

TEACHING WITH AFFECTION: CHARACTERISTICS AND DETERMINANT FACTORS OF QUALITY IN TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS*

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Abstract

This investigation has a look at the different aspects of the relationships between first grade teachers and their students. Special attention is given to the teachers' rating of the quality of their relationships with their students and the characteristics of the students which appear to influence the quality of those relationships. The results showed that on average, the opinion of the teachers on their relationships with their students was positive and that the interactions were very close with minimal conflict or dependency. It was also found that outbound behavior problems anticipated negative teacher-student interactions whereas social competence predicted positive interactions. The findings increase the knowledge available on affective relationships in a school context and identify variables that have to be explored in depth in order to develop programs which intervene to improve performance and prevent problems with school children.

Key words: *Affective relationships, behavior problems, school context, teachers.*

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Childhood development is a complex process, and it's the result of individual, social and contextual factors. The study of children's emotional and affective development and the importance of their social and academic adaptation requires the acknowledgement of the influence individual factors and different significant relationships have in the context in which children are brought up (i.e. family, school, and neighborhood) (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Social and affective relationships that children establish with those who are in charge of their care since birth are essential to their survival and development. Different researchers who study the social and affective development of children have agreed that the affective relationship model established between the child and the guardian in a family context will become the basis of his or her socialization process and the way he or she adapts in other contexts (for example, school) (Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy, 1999; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, 1999).

Many agree that in the early stages of life, the child's only significant care figures are the parents; however, several childhood development theorists disagree with this approach. Since the early development of the theory of attachment, Bowlby identified the role of other people who take care of the child, calling them auxiliary attachment figures. They are the ones who, in the absence of one parent or other elementary figures, assume the child's care and protection (Bowlby, 1969). Other authors agree on the importance of the relationship the child has with all the care givers or alternative figures inside and outside the family context, and noted among these alternative figures siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents, friends and guardians within education institutions (Ainsworth, 1991; Howes, 1999; Pianta, 1992). Some of these care takers have a critical importance within our social and cultural context. Studies carried out in Colombia have

found, for example, that older siblings (5 – 7 years old) play the role of alternative figures for the younger ones (Maldonado and Carrillo, 2002). Also, in a sample of children with single mothers the grandmothers were found to play a fundamental role as caregivers and attachment figures for their grandchildren, and become an important source of emotional support for their adolescent daughters who face maternity at an early age (Carrillo, Maldonado, Saldarriaga, Vega and Diaz, 2004). Researchers on social and emotional development have shown that adequate relationships with care takers during the first years of life constitute a preventive factor against behavior and adaptation problems during school age (Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Pianta, 1999). The social and affective resources that children acquire through the relationships with their guardians at an early age will be crucial for the child's adaptation and for the process of establishing relationships with their peers and teachers once they enter the school context. Different social, work and cultural conditions have lead parents to seek early support from other care takers and the children starting pre-school keep getting younger and younger. Under these circumstances, the role of the alternative guardians, especially the teachers, has become a crucial aspect of the children's development process. They have become a potential source of affection for the children, and in some cases even the main one. This is why the teachers' work can't be understood solely as the provision of knowledge; they must also be seen as protectors and as people with whom the children will establish a social and affective relationship. Diverse researchers suggest that teachers have a preponderant role in children's lives once they enter the school environment, and that the relationship established between them can have a great influence on the way children adapt to it, both socially and academically. This influence can be as strong as the one the parents have on the children. (Pianta, 1999; Birsch & Ladd, 1997; Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992).

Research carried out on this subject in other countries (i.e. the United States) has come to the conclusion that affective relationships between the child and the teacher have a big important potential for encouraging the children's social adaptation and academic success at school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Howes & Smith, 1995; Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). Research in Colombia regarding the school context has focused mostly on the improvement of the curriculum, school resources, and training teachers on ways to enhance the children's academic performance. Research on the affective aspects involved in the interaction of the teachers and children is scarce. There are a few papers on the subject of child-adult affective relationships and their influence on the children's performance, but they focus exclusively on parental figures (Carrillo, Maldonado, Saldarriaga, Vega & Diaz, 2004; Posada, Jacobs, Carbonell, Alzate, Bustamante & Quinceno, 2002). Because of this, the main purpose for this research was to extend the study of the child's social and affective relationships to the school context by studying teacher-student relationships during the first years of school. Specifically, to be able to document quality patterns of teacher-student relationships during the first year of school education and explore the children's characteristics associated with this quality.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: DETERMINING CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPLICATIONS

