




Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher–Child Relationships, Student Behavior, and Classroom Management

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Abstract

Children's relationships with their teachers are a potential resource for enhancing developmental and academic outcomes. The effects of positive or negative teacher–child relationships can be either beneficial or detrimental to students' academic progress, behaviors, and emotions. In the current study, we utilized a qualitative research design to examine 18 pre-kindergarten to fourth-grade teachers' perceptions of teacher–child relationships, student behavior, and classroom management. Analysis of in-depth interviews yielded five major themes: (a) beliefs in children, (b) teaching strategies, (c) acknowledging individual differences, (d) challenges, and (e) relationships. Findings of this study have the potential to inform in-service training regarding relationship-building skills and attending to children's social-emotional development. We discuss the limitations of the study, implications for professional school counselors, and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: *teacher–child relationships; student behavior; classroom management; school counseling*

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Introduction

Schools play a critical role in addressing students' psychological and physical concerns and improving students' school performance and mental health (Adelman & Taylor, 2012). Given the significant amount of time teachers spend with their students, the relational dynamics between teachers and students and how they impact children's well-being and development have been a major focus in educational and developmental psychology research (Ferreira et al., 2020). Ample studies have supported that the quality of teacher-child relationships during early education is key to children's social-emotional well-being, school adjustment, and academic development (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Lei et al., 2016; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Spilt et al., 2018). Specifically, children who experience high-quality relationships during early education develop improved social-behavioral skills, self-regulation, and academic outcome (Baker et al., 2008; Choi & Dobbs-Oates, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2020; Spilt et al., 2018). On the other hand, children who have low-quality relationships in early childhood show greater challenges in social-emotional and cognitive development and thereby have a higher risk for exhibiting poor school performance and classroom adjustment (Jerome et al., 2009; Nguyen et al., 2020). Consequently, positive teacher-child relationships may serve as a protective factor for children's learning, psychosocial concerns, and behavioral problems (Myers & Pianta, 2008; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

Teacher-Child Relationships and Student Behavior

A meta-analysis research shows strong associations between affective teacher-student relationships and students' externalizing behavior problems (Lei et al., 2016). From an attachment perspective, teacher-child relationships typically are categorized as three dimensions: closeness, conflict, and dependency (Birch & Ladd, 1998). In close relationships, teachers are capable of providing emotional security, behavioral support, and positive classroom environment that facilitate children's self-regulation and prosocial behavior and encourage children's self-direction and autonomy in the learning environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Cadima et al., 2016; Howes, 2000; Pianta, 1999).

Children in dependent teacher-child relationships tend to show a high degree of overdependence toward their teachers. Teacher-child dependency may restrict these children's engagement in class activities and interpersonal relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997). However, researchers suggested a need to consider the meaning of dependency and affective teacher-child relationships through a sociocultural lens (Ferreira et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2016). For instance, recent research findings indicate that, within more collectivistic cultures, children's dependency at the preschool stage can be associated with increased feelings of proximity and security by teachers and further contribute to children's later self-regulation abilities (Ferreira et al., 2020).

Children in conflictual relationships may continuously engage in discordant interactions with teachers. Children may feel isolated, depressed, or anxious (Saltali, 2013) and exhibit misbehavior (Muris & Meesters, 2002; Pianta, 1999) caused by a lack of rapport and support. Due to strained relationships, teachers may also become frustrated with children, increasing the stress teachers feel (Yost & Mosca, 2002) and affecting their abilities to address children's academic, emotional, and behavioral needs (Gagnon et al., 2019; Myers & Pianta, 2008). In turn, this may cause children's negative attitude toward schools and greater difficulty for children's academic engagement and classroom adjustment (Al-Hendawi, 2012; Decker et al., 2007). Research further validates a reciprocal relation between teacher-child conflict and children's externalizing behavior (Skalická et al., 2015).

The effects of a positive or negative relationship between teachers and students can be either beneficial or detrimental to students' academics, behaviors, and emotions (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Many teachers have reported their priorities of engaging students in academic learning and managing students' classroom behaviors (Myers & Pianta, 2008; Powell et al., 2006), and yet they often find it challenging to balance

teaching the curriculum with attending to problematic behaviors. This highlights the importance of understanding and managing both individual student behavior as well as collective student behavior in the larger classroom context.

Classroom Management

It is important to note that the dynamics between teachers and students are embedded within the larger context of classroom interactions (Nguyen et al., 2020). Teachers have a strong influence over classroom dynamics, both indirectly and directly through teaching practices and classroom management (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). Classroom management is an important and necessary aspect of teaching and is a broad term comprised of strategies and techniques used to assist in engaging students as well as limiting disruptive behaviors (Emmer & Stough, 2001). Evertson and colleagues (2002) discussed classroom management as being “actively involved in maintaining student cooperation and compliance with necessary classroom rules and procedures... by monitoring behavior carefully and consistently” (pp. 129–130).

