Child problem behavior and teacher wellbeing:
The value of a relationship perspective

Why this angle?
- Much attention for the impact of student-teacher relationships on students’ adjustment
- Policy makers: effects on school achievement
- So why looking at relationships and teacher wellbeing?
- This could be profitable for both teachers and students
- Moreover, I got a grant for looking at both sides in the Netherlands …

Two review studies
(Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research)
- The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students’ school engagement and achievement: a meta-analytic approach
  (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011, Review of Educational Research)
- Teacher wellbeing: the importance of teacher-student relationships = a narrative review
  (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011, Educational Psychology Review)

Dutch educational system

Regular education
- Primary school
  - 4 – 12 yr
- Secondary school
  - Pre-vocational
    - 13 – 16 yr
  - Vocational
    - 13 – 16 yr
  - Higher general
    - 13 – 17 yr
- Special education
  - Several types
    - 4 – 12 yr

Child problem behavior and teacher wellbeing
**Johnson et al., 2005: Low wellbeing and low job satisfaction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical health</th>
<th>Psychological wellbeing</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Fat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Care-providing occupations with intensive *interpersonal contact* are associated with an increased risk of stress-related disorders and depressions.


---

**Interpersonal relations: vulnerability and strength**

- Source of satisfaction, motivation, and meaning (Hargreaves, 2000)
- One of the core reasons for staying in the profession (Hargreaves, 1998; O'Connor, 2008)
- Basic underlying human need for relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Self-determination theory and attachment theory)

---

**What's new...?**

- Problem behavior → stress
- Problem behavior → disturbs lessons, order in the classroom... → stress
- Right?? Simple!!
- What does a relationship perspective add?
- Why, for example, are teachers so sensitive to overload and burn out?

---

**My presentation**

- Stress theory
- Comments on research about problem behavior and teacher stress
- Affective relationships and mental representations
- Implications for intervention
- Qualifications
- Research agenda
Stress theory

- What’s the “mechanism” behind stress?

Lazarus model Stress & Coping (1991)

What’s the “mechanism” behind stress for teachers?

- The experience of discrete, negative emotions in everyday, concrete interactions with students
  - teacher’s subjective judgment about problem behavior

It may begin with....
Lots of research shows: problem behavior → teacher stress

- Student disruptive behavior consistently identified as key source of teacher stress (e.g., Evers et al., 2004; Kyriacou, 2001; Tsouloupas et al., 2010)

So this is pretty much the idea...

Problem behavior: Fights with peers, Inattentive, Hyperactive...

However... comments on this research (1)
- generally based on overall perceptions of problem behavior in the classroom
- a few students may have a relatively strong influence
- similar levels of problem behavior may lead to different levels of teacher stress (e.g., Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Greene et al., 2002)
- important: problem behavior at the dyadic level

However... comments on this research (2)
- student (problem) behavior and teacher practices often exclusively examined in terms of concrete behaviors (Pianta, 2006)
- empirical evidence: perceptions of problem behavior shape mental representations of dyadic relationship (Doumen et al., 2008)
- important: interpersonal meaning of problem behavior

Empirical study (Koomen & Spilt, 2011)

Main question:
Associations between perceived problem behavior, relationship quality, and teaching stress?

Method
122 children (82% boys) from 49 EBD classes and 124 children (50.8% boys) from 39 regular primary classes (grade 1-6) and lead teachers

 Teachers rated for each individual child:
- Conduct Problems on SDQ
- Relationship quality (Closeness, Conflict, Dependency) on STRS
- Interaction Stress on ITS

Results
- Teachers reported higher levels of Conduct Problems, Conflict, Dependency, and Interaction Stress for EBD group.
- Path analyses revealed an indirect model in both groups.
In other words...

Problem behavior:
Fights with peers
Inattentive
Hyperactive

Interpersonal meaning of behavior:
"This child sees me as a source of punishment and criticism"
"This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other" (Conflict scale STRS)

Relationship with teacher:
Conflict

Conclusion

- Disruptive behavior affects teachers' wellbeing because of the interpersonal conflicts arising with behavior problem students.
- Teachers may not necessarily experience high stress in dealing with disruptive behavior per se, but with misbehavior that is embedded in relationships characterized by discordance and mistrust.

Implications for target of intervention

Affective relationship

- Not merely a sum of the behaviors of two (interaction) partners

- But also: underlying thoughts and feelings:
  security and (self)confidence vs. disappointment and rejection

Question

- How to conceptualize and understand "thoughts and feelings" of teachers about relationships with students?
Attachment perspective (1)

- Parallels between parents and professional caregivers (Teacher: Pianta, 1992/1999)
- People internalize relational experiences in “internal working models” or “mental representations” (MR)
  - Patterns of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings
  - ‘Self’, ‘other’, ‘self-other relationship’

Attachment perspective (2)

- MR child about parent
- MR parent about child
- MR child about teacher
- MR teacher about child

Hierarchical structure (Sibley & Overall, 2008)

Mental representations...