In recent years, theorists of social and emotional development overturned their interests to the school context and especially to a particular type of affective relationship that had not been explored before in theoretical or empiric literature: the teacher-student relationship. During the 1970s and 1980s, the research on this subject focused on the

parent-child relationship (particularly mother-child relationships) and its influence over different aspects of the child's interaction with his or her parents as well as on the child's social and academic adaptation in school. Only until the early 1990s and due to the influence of contextual and environmental development models, did the social and affective areas start to be considered from the connection between the immediate contexts in which the child grows (family and school). Diverse studies, especially within the theory of attachment, examined in detail the transition from the family context to the school context concentrating on the elements the children learn and assimilate from their early relationship models with their basic care givers, and the transference of these elements to relationships with others (i.e. their peers) in a non-familiar context (Elicker, Englund & Sroufe, 1992; Bryant & DeMorris, 1992; Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1994). Other studies on the relationship between the children and their parents assessed the influence that specific dimensions of this relationship have on the establishment of affective relationships with the teachers and their impact on behavior problems and academic abilities the children show inside the classroom (Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Pianta & Harbes, 1996; Denham & Burton, 1996; Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994). Early school enrolment has made teachers assume the role of substitute parents or alternative care giving figures more frequently; "Teachers not only control rewards and punishments in the classroom, grade the student's performance and keep the classroom in control, but also 'wipe the children's noses and give them comfort during sad times, taking on formal responsibilities and caring for them in a peculiar way'" (Pianta, 1999, p. 69). Still, the characteristics of the affective relationship the teacher has with the child, as well as its quality, widely depend on individual and contextual factors which in turn influence the relationship. According to Pianta (1999), the type of relationship established between the child and the teacher is

influenced by diverse factors such as: individual features (development history, biological factors and representational models), interaction processes and external and internal influence systems.

Research on teacher-student relationships, the contextual factors associated with it and their impact on the children's capacity to adapt are classified in three main categories. The first one collects all research focused describing the relationship and the way the teacher perceive it. The second category includes studies that detail the connection between the parent-child relationship and the teacher-student relationship. Finally, the third category of studies that surround the affective relationship of the children with their teachers in a school context, groups the research that establishes the impact this relationship has in the children's social development and academic adaptation.

ASPECTS AND CAUSES OF THE CHARACTER OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Robert Pianta is one of the main authors who have extensively researched the aspects, causes and implications of the teacher-student relationship. In an early study on this subject (Pianta, 1994), he classified six types of teacher-student relationships based on twenty six teacher's reports on their perception they had over the relationship with their students.

The types of relationships described found were: 1) dependant, in which the teacher relies excessively on the children; 2) positively involved, which describes a relationship characterized by high levels of warmth and communication; 3) dysfunctional, characterized by low involvement on the teacher's part as well as high levels of irritability and rage; 4) average functional, characterized by high levels of conflict and

anger; and 5) non involved, in which the teacher shows little warmth and communication as well as low levels of rage. In later work though, Pianta identified a more parsimonial classification of the teacher-student relationship based on three dimensions: closeness, conflict and dependency (Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995). These three dimensions have been identified repeatedly in subsequent studies in which the quality of the teacher-student relationship was examined from on the teachers' perception (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). These studies have shown that in relationships characterized by closeness, the teachers perceive high levels of warmth, affection and open communication with the students; they also feel effective in handling the children and comfortable with the relationship. On the contrary, in relationships characterized by conflict, teachers perceive high levels of negativity, difficult interactions and lack of communication, as well as difficulty handling the students. Finally, in dependant relationships, the teachers perceive the children as excessively dependant on them, with emotional reactions to separation, and frequent and unnecessary requests for attention.

Some work among this line of research has also been headed towards establishing what causes and what relates to the quality of the teacher-student relationship. These researches have focused mainly on the children's characteristics that are related to the establishment of some sort of relationship with their teachers.

Brich and Ladd (1998), for one, studied the child-teacher relationship with an emphasis on the children's contribution to the quality of the relationship. These authors found that the children in the school context show three behavior orientations in their interaction

with their peers as well as their teachers. They have been identified as “move towards, move against and move far from”, and respond to pro-social, antisocial (externalized) and asocial (internalized) behaviors, in that order. The results of this study indicated that the children’s behavior orientations regarding the quality of the teacher-student relationship in kindergarten are as follows: both antisocial and asocial behaviors or “moving against and moving far from” are associated with high levels of conflict, dependency, and little closeness in the relationship, while the pro-social behavior or “moving towards” is associated with closeness and low levels of conflict in the relationship. Additional analysis surrounding these types of interaction led to the conclusion that an antisocial behavior in kindergarten predicts conflictive relationships in the first grade, while asocial behavior predicts dependency in the same relationships a year later. Other similar studies have found consistent results in the connection between the children’s behavior problems and the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Howes and Ritchie (1999), found that children who show externalized behavior problems have relationships with their teachers characterized by resistance, avoidance and little harmony, while children with internalized behavior problems show higher levels of harmony in their relationships with their teachers. In a similar way, Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) found that externalized behavior problems are related with high levels of conflict in the teacher-student relationship. On the contrary, children with internalized problems tend to create a relationship with their teacher defined by lower levels of closeness compared to the ones that don’t have any behavior problems. These authors also found that there are two other variables related to the quality in the teacher-student relationships: social skills and academic success. Specifically, the results of the study suggest that the teachers perceive higher levels of closeness and lower levels of conflict with the students they consider socially and academically competent. Finally,

