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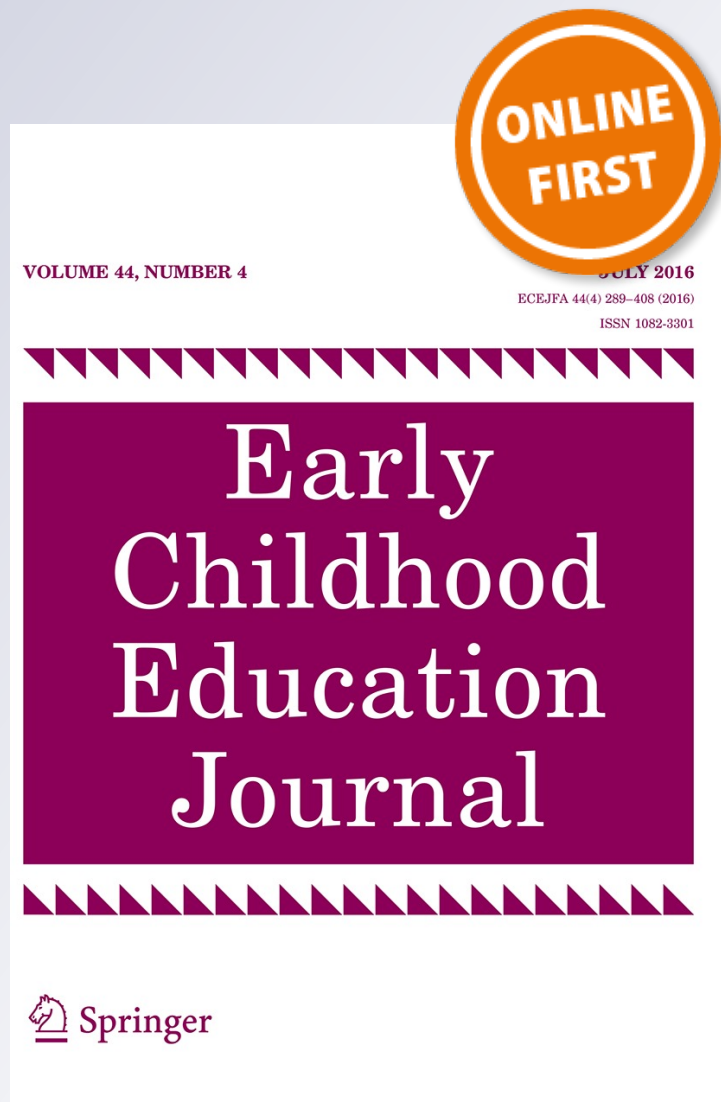
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# Social and Emotional Learning and Teacher–Student Relationships: Preschool Teachers’ and Students’ Perceptions

Maria S. Poulou<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** The study aimed to investigate how teachers’ perceptions of emotional intelligence, and social and emotional learning (SEL) relate to teacher–student relationships. Teachers’ perceptions of teacher–student relationships and the degree of agreement with students’ perceptions was also investigated. Preschool teachers from 92 public schools in central Greece completed the Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale, the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale, and the Student–Teacher Relationships Scale-Short Form for 238 students aged 5–6 years old. 170 students were interviewed using the Young Children’s Appraisal of Teacher Support. Regression analysis revealed that both teachers and students emphasized the role of teachers’ perceptions of SEL in positive teacher–student relationships. However, there was no agreement between teachers and students regarding teacher–student relationships. These findings and their implications for research and practice are discussed.

