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Carlo Schuengel a

a Department of Clinical Child and Family Studies and EMGO + Institute for Health and Care Research, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Teacher–child relationships as a developmental issue

Carlo Schuengel*

Department of Clinical Child and Family Studies and EMGO + Institute for Health and Care Research, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Teacher–child relationships may be a developmental issue in its own right, instead of an aspect of wider developmental issues such as attachment or adaptation to school. This paper discusses research findings on teacher–child relationships to argue that teacher–child relationships are important for carrying forward the experiences represented in the attachment behavioral system, although it is not clear whether teacher–child relationships themselves add to the attachment behavioral system or to the sociability behavioral system. The research demonstrates that attachment theory offers a useful template for understanding the role of teacher–child relationships in development. Listing teacher–child relationships among main developmental issues for today's children puts the spotlight on avenues for improving teacher–child relationships.

Keywords: teacher–child relationship; attachment; developmental theory; sociability; socio-emotional development

Introduction

School entry is an important developmental junction. Most parents trust that school will be good for their child. Sometimes parents worry, however, about behavioral skills of their children and their children's connections with peers and teachers (Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). If children develop good relationships, this will be a developmental asset for making the most of their school careers and contribute to children's ability to build and maintain supportive networks. However, teachers also identify a sizeable minority of children who show a difficult, problematic school entry, mainly due to socio-behavioral difficulties (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Adaptation to school and competence in peer interaction have been identified as key developmental issues for school-going children (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). The question is whether now the time has come to consider teacher–child relationships as a developmental issue in its own right. This question may be answered by considering teacher–child relationships in the context of other, related developmental issues. The focus in this paper will be on what the research focus on teacher–child relationships contributes in relation to the developmental issue of attachment, and how attachment theory and research function as a template for the study of teacher–child relationship development.

*Email: c.schuengel@vu.nl
Teacher–child relationships and the developmental issue of attachment

Considerations of parsimony dictate that teacher–child relationships should only be denoted a separate developmental issue if it is not to be subsumed under other, more general, developmental issues. Because the interest in quality of teacher–child relationships followed from theory and research on attachment (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012), the question may be whether teacher–child relationships should be considered an instance of the ongoing, life-span developmental issue of building and maintaining attachment relationships. Verschueren and Koomen (2012) described the various positions by stating that teacher–child relationships may have an attachment component, that teachers may function as temporary attachment figures, that teachers may be targets of attachment behavior, but also that children probably do not develop attachment bonds towards their teachers. With the nature of the linkage between teacher–child relationships and attachment being unclear, it is useful to examine to what extent teacher–child relationships and attachment relationships are based on shared or unique underlying mechanisms.

The attachment behavioral system in children is supposed to be responsible for the formation and continued adaptation of attachment relationships with specific caregivers (Bowlby, 1984). The operation of the attachment behavioral system is deduced from behavior with the apparent function to seek or maintain adequate proximity and contact to specific persons who have shown to be a source of protection, involvement, and support. There is no fixed, distinct set of attachment behaviors for detecting the operation of the attachment behavioral system. Children develop distinct patterns of attachment behavior that appear to be adaptations to the history of interaction with the attachment figure, and that appear to serve the function of optimizing the provision of felt security (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Main, 1990). The internal working model of the attachment relationship has been proposed as the cognitive-emotional substrate for collecting, processing, and producing attachment-related information to guide attachment behavior (Bowlby, 1984). The internal working model may be assessed through linked representations and expectations of the self and the attachment figure (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). These representations of self and other may therefore offer an indirect window into the attachment behavioral system and its relation to teacher–child relationships.

