



An examination of the effects of children's gender and behavioral problems on the quality of teacher – children relationships¹

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Abstract

The goal of the study was to examine and provide exploratory findings regarding the effects of child gender, gender socialization perspective, and child behavioral problems (i.e., internalizing and externalizing) on the quality of teacher-child relationship. Gender socialization perspective posits that girls tend to be more develop relationships characterized by emotional and physical closeness, whereas boys tend to be more focused on establishing conflictual or aggressive and have more extensive, activity-based relationships with other boys. The study was conducted using data from one first grade classroom teacher and fifteen first grade students in Edgelea Elementary School in Lafayette School District. The teacher was asked to complete the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale and the Social Skills Rating System-Behavioral Problems subscale. The study has revealed that girls had a closer and less conflictual relationship with their teacher as compared to boys and there was a strong negative correlation between the quality of teacher-child interaction and child's behavioral problems. Furthermore, the results of this study have partially supported the gender-socialization perspective.

Keywords: Teacher – student relationship; gender; behavioral problems; gender socialization; school adjustment.

Introduction

It is widely recognized that when children enter school for the first time, they encounter a variety of new challenges. These include creating positive relationships with peer groups and adults in the school environment as well as learning to meet the demands of a wide range of cognitive, social, and academic tasks (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Baker, 2006). Teacher-child relations play a prominent role in the development of competencies in the pre-school and early school-age years (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Pianta & Hamre, 2001). Recent studies support the significance of child-teacher relationships for: (a) developing skills in peer relations (e.g., Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994); (b) developing school adjustment competencies including attention, motivation, problem-solving, and self esteem (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Baker, 2006); and (c) the prediction and prevention of behavioral problems and psychopathology (Campbell, 1994; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, 2001, Birch & Ladd, 1998).

Studies have shown that positive teacher-student relationships establish a warm environment that facilitates successful adaptation in school. On the other hand, conflictual teacher-student relationships are associated with lower achievement as well as ongoing relational conflict with both teachers and peers (Pianta & Hamre, 2005; Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Damme, & Maes, 2008). Research has further indicated that children with whom teachers report having positive relationships with are outgoing and socially competent (Pianta, et. all., 1995; Birch & Ladd,

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1998). In this sense, Spilt and Koomen (2013) have examined measurement invariance and gender match in teacher – student relationship and behavioral orientation. They found that teachers with positive relationship with a particular student in their classroom reported less externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems in classroom setting. Additionally, they also put forward an explanation regarding the gender role in teacher – student relationship quality. Namely, same gender teacher – child interaction is a significant predictor of development of positive secure teacher – student dyadic relation. These findings support the key role of teacher-student relationships on children's school adjustment.

The Role of Child Gender and Teacher-Student Relationship Quality

A growing body of research has suggested that children's demographic characteristics, including child gender, play an important role in teacher-child relationships in early childhood education (Pianta, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Kesner, 2000, Baker, 2006). In several studies, boys are rated higher on conflict and lower on closeness in relationships with teachers, whereas girls have closer, less conflictual (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Saft, 1994), as well as more dependent relationships with their teachers (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). These trends seem consistent with the gender socialization perspective which holds that where boys tend to show more dominance and activity-based relationships with their peers, girls tend to build closer, cooperative peer interactions characterized by emotional and physical closeness (Maccoby, 1998). There is evidence that expectations influenced by gender stereotypes for children's behaviors in the classroom change teacher-student interactions, leading teachers to punish and reward both girls and boys in accordance with such stereotypic expectations (McKown & Weinstein, 2002; Fagot, 1977). For instance, Fagot (1977) observed that preschool teachers encouraged boys to participate in stereotypically male activities (e.g., hammering) and discouraged them from engaging traditional female activities (e.g., washing up dishes or dress up). Koch (2003) also claimed that girls and boys are exposed to differential treatment and receive different messages for their behaviors in the classroom and this may affect the relationships with their teachers. For example, although, childcare providers were more responsive to girls' efforts to communicate with them, they were not responsive to their assertive behaviors, a trend that was reversed for boys (Fagot, Hagan, Leinbach, & Kronsbert, 1985). According to the gender socialization perspective, children benefit more when their relationships with teachers are shaped along traditional, gender-specific relational styles (Ewing & Taylor, 2009). Therefore, girls would be affected more by close teacher-student relationships because girls, compared to boys, are more orientated toward intimacy and affiliation in their social relations (Maccoby, 1998). Conversely, males' orientation toward dominance is related to interpersonal conflict and is consistent with boys' relational styles.