**Keywords** Emotional intelligence · Social and emotional learning · Teacher–student relationships

Teachers’ personal characteristics, such as emotions, are increasingly recognized as forming the basis of their attitudes toward students and of their ability to provide a psychologically secure classroom environment (Harvey et al. 2012). Besides teachers’ personal skills and characteristics that buffer teachers against the negative aspects of their role, a considerable body of research on effective teaching has also emphasized teachers’ professional skills needed for

maximum effectiveness in the classroom (Vesely et al. 2013). Studies on emotional intelligence (EI) and the related area of social and emotional learning (SEL) have already provided evidence that social-emotional competence and skills are the foundation of positive relationships (Elias 1997; Goleman 1995, 1998). However, to date research has focused mainly on students’ social and emotional competencies. And although teachers are responsible for teaching students social and emotional skills (Cefai and Valeria 2014), there is surprisingly little research on teachers’ perceptions of their own social and emotional functioning. In the present study, we explored teachers’ perceptions of their EI and SEL skills in an attempt to explain teacher–student relationships in preschool classrooms. These types of teacher perceptions have not been considered concurrently in previous research. In the current study we aimed to rectify this by examining how these perceptions relate to teacher–student relationships.

## Teachers’ Perceptions of EI and Teacher–Student Relationships

It is often stated in the literature that teaching is a job requiring great “emotional labor” (Hargreaves 2001). However, little is known about the role of emotions in learning to teach, how teachers’ emotional experiences relate to their teaching practices, how teachers regulate their emotions and their relationships with students, or how important emotional experiences are for teacher development (Sutton and Wheatley 2003). Factors which may help to explain competent teacher behavior and positive classroom outcomes overlap with the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), which refers to the perception of emotions as well as the use of emotions to facilitate thinking, understanding and

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management of emotions (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Teachers' EI is linked to their responses to the complexity of interactions with others. Thus, teachers with high EI deal more constructively with negative situations involving students, than do their colleagues who possess low levels of EI (Jeloudar et al. 2011; Perry and Ball 2007; Ramana 2013). There is also evidence that teachers' perceived EI is important in establishing better working relationships in primary (Poulou in press), and secondary schools (Nizielski et al. 2012). However, little is known about how teachers' interactions with students are related to teachers' EI, in preschool classrooms. The assumptions that teacher–student relationships influence students' adaptation to schools (Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett 2003; Silver et al. 2005), and that students' experience of conflict with teachers may continue to impact over time on the quality of teacher–child relationships (Howes et al. 2000), highlight the need to investigate which teacher social and emotional characteristics promote positive teacher–student relationships.

### Teachers' Perceptions of SEL and Teacher–Student Relationships

EI has been useful in explaining individual differences in teacher social and emotional learning (SEL), the process of acquiring skills in recognizing and managing emotions, the development of care and concern for others, the ability to take responsible decisions and the establishment of positive relationships (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Practice and research involving SEL has grown substantially. SEL skills can help both teachers and students manage themselves, their relationships and their work (Gunter et al. 2012). In fact, Gunter et al. (2012) argued that secure teacher–student relationships are the foundation of SEL. Teachers can teach children to relieve stress, manage anger and deal with social interactions, as well as foster a sense of safety and well-being in children. This assumes, however, that teachers are already socially and emotionally skilled, and also feel competent implementing SEL with their students. Nevertheless, there has been little research into teachers' perceptions of SEL skills (Collie et al. 2011). The present study attempted to add to the literature by exploring teachers' perceptions of their SEL skills, and their association with teacher–student relationships.

### Students' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships

Teacher–student relationships in preschool and the early school years have been investigated mainly through reports by teachers of relationship patterns (Howes et al. 2000;

Mantzicopoulos 2005). Little is known of the meaning with which young children endow their relationships with teachers, or of the importance of children's interpersonal experiences (Spilt et al. 2010; Valeski and Stipek 2001). Reports offered by teachers, albeit valuable, cannot be a substitute for information on teacher–student relationships provided by students. Researchers who have worked on young children's perceptions offer evidence that valid, reliable and informative data may be gathered from children using assessment procedures which are sensitive to their levels of cognitive and social-emotional maturation (Valeski and Stipek 2001). Mantzicopoulos (2005) specifically concluded that kindergarten students' reports of teacher–student relational conflict are related to the relational climate in the classroom. Nevertheless, there is virtually no evidence regarding preschoolers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships and the way they are related to teachers' social and emotional functioning.