Many teachers have incorporated popular teaching methods such as cooperative learning groups, computer programs, lectures, and the use of student experiences (Lavasani et al., 2011; Stockall, 2011). Among these teaching strategies for learning, teachers also integrate specific approaches that assist in classroom management and positive classroom climate. Though many of these strategies aid in promoting academic success, many do not include the importance of teacher-child relationships. The quality of the teacher-child relationship has a direct impact on students’ academics, behaviors, and emotions (Jerome et al., 2009). Positive teacher-child relationships will often help reduce problematic behaviors and are typically linked to students being more engaged in learning (Myers & Pianta, 2008). Moreover, teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward students’ behaviors can influence classroom dynamics (Chang, 2013).

A series of reciprocal exchanges appear to reflect among teacher-child relationships, students’ behaviors, teachers’ perceptions of students’ behaviors, and teachers’ behaviors (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009). Incorporating these components, Gonzales-Ball and Bratton (2019) postulated a reciprocal relationship cycle, indicating an absence of training in addressing children’s emotional and behavioral needs may cause teachers and students to be caught in a continuity of a negative cycle of interaction. This highlights the need for teachers to foster consistent and secure relationships with children to better recognize and support children’s emotional needs and promote children’s optimal growth (Perry, 2001).

Despite empirical support for the impact of healthy teacher-child relationships on children’s learning and development, a review of the literature revealed few research studies investigating early childhood teachers’ views of their connections with students as well as their strategies to help with students’ classroom behavior, academic learning, and social-emotional growth. Thus, we sought to explore early childhood teachers’ experiences and perceptions of teacher-child relationships and the potential connection to student behavior and classroom management.

Purpose of the Study

We developed this study within the context of a larger quantitative study investigating the efficacy of a play-based teacher intervention. The current study addressed the guiding research question: What are early childhood teachers’ perceptions and experiences of teacher-child relationships, student behavior, and classroom management?

Method

Research Design

According to Leedy and Omrod (2016), when there is inadequate information on a topic or when there are unknown variables, qualitative methodology can explore the parameters of a specific phenomenon. In the current study, we employed a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of early childhood teachers' perceptions of teacher–child relationships, student behavior, and classroom management. Phenomenology examines the ways in which participants derive meaning from their inimitable experiences (Patton, 2002). Aligned with this methodological approach, we analyzed in-depth individual interviews to acquire knowledge of early childhood teachers' unique lived experiences as well as their collective perceptions (Wertz, 2005).

Setting

The research site was an early learning academy in the southern United States, consisting of prekindergarten to 4th grade classrooms and one special education classroom. The school had 264 students, aged 4–10 years old, enrolled at the time we conducted this study. The school had a diverse student body, including 3.8% Asian, 9.8% Black/African American, 20.8% White, 65.2% Hispanic, and 0.4% Native American.

Participants

A total of 18 teachers participated in the study, including two prekindergarten, three kindergarten, three 1st grade, two 2nd grade, one 3rd grade, four 4th grade, two special education, and one art teacher. The teacher participants were 17 women and 1 man, aged 22–53 years old. It was a racially and ethnically diverse group, including LatinX ($n = 8$), European American ($n = 9$), and Asian ($n = 1$). Years of teaching experience ranged from 2 to 28 years (mean 8.6 years). Fourteen participants held bachelor's degrees and four held graduate degrees in psychology ($n = 1$) and education ($n = 3$).

Research Team

The research team was comprised of one counselor educator and three PhD in Counseling students. All researchers had specialized training and experience in qualitative and school-based research. The second author is an associate professor at a public university in the southern United States and served as a mental health consultant at the intervention site. One PhD in Counseling student conducted individual interviews and, along with the other two research members, carried out data analysis and coding procedures under the direct supervision of the second author.

Individual Interview

The researcher conducted approximately 1-hour semistructured individual interviews with the teacher participants. The interview questions consisted of eight main questions. They explored teachers' perceptions of their classroom management strategies, classroom climate, teacher–child relationships, and students' socioemotional behavior as well as academic engagement. Example questions include “how do you stimulate student cooperation?”, “how do you handle students' off-task behavior?”, “how do you manage conflicts among students?”, “how do you build relationships with your students?”, and “what have been the most effective methods that you have used to help your students learn?”