The study by Verschueren, Doumen, and Buyse (2012) investigated the links between preschool child–mother attachment, the quality of teacher–child relationships in first grade, and children’s self-concept. Self-concept was differentiated in general, academic, and social domains. Teacher–child relationship quality was measured using a combination of the closeness and conflict subscales of the Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Koomen, Verschueren, van Schooten, Jak, & Pianta, 2012). The findings supported a model in which teacher–child relationships build upon earlier established attachment relationships. However, teacher–child relationships and mother–child attachment relationships were differentially related to representations of the self. Quality of parent–child relationships was predictive of general self-concept, whereas teacher–child relationship quality was not. Teacher–child relationship quality was predictive of academic self-concept, and mediated the association between mother–child attachment and academic self-concept. In addition to the attachment behavioral system, the school context is also likely to elicit activity of the sociability behavioral system. In fact, teacher–child relationships
contributed uniquely to social self-concept by dampening the association between social self-concept and peer acceptance. The linkage between experiences in teacher–child relationships and representations of the self in social relationships supports a link between teacher–child relationships and the sociability behavioral system. Whether teacher–child relationships may be also linked to the attachment behavioral system awaits research that taps general or specific self-representations in relationships with potential attachment figures.

Further insight into the respective roles of teacher–child relationships and attachment relationships was gained from the longitudinal data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD ECCR) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (O’Connor, Collins, & Supplee, 2012). Teacher–child relationship quality mediated a linkage between mother–child attachment quality and behavioral functioning over a period of seven years. A particularly interesting aspect of their study was their exploration of different trajectories in teacher–child relationship quality. Because children usually have a new teacher each year, these trajectories are a better reflection of children’s experiences than teacher reports at any time point. In addition to mediating the linkage between mother–child attachment and behavior problems, teacher–child relationship trajectories added significantly to the prediction of fifth grade behavior problems, over and above the prediction on the basis of mother–child attachment (in particular, insecure-other) and behavior problems at 36 months. This effect was particularly clear for the association between teacher–child conflict and externalizing behavior problems. These results are consonant with a model in which parent–child attachment contributes to the initial settings for teacher–child relationships, with experiences with teachers further shaping the development of underlying developmental issues (Sroufe et al., 2005). However, it should be noted that the associations with attachment depended on a small subgroup of children with an insecure-other attachment relationship.

Kobak, Herres, and Laurenceau (2012) studied mental representations of attachment experiences with parents and negative interactions with teachers in an at-risk sample. Preoccupied attachment representations and negative student–teacher interactions (largely based on conflicts with one or more teachers) each uniquely predicted sexual risk taking and, for females, placing romantic partners higher in the hierarchy of attachment figures. Preoccupied attachment representations were associated for females with negative teacher–student interaction, suggesting a gender-bound linkage between the attachment behavioral system and relationships with teachers. Kobak et al. used an interesting measure that might shed light on the question whether the attachment behavioral system is involved in teacher–child relationships, namely the Important People Interview (IPI; Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). Adolescents could nominate and rank persons in their lives in response to questions about feelings of attachment (to whom closest, who would be missed the most, who to call in emergency). The authors did not report whether teachers were at all nominated as attachment figures. An earlier study with early and late high school and college students found that attachment hierarchies were composed of parents, romantic partners, friends, siblings, not teachers (Rosenthal & Kobak, 2010). This may not be surprising for high school and college students because they have multiple teachers and each teacher has even more students. In primary school, children and teachers spend more time, interact on a regular basis,
and specific relationships might develop. It might therefore be interesting to adapt the IPI for research with primary school children as well.

The overview of selected research findings in this special issue supports linkages between the attachment behavioral system and teacher–child relationships. However, it remains unclear whether linkages are direct (i.e., the attachment behavioral system influences and is influenced by teacher–child interactions) or indirect (i.e., through third factors). Consistent with a developmental systems view (Sabol & Pianta, 2012), teacher–child interactions appear to be carried forward in behavioral development and are reflected in domain-specific aspects of self-concept, but direct measurements of internal working models of relationships with teachers have not been undertaken. It is unclear whether teachers occupy a place in the attachment hierarchy of children in primary school. They do not appear to do so in adolescence. This fits with the view that teachers may be targets for support seeking and sociable behaviors, and may be important enough that children are influenced by their relationships with teachers (although establishing causal associations will require experimental testing). On the basis of these findings, it may be argued that teacher–child relationships are a developmental issue in their own right rather than part of the developmental issue of building an attachment network.