In addition, research has indicated that there is minimal agreement between teacher and student ratings of teacher–student relationships, without giving any explanation as to the potential sources of these discrepancies (Mantzicopoulos 2005; Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett 2003). Assuming that neither teacher or student reports provide a complete picture of the teacher–student relationship, we examined both teachers and students' perceptions and the degree of their congruence, in terms of the way teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL relate to teacher–student relationships.

### The Present Study

Whilst there is a plethora of research that emphasizes the importance of teacher–student relationships, it does not take into account teachers' perceptions of their own social and emotional skills, and the ways in which they may affect classroom interactions. Identifying the direct or even indirect impact that teachers' social and emotional skills have on classroom relationships could be crucial to increasing the positive contribution teachers make to their students' learning and well-being. We argue that teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL skills could be linked to teacher–student relationships.

In the present study, we attempted to explore teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL skills in an effort to describe teacher–student relationships in preschool classrooms. These types of teacher perceptions have not previously been considered concurrently. In the current study we aimed to rectify this by examining how these perceptions relate to teacher–student relationships. Moreover, since findings based solely on teacher self-reports may suffer from bias (Wubbels et al. 1992), we also drew on students'

perceptions of teacher–student relationships. We assumed that obtaining measures of both teachers' and students' perceptions would produce a more reliable picture of teacher–student relationships.

The research questions addressed in our study were as follows: (a) to what extent do teachers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships could be predicted by teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL, and (b) to what extent do students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships could be predicted by teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL. On the basis of our review of previous research, we hypothesized that teachers with higher scores on EI and SEL would be more likely to report positive relationships with students. We also hypothesized that students would be more likely to report positive relationships with those teachers. Finally, due to limited research in the case of preschool teachers' emotional functioning and teacher–student relationship, based on both teachers and students' perceptions, our research aims were exploratory in nature.

## Method

### Procedure

Teachers who volunteered to participate in the study attended a seminar for in-service teachers by the author. Then teachers of the participating schools informed students and parents about the aims of the research. The instruments were administered after the written consent of parents and teachers had been obtained. Teachers were given written instructions regarding the completion of the instruments. Testing took place during regular school hours, with no time constraints being imposed. The completion of the instruments took approximately 45–60 min. All the questionnaires were returned by mail. Student interviews took place in a quiet room in the school, during regular school hours. The interviews were conducted by two female graduate students trained in interviewing preschoolers. The graduate students visited the participating schools to get familiar with the preschoolers before the interview process. The interviews lasted 40–45 min. Teachers had to assign pseudonyms to students to link their relationship questionnaires with their students' interview data, so that participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information they provided.

### Participants

Ninety-two preschool teachers (91 female, 1 male) from 52 public schools in central Greece participated in our study. Preschool education in Greece is mandatory and refers to students aged 5–6 years old. All preschool teachers receive

4 years of teacher training in preschool education. The majority of participants had teaching experience from 5 to 15 years (46.7 %). Preschool teachers were asked to complete questionnaires on themselves and on their students. Some teachers completed questionnaires for all their students (approximately 15 students) but some teachers, due to time constraints, completed questionnaires for a smaller number of their students they randomly selected (approximately 1–5 students). A total of 238 teacher–student relationship questionnaires were completed, for 112 male (47.1 %) and 126 female (52.9 %) students. Subsequently a random sample of 170 of these students (83 male, 48.8 % and 87 female, 51.2 %, 1 or 2 students randomly selected from each class by the researcher) was interviewed by two female graduate students.

