



## A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of the teacher-student relationship on the child's development proves to be particularly important in the first years of scholarization. Such impact is even higher in students with atypical development. Despite the clear relevance of the teacher-student relationship, researches have rarely encompassed subjects with special education requirements. The objective of this project, therefore, is to focus on the characteristics perceived by the teacher in the relationship with students with different educational needs. In particular, we describe the results achieved with different groups of children with special education needs, i.e. autism spectrum disorders (14) and Down's syndrome (18), learning disorders (38) and attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorders (72). To measure the teacher's perception of the quality of the relation with the pupil we have used the Italian version of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001) as developed by Fraire and colleagues (2013). The social bonds with children with difficulties differ for at least one relational aspect from those with children from the Control Group, the sole exception being children with Down's syndrome. The Closeness dimension is hampered only in the case of the bonds with children affected by an autism spectrum disorder. On the contrary, relationships with children affected by frequent distraction and hyperactivism-related disorders are characterized by a higher level of Conflict and Dependency. Both dimensions increase in presence of high levels of pupil distraction, whereas only Conflict is at stake in presence of hyperactivity. As to children with learning disorders, only a difference in the Dependency dimension has been registered. These children, in fact, are seen by the teacher as being less autonomous than their classmates and thus requiring more frequent support and assistance.

**Keywords:** student-teacher relationship, pupils with special needs, autism spectrum disorders, Down's syndrome, learning disorders, attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorders



## INTRODUCTION

In the international literature there is a consensus on ascribing a significative role to early relationships with adults in children's development. It is not only the attachment to family that is important, but also, in a multiple attachment perspective, the bonds established with other important adult figures, as they can also have repercussions on the development of the child. As an example, the relationship developed in the first years of scholarization between teacher and pupil can be viewed as crucial. This is altogether a development context (Howes & Hamilton, 1992; Kauffmann et al., 1986; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995) where the teacher becomes a "significant other" for the child. As such, s/he can interfere with the behavioral models built on the base of the attachment bond established with the mother, promoting new models of emotional and behavioral regulation (Pianta, 1999; Cassidy, 1994).

In being dyadic systems, teacher-student relationships include and are conditioned by various elements. Among the factors defining a relationship there are the individual characteristics of the teacher and the pupil (e.g. age, gender, ethnic group), the internal operative models, namely those models that the subjects have developed on the base of the relationship with their attachment figures and that condition their way of relating with others. Finally, we also have to mention the feedback processes of this dyadic system which ensure the exchange of information between two individuals because they comprehend interactive behaviors and the manifestation of the self and the other (Pianta, 1999).

If compared to the scholastic adjustment of the pupil, the teacher-student relationship is both a protection factor that can reduce the impact that risk factors have on development, and a risk increasing factor (Pianta, 1994). The relationship between teacher and student influences the emotional development of the child (Howes, 2000), his or her academic performance (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992) as well as his or her relational and behavioral conducts with peers (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2006; Hughes et al., 2001; Birch & Ladd, 1998). A positive relationship with the teacher acts as a prevention factor against family-related developmental risks and also negative scholastic experiences, particularly for children with disabilities (Murray & Pianta, 2007).

The impact of the teacher-student relationship on the child's development proves to be particularly important in the first years of scholarization, when pupils consolidate relevant competences on how to be successful at school and how to develop accurate cognitive representations of themselves as learners - representations that reveal themselves to be decisive in the subsequent years (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Such impact is even higher in students with atypical development (Robertson et al., 2003). There are researches that demonstrate how the student-teacher relationship results to be a valid support not only for the insertion of a new student in a classroom (Ahnert et al., 2006) and for welcoming foreign students (Saft & Pianta, 2001), but also for the integration of disabled children (Lerner, 2003; Hendricsson & Rydell, 2004).

