Mevlana International Journal of Education (MIJE)
Vol. 3(4), pp. 118-126, 1 December, 2013
Available online at http://mije.mevlana.edu.tr/
http://dx.doi.org/10.13054/mije.13.66.3.4

The teacher student relationship as a predictor of preschoolers' social anxiety

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Article history
Received:
29.08.2013

Received in revised form:
22.09.2013

Accepted:
27.09.2013

Key words:
Teacher-child relationship, social anxiety, preschooler

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship of teacher-child relations and the social anxiety of the preschool child. Twelve preschool teachers provided socio-demographic data regarding children and themselves and rated their teacher student relations and candidate teachers rated preschool children's (n=169) social anxiety. In this study, the Student-Teacher Relation Scale, developed by Pianta and adapted into Turkish by Beyazkürk was used to assess teacher-student relations. The social anxiety sub-dimension of the Children's Behavior Assessment Scale developed by Şehirli was also administered. Students' social anxiety score were negatively correlated with teacher-student relation closeness scores and positively correlated with teacher-student relationship conflict and dependence. A regression analysis indicated that the teacher-student relation was a significant predictor of children's social anxiety. The results of the study indicated that teacher-student relationship in the preschool period has an important effect on children's social anxiety. From the findings of this study, it can be inferred that intervention programs aiming at teachers' professional advancement should consider student-teacher relationship as an issue to emphasize. Teachers should be encouraged to gain and use certain skills and methods which would enable them to establish warm and caring relationship with children in classroom.

Introduction

School is important for the socialization for students. One of the most important relationships students establish in the school environment is their relationships with teachers. The child's interaction with his teacher is important both for social development and for learning (Barret & Pahl, 2006). Relations established with children in the early childhood period form the basis for the interpersonal relations the children will establish in the future. According to attachment theory, relationships established in early childhood are influential on the child's perceptions of self and others (Beyazkürk & Kesner, 2005; Şahin & Anlıak, 2008).

In terms of early period relationships, teachers seem to be the persons who the students meet after their parents and who have important influences in children. Pre-school children regard the teacher as the representative of parents at school (Tok, 2011). Children use their teachers as examples in many respects, including behavior, clothing, and even manner of walking (Yeşil, 2002).

A growing body of literature suggests that developmental outcomes for children in schools

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depend on teacher-student relationship quality (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Pianta, 1999; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). From the initial days of school, children trust their teachers and expect teachers to be understanding and encouraging toward themselves because teachers' friendly and accepting attitudes form a basis for children to benefit from daily exchanges in classroom (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). An emerging body of literature suggests that student engagement is associated with teacher-student relationship (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Although researchers have described the term of student engagement differently, common definitions include the elements of collaborative participation, obedience to classroom rules and procedures, self-directedness, autonomy, perseverance, energy and desire to achieve (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Hughes, & Kwok, 2007).

Teacher-child relationship studies have indicated that children's establishment of secure relation with their teachers during the early years is a good predictor of their future relations with peers and teachers (Kontos, & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 2001). On the other hand, a child who does not have an intensively emotive relationship with his teacher, or a child who is in an insecure relationship with his teacher may suffer from feelings of isolation (Meesters & Muris, 2002; Beyazkürk, 2005). Studies on this issue are of great importance in terms of attracting teachers and academics to this issue and for the provision of supplementary activities that will develop the student-teacher relationship. In this study, the effects of teacher-student relationships on children's social anxiety were investigated.

The definition of anxiety embodies several elements such as irrational tension and fears felt in response to so-called dangers and uncontrolled reactions to those feelings (Erol & Öner, 1999). The characteristic and type of anxiety can vary according to the developmental process of children (Swedo & Leonard, 2000). A child's being anxious to eat in a social setting or the anxiety related to speaking in social situations are considered to be social anxieties. According to Gümüş (2006), social anxiety is the feeling of disturbance and tension as a result of fears of behaving inappropriately in various social occasions, leaving a negative impression, or being judged negatively. Thus, socially anxious children feel a need not to behave in self-desired way because of the fear that other people will judge them negatively. These children avoid eye-contact and looking at someone's face, they prefer solitary play, show unwillingness to participate in group discussions and speak in front of people (Gülay, 2010).

