



THE THEORIES OF INTERPERSONAL ACCEPTANCE IN DEVELOPING POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: In recent years, Bulgaria has implemented significant changes in the educational system. The volume and complexity of study material have been increased, along with changes related to law on inclusive education. All this has increased the demands on teachers and students, putting a strain on relationships in the classroom. The lack of time and the need to teach all the intended learning material push the importance of interpersonal relationships to the background in the learning process. Communication between teachers and students has become formal and informative, which is a prerequisite for students' demotivation and withdrawal from the learning process. This article provides theoretical guidance and discusses scientific research from the last six decades, emphasizing the critical role of interpersonal acceptance in educational process in building a positive and productive environment and developing personal potential. The need for research and reformulation of contemporary models of teacher-student relationships is highlighted.

Keywords: interpersonal acceptance; learning; school environment; academic achievement.

The author have no funding to report.

The author have no support to report.

The author have declared that no competing interests exist.

THE ARTICLE CAN BE CITED AS FOLLOWS:

Stefanova, I. (2023). The Theories of Interpersonal Acceptance in Developing Positive Teacher-Student Relationships. *Psychological Research (in the Balkans)*, Volume 26, Number 3, 271-277 ISSN 2815-4797 (Print), ISSN 2815-4800 (Online). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7546/PsyRB.2023.26.03.07>

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Submitted – 16 May 2023

Revised – 15 October 2023

Published – 30 December 2023

The author has read and approved the final manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

School plays a crucial role in people's lives by providing them with the skills and tools necessary to prepare for the future. In this process, teachers have an irreplaceable role, as the teacher-student relationship can serve as an essential supportive mechanism for children's adaptation to the school environment. The expectations, support, and encouragement from teachers also directly influence students' self-perception and attitude towards the school environment. According to studies, the key characteristics of successful schools include a constant presence of caring, demanding, and well-prepared teachers (Zucker, 2001). This condition helps students become more successful, improves attendance, and thus reduces the dropout rate from the school system.

The development of education in Bulgaria over the last 20 years has been associated with European and global trends, requiring the formation of new models in educational system. The emphasis is placed on deadlines for the implementation of the curriculum, resource and normative provision, and student evaluation. For school education, the role of the teacher has become more challenging. All this has increased the demands on teachers and students and put a strain on relationships in the classroom. The lack of time and the need to teach all the intended learning material have pushed the importance of interpersonal relationships for the educational process to the background. Communication between teachers and students becomes formal and informative, which is one of the main factors leading to demotivation of students and their withdrawal from the learning process.

At its core, learning is based on the acquisition of knowledge and skills through experience, observation, and practice. The brain processes information, forms connections, and retains information for later use. Additionally, motivation, engagement, and attention play important roles in the foundation of learning. The foundation of learning is multi-faceted and influenced by a variety of factors, one of which is the motivation that relates to the social environment. Learning is a social and emotional process that begins in interpersonal relationships with significant others.

THE NATURE OF INTERPERSONAL ACCEPTANCE

The drive towards interpersonal acceptance has been present in humans since ancient times. From an evolutionary standpoint, acceptance represents a fundamental human need related to survival and the bene-

fits of group living. The pursuit of positive and lasting relationships has been a huge advantage among our evolutionary ancestors. Humans were vulnerable and unable to satisfy their needs for survival and reproduction without teeth, fur, or claws and with a long childhood. Therefore, they had to rely on each other and small groups to survive in a harsh environment (Freud, 1930). Emotional displays played a significant role in being accepted and established in the group, initially as a call to reproduce and a signal for survival. Darwin (1872) made a fundamental contribution to the study of the biological origins of emotions. He was the first to systematize knowledge about biology and behavioral observations of his time and described biologically modulated universal principles of expressing and recognizing emotions in humans and animals.

From what we have said so far, it follows that the biological drive towards interpersonal acceptance lies at the foundation of human relationships. Under conditions of stress, this drive activates the attachment system, which will be discussed below. Interpersonal relationships form certain patterns based on an individual's past experiences. Hinde (1988) describes interpersonal relationships as a series of interactions between two individuals that take place over time. Each interaction is relatively limited in duration but influenced by past interactions and affects future ones.

In real life, we categorize interpersonal relationships into healthy and unhealthy based on their dynamics. Healthy relationships are based on mutual agreement, pleasure, or necessity, and lead to positive internal and social outcomes for both parties. When a relationship does not meet these criteria, participants may choose to end it. Healthy relationships are characterized by active engagement and communication that adhere to social norms. Both verbal and nonverbal communication in healthy relationships contains elements of reciprocity and mutual affirmation.

Unhealthy relationships are often characterized by lying, stealing, running away from home or school, frequent fighting, and physical violence. Such relationships are widely discussed in literature as markers of delinquent and deviant behavior, including in children and adolescents. It is important to note, however, that participants in unhealthy relationships may not recognize or acknowledge the negative markers in their interaction patterns.