## Measurement Instruments

### Teachers' Perceptions

*Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale (SREIS)* Teachers' perceptions of EI was measured with the Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale (SREIS; Brackett et al. 2006). The SREIS is a self-report measure, based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) ability-based model of EI. The scale includes 4 items related to *perception* of emotions (e.g. 'I recognize the emotions people are experiencing from looking at their facial expressions'), 3 items related to *use* of emotions (e.g. 'when making decisions, I listen to my feelings to decide if the decision feels right'), 4 items related to *understanding* of emotions (e.g. 'I have a rich vocabulary to describe my emotions'), and 8 items related to *management* of emotions: 4 relating to management of one's own emotions (e.g. 'I have problems dealing with my feelings of anger') and 4 relating to social management of emotion (e.g. 'I have strategies for improving other people's moods'). Participants scored each item on a response scale ranging from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*). The SREIS was translated into Greek by the researcher, and re-translated into English by a graduate student in English literature. Pilot administration of the questionnaire to 5 teachers followed to ensure the accuracy of the Greek version. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to examine the four-factor measurement model underlying the SREIS in the Greek context. Following the examination of all the possible measurement models (from 4 to 1 factors), we ended up to one-factor model which better fit our data (the 3 items related to "use of emotions" were removed from the model). The model fit indices were:  $\chi^2 = 100.095$ ,  $df = 86$ ,  $p = .050$ , SRMR = 0.063, CMIN/df = 1.270, CFI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.050. The internal reliability of the factor named "emotional intelligence" is given in Table 1.

**Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale** Teachers' perceptions of their SEL skills were measured with the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale (Brackett et al. 2012). In current study we used two subscales: (a) *SEL comfort*, which relates to comfort with and regular implementation of SEL practices in the classroom (e.g. 'I am comfortable providing instruction on social and emotional skills to my students') and (b) *SEL commitment*, which relates to commitment to improving SEL skills (e.g. 'I want to improve my ability to teach social and emotional skills to students'). Teachers responded to questions about their SEL beliefs on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The process of translation and pilot administration of the measure was similar to the SREIS measure. A CFA with robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to examine the two-factor measurement model underlying the Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale in the Greek context. The model showed that the two factors correlated at 0.26, but the standardized loading on each item was above 0.600. The model fit indices were:  $X^2 = 21.607$ ,  $df = 18$   $p = .250$ , SRMR = 0.0738, CMIN/df = 1.200, IFI, TLI, CFI > 0.980; RMSEA = 0.045. Cronbach alpha reliabilities are given in Table 1.

**Student–Teacher Relationships Scale (STRS)** The STRS (Pianta 2001) is a widely used measure of teachers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships that is based on the attachment theory framework. The Student–Teacher Relationships Scale–Short Form (STRS-SF), consists of 15 items, which are grouped into closeness and conflict subscales. The *closeness* subscale measures the extent to which a teacher feels that his/her relationship with a student is characterized by warmth, affection and open communication (8 items; e.g. 'I have an affectionate, warm

relationship with this child'), while the *conflict* subscale assesses the degree to which a teacher feels that his/her relationship with a specific student is characterized by negativity (7 items; e.g. 'this child easily becomes angry with me'). Responses are given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*definitely does not apply*) to 5 (*definitely applies*). The translation and factorial validity of the STRS-SF in the Greek educational context has been demonstrated by Tsigilis and Gregoriadis (2008). Cronbach alpha reliabilities for this study are given in Table 1.

*Students' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships*

**The Young Children's Appraisal of Teacher Support (YCATS)** The Young Children's Appraisal of Teacher Support (YCATS; Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett 2003) was used to measure preschool students' perceptions of the teacher–student relationship. It consists of 3 subscales: the *warmth* subscale, which measures students' perceptions of teacher support, encouragement and acceptance (11 items; e.g. 'my teacher is my friend'), the *conflict* subscale, which assesses negativity in interactions with teachers (10 items; e.g. 'my teacher gets angry with me'), and the *autonomy* subscale, which assesses teacher practices to promote autonomy and self-directed activities (6 items; e.g. 'my teacher lets me do activities I want to do'). YCATS items were presented on small cards that were read by two graduate students to each student individually, in a quiet setting, during normal school hours. A dichotomous response format was used for all items: the interviewers asked preschoolers to indicate agreement or disagreement with an item, by placing a card in either a mailbox (*true*), or trashcan (*untrue*). In the current study, the interview protocol we followed was the same with the original US

