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The role of teacher-child relationships in predicting first graders' school adjustment levels

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Abstract.

The teacher-child relationship is critical in children's social, emotional, and academic development, directly influencing their school adjustment during early primary education. This study aimed to examine the predictive effect of teacher-child relationship quality on the school adjustment levels of first-grade students. During the 2023-2024 academic year, the study utilized a survey design in primary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in Kirkuk. The sample comprised 100 students aged 6-7 years (52% girls, 48% boys) and 10 female teachers. Data were collected using a Personal Information Form, the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, and the School Adjustment Scale for Primary School Students. Findings indicated that the closeness and conflict dimensions of the teacher-child relationship significantly predicted students' school adjustment levels. However, the dependency dimension of the relationship did not have a statistically significant effect on school adjustment. These results underscore the supportive role of closeness and conflict in facilitating school adjustment, while dependency neither contributes to nor hinders the adjustment process. The findings highlight the importance of fostering positive teacher-child relationships to support children's transition and adaptation during early primary education.

Keywords: teacher-child relationship, school adjustment, primary education, first grade, early childhood development.



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1. Introduction

Changing societal conditions and advancements in education have heightened the importance of primary education. Beyond being a space where children acquire academic skills, primary schools serve as critical environments that support their social, emotional, and behavioral development. As children's first structured social setting after their family, schools play a fundamental role in fostering their adaptation to society. Primary education represents a formative period that can directly influence children's success in later stages of life. Within this context, the teacher-child relationship holds a pivotal role in shaping students' school adjustment and academic achievement (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

The teacher-child relationship is a crucial factor affecting children's social, emotional, and behavioral development. This relationship is shaped by the support, trust, and guidance provided by the teacher. Positive teacher-child relationships enhance students' motivation toward school, while negative relationships can lead to disengagement and declining academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Particularly in primary education, the teacher-child relationship plays a critical role in facilitating children's adjustment to school. Research has demonstrated that a positive teacher-child relationship enhances students' academic achievement and social skills (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

1.1. School Adjustment

School adjustment is a multidimensional concept encompassing children's academic, social, and emotional adaptation to the school environment. This process is shaped by the interactions among children, their families, and the school (Brizuela & Garcia-Sellers, 1999). Primary education represents a phase during which children fully engage with the educational system and begin developing social skills. During this period, teachers' understanding of children's needs and their ability to provide guidance play a vital role in ensuring successful school adjustment. Teachers' support is essential for creating a positive learning environment, which is critical for children's school adjustment (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

1.2. Teacher-Child Relationship and School Adjustment

Studies have shown a significant relationship between teacher-child interactions and school adjustment. For example, Birch and Ladd (1997) found that the closeness and conflict dimensions of teacher-child relationships influence students' school adjustment processes. Similarly, Pianta, Steinberg, and Rollins (1995) emphasized that teacher-child relationships during primary education have long-term effects on students' academic performance and social adjustment. This evidence suggests that teacher-child relationships impact not only immediate school adjustment but also students' future educational and social trajectories.

In Iraq, research on teacher-child relationships and school adjustment is limited. Existing studies often focus on variables such as social skills (Gülay, 2011), peer relationships (Gülay & Erten, 2011), and parental attitudes (Gülay Ogelman et al., 2013). However, studies examining the impact of teacher-child relationships on school adjustment, particularly in primary education, are scarce. Investigating this relationship will contribute to the literature and inform the development of educational policies.



1.3. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to examine the predictive effect of teacher-child relationships on the school adjustment levels of first-grade students. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how the three dimensions of teacher-child relationships (conflict, closeness, and dependency) influence students' school adjustment levels. The research objectives are as follows:

- Does the level of conflict in the teacher-child relationship significantly predict the school adjustment levels of first-grade students?
- Does the level of closeness in the teacher-child relationship significantly predict the school adjustment levels of first-grade students?
- Does the level of dependency in the teacher-child relationship significantly predict the school adjustment levels of first-grade students?

This study is expected to guide future research on teacher-child relationships and school adjustment, as well as contribute to improving the quality of education by providing insights for educational policy development.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a survey design, a method used to collect data for describing the characteristics of a specific group (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014). The survey design was chosen to investigate the effects of teacher-child relationships on students' school adjustment levels.