along this line of research, several authors have raised the question of consistency in the type of student - teacher relationship through time, especially during the first years of elementary education. With the purpose of answering this question, longitudinal studies were carried out in which the quality of the child-teacher relationship proved to be consistent during the two or three-year period comprehended between preschool and the beginning of kindergarten (Howes, Phillipsen & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) found moderate levels of stability in both conflict and closeness in the teacher-student relationships from day care to the first year of elementary education.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE CHILDREN'S AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Attachment theory suggests that there is a continuity in the relationship patterns from one social context to another or from one development stage to another (Howes y Matheson, 1992); therefore, from the relationship model developed according to the constant interactions with their primary guardians, the child learns a series of skills, expectations and motivations that he or she will transfer to the relationship with other adults (i.e. teachers) (Howes, 1999; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, 1999). Some studies show there are patterns in positive relationships between mother and child that are associated with positive perceptions and behaviors of the teacher towards the child (Toth & Cicchetti, 1996). Pianta, Nimetz y Bennett (1997) carried out a study evaluating the connection between the relationship children have with their mothers and teachers and the predictive value these relationships have in the way a child adjusts to the kindergarten. The results show moderate consistency levels between the parent-child relationship and the child-teacher relationship; the authors found a connection in the security provided by the teacher-student bond and the mother-child bond.

The moderate consistency in the quality of affective relationships between the family context and the school context has been confirmed by other authors who have found that, as the quality in the affective relationship created between the children and the teacher at the day care center and during the first years of school can be somehow linked to the quality of the relationship children have with their parents, it can differ from it, thus serving as a compensatory resource for children who have difficult relationships with their parents or face difficult life circumstances (Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992).

THE IMPACT OF THE AFFECTIVE TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

This third line of research classifies the studies made by authors interested in exploring the impact affective relationships with teachers may have on the skills and overall development of children. Many authors have demonstrated significant connections between the quality of the teacher-student relationship and the development of social skills in regards to their peers, self-regulation, self-esteem and social skills during the preschool years as well as the first years of elementary school (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992; Pianta, 1992). Regarding the three main dimensions that characterize teacher-student relationships, it has been found that relationships with high levels of closeness between the child and the teacher predict high levels of social skills and better academic adjustment. On the contrary, high levels of conflict positively correlate with negative conducts such as avoiding school, low levels of pro-social behavior and the increase of behavior problems in the children (Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Birch & Ladd, 1998). Finally, the teacher-student relationship with a high dependency level associates with

difficulties adjusting to school, represented in negative attitudes and less involvement in school activities (Howes, Matheson & Hamilton, 1994; Birch & Ladd, 1997). Based on these findings, researchers tend to agree that “the quality of the teacher-child relationship, even in early school years, can predict later problems as well as successes” (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, p. 625).

This last literature revision points out various important aspects of the research on the subject of affective relationships in the family and school context. In first place, there is a large field of theoretical as well as empirical research that supports the importance of early affective relationships within the family and the influence the examples set in this context will have in the child’s future interaction with the school environment: this research, however, is focused on certain care giving figures (the parents) and relegates other possible ones who, in the current social and cultural conditions which surround our country, are playing an important role in the children’s development (grandparents, siblings, teachers). Second, there is a distinct increase in the number of studies that try to establish a direct connection between family and school systems, especially between the significant relationships in these two social contexts; these studies have emphasized on the importance of the affective area in the relationship of the teachers and their students, and have led to important findings which highlight the crucial implications this relationship has on the children’s social and academic adaptation, especially during preschool and the first years of elementary school.

The literature revision showed that most of the studies on this subject have been carried out in the American context. We need to expand this research matter to the Colombian context. The research on the affective relationships both in and out of the family context

in our country is limited and the studies on affective aspects in the school context are even scarcer, specially the ones that refer to the quality of the relationships children have with their teachers. The few studies on the importance of teachers in the development of children are basically linked to more practical aspects like curricular design, the improvement of the academic performance and the social construction of learning.

Therefore, the importance of this project lies in two fundamental aspects: first, this study will open up a new line of empirical research in Colombia, which is very important in order for us to understand the factors that affect children's social development and their adaptation to the school context, exploring the perception the teachers have over their relationship with the children and of some variables that affect the quality of this relationship. Second, we expect the results will raise in different professionals an interest on the potential the teacher-student relationship has for the promotion of social and academic skills in children, in a country where they face adjustment and academic problems, as well as a high school abandonment rate in the high risk populations of our country.