In the model developed by Rapee and Heimberg (1997) to explain social anxiety, it is maintained out that people with social anxiety problems start their life with excessively authoritarian or rejecting parents. According to this model, children infer that "being positively judged by others is important" (Sertelin Mercan, 2007). Social relations come to be reason for fear in children who receive these messages from their family. Individuals with social anxiety are afraid of and try to avoid as much as possible occasions that require social interaction (Köroğlu, 2006).

Development of social anxiety may not only be related with family's attitudes and behaviors. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory suggests that developing child is influenced by several factors. In ecological systems theory, microsystem includes individuals that the developing child is in close relationship. Those relationships are believed to contribute to social development of children and they protect children in risky situations (Hamilton et al., 2006). Based on this theoretical framework, teacher-child relations are examined in this study for determining whether those relationships predict social anxiety in preschool children.

Social anxiety can play a role in the development of negative social behaviors; it can be the reason for social withdrawal or not being able to take part in peer activities (La Greca & Stone, 1993). There are different views about when social anxiety comes into being and which behaviors at which age are regarded as evidence of social anxiety. Based on studies on social anxiety in the pre-school period, it is possible to define social anxiety as showing fear, anxiety, and shyness in an exaggerated way in social relations with adults (Akan, 2001; Roza, Hofstra, Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Şehirli, 2007). When the results of the findings that indicate social, emotional and behavioral disorders in early childhood are related with problem behaviors in the older ages, (Babinski, Hartsough, & Lambert, 1999; Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy, Shepard, Guthrie, Mazsk, et al., 1999; Nelson, Martin, Hodge, Havill, & Kamphaus, 1999), it is important to determine social anxiety at early ages and reveal issues related with it. However, as a consequence of a lack of research, we know relatively little about social anxiety problems among preschoolers (Campbell, 1995). Therefore, it is believed that studies on the frequency of the incidences of social anxiety among pre-school children in terms of its varieties, reasons for anxiety, and the factors that affect anxiety will contribute to the literature in this field. Following from this point, the effect of teacher-student relationships on social anxiety in pre-school children was investigated.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate teacher-student relations as predictors of social anxiety among a sample of Turkish preschoolers. Based on the previous literature, our research questions were: (1) What is the correlation between teacher-student relations and social anxiety? (2) How would the conflict between teacher and student predict the social anxiety of Turkish preschoolers? (3) How would the closeness between teacher and student predict the social anxiety of Turkish preschoolers? (4) How would the dependency of the student on the teacher predict the social anxiety of Turkish preschoolers?

Method

Participants

The target population of this study was composed of preschool teachers and their students from the Konya city center during the 2011-2012 academic year. Because both of the research instruments have to be completed by teachers, results may be biased; for this reason, two different teachers completed the instruments. Therefore, criterion (criterion sampling) method from purposeful sampling methods is used the determination of the sample of the study sample. Thus, study group has been recruited from the population that has pre-service trainee teachers in addition to a major teacher in classroom; finally 12 kindergarten classrooms constituted the study group. The study sample selection criteria is that pre-service trainee teachers who give opinion about children's social anxiety had to be working in the same classroom for at least one semester. After selecting the sample of the study, the researcher discussed with the teachers of selected classrooms about present study and teachers and pre-service trainee teachers stated their willingness to participate in research. Written permission was obtained from all parents whose children participated in the study. Twelve preschool teachers provided socio-demographic data and rated their teacher-student relations. Candidate teachers completed the instruments measuring social anxiety behaviors for each student (n=169 students). The children who took part in the study were aged between 60 to 72 months old (*Mean*=64.4; Sd= 1.2) and 89 of them were women and 80 were men. Nine of the teachers were female and three were male. The mean age of the teachers was 32.8 (sd=5.01), mean length of service was 7.7 years (sd= 4.2) and the average class size was 20.9 students (sd= 4.9).

Instruments

The Child Behavior Assessment Scale: The Child Behavior Assessment Scale was developed by Şehirli (2007) to measure undesired behaviors and emotional and behavioral disorders of 5 to 6 year olds. The five-point Likert type scale is completed by teachers based on their observations of the child. Instrument consists of 43 items and three sub-scales. These are: non-compliant behaviors, compliance and social anxiety. Cronbach's alpha was found to be .96 for the non-compliant behaviors sub-test, .93 for the compliance sub-test, and .88 for the social anxiety sub-set and .95 for the whole scale (Şehirli, 2007). In this study, the social anxiety sub-dimension of the scale which assesses children's fear, anxiety, shyness, and excitement in social environments was used. Social anxiety sub-scale used in this study includes 19 items.