Below, we consider two of the leading theoretical models from the past six decades examining interpersonal acceptance through the lens of interpersonal functioning. These are John Bowlby's At-

tachment Theory and Ronald Rohner's Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory.

Attachment Theory summarizes causal relationships through observable behavior and defines four types of interpersonal attachment, tracing key points in the development of skills for perceiving and maintaining relationships in parent-child interaction. In Bowlby's original Attachment Theory, the sense of interpersonal acceptance arises from the earliest moments of interaction between the caregiver and the child.

Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory postulates a "warmth dimension" where each person can place themselves as accepted or rejected. Here, causal relationships are derived based on the current interpretation of the behavior of the significant figure perceived by the individual as interpersonal acceptance or rejection.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP PROTOTYPES. ATTACHMENT THEORY

The relationships between adults and children have long been the subject of scientific research. It is known that the quality of the relationship between parents and children has a considerable influence on the understanding of child-adult relationships. Results from a series of studies have shown that the bond between parent and child becomes a prototype for other significant relationships, such as teacher-student relationships (Coleman, 2005). Studies have also shown that children who have a secure attachment with their caregivers are more likely to establish a secure attachment with their teacher (Del Villano et. al., 2014).

Parent-child relationships shape more than just future prototypes. Research by Del Vianno et al. (2014) shows a significant connection between learning performance, both in verbal and visual-spatial trials, and the moderating effect of attachment style. Specifically, their analysis reveals that a child's attachment style with their parents moderates the relationship between short-term verbal memory and reading ability. Similarly, attachment style with the teacher moderates the relationship between the short-term memory and reading skills, and marginally moderates the relationship between working memory and calculation ability. The authors conclude that parent-child and teacher-child relationships regulate a child's emotional skills and academic development, having a major influence on their skills deficit or enhancement.

One of the main purposes of this article is to provide theoretical guidance, so let us explain the

main characteristics of attachment styles. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, the attachment bond is an exclusive and enduring relationship that an individual establishes with their caregiver. It begins within dyadic relationship matrix with its internal mechanisms and external environment. Bowlby posits that the infants have an innate and biological predisposition to develop an attachment bond with their caregivers, which serves the biological function of ensuring protection and psychological security. Attachment theory distinguishes four models of interpersonal relationships: secure attachment, avoidant attachment, ambivalent attachment, and disorganized attachment (Bowlby, 2019). These models are based on daily interactions between the caregiver (attachment figure) and the child and are activated by a bio-behavioral attachment system in humans. The purpose of this system is to keep babies safe and in close proximity to their caregivers. According to Bowlby, this attachment system is mostly latent (inactive) until it is activated by the need for closeness and contact with the primary caregiver due to stress, fear, illness, or other situations that provoke a strong emotional charge (increased need to convey a high emotional intensity signal). Under normal circumstances, the attachment system cannot be observed. When activated, it prompts the child to exhibit behaviors that signal their need for or search for closeness and contact with the primary caregiver. This closeness enables the child to feel a sense of calm and security, which deactivates the attachment system. Bowlby's theory makes an extremely important discovery for his time demonstrating that young children build strong emotional bonds with their caregivers based on the principle of affective communication, rather than the previously held belief, that it was based solely on the principle of the food source.

The secure attachment model is characterized by an individual's confidence that the parent (or attachment figure) will be available every time, will be responsive to their needs, and will help them in situations where they encounter difficulties or threatening situations.

The insecure-avoidant attachment model is believed to develop in cases where the baby's caregiver has been insensitive to their needs, for example, with intrusive or confusing behavior. In this case, the baby is still driven by the attachment system to seek comfort through proximity to their attachment figure, but they must soften their behavior's expression so that the attachment figure's response is not devastating. In this model, the individual does not have the confidence that the attachment figure will

respond to their request for help. On the contrary, the individual expects to be rejected. These individuals strive to live their lives independently, without the love and support of others.

The model of insecure-ambivalent (anxious) attachment is characterized by an individual's uncertainty whether their parent will be available, responsive, and helpful. Due to this uncertainty, the individual is prone to anxiety about separation and prefers to cling tightly to the parent figure with clingy behavior. This model arises when the parent is sometimes available and sometimes not and is characterized by frequent separations and threats of abandonment as a means of exerting control.

The last model of attachment, disorganized attachment, is characterized by the child's stunned or disoriented behavior. This model combines both types of insecure attachment, and the behaviors associated with disorganized attachment suggest that the child is overwhelmed, disoriented, or frightened in the presence of their attachment figures. Although this model of attachment is more prevalent in high-risk samples, such as samples of abused children and parents with mental illness, this is not an indicator that the child is being abused in any way (Woolgar, 2021).