In this context, the object of this research is to initiate the study of the teacher-student relationship during the first years of school education in Colombia, by recording quality patterns of the teacher-student relationship and by exploring the children's features that relate to the quality of this relationship. Specifically, through this investigation we seek to know how first grade teachers perceive and grade their relationship with their students and the way some of the children's features contribute to the quality of the relationship.

In this study, the children's characteristics were established based on the parents' report and not on the teachers' perception, as it had been done by other authors (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Pianta, Nimetz & Bennet, 1997). When the teachers are the only source of information it is hard to establish whether the report the teachers give of the relationship indicates something about the quality of this particular relationship or just a sample in the report of the children's characteristics. Because of this, to include the parents as a source of information on the children's behavior problems represents a methodological contribution for the study, as it eliminates the possibility that the connections found between the quality of the teacher-student relationship and the children's characteristics are a result of having the teacher as the only source of information. In addition to this, including the parental reports in the study allowed us to evaluate to which point the quality of the relationship reported by the teacher is related to the children's features that go beyond the school context.

The revision of literature issued two hypotheses which will serve as guidelines for this study. First, we expected to find different patterns in the teacher-student relationship that might be categorized under the dimensions of closeness, as well as conflict and dependence. Specifically, we expected a higher quality in the relationship to be related with high levels of closeness and low level of conflict and dependence. Second, we expected the dimensions that characterize the quality of the teacher-student relationship to be associated with the children's traits reported by the parents. Therefore, we expected the children with behavior problems to have a relationship with their teachers characterized by high levels of conflict and, on the contrary, for the children with high

levels of competence and sociability to have a relationship with their teachers characterized by closeness.

METHOD

Participants

The sample was composed by parents and teachers of 85 children, students of first grade in co-ed private schools in Bogotá (43 girls and 42 boys). The children's ages varied between 5 and 9 ($M = 6.20$). The parents' questionnaires were answered by the mother in 82.4% of the cases (70 children) and by the father in 17.6% of the cases (15 children). The average age of the mothers who answered the survey was 33.6 (range = 20 to 50 years) and the fathers were an average 42.8 years old (range = 31 to 53 years). Out of the parents who participated in the study, 28.8% graduated from high school, 29.4% have a college degree, 7.1% are technicians and 3.5% have a masters degree. 31.8% of the parents didn't report their educational level. Most of the schools contacted teach children of stratum 3 (65.9% of the families that participated). Still, this is not the case of all the families of the sample (9.4% belong to stratum 2, 14.1% to stratum 4, 2.4% to stratum 5 and 8.2 % of the parents didn't provide the information). A total of 12 teachers, all women, participated in the study and each one graded their relationship with an average seven children.

INSTRUMENTS

The following instruments were used to measure the different variables of the study.

BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

The Spanish version of the Child Behavior Checklist ("Lista de conductas infantiles para niños entre 6 y 18 años de edad"; Achenbach, 2001) was answered by the parents

as a measurement of the children's conduct-related problems observed at home. The survey is a list of 118 behaviors that the parents graded using a scale from 0 to 2, where 0 represents "not true (that you know of)", 1 is "in some way, sometimes true" and is 2 "very true or frequently true". Following the indicated procedures, the scores for the competence scale (activity, social, academic and total) and behavior problems (internalized, externalized and total) were calculated. T scores were used for the statistic analysis in order to facilitate the comparison between different subscales. This instrument has been widely used and validated in different populations and languages. The Spanish version has shown good internal consistency and validity within Hispanic populations (Rubio-Stipec, Bird, Canino & Gould, 1990).

SOCIABILITY

The sociability and shyness scales, as well as ones for levels of activity and sociability of the Emotionality Inventory were used (Emotionality, Activity Level, and Sociability Inventory-EAS; Buss & Plomin, 1984). The scales consist of 10 items designed to measure aspects such as the child's orientation, ability to relate to strangers and preferences towards social contact instead of individual activities. Both scales were graded by the parents using the 5 point Likert scale, in which 1 means "Definitely not like my child" and 5 means "Definitely like my child". The scores obtained in both scales were averaged to produce a total sociability scale. An internal consistency of 0.83 was reported for the three scales of the instrument (Buss & Plomin, 1984).