2.2. Sample Group

The sample group was selected using random sampling, which ensures that every individual in the population has an equal and independent chance of being included in the sample (Balci, 2001). Two primary schools in Kirkuk, representing different regions, were chosen via a lottery method.

The sample consisted of 100 first-grade students aged 6–7 (52 girls, 48 boys) and 10 female classroom teachers. All teachers were graduates of primary education programs, with at least five years of teaching experience. Teachers were informed about the research purpose, data collection tools, and procedures, and they completed evaluations for each student.

The age and gender distribution of students are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. The age and gender distribution

Age	Girls (n)	Boys (n)	Total (n)	Percentage (%)
6	30	28	58	58
7	22	20	42	42
Total	52	48	100	100

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Personal Information Form

The Personal Information Form collected demographic information about teachers and students. The section for teachers included age, gender, professional experience, and educational background, while the section for students gathered data on age and gender.

Teacher-Child Relationship Scale

Developed by Pianta (2001) and adapted into Turkish by Gülay Ogelman and Seven (2014), this 28-item, 5-point Likert scale evaluates teacher-child relationships from the teacher's perspective (1: Strongly Disagree to 5: Strongly Agree). The scale consists of three subdimensions:

Conflict: Assesses negative interactions and conflicts between teachers and students (12 items).

Closeness: Measures positive and close relationships between teachers and students (11 items).

Dependency: Evaluates students' dependency on their teachers (5 items).

High scores indicate positive relationships, while low scores indicate negative relationships. The Turkish adaptation yielded an overall internal consistency coefficient of .73, with subscale reliabilities in this study as follows:

Conflict: .80

Closeness: .84

Dependency: .57

School Adjustment Scale for Primary School Students

This scale, developed by Ladd, Kochenfender, and Coleman (1996) and adapted into Turkish by Önder and Gülay (2010), assesses students' adjustment to school through 27 items across four subscales:

Liking School: Evaluate positive attitudes toward school.

Cooperative Participation: Measures participation in school activities.

Avoidance of School: Reflects negative emotions about school.

Self-Reliance: Assesses independent behavior.

The scale uses a three-point rating (Not Applicable, Applicable, Totally Applicable). The Turkish adaptation yielded an internal consistency coefficient of .67, with a coefficient of .68 in this study.

2.4. Data Collection Process

Data were collected in classroom settings with the participation of teachers. Teachers completed the Teacher-Child Relationship Scale and the School Adjustment Scale for each student. Confidentiality was ensured, and data collection adhered to ethical principles.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0. Simple linear regression analysis was employed to examine the predictive effects of teacher-child relationship dimensions on students' school adjustment levels.

Independent Variable: Teacher-child relationship (subdimensions: conflict, closeness, dependency).

Dependent Variable: Students' school adjustment level.

Assumption Checks:

Prior to regression analysis, the following assumptions were tested:

Normality: The distribution of the dependent variable was assessed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests.

Linearity: The linearity between independent and dependent variables was examined graphically.

Homoscedasticity: Variance equality was tested using Levene's test.

Multicollinearity: Correlation values, tolerance, and VIF indices were checked to rule out multicollinearity.

After confirming these assumptions, regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive effects of the teacher-child relationship subdimensions (conflict, closeness, dependency) on students' school adjustment. The findings were interpreted based on regression coefficients (B), explained variance (R^2), and significance levels (p).

All analyses were conducted at a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$). The results revealed the strength and direction of relationships between variables, addressing the research questions comprehensively.

3. Findings

Table 2: Correlation analysis results between teacher-child relationship dimensions (conflict, closeness, dependency) and school adjustment levels of 6–7-year-old students

Variables	Mean (\bar{x})	Standard Deviation (SD)	Correlation (r)
School Adjustment	46.25	5.10	-
Conflict	28.40	6.20	.38*
Closeness	48.75	7.15	.41*
Dependency	14.20	3.85	.12

*Note: $p < .01$

From Table 2:

There is a significant positive correlation between conflict and school adjustment ($r = .38, p < .01$).

A significant positive correlation exists between closeness and school adjustment ($r = .41, p < .01$).

No significant correlation is found between dependency and school adjustment ($r = .12, p > .05$).

These results indicate that the conflict and closeness dimensions of teacher-child relationships are significantly associated with school adjustment, whereas dependency has no significant effect on this variable.