Studies show that attachment patterns are stable, but there is a chance for them to be changed during the first two to three years of development. The latter is possible if the parent's attitude towards the child changes during this time window. Once a pattern is developed, it tends to become entrenched. One reason for this is that the parent's pattern remains unchanged. Another reason is that every structure tends towards stabilization and preservation (Bowlby, 2019).

The attachment models manifest during times of stress. Research shows that the attachment patterns between parent-child are like those between teacher-student. However, their establishment at a given moment cannot serve as a prognostic tool for subsequent interpersonal relationships, either as potential attachment models or as a measure of experiencing acceptance-rejection in the future.

INTERPERSONAL ACCEPTANCE-REJECTION THEORY

Ronald Rohner and colleagues have conducted cross-cultural research aimed at conceptualizing acceptance through a large body of research and Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (Rohner, 2008, 2016). In this approach, the interpersonal manifestation of acceptance and rejection is concep-

tualized as a continuum. R. Rohner defines that acceptance and rejection are not two categorical affective states, but rather exist in more of a continuous form along this continuum. Acceptance is described as "the warmth, affection, care, comfort, concern, nurturance, support, or simply love that one person can express to or experience from another person" (Rohner, 2016:4) while rejection is "the absence or significant withdrawal of these positive feelings and behaviors and by the presence of a variety of physically and psychologically hurtful behaviors and affects" (Rohner, 2016:4). According to the author, a large part of experiencing interpersonal acceptance carries symbolic essence. Therefore, to interpret why a particular behavior is perceived by a specific person as a signal of acceptance (or rejection), attention must first be paid to culturally grounded interpretations (whether from the family environment or more broadly - from the social background) of behaviors related to love, and then those interpretations should be related to the specific context.

Research in interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory shows mixed results regarding the relationship of perceived parental acceptance, perceived teacher acceptance, and school achievement.

Moreover, Vale and colleagues (2017) reported a positive and significant statistical correlation between the acceptance perception, resilience, the classroom climate, and academic success.

Results of Pianta and Steinberg's (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992) research show significant fluctuation in children's behavior with equal perceived interpersonal parent and teacher acceptance. These authors conducted a study with one hundred and one two-year-old children, their mothers, and their teachers. First, they assess the quality of the children's relationship with their mothers, and six months later they assess the quality of the children's relationship with their teachers. Research has shown that children tend to form relationships with teachers that resemble relationships with their mothers. However, the authors note that children's behavior toward mothers and behavior toward teachers may differ, because of the context of relationships at home and school, and because of the different roles of teachers and mothers in children's lives.

Another study confirms the importance of the perceived teacher acceptance for the positive attitude of boys and girls towards school. Erkman and colleagues (2010) examined the influence of perceived teacher acceptance, children's self-concept, and children's attitudes toward school, and their relationship to academic achievement. Despite the children's positive attitude toward school, the re-

sults also showed that the perceived teacher acceptance significantly correlated with boys' academic achievement but not girls. Further regression analyzes revealed that perceived teacher acceptance and academic self-concept (a component of school attitude) were significant and independent predictors of boys' academic achievement, but academic self-concept alone could predict academic achievement only in girls. The research supports the assumption that a positive perception of teachers in boys (but not necessarily in girls) is an important factor in academic achievement. In other words, there is no direct correlation between perceived teacher acceptance and thirst for knowledge. "Love is never enough" – as Aaron Beck says (Beck, 1989).

CHARACTERISTIC OF INTERPERSONAL TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Attachment theory proposes that early experiences with caregivers shape attachment styles, which can influence how a person forms relationships throughout life. Therefore, it is valid to assume that in the context of teacher-student relationship, a student with a secure attachment style should be more likely to trust the teacher, feel comfortable seeking help and guidance, and engage in positive interactions. Conversely, a student with an insecure attachment style may struggle with trust, feel uneasy seeking help, and be more likely to engage in negative interactions.

It is important to note that teacher-student relationships follow the context of an educational institution with strict internal rules, which differ from home environments. The primary focus is to teach students scientific and cultural knowledge, and teachers directly influence the formation of the student's personality through their pedagogical communication style.

The school environment itself assumes many stressful situations such as exams, tests, and mutual competition among students, fear of failure, expulsion, and admonishment - preconditions for activating the attachment system. Depending on the student's psychological adaptability, academic success and socialization may be possible at different levels.

MODELS OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Howes (1999) discusses early teacher-student relationships, which she believes resemble parent-child relationships. A study by Pianta and Steinberg

(1992) shows that children are likely to form relationships with teachers like those with their mothers. However, the authors caution that children's behavior towards their mothers and teachers may differ due to contextual differences in their relationships at home and in school, as well as the different roles that teachers and mothers play in children's lives.