Student – Teacher Relationship Scale – STRS: The Student – Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) developed by Pianta (1996) is a five point Likert type scale formed of 28 items. It is applicable for students from preschool period to third grade. The scale is completed by teachers and has three sub-dimensions: conflict, closeness, and dependence (cited in Beyazkürk & Kesner, 2005). The conflict points of the scale include the behaviors of the child perceived as negative by the teacher and the negative interactions in the emotional dimension. High points of conflict indicate possible conflicts between the teacher and the student, an uncertainty about how the teacher will deal with such students emotionally or that the teacher cannot define himself as effective in this relationship. The closeness subscale includes paying attention to the child as required, being responsive and engaging in positive emotional interactions. High scores of closeness indicate that the teacher perceives this specific student to be a good students and the student considers the teacher as a supportive adult and uses him as an effective resource. The dependence subscale, on the other hand, includes the children's search for physical closeness and help, their negative emotional interactions and the teacher's highly responsive behaviors against some children. High scores of dependence indicate problems of children being excessively dependent on the teacher, such that the student would react violently when leaving the teacher and that the student may demand help although he does not need it (Beyazkürk, 2005; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Kesner, 2002; Beyazkürk & Kesner, 2005).

The reliability and validity assessment of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale on Turkish sample have been provided by Beyazkürk (2005). According to the factor analysis results that have been made, it has been observed that the items in the scale have concentrated on three factors with 28 items basically similar to its original. Conflict factor is formed of eleven items with the sample item belonging to this factor being "This child will easily get angry with me". Closeness factor is formed of ten items with the sample item belonging to this factor being "I can share a warm relationship full of love with this child". Dependence factor is formed of seven items with the sample item belonging to this factor being "This child will give a violent reaction against leaving me". Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated to determine that the internal consistencies of the scale were .84 for the conflict subscale, .80 for the closeness subscale, .72 for the dependence subscale and .86 for the total score (Beyazkürk, 2005).

Data Analysis

Student-teacher relationship scale was completed by teachers for each student. Social anxiety subscale of The Child Behavior Assessment Scale was completed by preservice trainee teachers for each student. Pearson product–moment correlation analysis which was utilized to answer the first research question and compute bivariate correlations between the social anxiety and teacher-student relation scale sub-tests. In addition, the descriptive statistic related dependent and independent variable are presented in Table 1. Next, a multiple

regression analysis was conducted. SPSS statistical software (version 15.0) and a significance level (p) of less than .05 were used for all of the statistical analyses.

Results

The effect of the teacher-student relationship on the social anxiety level in the preschool period was examined firstly by the relationship between the teacher-student relationship and social anxieties of the children and secondly by the multiple regression analyses regarding the regression of social anxieties of children by the teacher-student relationship.

Descriptive statistics belonging to dependent and independent variants of the study and the results of the correlation analysis showing the results between these variants have been given in Table 1.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations among Interval Variables, Means and Standard Deviations N=169)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Conflict	-			
2. Closeness	-,64**	-		
3. Dependence	,44**	,05	-	
4. Social anxiety	,36**	-,46**	,29**	-
5. Mean	23.90	36.21	18.80	41.55
6. Standard deviation	9.12	7.48	4.73	14.11

Notes: $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$

When Table 1 is examined it is seen that the conflict point mean of children in the teacher-student relationship is 23.90 (sd=9.12); the closeness point mean is 36.21 (sd=7.48); the dependence point mean is 18.80 (sd=4.73) and the social anxiety point mean is 41.55 (sd=14.11). When the relationship between variants is examined it is seen that there is a positive significant relationship between conflict between teacher-student and the social anxieties of the children (r=36, p<.01), a positive significant relationship between the dependence of the student on the teacher and the social anxieties of children (r=.29, p<.01) and there is a negative significant relationship between the closeness between teacher-student and social anxieties of children (r=.46, p<.01).