Table 3: Simple linear regression analysis of the predictive role of teacher-child relationship dimensions on school adjustment levels of 6–7-year-old students

Variables	β	Std. Error	F	R	R ²	B	t	p
Conflict	.382	.068	22.350	.382	.146	-.315	-4.732	.000*
Closeness	.415	.062	26.120	.415	.172	.338	5.447	.000*
Dependency	.115	.102	2.540	.115	.013	.175	1.565	.121

*Note: $p < .01$

From Table 3:

Conflict significantly predicts school adjustment ($R = .382, R^2 = .146, F = 22.350, p < .01$). Conflict explains 14.6% of the variance in school adjustment levels.

Closeness significantly predicts school adjustment ($R = .415, R^2 = .172, F = 26.120, p < .01$). Closeness explains 17.2% of the variance in school adjustment levels.

Dependency does not significantly predict school adjustment ($R = .115, R^2 = .013, F = 2.540, p > .05$).

These findings demonstrate that the conflict and closeness dimensions of the teacher-child relationship play significant roles in students' school adjustment, while dependency does not exert a meaningful influence on this process. Combined, the conflict and closeness dimensions explain approximately 14.6% to 17.2% of the variance in school adjustment levels.

This highlights the importance of fostering constructive teacher-child relationships characterized by reduced conflict and increased closeness to support students' successful school adjustment. Conversely, dependency, while not harmful, does not appear to significantly contribute to this adjustment process.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that two dimensions of the teacher-child relationship—conflict and closeness—significantly influence students' school adjustment, while dependency does not. Conflict and closeness emerge as critical factors in supporting students' adjustment to school, emphasizing the strong role teachers play in this process.



These results align with the existing literature. For instance, Glüer and Gregoriadis (2017) found that the closeness dimension positively impacts social behaviors, while the conflict dimension is associated with externalizing behavioral issues. This supports the findings of the present study regarding the role of conflict and closeness in school adjustment. Similarly, Sette et al. (2018) highlighted that social behaviors are integral to school adjustment, further corroborating these results.

Mashburn et al. (2005) noted that teacher-child relationships are more influential on children's behavior than classroom environment or program implementation, emphasizing the critical role of positive teacher-student interactions in classroom dynamics and learning processes. Furthermore, Roorda et al. (2011) highlighted the positive effects of warm and close teacher-child relationships on academic achievement and social-emotional adjustment, which is consistent with this study's findings.

The lack of a significant effect of dependency on school adjustment may be attributed to students gaining independence during the study period. Palermo et al. (2007) observed that dependency is associated with social exclusion and classroom communication issues, suggesting that reduced dependency during this developmental phase is natural. Troop-Gordon and Kopp (2011) also noted that dependency could hinder social development and lead to peer victimization, which might explain its lack of impact on school adjustment in this study.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the conflict and closeness dimensions of teacher-child relationships positively affect students' school adjustment, whereas dependency does not play a significant role. The findings reaffirm the importance of teacher-student relationship quality in students' social, emotional, and academic development. Specifically, close and conflict-free relationships in the early years of primary school are instrumental in facilitating students' school adjustment.

Recommendations

1. Educational Programs and Practices

In-service Training: Organize training programs to strengthen teacher-student relationships.

Guidance Materials: Develop materials to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills regarding the school adjustment process.

2. Future Research

- Conduct studies with larger and more diverse samples from various regions.
- Explore the effects of teacher-student relationships on older age groups (e.g., middle or high school students).
- Use longitudinal designs to investigate the long-term effects of teacher-student relationships.



3. Assessment and Evaluation

- Utilize multidimensional data collection methods, incorporating feedback from students, teachers, and families.
- Develop culturally relevant tools for assessing teacher-student relationships.

4. Practical Training

- Encourage teacher candidates to observe school adjustment processes during their training.
- Provide opportunities for teacher candidates to observe teacher-student relationship dynamics in practice classrooms.

5. Parental Involvement

- Offer guidance to families about the school adjustment process.
- Strengthen teacher-family communication during the school adjustment period, particularly during orientation weeks.

This study underscores the critical role of teacher-student relationships in supporting students' school adjustment during the primary years. The findings highlight the importance of the support, warmth, and guidance provided by teachers in promoting children's social, emotional, and academic development. Future research in different age groups and cultural contexts can further enrich the literature on teacher-student relationships.

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