

## Teacher-child relationships in Turkish and United States schools: A cross-cultural study

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*Recent educational research utilising Bowlby's attachment theory has focused on children's interpersonal relationships with their teachers. Research in this area has indicated that the security of the teacher-child relationship influences children's development in many of the same ways as secure parent-child attachments. The purpose of this study is to examine and compare a United States and Turkish sample of teachers and their perceived relationships with their students. It was hypothesised that because teachers in the United States receive more information related to the developmental needs of children, they would be more sensitive to the need for closeness in teacher-child relationships. Results indicate that, in fact, Turkish teachers report less conflict and more closeness to their students than did United States teachers.*

Attachment, relationships, multicultural, teachers, children

Recent educational research has focused on children's interpersonal relationships with their teachers. As in the study of parent-child relations, this research has utilised Bowlby's (1973; 1980; 1982) attachment theory as a framework for understanding the interpersonal dynamics of this relationship. This is a departure from traditional teacher-child research, which has tended to focus on the relationships between teacher and child related to instruction. Teacher-child attachment research is primarily focused on the interpersonal relationship between a teacher and child.

Research in this area has indicated that the security of the teacher-child relationship influences children's development in many of the same ways as secure parent-child attachments (Goosen and Van Ijzendoorn, 1990; Howes and Hamilton, 1992; Murray and Greenberg, 2000; Pianta, 1994). Children may look to their teacher for the same sort of "emotional security" that characterises the sensitive, responsive, and socially supportive care-giving of the parent (Howes and Hamilton, 1992). Children benefit from encouraging and positive interactions with their teachers. They are more socially competent and do better in early childhood educational settings (Egeland and Hiester, 1995; Pianta and Nimetz, 1991). Further, research has indicated that children's cognitive activities and social competence with peers can be predicted by child-teacher relationship quality (Howes and Smith, 1995; Howes, 2000). It has been suggested that teacher-child relationships could even serve as a protective factor for children at risk for academic failure (Pianta and Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Stuhlman, and Hamre, 2002). Therefore, children appear better adjusted when positive and encouraging relationships with their teachers provide a secure base for exploring and learning (Howes, Phillipsen, and Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). Further, it has been argued that a positive relationship between teacher and child is as important as a high quality educational program (Pianta and LaParo, 2003).

The influence of culture on children's attachment relationships has received some attention in studying parent-child attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1989). Early parent-child attachment research relied mainly on North American mother-child samples. More recent research has begun to consider parent-child attachment relationships in other Western and non-Western cultures. This research has generally found inter-cultural differences in the patterns of attachment suggesting that secure and insecure attachments may manifest themselves differently across cultural contexts. Attachment related behaviours that appear insecure in one culture may be appropriate and evidence of a secure attachment in another (Mizuta, Zahn-Waxler, Cole and Hiruma, 1996). It is logical to assume that if secure and insecure parent-child attachments manifest themselves differently in other non-North American cultures, the same would be true of teacher-child relationships. Yet, there has been a dearth of research examining teacher-child attachment relationships in other cultures.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine and compare a United States and Turkish sample of teachers and their perceived relationships with their students. Recently, in Turkish culture, professional caregivers and teachers have begun to become more informed about developmental psychology and the significant effects of positive interactions with children. Despite this attention, one still finds insensitive and unresponsive care-giving, as most of caregivers have not the formal education or advanced training that informs them about the effects of these positive relationships. Research in Turkish schools has not focused on these kinds relationships yet. To date, research has only been conducted with Turkish samples on adult attachment, and factors affecting attachment and psychopathology (Sümer and Güngör, 1999a; Sümer and Güngör, 1999b; see Kayahan, 2002; Hortaçsu, 2003). There have been no studies, like those in the United States, emphasising the importance of attachment-based relationships specifically formed between children and professionals in early childhood settings.

