

# Descriptive Study on Grade 2 Pupils Relationship Behavior and School Adjustment As Perceived By Teachers: The Case of Jimma Zone, Oromia

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**Abstract.** This research aimed at examining teachers' perceptions of their relationship with pupils and the association of this relationship with the pupil's school adjustment. Quantitative data on the teachers' perceptions of the pupils' relationship and school adjustment behaviors were collected from 26 self-contained classes for 446 grade two sampled pupils using standardized measures. The Ward's method of cluster analysis identified the following three distinct pupil- teacher relationships, (a) positively involved, (b) functional average and (c) negatively involved. Likewise, the one way analysis of variance computed for the three relationship behavior scores showed statistically significant variation among the three clusters that designates the presence of three distinct pupil's relationship behaviors. In addition, the one way analysis of variance for the school adjustment scores among the three relationship types resulted in a statistically significant variation. The pupils whom the teachers reported to have positive relationship show close, warm and interactive relationship behaviors with their teachers. Moreover, the pupils scored significantly higher in school adjustment measure than the pupils whom the teachers reported to have functional average and negative involvement in their relationship behavior. Furthermore, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis between pupil's relationship behavior and school adjustment scores revealed the presence of a strong positive and statistically significant association between the teacher-pupil relationship and the school adjustment measure.

**Keywords:** Relationship behavior; school adjustment; teacher perceptions; early relationships

## **Introduction**

Several developmental theories assert the significant role teacher-pupil relationship play in leading to a range of positive academic and social outcomes (Wentzel, 2009). According to Bergin and Bergin (2009: p141), a child's school success can be influenced by the type of affection he/she has with parents at

home and teachers in the school environment. The same authors assert the importance of early relationship in predicting the long-term well-being of the child.

In general, the significance of early year's relationship behavior to learning and development is a well acknowledged phenomenon. Pupils' differences in relationship behaviors with adults are linked to the variations in school adjustment and learning. Kamala (2013), for instance, concludes that pupil's relationship behavior with significant persons predicts their competence in school adjustment. Hamre and Pianta (2001: p636) also confirm teacher-child relationship patterns as greatly useful components of children's success at school. At the early years, teachers assume a parent-surrogate role for children and may observe relationship behaviors which can have salient contributions for school adjustment and certain developmental outcomes for the child (Ramadass & Gowrie, 2014).

There is also a general conviction to the critical nature of early years in human development. Research evidence show the quality of relationships to be linked with the child's school adjustment behavior at present and in the future (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005: p305). In fact, the correlations between quality early relationship and later school work are strong and persistent. The relationship is more evident in the areas of academics and social success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001: p636). Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) indicated the presence of strong conviction on the significance of high quality early affiliation on children's school adjustment. O'Conner (2007) also indicated the contribution of high quality relations for children's academic success. From this, one can make an assumption that children's relationship behavior influence academic achievement through the encouragement of active learning and class activities (Patrick, Mantzicopoulos, Samarapungavan, & French, 2008).

Secure teacher-pupil relationships may be significant to make the school a supportive environment that can influence the adjustment competence of pupils. Moreover, when children experience positive relationships at school, they act attentively and explore their environment well. On the other hand, the experiences of insecure relationships with teachers lead to stress, suspicious exploration of the school environment and distorted self-concepts (Wentzel, 2009). In general, secure relationship forecasts more knowledge, high test result, learner motivation and fewer problematic and special needs education (Bergin & Bergin, 2009: p154). Negatively involved type of pupil relationship is characterized by continuous controlling of children's behavior and discouragement of the teacher in creating positive classroom setting (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). The major predictors of pupil insecure relations and maladjustments may be attributed to some unfulfilled or thwarted pupil needs within their homes and/or school environment.

