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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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Teachers can have a remarkable influence on their students. A famous example is of course the Pygmalion in the classroom study, by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). They randomly selected twenty percent of the children in classes and predicted that they would academically bloom. A year later it appeared that these children gained better scores on tests than their fellow classmates. These children did not actually have better intellectual capacities. Just because of the expectations in the minds of their teachers and their behavior towards these children, these children started to perform better. This not only proves that teachers' expectations influence the actual performance of children. It also shows that teachers behave differently towards different children.

That teachers behave differently towards different children, should not be too much of a surprise, because it basically proves that teachers are human too. Teachers, just like their students and everybody else, have personal preferences for certain types of persons above others. Teachers have been trained to treat all children equally and to divide their attention fairly, but it is almost impossible to entirely rule out acting on these preferences (Bourdeau & Ryan, 1978). This obviously will lead teachers to have better relationships with some children than with others. Teachers feel more affectionate towards one child than to another (Bourdeau & Ryan). As a result, the affective relationship in various teacher-child dyads will be very different.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) showed that teachers' academic expectations of children influenced these children's learning behavior. From there, it is only a small step to argue that the affection that teachers feel for their students, might influence the well-being and learning behavior of children at school as well. In this thesis, the influence of the affective teacher-child relationship on the learning behavior of children is regarded. According to Bowlby (1969/1984), children from three years up are increasingly able to function without their primary caregivers. Nevertheless, these feelings of security are still rather unstable. If a child feels distressed during school hours, the teacher, as a substitute attachment figure, is the most obvious person to turn to. The extent to which children have a positive relationship with this teacher is believed to be important for their well-being, involvement and performance on learning tasks.

Some children are probably more dependent on the relationship with their teacher than others. Especially for vulnerable children, the quality of the affective teacher-child relationship may be crucial as to whether the teacher will be able to restore children's emotional security. From former research it appears that for example young children (Brophy & Good, 1986) and children from risk samples (Garmezy, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982) profit from a supportive relationship with their teacher.

In the present thesis, emotional security is an important construct. Following Cummings and Davies (1996), children's sense of emotional security is considered a core concern in their functioning. Cummings and Davies regard emotional security as a set goal by which children regulate their functioning in social contexts. They have argued that whenever children feel insecure a regulatory system becomes activated and strategies are employed to promote security. Children's emotional security in a particular social context constantly reflects an interaction of factors internal and external of the child. The presence of emotional problems is an example of an internal factor that may influence a child's emotional security. An example of an external factor is the presence of a substitute attachment figure, such as the teacher.

Emotion regulation costs time and energy. Several authors have argued that in case of distress, individuals are primarily focused at preserving an acceptable level of well-being (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Lazarus, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For children dealing with stressful situations in the classroom, emotion regulation therefore may be at the expense of involvement with school tasks (Boekaerts, 1993). Given that involvement is considered to mediate learning (Harskamp, Pijl & Snippe, 1991; Schonewille & Van der Leij, 1995; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), feelings of insecurity may result in lower performance.

According to attachment theory, attachment figures provide children with a secure base from which they can explore their environment (e.g., Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969/1983; De Ruiter & Van IJzendoorn, 1993). From a slightly different perspective, the use of an attachment figure to achieve security can be described as one of several ways of regulating emotional security (Koomen, Hoeksma, Keller & De Jong, 1999). In school, young children will presumably use their teacher to derive security from. When the teacher makes them feel secure they will become more easily involved with cognitive tasks, and as a result they may perform better.

In the last decennium the association between the teacher-child relationship and learning behavior in school has increasingly gained the attention of researchers (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Pianta, Nimetz & Bennet, 1997; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Several studies confirm the idea that a positive affective teacher-child relationship can favorably influence children's cognitive achievement. Howes, Hamilton and Matheson (1994), for example, found that children, who had a secure relationship with their childcare teacher, were more involved in complex peer play. In addition, Pianta et al. (1997) revealed that the quality of the teacher-child relationship predicted children's performance on a measure of concept development in preschool. Birch and Ladd (1997) also observed that close relationships between children and teachers were positively related to academic performance.

However, the studies mentioned use different concepts concerning the affective teacher-child relationship and are not in agreement about the extent to which this affective relationship is of influence on learning behavior. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, the findings of

previous research concerning the relation between the affective teacher-child relationship and learning behavior are therefore integrated in a meta-analysis, to be able to draw some conclusions concerning the impact of the affective teacher-child relationship. The study is divided in four different meta-analyses. The impact of both positive and negative affective teacher-child relationships on involvement with school tasks, as well as achievement on school tasks is regarded.

In addition, three experimental studies have been performed which will be described in Chapter 3 and 4 of this thesis. In these studies kindergarten children were trained on a cognitive task either by their own regular teacher or by a less familiar teacher. It was examined whether children who worked with their regular teacher were able to profit from the teacher-child relationship that had developed during the months prior to the study. In other words, it was examined whether children who worked with their own teacher felt more secure, were more involved and performed better on the presented cognitive task as compared to children who worked with a less familiar teacher.

In previous studies the quality of the existing teacher-child relationship has merely been determined either by questionnaires (e.g., Pianta et al., 1997; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992) or observation (e.g., Ladd et al., 1999). In the experimental studies described in this thesis, teacher-child interaction in an existing relationship is compared with the interaction of a child with an unfamiliar teacher. Children are quite often confronted with new teachers during their school life. In a lot of schools, children change teachers every year. In addition, children are confronted with unfamiliar substitute teachers regularly. For example, trainee teachers may take over some classes or teachers have to be replaced temporarily because they are ill. Consequently, for theoretical as well as for practical reasons, it is very interesting to find out what the effect is of a strange teacher on children's learning behavior.

An advantage of the use of experimental manipulation, is that the subject of interest can be observed under rather controlled conditions. For example, in an experimental study subjects are divided over the conditions up front, whereas in a natural setting the number of subjects in each condition can't be determined in advance. An additional advantage is that studying the affective teacher-child relationship by way of an experimental manipulation provides a very objective measure to determine the affective teacher-child relationship.

Chapter 3 of this thesis, reports on the first experimental study. Kindergarten children who had entered school several months before the experiment, were trained on a categorization and recall task in a small group. They were trained either by their own regular teacher, or by a less familiar teacher that worked in the same school. The idea was that children could profit from an affective relationship with their own teacher, but not from a relationship with the less familiar teacher. It was expected that children would feel more secure with their own teacher, and that emotional security would lead to better involvement and eventually to better performance.

Chapter 4 reports on the second and third experimental study. In the second experiment, children worked on a picture-book task in a small group with a teacher. In this

study, the teacher was either their own regular teacher, or a strange teacher whom they had never seen before. Half of the children in the second study had internalizing problems, the other half had no internalizing problems. The third experiment fully corresponded with the second, with the exception that children worked on the picture-book task alone with a teacher. The expectations in the second and third experimental study were similar to those in the first study. In addition, internalizing children were expected to feel more emotionally insecure than non-internalizing children. In Chapter 5, the final chapter of this thesis, the findings of the several studies are combined and discussed.

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