More recently, the academic/behavioral risk perspective proposed by Pianta and Hamre (2001) presents different predictions about the role of gender in teacher-student relationships. It suggests that the teacher-student relationship quality would be predictive of school adjustment for boys at risk of school failure, and two studies (Pianta & Hamre; Ewing & Taylor, 2009) have found some support for this position.

As noted above, the relationships between child gender and teacher-student relational quality directly or indirectly affects children's academic and behavioral outcomes. In addition, it is important to develop further understanding of the potential role of child gender in teacher-student relationships in different educational settings. Therefore, the present study has investigated the effects of child gender on the teacher-student relationships. Based on the studies reviewed here, we hypothesized that first grade male students are expected to manifest greater conflict and less closeness with their teachers as opposed to first grade female students. Thus, the STRS total scale and subscale scores of boys may reflect relatively negative teacher-student relationships compared to the STRS scores with girls.

Behavior Problems and Teacher-Child Relations

The link between children's interpersonal behaviors and their relationships with teachers have a prominent role in children's school adjustment and the development of social competence and social skills (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997; Buyse, et. al., 2008). Children's behavioral orientations influence current and subsequent relationships with teachers (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1998; Buyse, et. al., 2008; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992).

Internalizing and externalizing expressions of dysfunction are two significant dimensions of behavior problems (e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 1991; Birch & Ladd, 1998). Externalizing problems refer to the behaviors that are disruptive or harmful to others such as overactivity, destructive behavior, aggression, and hostile defiance (e.g., Achenbach, 1990). These problem behaviors are stable and have been associated with long term negative outcomes including school failure and school maladjustment (Campbell, 1991; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). On the other hand, internalizing behavior problems are characterized by intropunitive emotions (i.e., sorrow and guilt) and by loneliness and withdrawal complaints (e.g., Zahn-Waxler, Klimes-Doughan, & Slattery, 2000).

Correlational evidence indicates that externalizing (i.e., aggressive and hyperactive behaviors) and internalizing behaviors (i.e., asocial and anxious/avoidant behaviors) are negatively associated with the quality of early teacher-child relationship (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Birch & Ladd, 1998). For instance, Birch and Ladd (1998) have examined the association between kindergartners' behavioral orientations and characteristics of their 1st grade teacher-child interactions (e.g., conflict, closeness, and dependency). They have found that early behavioral orientations predicted the quality of teacher-student relationships. Children's early antisocial and asocial behaviors were negatively related to closeness and positively related to conflict and dependency in their relationships with teachers. Similarly, Pianta and Steinberg (1992) showed that children, who were rated as having conduct problems, had more conflicted, dependent relationships with their teachers, lacking in warmth and open communication. Additionally, internalizing behavior problems were associated with lack of open communication and dependency. Therefore, children with externalizing and internalizing behavior problems are at risk for forming more conflictual and less positive relationships with their teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Fagot & Leve, 1998; Ladd & Burgess, 1999). In addition, Wang and colleagues (2013) examined moderating effects of teacher – student relationship quality in adolescent trajectories of behavioral adjustment. They found that positive teacher – student dyadic interaction had a protective role in the prevention of adolescents' depression and misconduct behaviors. Similarly,

To summarize, children's early behavioral orientations are an important indicator of the quality of teacher-child relations in early grades. Therefore, one of the main goals of the current study was to examine the relationship between the quality of teacher-child dyadic interactions and children's behavioral problems in Lafayette educational settings. We expected that there would be negative relationship between internalizing (e.g., asocial) and externalizing (e.g., antisocial) behavioral problems and the quality of teacher-student relationship.