Teachers' sensitivity to the type of relationship behavior determines the quality of school adjustment and learning for the child. It has also been estimated that 12 percent of the world's primary school going children are so emotionally upset as

to require the services of educational psychologists, sociologists or guidance and counseling specialists in matters of relationship and emotional stability (Ramadass & Gawrie, 2014). Hence, this is contextually a timely study with the intention of describing the teacher-pupil relationship behavior and its association to the pupils' school adjustment competence as perceived and reported by the teacher. Such type of research evidence can be informative for those significant individuals such as school teachers and school psychologists to understand how patterns of relationship behavior determines school adjustment and competence in the school environment and help to prepare themselves for possible interventions for perceived problematic relationships as the early relationship experiences have paramount importance for the individual's future life.

### **Teacher-Child Relationships**

Research findings showed positive relations between teacher-learner interaction and their school performance and adjustment (McCormick, O'Connor, Cappella & McClowry, 2013). Relationships are the arenas for socialization, development of communication skills and the regulation of emotions for children (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). A secure and close type of relationship not only predicts school adjustment but also crucial to the development of later successful relationship. Children adjust well if they feel their relationship is emotionally supportive (Wentzel, 2009: p309). On the other hand, if they feel threatened, anxious or uncertain, they fail to adjust well at school. The role of school teachers is not only to facilitate for knowledge acquisition but also socialize the children to form trusting relationships with others.

As Vygotsky (1978) stated it the teacher-child relationship behavior and the perception of the relationship by the teacher exert influence on salient developmental outcomes including cognitive ability. Children, who are supported for independence, motivated for achievement and encouraged to feel worthy, differ from their classmates on later quitting of school, success in learning and peer social skills in the school context. Bergin and Bergin (2009: p141) asserts the crucially of socio-emotional wellness on success at school where the basis of which is early attachment and relationship behaviors.

There are several studies which document teachers' perceptions on children's relationship behavior. Pianta (1997: p15), in his research described six categories of teacher relationship perceptions of children as uninvolved, dependent, angry-dependent, dysfunctional, functional average and positively involved positively involved. Children in the different patterns of relationships vary for the school adjustment measure. Of these, the most problematic are the dysfunctional and the angry-dependent. The functional average and positively involved children show relatively good adjustment to the school environment. They also show the fewest problem behaviors at school. Children whose relationships are described as dependent and angry dependent often experience adjustment difficulties at school. They have more conduct problems, less competent in cognitive functioning and also less tolerant to frustrations. Developmental researches have also documented angry-dependent relations at early childhood period to be

associated with decreased competence in socio-emotional functioning of the child. According to Demaray and Malecki (2002: p213), pupils with low perceived support attained significantly lower scores on positive behavior indicators and higher scores on problem behavior indicators than those having average or high perceived support groups do.

### **Child-Adjustment at School**

A well-adjusted child at school shows more behaviors of independence, creativity, active involvement in school work and less irritable behaviors. Kington (2013: p117) asserts higher levels of school adjustment and competence to have bases from positive teacher-pupil relationships and negative relationships to predict less promising path for children's future. Child-adjustment at school correlates with the relationship behavior of significant others such as the school teacher. For instance, Patrick, et al (2008: p126) and Furrer and Skinner (2003: p149) claim that having a relationship with one's teacher characterized by closeness, absence of conflict or dependency increases the chance of pupil motivation and achievement at school. On the other hand, children with anxious, avoidant and negative relations with teachers often show adjustment difficulties. For instance, children who are identified by dysfunctional and angry dependent relationship behaviors likely show more conduct problems, limited cognitive competence and learning difficulties. In fact, children with different relationship patterns with teachers vary in school adjustment behavior.

Children who often show positive relations exhibit better habits in various school works. There are researcher evidences which report the social adaptation advantages of early relationship behavior of children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001: p626). The teacher's perception and care for the child's emotional needs plays a salient role to predict learning and the development of social skills. Teachers are expected to examine the classroom environment in such a way that children are treated well and cared for. In the words of Malecki and Demaray (2003: p249) emotionally supportive tendencies of teachers relate to the children's academic success to a great extent. As a result of this, the influences of relationship behaviors on school adjustment should receive the highest recognition to be investigated so that to pave the ways for intervention schemes in case of problematic adjustment patterns. Because, improving the quality of teacher-pupil relationship starting from kindergarten and early grades can have salient contributions to the effectiveness of schools (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012: p336).

