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Summary

Inspired by social-ecological models of development, scholars have increasingly considered schools as social environments, and learning and development as processes that are embedded in a social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Especially proximal factors such as the dyadic processes found in teacher-child relationships are believed to influence children's school adjustment and development (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). From an *extended attachment perspective*, relationships with teachers are considered to provide children with a secure base from which they can explore novel situations and face social and academic challenges (Pianta, 1992). Conversely, discordant relationships will elicit emotional distress thereby constraining a child's psychological resources and energy to be devoted to learning activities. In particular, externalizing behavior problems of children appear to put constraints on the development of supportive teacher-child relationships.

The overarching goal of the current PhD thesis was to advance understanding of interpersonal relationships between teachers and young children with externalizing behavior in regular kindergarten classrooms. Teachers generally report heightened levels of conflict in relationships with disruptive children (Doumen et al., 2008; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). Importantly, close relationships have been found to buffer behaviorally at-risk children against maladjustment (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). Though researchers have given considerable attention to relationships between teachers and disruptive children, there are several limitations to our knowledge. This thesis addressed four issues that were introduced in *Chapter 1*.

First, while especially serious forms of antisocial behavior such as aggressive acts may be related to poor teacher-child relationships, few studies have explicitly focused on physical aggression in young students. Researchers have repeatedly notified that in this age range, physical aggression is often confounded with other forms of antisocial behavior (Broidy et al., 2003; Joussemet et al., 2008; Tremblay, 2000). Moreover, though the distinction between physical aggression and nonaggressive forms of antisocial behavior has been widely accepted, it has

not yet been empirically tested in samples with young children only. These concerns were addressed in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*. Factor analytic research and a multi-trait multi-method study provided evidence for the discrimination between physical aggression and nonaggressive forms of antisocial behavior in samples of kindergarten children. The results supported the use of a subset of items of the Preschool Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ; Behar, 1977; Thijs, Koomen, De Jong, Van der Leij, & Van Leeuwen, 2004) as a valid teacher-report screening measure of physical aggression in young children.

Second, research into teacher-child relationships has been largely limited to teacher-report questionnaires, especially in early elementary grades. Few studies have examined young children's own perceptions, and little is known whether relationship perceptions of kindergarten children are related to problem behavior such as physical aggression. Moreover, there are currently no well validated instruments available to measure the relationship perceptions of kindergarten children. *Chapter 4* therefore presented an evaluation study of the psychometric qualities of two instruments for young children: The Young Children's Appraisals of Teacher Support (Y-CATS; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003) and the Kindergartner-Teacher Interaction Computer test (KLIC; Van Dijk, De Graaff, Knotter, & Koster, 2006). Both instruments are developed to measure young children's perceptions of teacher-child relationships but different methods are employed. On the Y-CATS, children judged propositions about their teacher on a dichotomous response format. On the KLIC, children evaluated pictures of teacher-child interactions according to a two-step response procedure to obtain a 4-point scale. The KLIC showed high reliability but more research is needed to establish its validity. Stronger evidence was obtained for the validity of the Y-CATS. The subscales Warmth and Conflict of the Y-CATS were found to be sufficiently valid and reliable for research purposes. Consistent with attachment-based research, the results indicated that children display gender-typical problem behavior when having non-close teacher-child relationships (Turner, 1991). Girls experiencing non-close or distant relationships were more likely to be seen as socially inhibited by their teacher, whereas boys with non-close relationships engaged more in physical aggression according to their teacher. Together, the findings underscored the importance of including the child's perspective for

understanding the role of the teacher-child relationship in children's classroom problem behaviors, and how this may vary by gender.

The third issue addressed in this thesis also concerned the limitations of merely using teacher-report questionnaires to assess teacher-child relationship quality. Based on an extended attachment paradigm and the notion of internal working models of relationships, it was argued that indirect methods such as interview techniques are needed to tap more deeply into teachers' mental representations of their relationships with specific children (Maier, Bernier, Perkrun, Zimmermann, & Grossmann, 2004; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). This issue was addressed in *Chapter 5*, which reported on a study using the Teacher Relationship Interview (TRI; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002) to assess teachers' perceptions of relationships with disruptive versus typical kindergarten children. The results supported the validity of the TRI. Moderate convergence was found between the TRI and teacher reports on the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Koomen, Verschueren, & Pianta, 2007; Pianta, 2001). Furthermore, teachers experienced more anger and helplessness in relationships with disruptive children compared to typical children but did not appear to have less positive feelings for disruptive children. It was inferred that the TRI makes an important addition to generally-used teacher-report questionnaires. This semi-structured interview appeared especially suited to capture more implicit qualities such as emotional processes and how teachers cope with negative experiences.

Fourth, we addressed the repeated call for dyad-focused interventions specifically aimed at teacher-child relationships (Pianta et al., 2003). Such intervention research is needed to identify effective strategies to support teachers in building nurturing relationships with disruptive children. Guided by attachment research, a relationship-focused reflection program (RFRP) was developed, aimed at teachers' mental representations and reflective functioning rather than changing actual behavior (Pianta, 1999; Slade, 2006). The relative effectiveness of RFRP was evaluated against a comparison intervention that targeted teacher behavior in dyadic interactions using a randomized comparative trial. This research, presented in *Chapter 6*, supported the relative effectiveness of the RFRP in a sample of kindergarten children with above-median levels of externalizing behavior. The RFRP intervention affected teachers' relationship appraisals and pedagogical

approach as well as their observed responsiveness to the socioemotional and academic needs of the children.

In *Chapter 7*, the results of the separate studies were integrated and further discussed. New insights in the relationships between teachers and disruptive kindergartners were highlighted. Considering the teachers' perspective, it was inferred that emotions are vital in teachers' relationships with kindergarten children. We suggested that the elevated levels of anger and helplessness in relationships of teachers with disruptive children could be interpreted as frustration and uncertainty of teachers about their efforts to provide those children with what they need to succeed in the classroom. It is important that teachers are attentive to such negative feelings. In our research, in-depth reflection of teachers on their interpersonal and emotional experiences with specific disruptive children was facilitated through helping them narrate their relationship experiences and to label and 'mirror' those experiences (Pianta, 1999). The results suggested that, in this way, teachers' relationship perceptions and sensitive behavior towards individual students could be enhanced. Also, children's own beliefs and feelings about the relationship with their teacher were found to be associated with classroom problem behavior. Especially physical aggression of kindergarten boys was related to child reports of lower levels of teacher care and acceptance. Though the research design precludes causal inferences, it is important to recognize the possibility that maladaptive behavior of children could (partially) result from relational insecurity. Other issues that were highlighted in *Chapter 7* were the advances in measurement, practical implications of the findings with respect to teaching practices and consultative work with teachers, and limitations of the research. We closed the discussion with suggestions for future research.

In sum, this PhD thesis provided new insights in the nature of interpersonal relationships between teachers and disruptive kindergarten children by studying different methods and perspectives. In addition, support was found for the assumption that engaging teachers in in-depth reflection on the relationship with a specific child could support them in building nurturing relationships with disruptive children.