**Table 1** Correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics for Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence Scale (SREIS), Teacher SEL Beliefs Scale, Student–Teacher Relationships Scale (STRS-SF) and the Young Children's Appraisal of Teacher Support (YCATS)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	m	SD	$\alpha$
Emotional intelligence								3.57	0.51	0.83
<i>SEL beliefs</i>										
2. Comfort	0.70**							3.95	0.67	0.80
3. Commitment	0.25	0.36**						4.33	0.84	0.84
<i>Teacher–student relationships</i>										
4. STRS closeness	0.55*	0.62*	0.19					3.50	0.88	0.68
5. STRS conflict	−0.06	−0.11	−0.30*	−0.46**				1.94	0.90	0.92
<i>Children's appraisal of teacher support</i>										
6. YCATS warmth®	0.00	−0.06	0.23*	−0.01	0.03			1.14	0.19	0.66
7. YCATS conflict®	−0.10	−0.14*	0.22	−0.10	−0.01	−0.07		1.60	0.31	0.71
8. YCATS autonomy®	0.03	0.05	0.31**	0.26	−0.22	−0.22*	0.04	1.31	0.28	0.54

YCATS®: 1 = No, 2 = Yes

\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$

version (Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett 2003). The YCATS has been translated into Greek by the researcher, and then re-translated into English by a graduate student of English literature. Pilot administration of the interview to 8 preschool students followed to ensure the accuracy of the Greek version. Three weeks after the first administration 18 of preschoolers were interviewed twice. The test–retest reliability of the YCATS items was found to range from 0.60 to 0.88. Cronbach alpha reliabilities are given in Table 1. A CFA of the YCATS with robust maximum likelihood analysis method was used. The statistics for our model were:  $X^2(321) = 68.731$ ,  $p = .040$ ,  $TLI = 0.96$ ,  $CFI = 0.96$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.057$ , indicating that the model was a good fit to our data.

## Results

Data were analyzed using stepwise regression. Teachers' ratings on EI were entered in Step 1 of the regression models, and teachers' ratings on SEL were entered in Step 2. The process was repeated using students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships as the predictor, in addition to teachers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships.

### Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships

Table 1 gives descriptive statistics for the reported variables. Perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills received the highest ratings by teachers ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), a result that is in line with previous research, in which teachers reported that, although they teach SEL skills to their students, they are in need of in-service training in order to improve SEL skills implementation (Triliva and Poulou 2006).

Table 1 also gives the correlations between predictor and outcome variables. Teachers' ratings on EI and comfort in implementing SEL practices in classroom were positively associated with their perceptions of closeness in relationships with students. Contrary to our expectations, teachers' perceptions of EI, and comfort in implementing SEL practices were not associated with perceptions of conflict with students. In fact, teachers' perceptions of SEL commitment to improving SEL skills were associated with ratings of conflict with students.

Table 2 gives results from the regression analysis of teachers' perceptions of teacher–student relationships on teacher perceptions of EI and SEL. The regression models were statistically significant. Specifically, in Step 1, the entry of teachers' perceptions of EI accounted for a statistically significant contribution to the variance in teachers' perceptions of closeness with students ( $R^2 = 0.29$ ). In

Step 2, teachers' perceptions of EI, comfort in implementing SEL practices and commitment to improving SEL skills were entered. The simultaneous entry of this group of variables in Step 2 accounted for 37 % of the variance in teacher-rated closeness. Teachers' perceptions of comfort in implementing SEL practices were significantly correlated with closeness ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that teachers were more likely to report closeness to students when they felt comfortable in implementing SEL practices. Teachers' perceptions of EI were marginally related to perceptions of closeness ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p = .054$ ). The adjusted  $R^2$  increased at each step (Step 1:  $R^2 = 0.291$ , Step 2:  $R^2 = 0.374$ ), indicating strong predictive power. This result suggests that teachers' perceptions of SEL skills made a small but significant contribution to the variance explained by the model over and above the contribution of teachers' perceptions of EI.

As shown in Table 2, Step 2 produced a statistically significant model, in which teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills were the only statistically significant predictor of teachers' perceptions of teacher–student conflict ( $\beta = -0.300$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Teachers were more likely to report relational conflict when they reported less commitment to improving SEL skills.