### **Research Methods**

This study followed a cross-sectional survey design that was helpful to collect data on grade 2 self-contained classroom teachers' perceptions of children's relationship behaviors and the corresponding adjustment at school. Twenty six grade 2 self-contained teachers from four Districts of Jimma Zone filled out the adapted teacher-child relationship scale a seminal work of Pianta and Steinberg (1992) and the school adjustment scale by Barbara (1975) for a total of 446 children. Before the actual data collection, the two instruments were checked for

content validity to examine whether they can reliably measure the intended variables in the study. A pilot-test of both instruments by five teachers for twelve children each resulted in an internal consistency reliability coefficient of 0.76 for the teacher-child relationship scale and 0.69 for the child's school adjustment scale (which can be judged as moderate).

The data for the main study were collected on separate days for the two scales. The twenty six grade two self-contained teachers filled out the teacher-child relationship scale for an average of eighteen children each. After two weeks, they again filled out the school adjustment scale for the children to whom they filled the teacher-child relationship scale. The time gap in filling out the two scales helped to decrease the chance of bias and maximize the return rate of the scales. The responses were based on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from definitely does not apply (1) up to definitely apply (5) to the child yielded a range of scores from 21 to 105 for the teacher-child relationship scale and from 19 to 95 for the school adjustment scale, respectively. In both types of scales relatively high scores show positive and relatively low scores show negative outcomes in the measured variable. After assigning numerical values to both types of measured variables (N= 446, Female= 218 & Males=228) the Ward's method of cluster analysis was done for the teacher-child relationship behavior scores.

Ward's hierarchical method of cluster analysis is based on the logic of minimum error variance grouping (SAS Inc., 2008). In the clustering, three distinct cluster solutions came out for the teacher perceptions of children's relationship behavior. Following the clustering, the school adjustment scores of each child were matched to the scores of teachers' perceptions of child relationship behavior for the respective clusters. Next, a one way analysis of variance that assumes inequality of variation for teacher relationship perception scores and school adjustment scores among the three cluster solutions was computed to verify whether the three patterns of relationships are equally homogeneous for the two measured variables. Then after, a mean difference test (t-test) that assumes the three patterns of relationship perceptions as independent was computed for both relationship perception and school adjustment variables. Further, to check for the presence of systematic association between the two variables, Pearson-Product-Moment correlation was calculated for the three clusters. Finally, the statistical tests of significance in the study were all checked at alpha ( $\alpha$ ) = 0.05.

## **Results**

The Ward's hierarchical cluster analysis method carried out on the raw scores of child relationship behavior obtained from 446 sampled children resulted into three distinct teachers' perceptions of the pupils' relationship behaviors as perceived by their self-contained classroom teachers. This method works by iteration of the scores to reach to the final cluster solution, where the researchers chose the clustering with the least error variance grouping. After checking the cluster solutions for 3, 4, 5 and 6 groups, the minimum error variance was found to be for the cluster solution of 3 groups. Therefore, the researchers decided the

three cluster solution to report the results. Table 1 below shows the number of observations (n), mean scores (X) and standard deviations (SD) of the different relationship behaviors.

**Table 1: Number of observations, mean score and standard deviation in the relationship score**

Cluster case	Observations(n)	%	Mean Score(X)	Standard Deviation(SD)
Positively involved	156	34.97	95.26	4.81
Functional average	182	40.81	80.21	4.74
Negatively involved	108	24.22	65.88	4.68

Table 1 shows the three types of relationship behaviors as perceived by their self-contained classroom teachers, namely the positively involved (n=156), functional average (n=182), and negatively involved (n=108). This classification was made by assuming the least error variance grouping.