With the strong cultural differences between American and Turkish culture, it was hypothesised that there would be significant differences between the two groups of teachers. Specifically, because of the increased knowledge of developmental psychology found in United States teacher education programs, it was believed that teachers in the United States would report generally more positive relationships, less dependency and conflict than Turkish teachers. We postulated that a greater knowledge of the emotional needs of children would precipitate greater attention to the interpersonal teacher-child relationship by the teacher.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Thirty-one elementary school teachers from the south-eastern United States and 40 primary teachers from south-western Turkey participated in this study. Teachers reported on their perceived relationships with 747 children, with a mean age of 6 years. The Turkish group was recruited from five private preschools (offering fulltime and/or part-time care and education for children between the ages 4-6), four public kindergartens (state-supported, for 6 children years old) and three university based preschools (offering fulltime and part-time care and education for children 4-6 years old in western Turkey. The United States group was recruited from public schools in a large metropolitan area of the south-eastern United States.

On average, children in the Turkish sample were younger than the children in the United States sample by approximately 3 years. The two teacher groups had approximately the same number of years of teaching experience; however, one-half of the Turkish sample did not have a university degree, whereas virtually all of the United States sample had at least a Bachelor's degree in education. All of children from both cultures who participated in the study were attending school

fulltime and had been together with the same teacher for at least one year. For a breakdown of sample demographics for the Turkish and United States groups see Table 1.

**Table 1. Sample demographics**

Variable	Turkish Sample		United States Sample	
Child Age	5.4 years		7.9 years	
Child Gender	51% Male		52% Male	
	49% Female		48% Female	
Number of Years Teaching	12 years		14 years	
Teacher Educational Level	High School Diploma	50%	High School Diploma	0%
	Associates Degree	23%	Associates Degree	0.5%
	Bachelor's Degree	27%	Bachelor's Degree	31%
			Master's Degree	69%

## Measures

*Student-Teacher Relationship Scale:* The STRS (Pianta, 1996) is a 28-item self-report measure with a 5-point Likert-type rating scale. It was designed to measure teachers' perceptions about his or her relationship with a particular student, a student's interactive behaviour with the teacher and a teacher's beliefs about the student's feelings toward the teacher. The teacher rates his or her relationship with a particular student by indicating to what extent a particular item is applicable to that relationship. Responses range from 'definitely does not apply' (1) to 'definitely applies' (5).

The STRS yields three subscales: conflict, closeness and dependency. The Conflict subscale comprises 12 items designed to measure the degree to which a teacher perceives his or her relationship with a particular student as negative or conflictual (e.g. "This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other"). The Closeness subscale includes 11 items designed to measure the degree to which a teacher experiences affection, warmth, and open communication with a particular student (e.g. "I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child."). The Dependency subscale with five items measures the degree of dependency a teacher perceives in their relationship with a particular student. (e.g. "This child is overly dependent on me").

The STRS has demonstrated good reliability on all subscales: test-test reliability coefficients have been reported by the authors as 0.92 for conflict, 0.88 for closeness and 0.76 for dependency. Internal reliability coefficient alphas have also been reported to be 0.92, 0.86, and 0.64 for conflict, closeness, and dependency subscales. The scale has also shown strong evidence for concurrent and predictive validity across studies in terms of school adjustment and academic outcomes (Pianta, 1994; Birch and Ladd, 1997; Kesner, 2000; Kesner, 2002; Hamre and Pianta, 2001). In this study, internal reliability coefficients for the United States and Turkish sample were 0.82 and 0.80 for conflict, 0.81 and 0.73 for closeness, and 0.60 and 0.62 for dependency respectively.

*Demographic Information Form:* This form includes demographic items related to the teacher such as educational level, experience in the profession, marital state and if he/she has any children.

## Procedure

Because STRS was originally developed in English, the scale was translated into Turkish for use with the Turkish group of teachers. These translations were confirmed by two clinical psychologists fluent both in English and Turkish and also by two linguists in English.

