NEWS | POSTED NOVEMBER 20, 2024

Study Reveals Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships In Early Childhood Education

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on November 20, 2024

PRESS RELEASE

Published
Wednesday, November 20, 2024
2:47pm

The cumulative, timing-specific, and enduring associations between student–teacher relationships and early elementary outcomes

Read the Child Development article:

WILEY ONLINE LIBRARY

Contact:

Jessica Efstathiou, Public Relations Consultant

E-MAIL

Researchers Explored Data from One of the First Nationally Representative Samples in the United States

Are student-teacher relationships critical to early childhood education? With roughly 33 million students enrolled in public elementary school education throughout the United States, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), there is an acute need to more comprehensively understand the ways in which children's development can be promoted through student-teacher relationships.

In a new *Child Development* study, researchers at The Ohio State University and University of Pennsylvania explored the significance of student-teacher relationships between kindergarten and third grade. Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten Class of 2010-2011, a nationally representative sample of approximately 14,370 children in the United States (51% Male; 51% White; 14% Black; 25% Hispanic; 4% Asian; 6% Other), researchers examined whether student-teacher relationships, as measured by closeness and conflict, matter more in specific grades, last over the early elementary school years, and have accumulating effects over time. The outcomes of these relationships included students' achievement, absenteeism, executive function, and social behavioral development. Additionally, this study considered whether different groups of students benefit more or less from these relationships.

To address their study questions, researchers used data from the surveys administered to parents and teachers along with direct assessments of students between kindergarten and third grade. Kindergarten through third grade was focused on because teachers in fourth and fifth grade did not report on their relationships with students. The findings show that the quality of relationships between students and teachers between kindergarten and third grade may have a significant benefit for children's overall early learning and development. There was also evidence that these relationships matter across the early

elementary school years and have cumulative effects over time. All of the children benefited from a close rapport with their teachers and girls tended to fare worse socially than boys when faced with conflict and less closeness in their teacher relationships.

Findings from the study highlight the importance of student-teacher relationships for children's development during the early elementary school years and provide valuable information for teachers, school administrators, families and researchers.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to discuss this research with Dr. Arya Ansari, Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University.

SRCD: What led you to study the quality of student – teacher relationships in early childhood education?

Dr. Arya Ansari: The topic of student-teacher relationships has received a great deal of attention in developmental and educational research. Despite this attention, there has been no nationally representative investigation into the cumulative, timing-specific, and enduring outcomes of these relationships. Additionally, previous research has often overlooked the patterns that emerge across different grade levels and important outcomes, resulting in a lack of comprehensive insight into the importance of these relationships and how they may vary among different populations. Accordingly, we viewed this study as an important next step toward filling these gaps in knowledge.

SRCD: Could you please expand upon the significance of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten Class of 2010-2011?

Dr. Arya Ansari: The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten Class of 2010-2011 (ECLS-K) is one of the few longitudinal and nationally representative samples of children in the United States, providing much needed insight into the home and school experiences of young children between kindergarten and fifth grade. The ECLS-K is a critical resource for understanding the role of student-teacher relationships in the early learning and development of young children. By providing regular information on children's relationships and outcomes, the ECLS-K can be used to pinpoint effective points of intervention that can enhance relationships among students and teachers.

SRCD: How can these findings be useful for teachers, school administrators, families and researchers?

Dr. Arya Ansari: The results of this study have several potential implications for teachers, administrators, families, and researchers. For teachers, our findings underscore the importance of developing strong connections with students across the early elementary school years. By recognizing the importance of a close and conflict free relationship, teachers can better support student success. For administrators, our findings highlight the importance of supporting teachers so that they have the time and space to cultivate stronger relationships with students. For families, our findings highlight the importance of collaborating with teachers to better support their children. Finally, for researchers, our findings provide a basis for continued exploration into the different aspects of relationships that shape student learning, and how these relationships may vary across populations and contexts.

SRCD: Were you surprised by any of the findings?

Dr. Arya Ansari: The most surprising finding is the consistency with which student-teacher relationships mattered for a broad range of outcomes across different student populations, both in the short- and long-term. We were also surprised that relationships formed as early as kindergarten matter for development not only in that year, but through the end of third grade. Moreover, these early connections significantly influence not only academic achievement, but also social and emotional development and executive functioning skills, which are critical for educational success.

SRCD: How can teachers strengthen their relationships with young children, particularly young girls who rely on this close relationship to help develop socially?

Dr. Arya Ansari: Teachers can strengthen their relationships with young children, and in particular young girls, in several ways. Teachers should try to create an environment of open communication and actively listen to their students. Additionally, showing empathy and understanding by validating emotions, encouraging collaboration, and personalizing interactions based on individual student interests can help build stronger connections. At the same time, however, it is important that we provide teachers with the support needed to allow them to develop these stronger and more individualized relationships.

SRCD: What's next in this field of research?

Dr. Arya Ansari: We need more information on what contributes to closer and less conflictual relationships between students and teachers and how that drives student achievement and social-emotional development. Identifying these factors is critical so we can develop more targeted interventions and strategies that address the unique needs of different student groups.

Summarized from an article in *Child Development,* "The Cumulative, Timing-Specific, and Enduring Associations Between Student—Teacher Relationships and Early Elementary Outcomes" by Ansari, A., Buckley, M.N., (The Ohio State University) and Woods, S.C., Gottfried, M. (University of Pennsylvania).
Copyright 2024 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.