Among the defining factors for a relationship, the behavioral characteristics are particularly relevant in the case of students. The relationships are invalidated by the inadequacy of social negotiation abilities due to difficulties in auto-regulation caused by both externalizing (aggressiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity) and internalizing problems (e.g. anxiety and depression) (Baker, 2006; Mash & Barkley, 1996; Hendricsson & Rydell, 2004). According to the literature, it's the externalizing disorders in particular that negatively affect the quality of the relationship with the teacher (Birch, Ladd, 1998; Howes, 2000; Meehan et al., 2003).

Also the presence of learning disorders can hamper the relationship with the teacher (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004) and constitutes a risk condition for scholastic failure. On the other hand, a satisfying relationship with the teacher, especially in terms of emotional support, is a protective factor as it can determine a higher participation and a higher motivation for the student towards scholas-



tic activities (Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Baker, 1999) and influence positively his learning achievements (Hughes et al., 2008; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Davis, 2003).

Children's difficulties thus represent factors of vulnerability that can weaken the quality of the teacher-student relationship. However, there is still the need to investigate in depth the way in which the specific difficulties of the students (both type and extent) diversely affect the teacher's perception as to the quality of this relationship (Baker, 2006).

## **AIMS**

Despite the clear relevance of the teacher-student relationship, researches have rarely encompassed subjects with special education requirements (Robertson et al., 2003). In this regard, the Italian context is no exception, although great importance is given to the integration of the disabled child as an essential element of the educative and scholastic system (cf. DL517/1977, DL141/1999 of the Italian Law). The objective of this project, therefore, is to focus on the characteristics perceived by the teacher in the relationship with students with different educational needs. In particular, we describe the results achieved with different groups of children with special education needs, i.e. autism spectrum disorders and Down's syndrome, learning disorders and attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorders.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

### **Children with autism spectrum disorders and Down's syndrome**

The study involved 32 disabled children (18 with Down's syndrome and 14 with ASDs), respectively 17 males and 17 females (age:  $M = 85.75$  months;  $SD = 19.612$ ), and the same number of teachers and teaching assistants. The sample also included a control group formed by 4 classmates for every subject of the experimental group, that means 128 pupils (64 males and 64 females, age:  $M = 78.54$  months;  $SD = 17.583$ ).

### **Children with learning disorders**

108 pupils have taken part in the study (age:  $M = 100.03$  months;  $SD = 6.291$ ) of which 63 males and 45 females. All the subjects are Italian citizens; the sample is articulated in three groups: an experimental group (EG) formed by 38 students with a specific learning disorder (diagnosed or have a pending diagnosis); a first control group (CG1) was composed by the same amount of classmates ( $N = 38$ ) that did not present learning disorders but had the same scholastic performance as the children in the EG; a second control group (CG2) included 32 students with opposite scholastic performance compared to EG members.

### **Children with attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorders**

The study involved 156 students (age:  $M = 7.83$ ;  $SD = .80$ ) of which 104 males and 52 females. The experimental group was composed by 72 children that, according to the SDAI (Cornoldi et al., 1996) compiled by the two class teachers, had scored higher than nine in at least one of the two scales. Four children (two males and two females) were chosen randomly among the remaining students of each class and were inserted in the control group (CG).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Instruments**

To measure the teacher's perception of the quality of the relation with the pupil we have used the Italian version of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001) as developed by



Fraire and colleagues (2013). This scale evaluates three relational dimensions: Conflict, Closeness and Dependency. High scores in the Conflict subscale (minimum score assumed 10, maximum 50) would implicate that a problematic behavior on the part of the student during lessons is the cause of a hostile or negative emotional climate; the teacher perceives the pupil as being angry and unpredictable but does not know how to contain either his emotions or their manifestation and, consequently, feels ineffective and frustrated.

The Closeness dimension (theoretical minimum score 8, maximum 40), on the other hand, evaluates the positive emotional aspects of the relationship. If the latter is characterized by reciprocal trust and good communication, the teacher sees himself or herself as a supportive figure for the pupil and the latter will turn to him or her in moments of distress. The Dependency subscale (theoretical minimum score 4, maximum 20) measures if the educator views the student as excessively dependent on him in performing any kind of activity; in this case the teacher is convinced that the pupil asks for help too often or requires attention even when it would not be the case to do so.