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness relates to a study's strength (Patton, 2002) and demonstrates the quality of the methodology. To ensure the trustworthiness of the current study, we made efforts to utilize an audit trail, a record of every

step in data collection and analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012), including informed consent materials and the coding manual. We performed analyst triangulation based on a research team composition of three coders. We conducted peer-debriefing sessions among the research team members. In line with analyst triangulation, the goal of peer debriefing was to establish accountability and carefully acknowledge potential researcher bias throughout data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis

The research team utilized an adaptation of the data analysis strategy described by Miles et al. (2014) and implemented an inductive-deductive approach to coding procedures. The initial stages in qualitative data analysis involved an inductive method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). This facilitated the development of data patterns and related themes. The latter stages of coding were predominantly deductive in nature and involved confirming codes developed during the inductive stages (Patton, 2002). This data analysis strategy aligns with the perspective that “phenomenology tends to look at data thematically to extract essences and essentials of participant meanings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 8).

The coding team, consisting of the three PhD in Counseling students under the supervision of the second author, followed seven steps adapted from Miles et al. (2014). The coders first analyzed a subset of nine interviews individually by noting their initial reactions in the margins of each transcript. The coders then met to compare their notes, to highlight shared and different perspectives, and to develop a summary note. During the third step, the coders used the summary note to develop phrases that represented their interpretation of transcripts. This process led the coders to a preliminary code development. After comparing key phrases, the coders started to group them into categories and further merged similar categories. In the next step, the coders continued to refine categories and developed a preliminary coding manual. The coders started an initial coding process where they established intercoder agreement by applying the preliminary coding manual to the nine transcripts independently. They reviewed discrepant coding, rearranged the coding manual, and reapplied codes to the same subset of transcripts until the team met or exceeded a 90% mean agreement (Miles et al., 2014). Finally, the coders applied the final coding manual with a set of five themes to the second set of nine transcripts. Intercoder agreement ranged from 85% to 99% throughout the final coding period.

Results

This phenomenological study examined prekindergarten to 4th-grade teachers’ perceptions of teacher–child relationships, student behavior, and classroom management. Analysis of the 18 teacher interviews revealed five major themes: (a) beliefs in children, (b) teaching strategies, (c) acknowledging individual differences, (d) challenges, and (e) relationships.

Beliefs in Children

During the individual interviews, most of the teachers ($n = 12$) made comments that aligned with the theme of beliefs in children. The researchers applied this code when teachers commented on the belief they had in children’s learning and growth. This code also included teachers’ expressions of caring and hope for their students. One teacher reflected on the pride both she and her students experience when, through hard work and perseverance, children begin to understand the class material and generalize learning to other contexts.

I enjoy being with the kids. I just enjoy when you’re teaching something and they’re struggling and then all of a sudden when they understand, just the expression on their faces. They just get so excited. And then after they understand it then they start making connections with other things in real-life situations and in other subjects, and so it’s just really neat.

Similarly, another teacher commented on the excitement and confidence that children feel when they make accomplishments in the classroom.

I love teaching [students to read]. The interaction with the students, really watching them take control of their own knowledge, and come alive with it. Seeing their achievements, making connections between the book and their life, and other things that we're learning. They get so excited when they start to put it together, when they start to realize that they can read and then it just opens their world to everything else that they can do.

Teaching Strategies

Teaching strategies are the methods teachers used to engage students in the learning process. During the individual interviews, 16 of the participants commented on strategies for teaching and learning. This code also included teachers' attempts to model and encourage adaptive skills and appropriate conflict resolution. One teacher described flexibility in allowing students to make positional adjustments to facilitate learning. "If they need to stand up to work, if that helps them stay focused, that's okay. If they need to sit away from the group to focus, then that's alright." Another teacher commented on the importance of social interactions in supporting academic engagement. "We've seen how we can improve instruction with less instructional time and more social time. When the kids feel good at school they will learn."

A third teacher illustrated her approach to managing conflict by encouraging students to openly communicate with each other, and independently resolve their issues.

Kids come to you for every little thing every 5 seconds and what has been working lately is "Really? Ok, do you think you two can work it out?" and they just look at me and I say, "Ok, talk about it and if you need me..." and then sometimes they just look at each other and smile and go back [to their seats].

Acknowledging Individual Differences

Acknowledging individual differences referred to teachers' attempts to prize the individuality of students, including personality and cultural variables. Half of the teacher respondents ($n = 9$) made comments consistent with this code, which we also identified when teachers personalized their teaching to incorporate the cultural differences and values of the students in their classroom. One teacher described the importance of building a relationship, seeing the unique perspectives of her students, and adapting her teaching to meet their needs.

I think that what I learned is that first, I have to have rapport with them. I have to know where they're coming from before we can think academics. One size doesn't fit for every child. You just have to try various ways to reach a child on whatever they're struggling with. You have to think outside the box. Think of another way to present the skill to them.

Another teacher illustrated a strengths-based approach to learning.