Teachers were contacted by the authors in their respective countries and asked to participate in a study of teacher-child relationships. In both cultures, teachers were asked to complete STRS for children in their classroom at the end of the spring semester (end of the school year). Some teachers chose not to complete the scale for all children in their classrooms. On average, Turkish

teachers completed the scale on approximately 13 of their students, while the United States teachers completed the scale on 5 students chosen at random. Besides the STRS, teachers were also asked to fill out a short demographic information form.

## RESULTS

Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was utilised to assess differences between the Turkish and United States group of teachers. As noted above, there were considerable differences in both the age of children involved as subjects of the STRS and the level of education between teachers in Turkey and the United States. Thus, child age and teacher educational level were covaried in all statistical analyses.

Results of the MANCOVA, in which the three subscales of the STRS (Conflict, Closeness and Dependency), were the dependent variables and country (Turkey or United States) was the independent variable, indicate significant differences between the Turkish and United States teachers. Turkish teachers report significantly more closeness in their relationships with students as compared to United States teachers ( $F_{(1,728)}=12.13$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In addition, Turkish teachers report significantly more dependency in their relationships with students as compared to United States teachers ( $F_{(1,728)}=83.0$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). No significant difference was found in the amount of perceived conflict between teachers and students. It should be noted that these significant differences were found after controlling for the educational level of teachers and the age of the STRS child. Table 2 shows a more detailed summary of the means and standard deviations of selected variables.

**Table 2. Mean, and standard deviations for teacher reports of child-teacher relationships**

Variable	Turkish Sample	United States Sample
Conflict	24.6 (8.6)	23.4 (12.04)
Closeness	45.8 (6.8)**	41.8 (8.5)
Dependency	18.9 (4.9)***	13.1 (3.6)

\* $p<0.05$     \*\* $p<0.05$     \*\*\* $p<0.05$

## DISCUSSION

The present study was designed to highlight certain culture related variables which could be associated with the quality of teacher-child relationships. The initial aim of this cross-cultural study was to compare perceived teacher-child relationships in Turkish and United States samples based on the dimensions of conflict, closeness and dependency. It was hoped that the comparison between Turkish and United States teacher-child dyadic interactions would provide insight into the nature of those interactions in the two cultures.

Contrary to expectations, results indicated that Turkish teachers perceived significantly more closeness in their relationships with students than did United States teachers. This did not support the original hypothesis of more closeness in the United States teacher-child dyads. Additionally, the original hypothesis of more conflict between Turkish teachers and their students as compared to the United States sample was not supported. There are no significant differences in the amount of perceived conflict between the two cultures. The hypothesis that Turkish teachers would perceive more dependency in their relationships with students compared to United States teachers is confirmed by the results of the study.

Our original belief that increased knowledge of the importance of positive teacher-child relationships in the United States sample did not seem to be a factor in determining the quality of teacher-child relationships. According to Pianta, Stuhlman and Hamre (2002), the foremost factor in explaining variations in the quality of attachment relationships is culture. Limited data on caregiver-child interactions in different cultures indicated that although some attachment-related dimensions varied as a function of culture, there have been many similarities across cultures

(Mizuta et al., 1996; Posada and Jacobs, 2001; Carlson and Harwood, 2003, Sagi et al., 2002, Van Ijzendoorn, 1990).

For effective teacher-child interaction, it seems necessary to recognise how child-rearing practices in different cultures affect the extra-familial relationships children form. From this perspective, variations in findings of the present study might result from cultural differences in parenting practices. In a cross-cultural study, Aukrust et al. (2003), explored parent's perceptions of their young children's close relationships outside family across four different cultures: United States, Turkish, Norwegian, and Korean. In comparison with American parents, Turkish parents emphasised more the importance of their children having close, positive relationships with their teachers at school. The American parents recognised the importance of a good teacher-child relationship, but saw the importance in relation to academic outcomes rather than social-relational ones (Aukrust et al. 2003). According to American parents, relationships with teachers were seen as necessary for successful adjustment to school. However, as opposed to the findings in that study, North American parents have usually stressed autonomy and individuality in many studies (see Aukrust, 2001).