QUALITY OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

The quality of the teacher student relationship was graded using the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001). This self-report instrument was designed to

evaluate the teacher's perception about her relationship with each student. The instrument has 28 items the teachers had to grade using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "Definitely doesn't apply" and 5 means "Definitely applies". Aside from calculating the global quality score, scores for subscales of conflict, closeness and dependence were also obtained following the procedures suggested by the author. This instrument has been widely used in the United States in studies on teacher-student relationships and has shown an adequate internal consistency and validity in the current predicted levels as well as future academic performance, behavior problems and school skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

PROCEDURE

The goals of the study were initially presented to the school principal and to the elementary school teachers. With the help of the teachers that agreed to participate, a letter was sent to all the parents explaining the objectives and procedures of the project. The sample only included the parents who agreed to participate and returned the consent forms signed. Questionnaires were then sent to the parents with instructions on how to answer them and return them to school in the provided envelopes. The teachers received instructions to answer the surveys for each child once the parents had returned the envelope with the answered questionnaires. To ensure confidentiality, the surveys were coded and the data was processed without personal identification. Both teachers and parents received monetary compensation for the time dedicated to answering the survey.

RESULTS

Quality of the relationship

Chart 1 shows the results of the descriptive analysis of the scores revealed by the teacher-student scale, which measure the teacher's perception of the quality of their relationship with each student. The measurement of the scores obtained from the teacher when grading the global quality of the relationship with the students show, that they have positive and effective relationships with their students (M= 108.6; range of the scale = 28 to 140). More specifically, this global quality responds to the teacher's report of a relative closeness with their student (M= 40.05; range of the scale = 11 to 55), low conflict (M = 21.81; range of the scale = 12 to 60), and low dependency (M = 11.37; range of the scale = 5 to 25). The estimates for subscales such as closeness, conflict, dependency, and total quality of the relationship are similar to the ones reported by Pianta (2001) for the normative sample of 1.535 American students (closeness = 43.56, conflict = 22.87, dependence = 10.99, total quality = 111.72).

The variance analysis didn't show any significant statistical differences between genders in the scores of closeness, conflict, dependence and total quality in the relationship. The correlation analysis between closeness, conflict, dependence and total quality scores are shown in chart 2. With the exception of the correlation between the closeness and dependence subscales, the rest were statistically significant and show a moderate association between the subscale and the total quality scores.

The direction and magnitude of the correlation is consistent with the result reported by Pianta (2001) from the normative sample.

CHART 1. Descriptive analysis of the study's variables

VARIABLES	M	OF	RANGE
Quality of the Relationship			
Closeness	40,05	5,33	22-51
Conflict	21,81	6,09	13-36
Dependence	11,37	3,61	5-25
Total quality	108,86	10,82	83-133
COMPETENCE			
Academic	44,75	7,85	27-55
Social	37,70	12,51	23-65
Activities	48,67	12,51	26-67
Total	41,75	10,89	25-70
CONDUCT PROBLEMS			
Externalizing	54,48	10,22	12-77
Internalizing	56,94	9,86	34-86
Total	56,05	9,59	34-74
SOCIABILITY	3,76	,56	1,9-4,9

Chart 2. CORRELATION BETWEEN THE RELATIONSHIP'S QUALITY SCALES

RELATION	CONFLICT	DEPENDENCE	TOTAL QUALITY
Closeness	-,25*	,14	,59**
Conflict		,63**	-,89**
Dependence			-,62**

* p < .05

** p < .01

The descriptive results in the scores of competence and behavior problems reported by the parents in the Child Behavior Checklist are shown in Chart 1. In general, the total scores of competence that add up to the sum of the scores obtained in the competence, academic, social and activities scores indicate that 46.1% of the children are in a normal range (T scores higher than 40), 9.2% in the limit range (T scores between 30 and 37), and 44.7% in a clinical range (T scores less than 37). On the other hand, total scores of behavior problems in the sum of the scores obtained from the internalized behavior problems, externalized behavior problems and other behavior problems, show that 61.2% of the children are in a normal range (T scores less than 59), 21.2% are in the range limit (T scores between 60 and 63) and 17.6% in a clinical range (T scores higher than 63). Nevertheless, this information must be carefully interpreted as the population used as a parameter for comparison is composed of American children and there are no available standards for the Colombian case.

Nevertheless, the average scores revealed that, according to this sample's parental reports, they show relatively low levels of competence ($M = 41.7$; range of the scale = 10 to 80) and conduct problems ($M = 56.05$; range of scale = 24 to 100). The variance analysis didn't show any significant statistical differences between genders in any of the scores of competence and behavior problem scales.

The descriptive results of the total sociability scores reported by the parents are shown in Chart 1. In general terms, the average scores show that the parents reported moderate levels of sociability ($M = 3.76$). The variance analysis didn't show any significant differences between boys and girls in the sociability scores. Finally, Chart 3 shows the results of the correlation analysis among the competence (academic, social, activity and total), behavior problems (externalized, internalized and total), and sociability scores.