For the purpose of observing the frequency of student hyperactive behaviors or distraction, both teachers in charge of every class filled out the SDAI, *Scala per l'individuazione di comportamenti di disattenzione e iperattività* (distraction and hyperactivity-related behaviors scale; Cornoldi et al., 1996). The test is composed of 18 items defined on the base of DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. Nine items evaluate the hyperactivity-impulsiveness dimension, while the remaining nine evaluate the level of distraction. For every statement, the frequency of the specified behaviors is evaluated (0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes, 2 = Quite often, 3 = Very often). A score of at least nine points on a single scale identifies a "risk case".

## RESULTS

### Children with autism spectrum disorders and Down's syndrome

Classroom teachers perceive in a similar way the relationships established with students with Down's syndrome and those from the control group (Table 1). On the other hand, differences become statistically relevant in the perception of the relationship between the teacher and the autistic children group. In this particular relationship there is an increase in conflict values ( $F = 12.730$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and dependency values ( $F = 3.736$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and a decrease in closeness values ( $F = 17.675$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .001$ ). This data seem to lead to a higher difficulty-perception in the relationship that the class teacher sets up with children with autistic traits. These difficulties could be owed to the qualitative compromises typical of an autistic child's social relationship skills.

Teaching assistants recognize a feeling of higher closeness in the relationships with children with Down's syndrome, if compared to those developed with children with ASDs ( $F = 6.174$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < .05$ ). The values on the Conflict and Dependency scales, however, are the same in both experimental groups (Table 1).



Table 1 - STRS scores with teachers and teaching assistants.

		STRS Teacher			STRS Teaching Assistants		
Relation with		Conflict	Closen.	Depend.	Conflict	Closen.	Depend.
Students with Down's Syndrome (N=18)	Mean (SD)	15.39 (4.19)	29.22 (7.11)	7.67 (2.33)	16.39 (4.58)	31.22 (5.42)	8.83 (3.54)
	Min-max	10-26	15-39	4-13	10-25	17-39	4-16
Students with ASDs (N=14)	Mean (SD)	21.43 (7.65)	23.36 (4.50)	8.29 (3.67)	18.07 (8.45)	25.36 (7.93)	9.21 (3.19)
	Min-max	10-32	15-30	4-14	10-33	14-40	5-15
Control Group (N=128)	Mean (SD)	13.63 (5.42)	32.27 (5.36)	6.41 (2.86)			
	Min-max	10-37	12-40	4-18			

There are significant correlations between the scores given by both educators in the three STRS sub-scales (Conflict:  $r = .536$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Closeness:  $r = .557$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Dependency:  $r = .373$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Thus, it would seem that a different manner of building and perceiving the relationship with autistic children for teachers and teaching assistants has emerged. Both educators evaluate differently intimate and affective components in the relation with the autistic child, his or her help requests and his or her level of autonomy. The class teacher views these relationships as more conflictual and perceives a lower level of Closeness, if compared to his or her relations with the other pupils.

### Children with Learning Disorders

The teachers perceive relations with students suffering from learning disorders as characterized by lower levels of Closeness and higher levels of Conflict (Table 2), but these differences are not statistically relevant. However, the difference between the perception of the relationship with students from the EG and those from the CGs (considering both CG1 and CG2) is statistically relevant in the Dependency dimension ( $t$ -distribution = 4.545;  $df = 117.585$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The Dependency score attained by the EG is statistically higher than the one given to both CG1 and CG2 students ( $F = 14.252$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, the highest level of dependency is associated with ASDs and not with poor academic performance. However, students' performance seems to influence the levels of closeness and conflict perceived, even though the differences are not statistically relevant. As a matter of fact, teachers tend to perceive a more affectionate and less hostile relationship with pupils who achieve a better school performance.