Erkman and colleagues (2010) investigated the influence of perceived teacher acceptance, children's self-concept, and attitudes towards school on their academic achievement. The results indicated that the feeling of acceptance from the teacher is significantly correlated with positive attitudes towards school for both boys and girls. Perceived teacher acceptance was found to be significantly correlated with the academic achievement of boys but not of girls. Regression analyses revealed that perceived teacher acceptance and academic self-concept (a component of attitude towards school) were significant and independent predictors of boys' academic achievement, but academic self-concept alone could only predict academic achievement in girls. The study supports the hypothesis that positive teacher acceptance among boys, but not necessarily among girls, is an important factor for academic achievement. However, both boys and girls who perceive their teachers as accepting tend to have a positive attitude towards school and a positive self-concept.

Silberman (1969) distinguishes four qualitatively different interpersonal relationships that can form between children and teachers: attachment, concern, indifference, and rejection. Research shows that successful and compliant children tend to become attached to their teachers, while children who struggle with the structure of the system are often sought after by teachers. Children who are quiet and withdrawn may be ignored by teachers, while those whose behavior falls outside of accepted norms are likely to be rejected (Good & Brophy, 1972).

Birch and Ladd (1997) identified three qualitative aspects of the teacher-student relationship that influence children's adaptation in school. These are closeness, dependence, and conflict. Closeness is characterized by the degree of warmth and openness in communication between teachers and children. The authors suggest that a warm and responsive teacher in the classroom can strengthen positive emotions and attitudes toward school. A sign of a dependent relationship is excessive reliance on teachers as a source of support. Students who are more dependent on their teacher may feel lonely among their peers and may develop negative feelings toward school. Finally, the authors conclude that conflict can disrupt children's adaptation to school, as

it tends to provoke anger and anxiety in children, motivating them to withdraw from the educational system. Both conflict and closeness with the teacher are significant factors explaining children's academic achievement.

HEALTHY AND STIMULATING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The type of teacher-student relationship that generates respect, fairness, and care is considered an important element for the effectiveness of the learning process. The ability of teachers to develop a positive and caring relationship with students is crucial for creating a positive learning environment and encouraging student achievement (Brophy & Good, 1986). Perceived care from the teacher is a significant part of the difference in both academic achievement and effort, as well as motivation to learn (Murdock & Miller, 2003). It is linked to students' inclination towards prosocial behavior and the formation of socially responsible goals (Wentzel, 1997). Students' sense of trust in their teachers is a key element in their adaptation to the school environment (Lee, 2007).

Teachers influence children directly through direct contact and indirectly through the structure of the classroom environment. One important aspect of the classroom environment is providing rules. Rules such as asking for permission to speak, following modeled behavior, organizing materials when work is done, etc., are quickly assimilated by most children. The degree to which these rules are directly assimilated affects the building of child-teacher relationships. Students who do not comply with the rules can be labeled as problematic. Once they acquire such a label, their overall relationships with all teachers begin to suffer, even before the teachers have met the students in question (Good, 1981).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the teacher-student relationship is a crucial aspect of the educational process. Positive relationships that are built on a foundation of interpersonal acceptance can foster motivation, engagement, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging in students. Teachers who communicate care, warmth, concern, and emotional support can help students overcome emotional and behavioral challenges and create an inclusive learning environment that encourages growth and development. By prioritizing interpersonal acceptance and positive relationships, educa-

tors can support their students in achieving academic success and reaching their full potential.

In conclusion, the teacher-student relationship is a crucial factor in shaping a student's academic achievement, socialization, and overall development. Research suggests that a positive and caring relationship with a teacher can significantly impact a student's attitude towards school, academic achievement, and motivation to learn. The quality of the relationship between teachers and students can be influenced by various factors such as attachment, perceived teacher acceptance, rules in the classroom environment, and the teacher's ability to provide emotional support. Therefore, it is important for teachers to develop a positive relationship with their students and provide a safe and supportive learning environment to help students reach their full potential.

While interpersonal acceptance is crucial in establishing positive teacher-student relationships, it is not always easy to achieve. Teachers must be mindful of their verbal and nonverbal communication, actively listen to their students, and be open and responsive to their needs. In Bulgaria recent changes in educational material have put a strain on relationships in the classroom, making it more challenging for teachers to communicate acceptance to their students. However, given the importance of interpersonal acceptance in the learning process, it is essential to conduct research in this area and develop interventions that promote positive teacher-student relationships and improve student outcomes. Schools and education systems should also provide training and support to teachers to help them develop the skills needed to establish positive teacher-student relationships. This can include workshops on affective communication, emotional intelligence, and classroom management strategies that promote positive interactions between teachers and students. By prioritizing the development of positive teacher-student relationships, we can help students love learning and reach their full potential.

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