Summary of research questions and hypotheses

The goals of the study were summarized by the following research questions:

1. Does the teacher-child relationship quality (as reported by teachers on the STRS) vary as a function of child sex? Specifically, first grade male students are expected to manifest greater conflict and less closeness with their teachers as opposed to first grade female students. Thus, the STRS total scale and subscale scores of boys may reflect relatively negative teacher-student relationships compared to the STRS scores with girls.
2. Is there an association between children's behavioral problems and the quality of relationship with their teachers? Specifically, there may be negative relationship between internalizing (e.g., asocial) and externalizing (e.g., antisocial) behavioral problems and the quality of teacher-student relationship. In addition, based on gender socialization perspective, the researcher hypothesized that teacher-child

conflict is more strongly related to internalizing behavior problems for boys than girls whereas; teacher-child conflict is more strongly associated with externalizing behavioral problems for girls than boys.

Method

Participants

Participant of this study included only one female teacher and her fifteen students in Edgelea Elementary School to preliminarily show a descriptive picture of the dynamic relationship between study variables. She was selected based on her availability and willingness to participate in this study. She was 32 years old and was European American. She did not receive any compensation for her participation in this study. The teacher was asked to use the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 2001) and a behavior rating scales (the Social Skills Rating Scale, Gresham & Elliot, 1990) to rate 15 randomly selected students from her classroom. The students consisted of 15 children (7 boys and 8 girls). 60% of the students were Caucasian, 20% were African American, and 20% were Hispanic.

Measures

Student Teacher Relationship Scale. The STRS (Pianta, 2001) is a 28-item self-report measure that is used to assess teachers' perceptions of three features of their relationships with their students. It uses a 5-point rating format similar to the format used by Likert, which ranges from 'definitely does not apply' (1) to 'definitely applies' (5). As mentioned earlier in this proposal, the STRS consists of three subscales: conflict, closeness, and dependency. The Conflict subscale includes 12 items designed to assess the degree to which a teacher perceives his or her relationship with a particular student as negative and conflictual (e.g., "This child easily becomes angry with me"). The Closeness subscale consists of 11 items designed to measure the degree to which a teacher experiences warmth, closeness, and open communication with a particular student (e.g., "This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself."). The Dependency subscale embraces 5 items designed to measure the degree to which a teacher perceives clingy, dependency in their relationship with their students.

The STRS has demonstrated good reliability on all subscales: for the STRS Total, .92 Conflict subscale, .86 Closeness subscale, .64 Dependency subscale. The scale has showed strong evidence for concurrent and predictive validity across a number of studies (Pianta & Hamre, 2001; Kesner, 2000; Birch & Ladd, 1997).

Social Skills Rating System. The Social Skills Rating System, Elementary Teacher Form (The SSRS-T, Gresham & Elliot, 1990) measures a teacher's perception of the child's social skills development, academic competence, and problem behaviors in the classroom.

Although, the Problem Behaviors subscale consists of three subdomains: (a) Externalizing Problems including 6 items (i.e., "Fight with others"); (b) Internalizing Problems comprising 6 items (i.e., "Appears lonely"); (c) Hyperactivity consisting of 6 items (i.e., "Is easily distracted"), the researcher have used the Internalizing and Externalizing dimensions of behavioral subscales of the SSRS. Therefore, he Problem Behaviors subscale includes 12 items rated on 3-point Likert scale (0=never, 1=sometimes, and 2=very often).

The criterion-related and factorial estimates of this scale were computed on several samples across the United States. Criterion-related estimates based on the Child Behavior Checklist and the Social Behavior Assessment (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Correlation estimates between the SSRS-T (Elementary level) and the CBLC-TRF ranges from -0.30 to 0.81. On the other hand, correlation between the SSRS-T (Elementary level) and the SBA ranges from 0.55 to -0.68. Reliability estimates for Problem Behaviors, based on a 4-week interval, range from 0.76 to 0.84. Alpha coefficients computed for Problem Behaviors subscales were .88 (Externalizing) and .78 (Internalizing).