### Students' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships

In similar fashion to how teachers' perceptions were processed, the regression model was run in two steps using the enter method for student perceptions' of warmth, conflict, and autonomy. The regression models were only statistically significant at Step 2. Teachers' perceptions of EI did not appear to be a significant contributor to student perceptions of warmth in the relationships with their teachers (Table 3). In fact, teachers' perceptions of comfort and commitment were significant contributors to students' perceptions of warmth in the relationship with their teachers. That is, students were more likely to report warm relationships with teachers who possessed higher ratings in comfort in implementing SEL practices. Unexpectedly though, students were also more likely to report warm relationships with teachers who reported less commitment to improving SEL skills, a finding which confirms the divergence between teachers' and students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships.

Teachers' perceptions of comfort and commitment in SEL were significant contributors to students' perceptions of conflict with teachers (Step 2, Table 3). Teachers' perceptions of EI did not appear to be a significant contributor to student perceptions of conflict ( $\beta = -0.022$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Although there was a significant increment in the variance explained (7 %), when teachers' perceptions of

**Table 2** Regression results for STRS closeness and conflict depending variable

Variables	Closeness			Conflict		
	$\beta$	t	Sig(p)	$\beta$	t	Sig(p)
<i>*Step 1</i>						
(Constant)		3.11	0.00		2.89	0.00
Emotional intelligence	0.55	4.64	0.00	-0.06	-0.47	0.63
adjR <sup>2</sup>	0.29			-0.01		
<i>*Step 2</i>						
(Constant)		2.17	0.03		3.62	0.00
Emotional intelligence	0.23	1.49	0.05	0.00	0.04	0.96
Comfort	0.45	2.81	0.00	-0.00	-0.03	0.96
Commitment	0.00	0.02	0.97	-0.30	-1.99	0.04
adjR <sup>2</sup>	0.37		0.13			
$\Delta R^2$	0.083			0.14		
P	<0.05		<0.05			

**Table 3** Regression results for YCATS warmth, conflict and autonomy depending variable

Variables	Warmth			Conflict			Autonomy		
	$\beta$	t	Sig(p)	$\beta$	t	Sig(p)	$\beta$	t	Sig(p)
<i>*Step 1</i>									
(Constant)		9.96	0.00		8.37	0.00		6.95	0.00
Emotional intelligence	0.00	0.07	0.93	0.10	00.91	0.36	-0.03	-0.30	0.76
adjR <sup>2</sup>	-0.01			-0.00			-0.01		
<i>*Step 2</i>									
(Constant)		9.61	0.00		8.27	0.000		7.54	0.00
Emotional intelligence	-0.09	-0.55	0.58	0.037	0.24	0.80	0.029	0.18	0.85
Comfort	0.20	1.18	0.042	0.17	1.17	0.043	-0.02	-0.13	0.89
Commitment	-0.27	-2.30	0.024	-0.27	-2.34	0.022	-0.31	-2.77	0.00
adjR <sup>2</sup>	0.06			0.07			0.06		
$\Delta R^2$	0.08			0.07			0.07		

comfort and commitment to SEL were entered in the model with teachers' perceptions of EI (Step 2, Table 3), teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills alone significantly predicted students' perceptions of autonomy in relationships with teachers.

## Discussion

### Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships

This paper has addressed a number of important limitations on our understanding of teachers' psychological functioning and teacher–student relationships. First, although previous studies in elementary schools reported an association between teachers' social-emotional functioning and the quality of classroom processes (Brown et al. 2010; Poulou in press), this study—to the best of our knowledge—is the first to examine how teacher–student relationships are

predicted by teachers' perceptions of social and emotional functioning, in terms of emotional intelligence, comfort and commitment to SEL practices in preschools. As predicted, teachers' perceptions of their own EI (measured as perceiving the emotions of others, understanding and managing emotions of self and others) were related to their perceptions of positive classroom relationships. We therefore indicated that how teachers respond to the complexity of their interactions with students is one aspect of their level of EI, thus confirming the importance of enhancing teachers' sensitivity and emotional involvement for the establishment of positive relationships (Brackett et al. 2012). We found that teachers' perceptions of EI significantly correlated with teachers' perceptions of closeness to students, suggesting that a positive relational climate in the classroom is more likely to develop when teachers report higher EI scores. In other words, teachers' difficulties in establishing good working relationships with students may actually underscore an inability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions.



