

Examining the Relationship between Teacher Authoritarian Beliefs and Classroom Interactions: Role of Teacher-student Similarities

Ebony Hinton¹, Manuela Jimenez², Andre Durham², Jason Downer²
¹University of Alabama at Birmingham, ²University of Virginia

INTRODUCTION

- Positive teacher-student interactions have been consistently linked to better child outcomes (Fraser & Walberg, 2006).
- In particular, classrooms in which teachers are warm, sensitive, and flexible tend to support the development of positive social and emotional competencies in young children (Mashburn et al., 2008).
- It is therefore important to understand how teacher and child characteristics are related to classroom interactions, because this may highlight new targets for intervention that will improve children’s classroom experience.
- A number of studies have established that teachers’ authoritarian beliefs are related to less positive, harmonious teacher-student interactions (Del Popolo, 1960; Pianta et al., 2005).
- Though mixed, there is also evidence that teacher-child similarities, such as shared race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background, may be linked to positive classroom interactions (Alexander & Entwisle, 1987; Dee, 2004).
- Interestingly, authoritarian teachers are more likely to use stereotypes when making judgments about students who are different from them (Tom, 1984); this suggests that authoritarian beliefs may lead to less positive teacher-child interactions that are grounded in bias, when teacher-child dissimilarities exist.
- This project seeks to bring all of these disparate literatures together in trying to better understand the conditions under which positive teacher-child interactions occur in preschool classrooms.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers’ authoritarian beliefs and teacher-child similarities relate to teacher-child interactions in preschool classrooms?

Hypothesis: Teachers with less authoritarian beliefs and more similarities with the children in their classroom will show more warmth, sensitivity and flexibility.

2. Do teacher-child similarities either buffer or strengthen this relationship?

Hypothesis: More teacher-child similarities will lessen the negative relationship between authoritarian beliefs and emotionally supportive interactions.

SAMPLE AND MEASURES

Sample:

507 teachers participated in a professional development intervention administered by the National Center for Research in Childhood Education (NCRECE).

- 46.6% Black, 29.8% Hispanic

Measures:

Authoritarian beliefs - 16-item questionnaire about teacher’s ideas about children, discipline, and classroom management.