The one way ANOVA that assumed homogeneity within the same cluster case was carried out on the three clusters of pupils' relationship behaviors as perceived by their teachers (see table 2). The Leven's test for inequality of variances among the three groups also confirmed the presence of significance variations on the pupils' relationship behavior perceptions of the teachers for the three distinct clusters.

**Table 2: ANOVA Summary for the three pupil relationship behavior types**

Variations	SS	df	MS	F-ratio
Between groups	29 999.72	2	14999.36	309.52**
Within groups	21564.86	444	48.46	
Total	51459.58			

\*\* P< 0.01

Table 2 shows the presence of a statistically significant variation of the teachers' perceptions towards the relationship behavior of children in the three cluster cases (F 309.52, df (2/444), P<0.01). This result depicts the presence of three distinct teacher-child relationship patterns as perceived and reported by the teachers.

**Table 3: Number of observations, mean score and standard deviation in the school adjustment behavior**

Cluster case	Observations(n)	%	Mean Score(X)	Standard Deviation(SD)
Positively involved	156	34.97	90.47	5.11
Functional average	182	40.81	77.96	4.86
Negatively involved	108	24.22	62.38	4.52

Table 3 above shows the three groups of pupils' adjustment situations at school, where the well-adjusted are (n=156), moderately adjusted (n=182), and poorly adjusted (n=108).

**Table 4: ANOVA Summary for pupil's school adjustment types**

Variations	SS	df	MS	F-ratio
Between groups	22168.74	2	11849.37	223.65**
Within groups	21986.62	444	48.77	
Total	44155.36			

P<0.01

On the other hand, one way ANOVA was conducted on school adjustment scores for children grouped in the different relationship patterns as perceived by their teachers (see table 4). As shown in the table, the F-statistic resulting from the one-way analysis of variance revealed the presence of statistically significant variation (F=223.65, df (2/444), P<0.01) in their school adjustments. This result showed statistically significant difference in the school adjustment scores where the positively involved receiving high scores, which show better adjustment in the school environment to benefit from academic learning and social competence. Furthermore, Pearson Product Moment Correlation that assumes both relationship and school adjustment behaviors of children as continuous variables computed & shown in table 5 below.

**Table 5: The correlation between pupils' relationship and school adjustment scores**

No	Case	N	Pearson Correlation Coefficient
1	Whole group	446	0.83 **
2	Positively involved	156	0.74**
3	Functional average	182	0.58*
4	Negatively involved	108	0.42*

\*\* P< 0.01

\* P< 0.05

As indicated in table 5, the correlation analysis showed the presence of strong and statistically significant links between the relationship behavior of pupils as perceived and reported by the teachers and the corresponding school adjustment scores (P<0.001). The correlation coefficient values reveal that there are associations between teachers' perceptions of pupils' relationship behavior and measures of school adjustment which range from light to strong, respectively. For instance, for the positively involved relationship group, the correlation coefficient value is 0.74 that shows the presence of a strong positive association between the teachers' perception of the children's relationship behavior and the school adjustment score.

## Discussion

Current researches are showing the significant role of relationship behaviors to children's school adjustment and academic performance. Driscoll and Pianta (2010: p40) witnessed the presence of evidence in support of the link between pupils' school adjustment and the importance of teacher-pupil relations in the early elementary school years. As Murray-Harvey (2010:p104) avers, compared to the relationships with family and peers, teacher-pupil relationship exerts the strongest influence on academic, social and emotional outcomes. The salience of

early adult-child relationship and the perceptions associated to children's learning and development is also a well acknowledged fact (Ramdass & Gowrie, 2014).

According to the perceptions of teachers, grade two pupils in the present study were classified into three distinct relationship clusters as of children with positive involvement (secure, affectionate and warm), positive but moderate involvement (functional average group) and negative involvement (conflicting, avoidant and dependent) respectively. Similar results about teacher-child relationship behaviors at Kindergarten level were already reported in several studies (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). The teachers' perceptions clearly revealed those children in the positively involved relationship cluster are often characterized by close and warm relationship behaviors. Most of the teachers reported to experience a warm, secure and a relatively affectionate relationship with the children. Moreover, relationship items indicating conflict and dependency are rated the lowest among these children. The moderately positively involved children's relationship behavior was reported to be in mid-way between positive and negative experiences. The children who are characterized to have negative relationship patterns with their teachers often show conflicting, avoidant and dependent relationship patterns (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Since the importance of early life in general and relationship experiences in particular is well supported by development theories and practices in the field, the findings of this study can have clear implications for further rigorous research and inform the practices on the part of early childhood caregivers and teachers.