Procedure

First of all, the researchers have asked the teacher to randomly select 15 students. After random selection, the teacher completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires about the quality of teacher-student relationship and the children's behavioral problems (i.e., externalizing and internalizing behavior problems). Those measures were administered in the spring of the school year. After teacher rated the participants, she returned the questionnaires to the researchers.

Data Analysis

The correlational research design was employed in the current study. Each form was scored based on manuscripts of those scales above. Gender differences were examined using independent sample T test. The alpha level was being set at .05. Correlational analyses was used to examine associations among the teacher-student relationship quality and behavioral problems.

Results

Each form was scored according to the scoring procedures in the manuscript of the STRS (Pianta, 2001) and the SSRS-T (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Contradictory to our first hypothesis, the researcher has not found a significant difference between male and female students in terms of conflict subscale scores, $t(13) = 1.864, p > .05$. However, as expected, the STRS total scales scores have revealed that there was a significant difference between male and female students, $t(13) = -2.503, p < .05$. Consistently, the researcher found that there was a significant difference among male and female students in closeness subscale scores, $t(13) = -3.045, p < .05$. Although there was not a statistically significant difference in conflict subscale scores, it was very close to $\alpha = .05$. The results have indicated that female students have had relatively more close and less conflictual relationships with their teachers according to total scales scores (see. Figure 1).

Correlational analysis revealed that there was a strong negative relationship between behavioral problems (i.e., internalizing and externalizing) and the quality of teacher-student relationship, $r = -.878, p < .05$ (see. Figure 2).

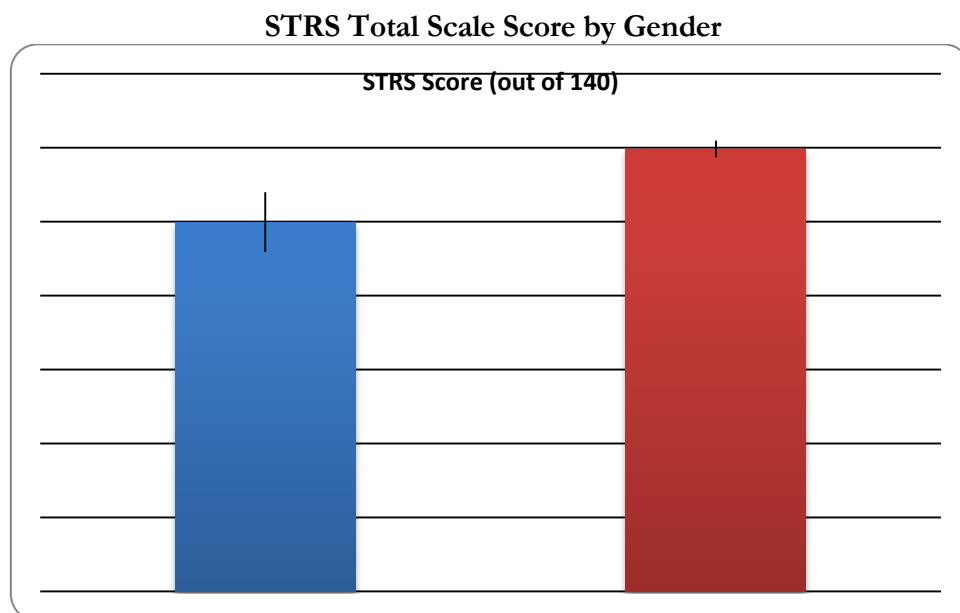


Figure 1. Gender differences in the STRS total scale scores. Error bars represent standard error of the mean (SEM).