However, the association between teachers' perceptions of EI and teacher–student closeness was lessened, when considered in the context of teachers' perceptions of comfort in implementing SEL practices. Teachers' perceptions of comfort in implementing SEL practices in classrooms turned out to be the most important predictor of teacher–student relationships, in line with Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) model, which stated that teachers' social-emotional competence is important for healthy teacher–student relationships. It is possible that teachers who rate themselves more comfortable implementing SEL in their classrooms tend to experience more positive relationships with their students. The result that teachers' perceptions of SEL comfort are more likely to explain teacher–student interactions than teachers' perceptions of EI, stands out as an important new contribution. This result suggests that effective practices attuned to high positive interactions at preschool involve promoting teachers' effective implementation of SEL practices. Moreover, the minimization of EI significance when SEL comfort was entered into the model, might suggest that teachers' perceptions of EI are not directly linked to close teacher–student relationships, but to perceptions of comfort in implementing SEL, which are in turn related to close teacher–student relationships. This assumption though needs further exploration.

In a similar line, teacher student conflict was mainly predicted by teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills, in accordance with Jennings and Greenberg (2009), who argued that socially and emotionally competent teachers deal effectively with conflicting situations with students. Mantzicopoulos (2005) also argued that teachers' skills and knowledge in creating and managing early classroom environments may lessen the risk of negative relationships developing between young children and teachers. Surprisingly, in our study teachers' perceptions of EI were not found to play a significant role to negative teacher student relationships, suggesting that the negative quality of classroom interactions might be attributed to teachers' professional rather than personal skills, such as EI.

### **Students' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships**

Second, the study may be the first to examine how teacher–student relationships are predicted by teachers' perceptions of EI, comfort and commitment to SEL practices, according to preschool students' perspectives. Although in the literature there is already clear evidence regarding the nature of the determinants of classroom relationships in preschool, and early elementary school classrooms (Howes et al. 2000; Scott-Little et al. 2006), the present study is the first to consider teachers' perceptions of EI, and SEL in an

investigation of teacher–student relationships, in terms of preschool students' perceptions. We showed that students' perceptions of warmth and conflict in teacher–student relationships were not predicted by teachers' perceptions of EI, not even in cases where perceptions of EI were examined as the only predictor. This is a surprising finding. One possible explanation stems from the preschoolers' difficulty to discriminate between teachers' idiosyncratic characteristics referred to EI, and their social and emotional skills implemented in their daily interactions. Another explanation pertains to the reliance on a self-report measure of teachers' EI. Gathering information on teachers' emotional competences and skills from observations may increase accuracy. In fact, teachers' perceptions of comfort with the implementation of SEL practices and commitment to improving SEL skills turned out to be the robust contributors of teacher–student relationships. In other words, students generally emphasized the importance of teachers' professional competencies and skills, such as SEL comfort and commitment, rather than teachers' personal skills such as EI, in cultivating positive classroom relationships.

Teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills were also significant predictors of students' perceptions of autonomy in teacher–student relationships. Surprisingly, teachers' perceptions of commitment were negatively associated with students' perceptions of both warmth and autonomy in teacher–student relationships, indicating that higher scores in teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills could turn teacher–student relationships that were regarded as warm and autonomous by students to deteriorate. This finding is perhaps to be explained by the positive association between teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills, and teacher stress related to student behavior and workload (Collie et al. 2012). It is possible that teachers' desire to improve SEL skills is associated with higher levels of stress, which is reflected in students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships. Yet, the negative and significant relation between teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills and teacher–student conflict with students might imply that teachers' perceptions of commitment to improving SEL skills counteracts relational conflict between teachers and students to a certain point. However, when this relationship exceeds a certain threshold, it may harm teacher–student relationships. This finding, though, needs further examination.