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis on Children's Social Anxiety (N=169)

Teacher-Student Relation	*Beta*	SH_B	β	*T*	*P*
Constant	70,51	8,14		8,66	,00
Conflict	-,39	,16	-,25	-2,37	,02*
Closeness	-1,22	,18	-,64	-6,80	,00***
Dependence	1,30	,24	,44	5,38	,00***

Notes: $R = .58$ $R^2 = .34$ $F_{(3/165)} = 27.78$ $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

In order to know what degree the teacher-student relation predicted children's social anxiety,

the multiple regression analysis was performed and statistical significance found between them ($F_{(3/165)}$= 27.78, p<.001). It was found that all of the sub factors of the teacher-student relation (conflict, closeness, dependency) could explain %34 of the difference in the child social anxiety scores (R=.58, R^2=.34). It was determined that in teacher-student relation conflict (β=-.25, p<.05), closeness (β=-.64, p<.05) and dependency (β=.44, p<.05) have model specific contributions.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the study results, students' social anxiety score were negatively correlated with teacher-student relation closeness scores and positively correlated with teacher-student relationship conflict and dependence. Besides, the results of regression analysis indicate that teacher-student relations significantly predict children's social anxiety. Preschool educational institutions are the educational environments in which children feel safe because they leave the family environment for the first time and spend a long period of time. In these environments, there are peers who he has not known before and a community formed by his teacher and he will be working as an individual for the first time without his parents. The preschool teacher is the first adult that a child has an authority relationship with after the people giving him primary care. When considered from this point of view, the teacher is important for the child on emotional terms. All the messages he derives from his relationship with his teacher such as appreciation will be initiated by the teacher. Likewise if a reprimand is to be given by the teacher, his perception regarding whether his teacher likes him or not is important for the child. It is important to remember, as suggested by Rapee and Heimberg (1997), that a child's perception is that "it is important to be positively appreciated by others". Given that this view provides the basis for social anxiety it is clear how the conflict that a teacher has with a child or how a closeness between them is important for the child. A teacher having a friendly relationship with the child, his avoiding entering into a power struggle and conflict with the child and making the child feel that he is aware of his positive behaviors and that he approves them will give the child a sense of safety in the classroom. With the studies that have been conducted and the relevant literature that has been examined, it is seen that a warm and close relationship between teachers and students can have positive effects on the social, emotional, behavioral and academic skills of the child (Howes & Smith, 1995; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Howes, 2000; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Findings obtained by various researchers of preschool students, state that the conflict in relationships between teachers and students adversely affects the social relationship with peers, increases aggression and behavioral problems (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, 1994; Birch & Ladd, 1997) and positive relationships between teachers and students support the child's socialization (Raikes, 1996; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Stuhlamn, 2004) support the results of this study.

One of the findings of the study is that a child's social anxiety increases as his dependence in the relationship with his teacher increases. When we consider this finding in a theoretical framework and examine the family structures of children with a high level of social anxiety, it has been determined that such children came from families which are overprotective and which have relationships with their children based on dependence. Takako (1994) states that the families of individuals with social anxiety are overprotective, excessively strict families which like to be in control but which can give only a limited amount of emotional support. Children raised in such family structure worry in social environments and fear making mistakes and being assessed negatively which limit the child's behavior in social environments (Cited by Erkan, 2002). Given such a family structure, when the child starts his preschool education the child may carry on a similarly dependent relationship with his

teachers which may be one of the reasons of social anxiety that the child experiences. There are information in literature indicating that relationship between child and family influences the relationship that will be established between child and teacher (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992).

The results of the study indicated that teacher-student relationship in the preschool period has an important effect on children's social anxiety. From the findings of this study, it can be inferred that intervention programs aiming at teachers' professional advancement should consider student-teacher relationship as an issue to emphasize. Teachers should be encouraged to gain and use certain skills and methods which would enable them to establish warm and caring relationship with children in classroom. However, it is a limitation for this study to assess teacher-student relationship based on teacher reports. For this reason, supporting the study findings with different measurement scales would be useful. When rating their relationship with students, teachers may have given biased answers because of the feeling that they will be judged. For this reason, supporting the results of study with qualitative data relying on observation would be useful. Future studies examining the influential factors on social anxiety of preschool children would make great contribution to detailed understanding of this issue. Besides, based on research results, it can be suggested that school psychologists should identify children with high social anxiety and do interventions to reduce anxiety. In these interventions, school psychologists can use intervention programs like FRIENDS. In addition to this, due to preschool children's young ages, bibliotherapy, puppets, drawing, sandplay, games and method of cross–age peer tutoring can be used (Campbell, 2003). It is recommended that teachers should be included in these interventions and interventions should involve activities that support intimacy between teacher and child, and activities that reduce independency and conflict.

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