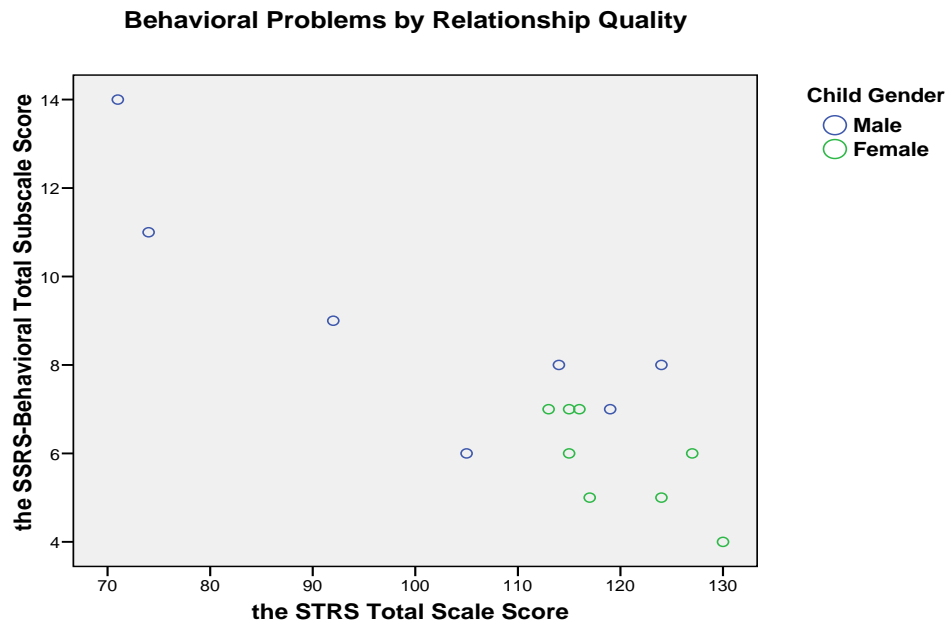


Figure 2: There is a strongly negative correlation between the quality of teacher-student relationship and the behavioral problem

Moreover, although there was a significant difference between male and female students in terms of internalizing behavioral problem subscales scores $t(13) = 3.158, p < .0$, the data have revealed that there was not significant difference among male and female students in externalizing subscale scores, $t(13) = 1.029, p > .05$. To investigate our gender socialization perspective based hypothesis, the researcher run the correlational analysis. Firstly, the current study has showed that externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems were moderately positive correlated, $r = -.878, p < .05$ (see Figure 3).

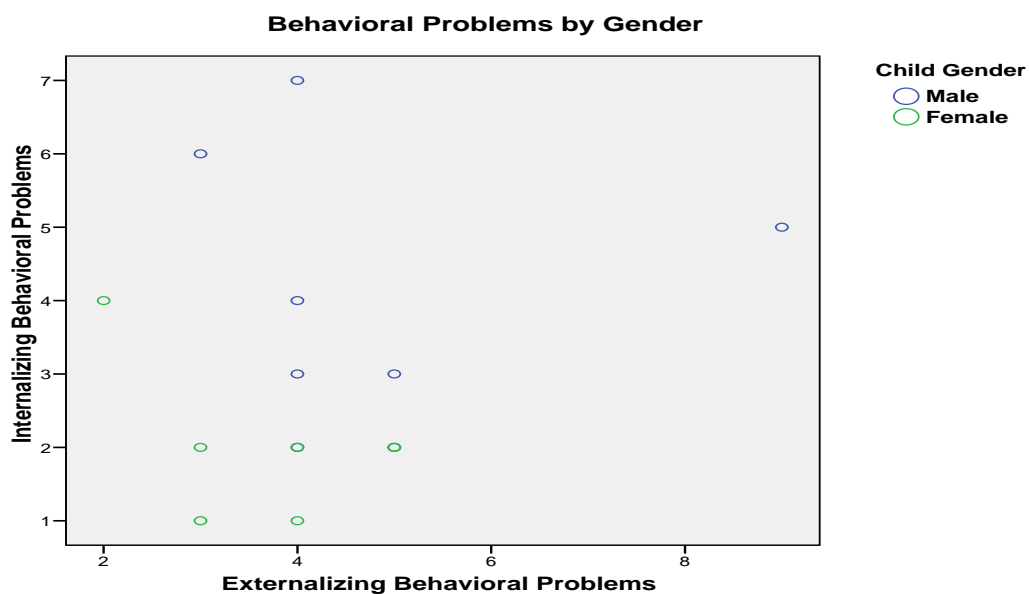


Figure 3: There was moderately positive correlation among the externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems.