### Attachment theory and research as a template for research on teacher–child relationships

If teacher–child relationships are a developmental issue in their own right, it is important to ask whether its unique features and underlying mechanisms can be brought out clearly enough if research proceeds from an attachment theoretical template (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Views borrowed from attachment theory stress: (1) the interplay of closeness and exploration and the priority given to attachment behavior if children perceive a situation as unsafe; (2) the explanatory power of patterns of interactive behavior over single concrete behaviors; and (3) the idea that attachment relationships self-organize because both partners in the relationship perceive the outcome of their interactions as salient and learn to anticipate each other’s behavior through building a mental working model of the relationship. The empirical study of teacher–child relationships is not restricted by the assumptions of attachment theory, however. By operationalizing teacher–child relationships along dimensions of closeness, conflict, and dependency, the idea is retained that teachers may become affectively important to children such that an affectional bond develops, and that both partners in the relationship organize their interactive behavior in order to adapt to the contradictions between the interactions desired and the interactions offered. Similar to conceptualizations of attachment relationships as offering a metaphorical “secure base”, supportive and encouraging interactions in the context of learning and exploration are selected as relevant for the quality of the teacher–child relationship. Different from conceptualizations of attachment relationships as offering a metaphorical “safe haven” in times of stress, contact seeking when the child is upset does not weigh heavily in judging the quality of teacher–child relationships.

Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler, Eckstein-Madry, and Milatz (2012) explored whether taking the dyad as the unit of analysis and interpreting patterns of interactive behavior from a self-organizing perspective (like in attachment research) unleashes explanatory strength that is not found in linear combinations of
single relationship characteristics. Employing cluster analysis as an appropriate technique for person-centered analyses, they found four distinct relationship patterns. Ahnert et al. noted the parallels between their proximal-balanced teacher relationship cluster (high closeness, low conflict, low dependence) to secure attachment, between their proximal-dependent cluster (high closeness, low conflict, high dependence) and resistant relationships, between their distant-independent cluster (low closeness, low conflict, low dependence) and avoidant relationships, and between their conflict-loaded cluster (low closeness, high conflict, high dependence) and disorganized relationships. Patterns of interactive behavior in the natural situation (i.e., the classroom) may not be directly comparable to patterns of interactive behavior in a stressful setting such as the strange situation. Studies conducted in the home have found that children classified as avoidant in the strange situation did not show less conflicted, inharmonious interactions with their mothers at home, but rather similar (Bailey, Moran, Pederson, & Bento, 2007) or even higher rates of conflicted behavior (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Van Bakel & Riksen-Walraven, 2002). Notwithstanding, the patterns found by Ahnert et al. showed intriguing associations with observed support by teachers, and allostatic load measured by daily cortisol patterns across the school week. Children with proximal-dependent relationships were more likely to be in classrooms characterized by less emotional support; in children with proximal-dependent and conflict-loaded relationships, the diurnal pattern of cortisol was flattened in comparison to children with proximal-balanced relationships. These results underscore the considerable explanatory power of the person-centered (cq., dyad-centered) approach that has been at the basis of much of attachment research (Ainsworth et al., 1978), and that is now revisited by Ahnert et al. with respect to teacher–child relationships. In order to understand the etiology and developmental meaning of these patterns, researchers might be inspired but not limited by the interpretations given to attachment relationship patterns.