Table 2 - Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores given by the teachers to the STRS dimensions, separately for all three groups.

Relation with		Conflict	Closeness	Dependency
Students with SLDs (N=71)	Mean (SD)	16.18 (7.27)	28.87 (7.02)	7.82 (3.42)
	Min-max	10-45	13-40	4-19
Control Group with low performance (N=69)	Mean (SD)	15.32 (7.92)	29.12 (7.96)	6.16 (2.89)
	Min-max	10-40	11-40	4-16
Control Group with high performance (N=53)	Mean (SD)	13.51 (7.50)	30.89 (6.73)	5.06 (2.05)
	Min-max	10-42	13-40	4-13

### Children with attention-deficit problems and hyperactive behavior

STRS results highlight that teachers perceive the relationships with children who present attention-related and hyperactivism-related problems as more conflictual ( $t$ -distribution = 7.497;  $df$  = 121.134;  $p$  < .001) and dependent ( $t$ -distribution = 5.599;  $df$  = 151;  $p$  < .001). The perception of Closeness, instead, does not present significative differences between the two groups: Despite the problematic character traits, the teacher perceives a good level of emotional communication and relationship warmth. The perception of the conflict level present in the relationship is positively correlated to the scores obtained in the SDAI scales of Distraction ( $r$  = .242;  $p$  < .05) and Impulsiveness-Hyperactivity ( $r$  = .350;  $p$  < .01). Dependency, instead, correlates solely with the Distraction sub-scale ( $r$  = .250;  $p$  < .05).

Table 3 - Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores given by the teachers to the STRS dimensions, separately for the members of both groups.

Relation with		Conflict	Closeness	Dependency
Students with AD problems and hyperactive behavior (N=72)	Mean (SD)	26.94 (5.78)	24.07 (4.36)	10 (3.13)
	Min-max	15-38	10-32	4-19
Control Group (N=84)	Mean (SD)	20.91 (3.85)	23.98 (4.17)	7.28 (2.87)
	Min-max	14-33	14-33	4-15



## CONCLUSIONS

The data discussed in this study show the differences between the quality of the relationship with children with specific difficulties and the relationship with children who have had a normal development as perceived by the teacher.

The social bonds with children with difficulties differ for at least one relational aspect from those with children from the Control Group, the sole exception being children with Down's syndrome. The three dimensions of the relationship do not register significative differences for children with Down's syndrome and their other classmates in the teacher's perception.

The Closeness dimension is hampered only in the case of the bonds with children affected by an autism spectrum disorder. The relationships between the teacher and these children, therefore, appear to be less warm and affectionate, as well as less characterized by the sharing of feelings and narrations.

On the contrary, relationships with children affected by frequent distraction and hyperactivism-related disorders are characterized by a higher level of Conflict and Dependency. Both dimensions increase in presence of high levels of pupil distraction, whereas only Conflict is at stake in presence of hyperactivity.

As to children with learning disorders, only a difference in the Dependency dimension has been registered. These children, in fact, are seen by the teacher as being less autonomous than their classmates and thus requiring more frequent support and assistance.

Therefore, if we compare these results, we see that the teacher's relationship with children suffering from ASDs seems to be the one that deviates the most from the typical relations with normally developed children, as in those cases the possibility of sharing and communicating is compromised. Moreover, the literature shows that teachers admit not to be trained enough on how to provide adequate support for this particular type of children (Robertson, Chamberlain & Kasari, 2003). In these cases, the presence of a teaching assistant may be a valuable resource as s/he can develop a more intimate relationship with the child and mediate between the child and the teacher, facilitating the pupil's integration with the rest of the class (McVittie, 2005; Howes, 2003; Hemmingsson et al., 2003; Longobardi et al., 2013).

Our work is gradually reaching the objective of comparing the perception of the relationship with children with special education needs and the average data registered among the Italian population (Fraire et al., 2013). The aim is to better analyze, from a statistical point of view, the peculiarity of these social relations.

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