To test the hypothesis based on the gender socialization perspective, the researcher also investigate the correlation between internalizing, externalizing behavioral problems, and the STRS total scales scores according to gender. The study findings revealed that while the STRS total scales scores and externalizing behavioral problems were moderately negative correlated, $r=-.517, p<.05$ (see Figure 4), the internalizing behavioral problems and the STRS total scales scores were strongly negative correlated, $r=-.783, p<.05$ (see Figure 5). In addition, as shown in the figures above, male students had more internalizing problems than female students. As expected, teacher-student conflict was more strongly related to the internalizing behavioral problems for boys than girls. Moreover, teacher-child conflict was more strongly associated with externalizing behavioral problems for girls than boys. In short, these results strongly supported the gender socialization result.

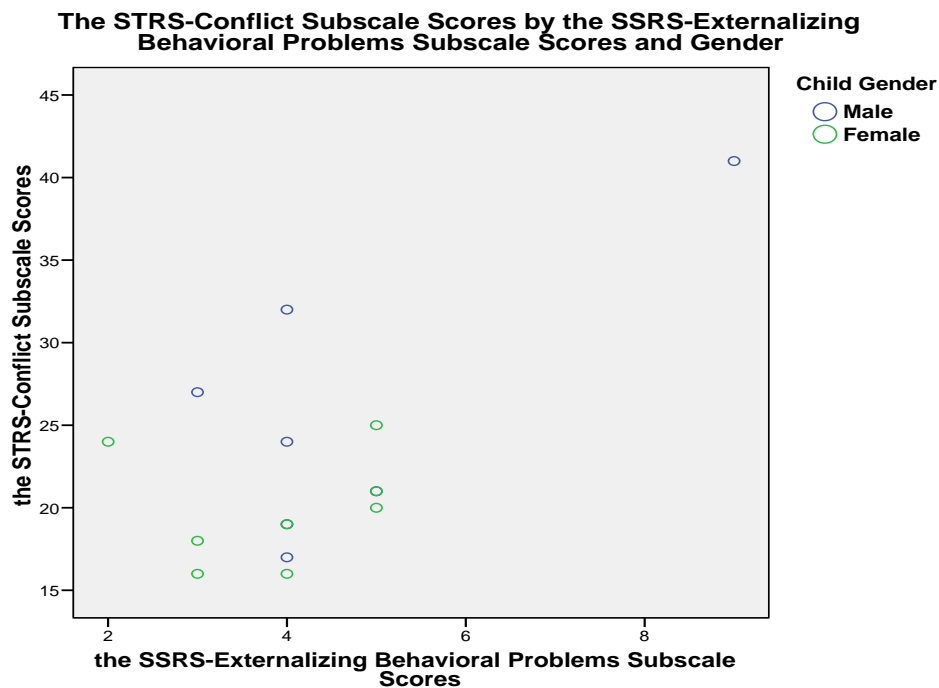


Figure 4: There was moderately high and positive correlation between teacher-student conflict and student's externalizing behavioral problems.

The STRS-Conflict Subscale Scores by the SSRS-Internalizing Behavioral Problems Subscale Scores and Gender