One can observe that the externalized and internalized behavior problems are significant and positively related with each other and with the total behavior problems. This means that there is a tendency in the children who composed the sample to have externalized and internalized problems. On the other hand, the correlation analysis shows that only the internalized behavior problems are significantly related to the competence scales (social, academic and activity); this means children who display internalized problems have lower levels of competence. Finally, it was shown that sociability is both significant and negatively related with only one of the competence scales (activities).

Chart 3. CORRELATION BETWEEN CONDUCT PROBLEMS, COMPETENCE AND SOCIABILITY

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Conduct Problems							
1. Externalizing	1						
2. Internalizing	,54**	1					
3. Total	,74**	,85**	1				
COMPETENCE							
4. Academic	-,15	-,23*	-,36**	1			
5. Social	-,02	-,26*	-,24*	,12	1		
6. Activities	,03	-,22**	-,19	-,04	,38**	1	
7. Total	,04	-,12	-,06	,23*	,78**	,80**	1
8. Sociability	-,01	-,16	-,07	-,01	,02	,25*	,17

* p < .05

** p < .01

CONNECTION BETWEEN BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS, COMPETENCE, SOCIABILITY AND OVERALL QUALITY

Chart 4 shows the results of the correlation analysis between the variables of the study. The only significant correlation between the behavior problems reported by the parents and the relationship quality reported by the teachers was the one between the externalized problems and the conflict subscale. On the other hand, it was found that the academic competence is both significant and negatively associated with conflict and dependency in the teacher–student relationship, and significant and positively related with the overall quality of the relationship. No other correlation between behavior problems, competence, sociability and quality scores of the relationship were significant.

Chart 4. CORRELATION BETWEEN CONDUCT PROBLEMS, SOCIABILITY AND QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP

	CLOSENESS	CONFLICT	DEPENDENC	TOTAL QUALITY
CONDUCT PROBLEMS				
Externalizing	-,11	,25(*)	-,003	-,19
Internalizing	-,03	,08	-,12	-,02
Total	,02	,11	-,08	-,03
COMPETENCE				
Academic	,04	-,24(*)	-,27(*)	,23(*)
Social	,05	-,18	-,16	,18
Activity	-,14	,04	-,02	-,08
Total	-,10	-,08	-,11	,03
SOCIABILITY	,19	-,12	-,01	,17

* p < .05

Finally, through a regression model the impact of behavior problems (externalized and internalized), competence (social, academic, and activity) and sociability were examined in relation to the quality of the teacher-student relationship.

One can observe in the results of the regression in Chart 5, that the externalized behavior problems and one of the competence scales (activity) have a significant and negative importance over the quality of the teacher-student relationship, while the social competence and sociability have a significant and positive impact on the quality of the relationship. The standardized regression coefficients show that the magnitude of the impact these variables have on the quality of the relationship is very similar; nevertheless, the externalized behavior problems are the ones with a higher impact.

The regression also shows that the internalized behavior problems and the academic competence have a positive impact (though not statistically significant) on the quality of the relationship. Still, the level of significance of these variables is slightly above 0,05, defined as criteria for the analysis and for this reason it is important to acknowledge it.

Chart 5. PREDICTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP'S QUALITY IN CONNECTION TO THE CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS

	B	E.E.	B	Sig.
<u>QUALITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP</u>				
Constant	78,15	14,84		,000
Externalizing problems	-,33	,12	-,32	,012
Internalizing problems	,26	,15	,24	,072
Academic competence	,27	,15	,20	,066
Social competence	,31	,13	,28	,017
activities	-,23	,10	-,26	,022
Sociability	5,66	2,05	,29	,007

R² = ,24

F = 3,94, p < ,05

N = 79

DISCUSSION

The quality of the teacher-student relationship

The first goal of this study was to explore how first grade teachers perceive and grade their relationship with some of their students, and to establish if the quality of their relationships is determined by a combination between the different levels of closeness, conflict and dependence as indicated in the American literature on the subject (Pianta, 1999). For example, in Pianta and Steinberg (1992) and Pianta (1994) three dimensions are identified as the ones that primarily characterize the relationship between first grade teachers and their students according to the perception of the teachers' reports. These same features have been found by other authors in samples of different ethnic groups and socioeconomic strata (Taylos & Machida, 1996, quoted Pianta, 1999).

Being consistent with our initial hypothesis, the results of the study suggest that in our context there are different patterns in the affective relationships between teachers and children and that the global quality of these relationships is determined by different levels of closeness, conflict and dependence. The scores obtained for the global quality of the relationship showed that according to the perceptions of the teachers that participated in this study, the relationship with their students are overall positive and affectionate: meaning, they are characterized by relatively high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict and dependence. This means that most first grade teachers feel that having affectionate and warm relationships with their students makes it easier for them to share with their teachers personal information, seek comfort and feel support.