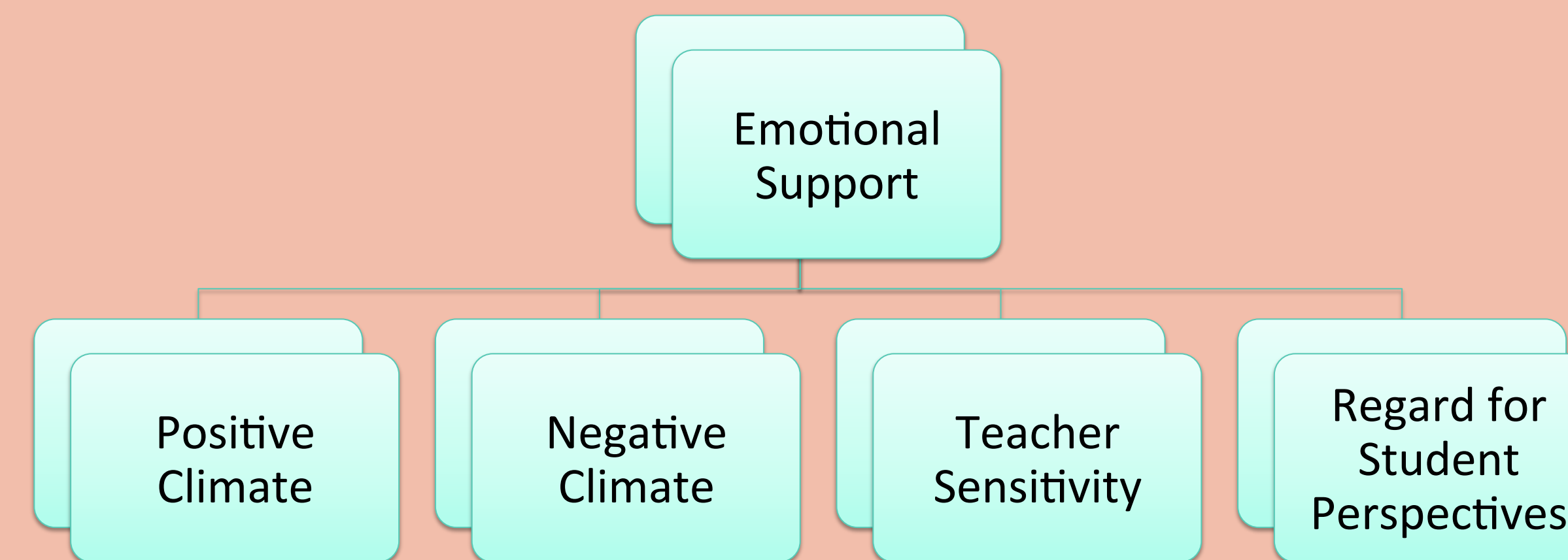
Teacher-student similarities -

- Race - percentage of students in the classroom who are of the same race as the teacher
- Socioeconomic background - percentage of students in the classroom whose parents are of a similar SES status as the teacher’s parents when the teacher was growing up

MEASURES

Teacher-child interactions – The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is an observational assessment conducted in the preschool classroom (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008).

- Across a full morning
- Cycles = 15 minutes observe, 10 minutes code
- Captured 4 dimensions of Emotional Support (see below)



METHODS cont.

Teachers self-reported their authoritarian beliefs. Teachers and parents provided demographic information about themselves and the children. Observations were conducted live in preschool classrooms during the mid-point of the school year.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and linear regression findings are reported.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for key study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Authoritarian Beliefs	2.52	.61	1.19- 4.06
% of Children who Share Teacher Race	31.30	37.21	0- 100
% of Children who Share Teacher SES Background	20.93	30.30	0- 100

Table 2. Standardized betas from multiple linear regressions examining the association of authoritarian beliefs and teacher-child similarities with observed teacher-child interactions

	<i>PC</i>	<i>NC</i>	<i>TS</i>	<i>RSP</i>
Authoritarian Beliefs	-.03	-.03	-.11	-.14*
% Shared Race	.05	-.07	-.09	-.01
% Shared SES	.13	-.012	.07	.10
BeliefsXShared Race	.26	.28	.29	.07
BeliefsXShared SES	.01	-.22	-.15	-.07

• Teacher authoritarian beliefs were significantly predictive of lower scores in the Regard for Student Perspectives dimension and there was a trend toward lower scores in Teacher Sensitivity ($p < .085$).

• Neither teacher-student racial similarity nor teacher-student SES background similarity moderated the relationship between authoritarian beliefs and the four dimensions of teacher-child interactions.

DISCUSSION

- The present results are consistent with past research on the authoritarian characteristics of teachers. A negative trend was present across all indicators of emotional support, though only Regard for Student Perspectives showed a significant relationship.
- Though research on teacher-student similarity has supported the idea that students and teachers who share characteristics benefit from enhanced social interactions, for the teachers in the present research, this was not always true. Classroom level race and family SES similarities were largely unrelated to teacher authoritarian beliefs or teacher-student interactions.
- In the present research teacher-student similarities are conceptually meant to serve as proxies for a shared experience, culture and understanding. Though, considering the mixed results of literature in this area, perhaps better indicators of a common connectedness (shared values and interests, etc.) should be investigated and utilized along side race and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Teachers with more authoritarian beliefs are more likely to agree to the adult-focused as opposed to child-focused items of the questionnaire. A teacher who does not subscribe to a student-focused perspective is less likely to be flexible and supportive of student autonomy. Therefore, lower scores in the Regard for Student Perspectives domains is not surprising.
- Post hoc analyses revealed that some groups (especially Latino teachers) showed evidence of strengthened teacher-student interactions when they were more similar to the students in their class in regards to socioeconomic upbringing.

LIMITATIONS

- All data on teacher-student interactions and teacher-student similarities were done on a class-level basis. By averaging similarity across the classroom and coding interactions of all students at once, information about individual students’ experiences were lost.
- Future research should seek to capture a possible relationship between authoritarian beliefs, classroom interactions and teacher-student similarities on a more individual basis.
- The measure for authoritarianism varies across the literature. Some studies utilized the famous F Scale while others created their own. It is possible that a more consistent way of measuring authoritarianism would serve future research well.
- Also, the present measure of authoritarian beliefs was adapted from a questionnaire intended for parents. A more teacher-focused measure may work better to capture the intended characteristics.

CONCLUSION

- Teachers with more authoritarian beliefs were observed to be less flexible and encouraging of student ideas and independence.
- No indicators of teacher-student similarity moderated the relationship between authoritarian beliefs and observed interactions.
- Within racial group correlations revealed some relations between SES upbringing and teacher-interactions amongst Black and Latino teachers.

References available upon request: hintonej@uab.edu