- Develop when much time is spent together
- Are activated in everyday interactions
  - Influence (discrete) emotions and behavior in everyday interactions (cf. Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002)
  - Primarily through unconscious processes
- Problem behavior students: negative emotions dominate (Spit & Koomen, 2009) and more rigid representations (self-fulfilling prophecy) (Pianta, 1999)

Question

How to conceptualize and understand “thoughts and feelings” of teachers about relationships with students?

As mental representations that...
- ... contain global, domain-specific, and relation-specific information
- ... guide the interactions with the student and influence emotions in concrete situations
- ... operate largely on an unconscious level

Lazarus model: applied to teachers and wellbeing

- Incident e.g. interaction with student
- Perception e.g. student (problem) behavior
- Evaluation stressor
- Evaluation coping
- Wellbeing (stress/satisfaction)
Hypothetical model about teacher wellbeing

Subjective appraisal process

Teacher-Student interaction

Perception of student (problem) behavior

Relationships

Wellbeing (stress/satisfaction)

Implications

- Interrelatedness personal and professional identity
- Since MRs on various levels are connected:
  - relationship with every student is unique (relation-specific)
  - role beliefs about own performance but also beliefs about 'normal' student behavior play a part (domain-specific)
  - (early) experiences with own parents, own teachers etc. can be reflected in teacher-student relationships (global)

Connections between MRs...

Global

Students

Own children

Parents

Jessica

Mark

Top down

Bottom up

Connections between MRs...

but also:

Implications (2)

- Assessment and consultation should be targeted at relationships (not only at problem behavior)
- MR are stable, but not unchangeable:
  - Awareness and reflection: exploration of patterns of beliefs, internalized feelings and past experiences with important others
  - Starting at the top or the bottom?

Intervention study:

(Spilt, Koomen, Thijs & van der Leij, 2012)

Relationship-focused reflection:
- Targeted at: dyadic relationships with disruptive children

Rationale:
- Teaching stress (Greene et al., 2002)
- Teachers express more negative emotions (Spilt & Koomen, 2009)
- Less observed responsiveness (e.g., Fry, 1983)
- Downward spiral within a school year (e.g., Doumen et al., 2008)
Teacher consultation: Relationship-Focused Reflection Program (RFRP)

- Teacher as primary agent of change
- Reflection aimed at teacher beliefs, attitudes, and emotions: to change relation-specific MRs
- Real-life input for reflection (cf. Pianta, 1999)
  - Teacher narratives (emotions and beliefs): TRI (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002; Spilt & Koomen, 2009)
  - Videotapes of dyadic interaction

Teacher consultation: RFRP

- Teacher’s narration: starting point for reflection
- Relational profile: to mirror the teacher’s narration
- New information: video-tapes of actual interactions
- Reflection about teacher narratives and link with actual interactions
- Four individual sessions with consultant (2 x 2)

Relational Profile TRI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior management</th>
<th>Secure base</th>
<th>Perspective taking</th>
<th>Effective leadership</th>
<th>Helplessness</th>
<th>Positive feelings</th>
<th>Negative feelings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RFRP vs Interpersonal Skills Training (IST)

- N = 32 teachers (15 schools)
- Two behaviorally at-risk children per teacher (N=64; 70% boys)
  - RFRP: n = 32 (16 teachers)
  - IST: n = 32 (16 teachers)
- Randomized comparative trial with repeated measures (5 observations during 9 weeks)

Measures

Outcomes:
- Teacher reports: Closeness and Conflict (STRS)
- Dyadic observations: Teacher sensitivity and Behavior Management Quality (dyadic adaptation CLASS)
- Covariates: Externalizing and internalizing behavior (child), Teacher efficacy beliefs, teacher age, experience,...

What did we find?

RFRP:
- Changes over time in reported closeness for more than half of the dyads (mostly positive)
- Declines in conflict only for teachers with high efficacy beliefs
- Significant increase in observed teacher sensitivity (whole group)

IST:
- Significant decrease in teacher reported conflict (whole group)
Conclusion
Although...  
- Only two experimental conditions  
- Small sample size  
- Limitations in outcome measures  
- ...  
Still...  
- Reflection on interpersonal experiences (based on TRI framework) looks promising to change MRs  
- Closely fits with the consulting roles of school psychologists

Research agenda
- Focus on relationships (patterns of thoughts and internalized feelings) vs behavior → different measurement instruments  
- Unconscious automatic processes → need for more in-depth measures (indirect methods)  
- Teachers’ daily emotional experiences → appropriate micro-analytic methods (e.g., Carson et al., 2010)  
- Also attention for positive indicators of teacher wellbeing  
- Need for longitudinal studies to test (parts of) the hypothetical model

In sum: our message
- Relationship is more than behavior  
- Relationships require emotional investment and personal involvement (strength and vulnerability)  
- Teachers internalize their relationships with individual students (MR) → discrete emotions → changes in wellbeing on the long run

Many thanks to:  
Co-authors  
Jantine Spilt (VU University, Amsterdam)  
Jochem Thijs (Utrecht University)

Thank you for your attention!