Nevertheless, the ranges through which the scores of closeness, conflict and dependence varied, show that even though the quality of the teacher-student relationship is mostly positive, there are also teachers who perceive the relationship they have with some of

their students as conflictive; this means that some teachers perceive certain students as unpredictable and hard to handle, and they themselves do not feel comfortable nor effective in handling those students. In addition to this, the current perception of high levels of dependence reported by the teachers indicates that in certain cases they perceive some students as excessively reliant on them, showing strong emotional reactions when they are separated as well as frequent and unnecessary requests for attention. The different kinds of teacher-student relationships (not all relationships were graded by the teachers as positive) is consistent with the patterns reported by the different authors in American literature (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995; Howes & Hamilton, 1992) and provides additional evidence that confirms the existence of different patterns in the kinds of affective relationships between teachers and students in our context.

On the other hand, the results of the correlations between the quality dimensions of the teacher-student relationship support our first hypothesis, due to the negative and significant relationship we found between the global quality of the relationship and the dimensions of closeness and dependence, and between the level of closeness and conflict in the relationship. This means that the positive overall perception of the teacher-student relationship is associated to low levels of conflict and dependence, and that the perception of high levels of closeness is associated as well to low levels of conflict.

Finally, our analysis didn't show any significant statistical differences between genders in the closeness, conflict and dependence scores nor in the total quality of the teacher-

student relationship. This means that, contrary to what some authors have reported (Pianta, 2001; Birch & Ladd, 1997), our results suggest that in our context the teachers perceive that relationships they have with boys and girls are very similar in quality as well as in levels of closeness, conflict and dependence. These results can relate to the fact that in our sample we didn't find any significant differences of conduct, competence and sociability problems between genders. In summary, these results show that also in our context, and at least during the first year of school, the teacher establishes affective relationships with the children that vary according to the combination of different levels of closeness, conflict and dependence. This finding gains great importance if one acknowledges that previous studies have shown that the affective teacher-student relationships not only have an impact on the future development and competence of children (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Birch & Ladd, 1998), but also serves as a compensatory resource for children with low quality relationships with their parents or who face difficult life circumstances (Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992). Because of this, the results of the study suggest that improving the active relationship between teachers and their students can be an important goal of prevention and intervention programs aimed to improve the future adjustment and competence of children.

CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS AND THE QUALITY OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

The second aim of our study was to explore whether or not children's personal characteristics contribute to the quality of the teacher-student relationship.

With the parents' reports, we evaluated some of the children's characteristics that, according to the previous literature on this subject, could be related to the quality of the relationship they establish with their teachers. These characteristics were: conduct problems, competence and sociability levels.

According to our second hypothesis, we expected to find a relationship between the children's characteristics reported by the parents and the quality of the teacher-student relationship. More specifically, we expected the children who presented behavior problems to have a lower quality in their affective relationships with the teachers, characterized by conflict and dependence, while the children with higher levels of competence and sociability would have closer relationships with their teachers. This hypothesis was only partially confirmed by the results of the correlation between the dimensions of the teacher-student relationship and the children's characteristics reported by the parents. According to our result, only the externalized behavior problems are associated with high levels of conflict. This means that the teachers perceive they have more conflictive relationships with children who, according to parental reports, tend to break the rules and behave in an aggressive manner (externalized conduct problems). Also, the results showed that the children's academic competence is the only one associated with conflict and dependence in a negative way and with the global quality of the teacher-student relationship in a positive way. This means that teachers perceive lower levels of conflict and dependence and a higher quality in their relationship with children who, according to the parents' reports, have lower academic performances. The regression analysis provided additional evidence which supports the second hypothesis by letting us assess the impact the children's characteristics have on the global quality of the teacher-student relationship. The results of this regression confirmed the

importance of the externalized behavior problems because of the negative impact they have on the quality of the teacher-child relationship and showed that out of all the variables included in the model it has the greatest impact. This result is consistent with other studies that have pointed out that children's externalized and antisocial conduct problems are an important predictor of high levels of conflict in the teacher-student relationship (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Howes & Ritchie, 1999; Birch & Ladd, 1998).

The regression also confirmed that academic competence has a positive impact on the quality of the relationship. Though this result wasn't statistically significant to the levels established as criteria for this study, it is important to acknowledge it due to its consistency with the results of other studies which indicate that teachers perceive higher levels of conflict with children who have a poor academic performance, while they perceive closeness with students who have a high academic performance at school (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

Our results also confirmed that two other children's characteristics have a significant and positive impact on the quality of their relationship with the teachers: social competence and sociability. The results of the regression model show that these two variables have a positive impact; this means that teachers perceive more positive and effective relationships with children who have frequent and good quality relationships outside the school context (with friends, parents and siblings) and who are sociable. This result can be understood under the context of the literature on the theory of attachment which shows that children with secure attachment histories, compared to ambivalent or attachment avoidance histories, have higher levels of social competence in school, develop friendships faster and are more capable of maintaining reciprocal

interactions with their peers (Schulman, Elicker & Sroufe, 1994; Weinfield & cols, 1999). Also, this finding is consistent with the results of Pianta & Stuhlman's study (2003), who also found an inverse connection between the children's social competence level and conflict in their teacher-student relationship.