The findings of the present study related to the variations in dependency and closeness dimensions between the United States and Turkish samples can be explained by examining the underlying family structures found in the two cultures (see Table 3). The emphasis on individuality and autonomy common in American families stands in direct contrast to a more collectivist orientation found in Turkish families (Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier, 2002). Aukrust et al., (2003) concluded that "Ankara parents with the most education seemed most attuned to the social dimensions" (p. 493). This social-relational emphasis persists beyond the family and into the Turkish school system. In Turkey the preschool and primary schools require that children stay with the same teacher and classmates for several years, which allows close relationships to form between teacher and child and child to child. In contrast, children in primary schools in the United States have new teachers every year, and in the later primary years, multiple teachers during the same school day. American parents emphasise the importance of social relations with teachers, but only to the extent that it facilitates their child's academic success. This way of relating to others outside of the family is compatible with the individualistic nature of United States culture (Aukrust et al., 2003). Therefore the findings of the study are best understood by focusing on those individualistic-collectivistic dimensions that mainly affect child-care practices in both cultures (Kagitcibasi, 2000), rather than the presence of absence of knowledge of the importance of close teacher-child relations.

**Table 3. Social dimensions and relationship styles in Turkish and United States cultures**

<b>Relationship Dimensions</b>	<b>Turkish Culture</b>	<b>United States Culture</b>
Closeness Dimension	Closeness is important for all kinds of relationships	Closeness is important in some cases like academic success
Dependency Dimension	Collectivism is dominant, more dependent relationships	Individuality and autonomy is supported

The lasting impact of this study is to emphasise the need to understand cultural variations in child care practices by conducting cross-cultural studies. In addition, it is necessary to take the findings of such studies and incorporate them into the training programs of teachers from all cultures. Specifically, training teachers to be culturally sensitive educators by educating them in special training programs that focus on the importance of close non-parental adult-child relationships would add a component missing from most teacher training programs in the United States and other countries.

Because of the multicultural structure of many United States schools, there has been growing interest in understanding different cultures. Policy makers, researchers, educators and many other

leaders in the field have tried to increase the awareness of teachers and administrators about the impact of multiculturalism in schools.

In the Turkish culture, despite some studies on adult attachment or factors affecting attachment and psychopathology (Sümer and Güngör, 1999a; Sümer and Güngör, 1999b; see Kayahan, 2002; Hortaçsu, 2003), there has been a dearth of studies emphasising the importance of attachment-based relationships between children and professionals in early childhood settings. Subsequently there has not been the emphasis needed in teacher training programs in Turkey related to the importance of positive teacher-child relations. Despite this, there is a real opportunity to promote this aspect of teacher-child interactions in Turkey because of the almost innate social-relational emphasis found in Turkish culture. An emphasis on interpersonal relationships found naturally in Turkish society (Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier, 2002) makes the inclusion of this emphasis in teacher training logical.

At this point, it could be suggested that culturally designed interventions to increase caregivers' positive social interaction with children might improve social and emotional adjustment of children by focusing on individual and also cultural influences on these relationships. In the literature, there are few attachment based intervention studies in childcare settings. In one of them, Howes, Galinsky and Kontos (1998) examined whether changes in the sensitivity of child caregivers would increase children's attachment security with their caregivers. They found a modest intervention directed at improving the practices of caregivers could improve the attachment security of children. Additionally, case studies conducted to increase a teacher's sensitivity to a specific child in the classroom and to focus on how problem behaviors could be managed in preschool settings by using behavioral interaction principles (McIntosh, Rizza, and Bliss, 2000).

In classroom interactions, teachers are important figures as significant adults in children's lives. Also since teachers have close interactions with children, they can be effective models in putting those kinds of improvements into practice based on interactional styles. Therefore, teachers need training related to how they can improve themselves both individually and also professionally in order to support the social and emotional development of children. With such training, they would gain insight into themselves and their interpersonal relationships, so they can help children form an emotional balance and protect their mental health.

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