### **Congruence Between Preschool Teachers and Students' Perceptions of Teacher–Student Relationships**

Third, this study in preschool explored the congruence between teacher and students' perceptions concerning

aspects of teachers' emotional functioning and professional skills, using relationship measures, at the level of individual teacher–student dyads. Interestingly, the study revealed similarities in both teachers and students' perceptions of the important role of teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL as predictors of teacher–student relationships. However, there was no significant relation in the way both teachers and students perceived these teacher–student relationships, a finding consistent with previous research (Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett 2003). There are a number of possible explanations for these differences in reported perceptions. First, this lack of agreement may indicate that students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers actually differed from teachers' perceptions. It may be that students and teachers view their relationships differently. Support for this view is provided by Spilt et al. (2010), who argued that teacher reports of teacher–student relationships are influenced by teachers' psychological functioning, whilst student reports might be driven by student perceptions of trust and warmth in the relationship. A second possible explanation for the lack of concordance is that teachers' ideals actually distort the self-reports of their interpersonal behavior, irrespective of their actual behavior (Wubbels et al. 1992). This may possibly lead to a mismatch between teachers' self-reports and students' perceptions of teacher–student relationships.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, it does not allow one to assume inferences from causal relationships. The examination of the same variables using different analysis techniques would probably provide a greater understanding of causality. Second, the teachers who completed the questionnaires did so voluntarily, which may have resulted in a response bias. The third limitation is that, although we interviewed preschoolers so as to reduce the danger of single-source bias arising from relying solely on teachers' self-reports, the use of mixed method designs, in which data are collected from classroom observations, would probably add information to our study. We suggest that future research should turn its attention to teachers' social and emotional behavior, as well. Finally, this study assessed teacher–student relationships at a single point in time. Longer-term investigation with repeated waves of data collection is needed to examine how these relationships may change over time.

### Implications

Despite these limitations, the results of this study improve our understanding of preschool teachers' perceptions of social and emotional skills in teacher–student relationships.

This study extends previous research findings demonstrating associations between the quality of teacher–student interactions and teacher psychological and demographic characteristics (Brown et al. 2010), in that it suggests that teachers' perceptions of personal skills such as EI, and professional skills such as SEL comfort and commitment are important predictors of the quality of teacher–student relationships. These factors, however, have not received an equal amount of emphasis in describing teacher–student relationships. Teachers' professional skills played the most prominent role in explaining teacher–student relationships in comparison to their personal skills. And this finding results from the investigation of both teachers and students' perceptions.

The study has implications for research and practice. As regards research, the study suggests that teachers' perceptions of EI, and SEL are potential teacher-based factors that might describe teacher–student relationships. As regards practice, it is evident that enhancing teachers' social and emotional skills would promote positive teacher–student relationships, and prevent relational conflict in preschool classrooms. It seems that teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL skills are the prerequisites for effective classroom management, since they promote healthy relationships between students and teachers. Furthermore, attachment theory supports that kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the quality of teacher–student relationships significantly affect student behavior, and teacher relationships in first grade (Birch and Ladd 1998). At the same time, research supports that the quality of teacher–student relationships in kindergarten potentially influence students' achievement and behavioral outcomes (Mantzicopoulos and Neuharth-Pritchett 2003). Based on these assumptions, our findings underscore the importance of teacher-training in helping preschool teachers to develop personal and professional skills. We suggest improving teacher training programs, by helping teachers to develop competences and skills that help them to focus on teacher–student relationships. Moreover, this study could give insight to educational, school psychologists and other agents who collaborate and consult with teachers, on which teachers' personal characteristics and professional skills are important to the cultivation of positive teacher–student relationships. Finally, educators and researchers need to be aware of the importance of teachers' perceptions of EI and SEL skills in determining positive classroom environment. Since teachers' perceptions can affect the implementation of SEL programs (Hamre et al. 2012), researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers—who are invested in educating the child as a whole—should take a particular interest in assessing these perceptions, and the ways in which they can be integrated seamlessly into teaching practice.

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