Spilt, Koomen, Thijs, and Van der Leij (2012) used attachment research as a template for intervening in teacher–child relationships. Their intervention program focused on reflective functioning and teachers’ mental representations of the relationships with children. The results of the intervention were promising, despite limited statistical power. In fact, the size of the effect on sensitivity that could be calculated from the Spilt et al. study ($d = .57$ for difference in slopes) was considerably larger than the effect of representation focused interventions aimed at improving maternal sensitivity and mother–child attachment ($d = .17–.20$; Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003). The intervention by Spilt et al. may provide a paradigm that could be used to experimentally manipulate teacher behaviors that would contribute to children’s expectations of teachers as potential regulators of affect and supportive figures in challenging situations.

Attachment theory and research continue to support fruitful new avenues for studying and intervening with teacher–child relationships. Some findings suggest that rather than the attachment behavioral system, the sociability behavioral system may be a component of this relationship, or the involvement of the attachment or sociability behavioral system may vary according to developmental and situational context (Kobak, Little, Race, & Acosta, 2001; Verschueren et al., 2012). Sabol and Pianta (2012) therefore also point to other models, including social-motivational, socialization, interpersonal, and social support models that support the importance of emotional support and social connections. By including concepts and mechanisms from these related theories, the study of teacher–child relationships may contribute
Conclusions and avenues for further research

The research reviewed in this paper echoes the point made by Sabol and Pianta (2012) that teacher–child relationships can be understood from a developmental systems perspective: seen from this perspective, the latest crop of research findings show that the study of teacher–child relationships is an indispensable part of developmental systems research. To add to the future directions recommended by Sabol and Pianta, research in this area may further capitalize on unique features of the school context. One such feature is the nesting of children in classrooms headed by one or two teachers. By sampling multiple children from a sufficient number of classrooms and using multilevel analytical techniques (Goldstein, 1995; Peugh, 2010), variance in teacher–child relationship quality can be decomposed into a component attributable to classroom characteristics (such as the teacher of that class) and a component attributable to children’s characteristics (and measurement error). Having these two components enables the testing of models in which both teachers’ and children’s characteristics may contribute to the explanation of relationship quality. Of special relevance for developmental systems theory is that the classroom-level component of teacher–child relationship quality approximates the contribution of teachers to children’s developmental outcomes through fostering good quality relationships (cf. Rutten, Schuengel, Dirks, Stams, Biesta, & Hoeksma, 2011). Another unique feature of teacher–child relationships is that most children have different teachers each school year. Research may capitalize on this feature in at least two ways. Aggregation of longitudinal measurements or multilevel decomposition leads to unbiased estimators of children’s experiences in teacher–child relationships (O’Connor et al., 2012). And longitudinal analyses provide the opportunity to investigate the extent to which experiences in the relationship with one teacher may be carried forward into relationships with subsequent teachers, which would support the proposition that quality of teacher–child relationships at least partly depends on internal working models of such relationships (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Including teacher–child relationships in our list of developmental issues to study and support is a decision that must not only be based on its empirical links with other developmental issues and its unique explanatory power. It should also be based on consideration of the challenges that children face in a given socio-cultural setting. In a recent survey about the impact of growing up in a “hyperconnected” world (Anderson & Rainie, 2012), teachers expressed concern that electronically mediated shallow social contacts, unselective use of information, and continuous distractions compete with the support that teachers have to offer to children on how to judge information, become involved and interested in other persons, and learn how to focus, delay gratification, and engage deeply with subject matter. The rapid worldwide changes in networks that children find themselves in may not only affect academic learning in school but may also have broader developmental and social implications (Anderson & Rainie, 2012). In countries with formal schooling, teacher–child relationships still represent universal “strong ties” in an era in which children increasingly establish ties through social media and communicative devices that may be considered weak (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Livingstone & Brake, 2010).
Developmental issues also put the spotlight on challenges for caregivers and educators (Cummings et al., 2000). Research such as that reviewed in the current paper yields insight in ways how these challenges may be met. To consider teacher–child relationships as an important developmental issue in its own right is therefore not only warranted based on their connections with other developmental issues, but may also prove to be highly topical with respect to the challenges that developmental science is asked to address.

References