On the other hand, the study finding revealed the presence of a strong association between children's relationship behavior as perceived by the teachers and the school adjustment scores. The more the child is positively involved his/her relationship with the teacher, the more he/she will likely to experience successful and competent adjustment behaviors in the school environment. On the other hand, when teachers perceive positive relationships, they tend to exert more effort to guide and to teach, and the pupils in turn develop trust and motivated to succeed (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010: p40). Furthermore, the well-adjusted children outperform their class mates in academic competence, peer relationship, maturity and also language development. For instance, a study by McCormick et al (2003: p611) reported a valid prediction of high quality teacher-pupil affiliations at Kindergarten level and in first grade Mathematics achievement.

For the insecure children, there are conditions in the environment which create frustrations leading to personal inadequacies, feelings of inferiority, rejection by teachers, parents or peers. In many respects, these conditions happen to relate to conflicting and dependency oriented patterns of child relationship behavior.

Hence, caregivers and teachers at the early periods of life would need to be sensitive and skillful to identify patterns of early childhood relationship behaviours as this may facilitate to early intervention and the devising of copying strategies when the child grow up. Thus, teachers would be able to foster positive relationships, which are predictors of pupils' academic success, active engagement and enthusiasm about learning (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White & Salovey, 2012: p701).

In summary, perceived positive relationships of pupils are capable of boosting the teachers' motivation to extend their effort and time to enhance the pupils' successful and competent adjustment behavior in the school setting. This, in turn will lead to eventual improvement in the academic performance of the pupil. Contrary to this, conflict and dependency based relationship behaviors may potentially hamper the attempts of creating a positive classroom environment (Wentzel, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Childhood social environments can have association with certain developmental outcomes such as adjustment at school and learning competence. For instance, teacher-child relationship behavior associates with the child's social, emotional and academic development outcomes. As this study showed significant variations exist in the way school teachers perceive the pupils' relationship behavior. These significant variations in the relationship behavior are also strongly linked to the pupils' adjustment in the school environment.

The significance of childhood life experiences to the betterment of later development and life is a well theorized and evidenced phenomenon. Specifically, there is a strong conviction to the prominence of early relationship experiences to the acquisition and development of competent behaviors, which will contribute to an individual's quality of life in later periods of life. Because of this reason, teacher-child relationship patterns at early grades would require careful observation and study with the intention of informing school personnel particularly the teachers and promoting positive early social relations and school adjustment for a scheme of not only encouraging the positive relationships involvement and adjustment but also to plan for remedial interventions for children with problematic social relationships and incompetent adjustment at school and with difficulties in successful learning.

### **Recommendations**

Early life social processes particularly childhood relationships behavior with significant others have great implications for school adjustment and other desirable developmental outcomes. Consequently, it is essential to note down the fact that significant influence of social processes in children's adjustment, learning and development. Therefore, the following recommendations are forwarded:

- Teachers at the early grade levels need to get refreshment training in how to identify children's relationship behavior and approach the children by considering social and emotional tendencies.

- Teachers at the early grades are required to be attentive in identifying the children's relationship behaviors to facilitate intervention mechanisms with children of problematic behavior.
- Teachers in collaboration with school psychologists and parents of the children may intervene on the children with problematic relationship patterns because early year interventions are likely to bring better outcomes of school adjustment and social relations.
- Researchers in the areas of school psychology shall pay greater attention in furthering investigations which will come out with better knowledge of children's relationship and school adjustment behavior so that to inform teaching at early grades, teacher professional competence and responsibility.

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