Our analysis also pointed out that the activity variable has a significant and negative impact in the quality of the relationships. This means that children who are involved in more extracurricular recreational activities have lower quality relationships with their teachers. This variable hasn't been considered in of the reviewed studies on the quality of the teacher-student relationship. A possible explanation for this result is that teachers perceive lower levels of compromise with the school's academic activities in children that dedicate a great part of their free time after school to extracurricular activities and this has a negative impact on the quality of the relationship. Another possibility is that teachers anticipate that children involved in more extracurricular activities will have lower levels of academic performance which is also associated with difficulties in the quality of the relationship. The exploration of why the teachers report lower quality relationships with children involved in more extracurricular activities must be researched in a future study. Finally, we believe it is important to mention that though the results related to the internalized behavior problems were not significant to the levels established for this study, they do suggest a tendency in this type of behavior problems to impact in a positive way the quality of the teacher-student relationships. This result suggests a better quality in the teacher's relationships with children with high levels of anxiety, depression, isolation and somatic complaints (internalized behavior problems). This result is consistent with the study by Howes and Ritchie

(1999), who pointed out that the children with internalized behavior problems show higher levels of harmony in the relationships with their teachers.

We consider important to mention that teachers may establish relationships they perceive as positive and effective with children who have internalized conduct problems, because through closeness and communication they can improve these children's performance and adaptation. However, these results may also suggest that teachers do not find certain characteristics such as shyness, depression, anxiety and somatic complaining to be a problem. Even though they don't affect the classroom's dynamic and organization, they do constitute a disadvantage for the children in terms of current and future adaptation and skill development. A better exploration of the perception of the teachers of the children's internalized conduct problems is an aspect that needs to be carefully researched in future studies.

To summarize, the study shows that some of the children's characteristics have a positive impact on the quality of the teacher-student relationship, while others have negative impact. In general, we found enough evidence to indicate that social competence, sociability, academic competence and internalized behavior problems are associated with higher quality levels of the teachers-student relationship during the first year of school education. On the contrary, the externalized behavior problems and the children's participation in extracurricular recreational activities are associated with less positive and less effective teacher-student relationships.

The current study provides theoretic as well as methodological elements which contribute to a better understanding of the subject of affective relationships in the school

context and in particular, the characteristics and factor that determine the teacher-student relationship during the first years of elementary education. In the first place, the identification of dimensions that characterize the quality of the relationship with the children allows us to begin the process of identifying profiles that distinguish this relationship in the Colombian socio-cultural context. According to the literature, relationships characterized by high levels of conflict will have a significant impact in the adjustment and performance of children in school; for this reason this type of relationship should receive more attention in terms of intervention programs. Second, the results concerning the connection between the children's characteristics and the quality of the relationship with the teacher, bring our attention to the multidimensional character of the teacher-student relationship; this means we need to highlight the importance of considering different variables (individual of the children and the teacher, of the family context and school context) when evaluating this relationship and even more when observing the possible implications on the children's behavior. Finally, as mentioned in the initial revision, the study and its results allow the opening of a new area of research focused on the affective relationships in the school context that has not been yet explored in our country.

The concept of the teacher as a potential care and protection figure for children, as well as the idea that the teacher has a great influence on their adjustment and performance, leads us to reconsider their role in school, their formation and training and many other factors that can influence the children's daily performance. This reflection raises a different specific set of questions for research that can enrich the studies on this subject. Some of these questions are: Do other factors such as the teacher's personal characteristics and their teaching style contribute to the quality of the relationship

established with the children, and how? How does the quality of the relationship change throughout the school year and during the following years? What is the impact of the affective relationship on the children's competence during the following years of school education?

As it can be observed, we need new lines of permanent teacher-related research, which should include research questions that analyze certain factors to determine the way they perform with the children, examine their perceptions, beliefs and conceptions of their own role, evaluate the characteristics of their relationship with the children and that studies the different variables that can affect the children's motivation, interest and performance during their transit through school. The development of research surrounding these problems will allow us to understand the subject of affective relationship in the school context and to have better and more assertive elements to design the prevention and intervention projects in the school context, particularly during preschool and the first years of elementary. The promptitude in achieving these programs will guarantee a better scenario for the children during the basic years of education and a more effective preventive labor of behavior and adjustment problems in the school environment.

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