in the absence of emotion: rather, in theoretical terms, emotions and relationships are inherently linked (Cross & Hong, 2012; Garner, 2010; Hagenauer et al., 2015; Yan, Evans, & Harvey, 2011). For example, closeness is often defined as a warm and affectionate or emotional bond, and conflict is frequently defined by anger (Ladd et al., 1999; Pianta et al., 1995; Solheim, Berg-Nielsen, & Wichstrøm, 2012). We therefore measure the associations between teachers' expressed emotional and expressed relational tone, which have not yet been empirically examined.

### 1.2. Disruptive students, teachers' emotions, and relationships

Disruptive behaviour<sup>2</sup> is often identified as a key risk factor for students (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2007); however, such behaviour also significantly influences teachers' emotions (e.g. Hagenauer et al., 2015) and perceptions of student-teacher relationship quality (e.g. Murray & Zvoch, 2011). With regards to teachers' emotions, student misbehaviour elicits negative feelings, such as anger and frustration (Hagenauer et al., 2015), which may eventually lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Chang, 2009, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). In accordance with the concept of emotional labour (see Hochschild, 1983), which explains that employment requires emotions to be managed conforming to predetermined rules (Wharton, 2009), teachers report frequently hiding negative emotions, such as anger and dislike (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015; see also; Boler, 1999). Indeed, it may be perceived as inappropriate for a teacher to express negative emotions

<sup>1</sup> Closeness, conflict, and dependency were defined based on the work of Pianta and Steinberg (1992). These three dimensions are frequently used to define student-teacher relationship quality (see McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Sabol & Pianta, 2012 for reviews).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout our introduction we use the term 'disruptive behaviour' to encompass a range of behavioural definitions including misbehaviour, externalising disorders, antisocial behaviour, and difficult temperament. A definition of disruptive behaviour used in the present study can be found in the method section.

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