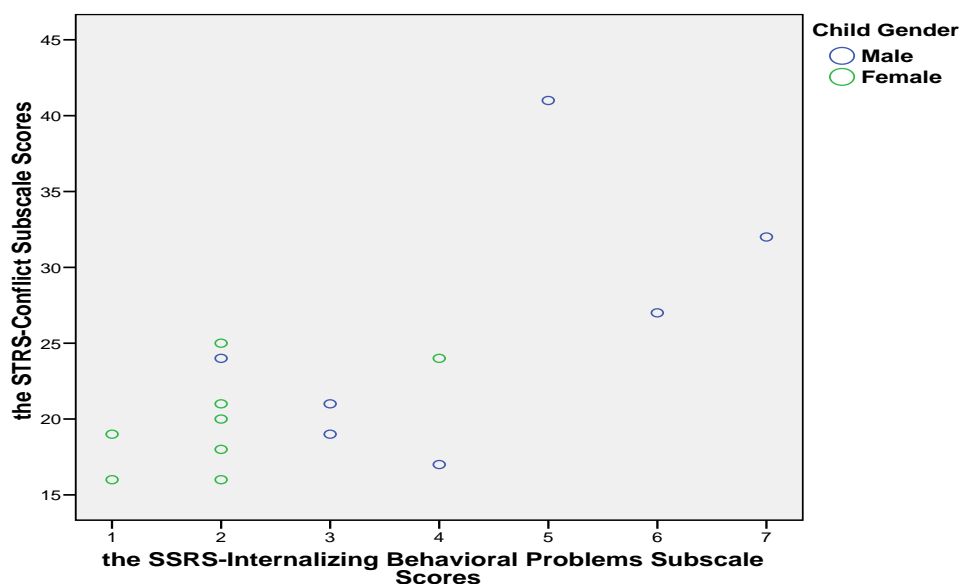


Figure 5: There was moderately high and positive correlation between teacher-student conflict and student's internalizing behavioral problems.

Discussion

The present study investigated the extent to which child gender and child behavioral problems (i.e., internalizing and externalizing) have an effect on the quality of teacher-student relationship. Overall, our findings support the previous researchers studying kindergarteners and elementary students who demonstrated that children's behavioral problems are negatively and strongly related to the quality of teacher-children dyadic interaction (i.e., Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Birch & Ladd, 1998) as well as how the teacher-student relationship can change according to child gender (i.e., Pianta & Hamre; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Wang et al., 2012).

The result of our hypothesis supported that female students have less conflictual and closer relationship with their teachers as compared to male students. Namely, the quality of teacher-student relationship was higher for boys than girls in this study. In addition, in consistence with the results of previous studies (Pianta, et. all., 1995, Pianta & Hamre, 2001, Spilt & Koomen, 2013), children's behavioral problems were strongly negative correlated with the quality of their relationships with their teachers.

Similar to previous studies based on gender socialization perspective, we have found that while teacher-child conflict would in theory be more strongly correlated with internalizing behavioral problems for boys than girls, teacher-child conflict is actually more strongly correlated with externalizing behavioral problems for girls than boys.

Because of the low number of participants in this study, results should be interpreted with caution. Only one teacher and fifteen students took part in this study. As a result, it is difficult to generalize the results of this study. Other important limitations of this research were that the participants for the study were a convenience sample made up of a familiar teacher and her students. Moreover, the study focused on a teacher's perceptions about her relationship with children and their behavior problems. The teacher-student relationship is a dyadic interaction, and so it is very important to focus on children's perceptions about their relationships with their teachers. Studies that include children's perceptions are also needed to clarify our hypothesis. We also have used two teacher-rating scales (i.e., the STRS and the SSRS), however, using multiple measurements (i.e., interview, observation, and child reports) could be very helpful in future work to properly utilize our research questions and hypothesis.

Implications

Concerning that early teacher – child interactions and behavioral problems have long-term implications on students' school adjustment competencies, therefore it was crucial to document and understand the interaction between these variables. In addition, many studies posited that gender was a significant background variable that might influence this dyadic interaction. In this sense, the exploratory findings of the current study clearly showed that teacher – student relationship was positively related to children's behavioral problems. Furthermore, a student with higher level externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems developed a relational conflict with his/ her teacher. In addition, male students had more conflictual and dependent relationship with their teachers as compared to female ones. This study provided a significant insight into understanding and documenting of the relationship between gender socialization, teacher – child relations, and behavioral orientation. In this respect, children who experience positive relationship with their children might develop more positive attitudes toward school. Furthermore, they might exhibit less behavioral problems in classroom settings.

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