Get to know them. What they like, what their lives are like, what are their needs, what are their strengths, and not focus on the weaknesses but focus on the strengths. Maybe this person over here is really good at X, but you're good at Y, and let's see how we can use Y to accomplish the goal. Whatever it is that we're trying to do.

Challenges

Fifteen of the teacher participants commented on challenges they experienced in the process of teaching. This code referred to the inherent difficulties involved in managing and implementing a curriculum, including time constraints and perceived pressure from school administrators. This code also referred to nonacademic issues, such as managing disruptive classroom behavior and working with parents. One teacher indicated student behavior as her main challenge, also noting a lack of parent involvement as a core impediment to healthy student development.

Behavior... behavior is number one, if you didn't have any behavior issues you could teach them everything and get it all done in a couple hours, but behavior is the biggest issue and especially in this day and time when parents have one, two, three jobs; children go to babysitters when they leave us. They're just not getting the home time that they used to so as a teacher it's up to you to teach them social skills, how to get along with other children, things like that that probably in the past they would have learned at home.

Another teacher had a similar impression of the amount of paperwork involved in the job. However, she also expressed a desire for parents to be more involved and supportive of their children's academic and behavioral progress and emphasized the need for parents and teachers to work together to promote student engagement.

Aside from the grading and the paperwork, it's nowadays, cause it wasn't like a decade ago, it seemed parents were more in tune with the education system, and it seems more and more we're getting parents who [say] "they're your problem, you figure it out during the day" and then you just don't have the parent support at home. And I think that's the most challenging thing because in order to be truly successful, the student needs to have their parents and the teacher working together. And students just soar. I've seen students come from a year behind and make the gain that they need, when their parents are on their side, and we're all working in the same direction.

A third teacher expressed frustration with the amount of assessment and grading, and the negative impact on students. She also described being overwhelmed by the increasing responsibilities placed on teachers.

The grading and seeing that [the children] are not getting it. The other thing is that [the workload] is too much. [The administrators] just keep adding stuff and adding stuff and... there's not more hours, there's only 24 hours, that's the only thing.

Relationships

Relationships referred to the quality and experience of the teacher–student bond, including safety, support, and collaboration. During the individual interviews, all teacher participants (N = 18) commented on their relationships with individual students. This code also included relational conflict and the process of repairing the teacher–child relationship. One teacher detailed the importance of the relationship in encouraging students to persevere.

They have to know that you care about them, even if no one else does, and that you have high expectations of them and why you have high expectations, that it's not about you but them going on for next year so they're prepared and can be successful.

Another teacher emphasized the role of healthy teacher–child relationships and a positive classroom climate in promoting student learning. "[It's important to make] them feel safe and secure, giving them a nurturing environment to learn in, and I think that once they feel that then it's reciprocated in their learning." A third teacher described her efforts to build one-on-one relationships and maintain consistency in her interactions with her students.

I have some that connect easier than others. Those that don't seem to have trouble making a connection, I try to continue to keep that connection going, but those that have a more difficult time, I try to make a reason why we need to be connected. And a reason to spend one-on-one time with them. I try every day to call one or two up to me privately just [to have] a little conversation: "How's it going? What'd you do last night? What are you going to do this weekend?" Just to try to let them know I'm just interested in them and I'm there for them and the same every day. I try to be the same to them every day so that there's not this one day everything's great and the next day "she's mad at me." I try to keep that even keel. I'm always interested in you and what you have going on, and so interested I called you up here just you and me and we're just going to have this few minutes together to visit and talk with each other.

Finally, a fourth teacher illustrated her process of managing student misbehavior, communicating with the parent and the child, and reconnecting with her student after a conflict.

Well, we visit and sometimes together we call the parent. The child calls the parent while I'm there and I tell the parent that they need to speak to you about what has happened and then I'll let the child speak first and then I speak to the parent, but I do always end the conversation with "I'm not mad at you. I'm disappointed, you made a bad choice. Let's turn the choice around." I do let them know I'm not mad at them, it's their actions that they did were not a good choice. "And I hope that this afternoon's better or tomorrow's better," and I hug them. They walk in the door and I hug them, they leave, and I hug them. And they need that. They need that affirmation, there's no doubt about it.

Discussion

In the current study, we examined early childhood teachers' perceptions of teacher-child relationships, student behavior, and classroom management. Responses from 18 teacher participants yielded five major themes that either directly or indirectly connected to one or more of these three constructs. As mentioned, relationships emerged as a major theme during data analysis procedures. All 18 teachers commented on their relationships with individual students in their classroom and described their efforts and strategies to build relationships with their students. During the individual interviews, most of the participants ($n = 12$) made comments that aligned with the theme of beliefs in children. Of those 12 teachers, 10 made specific reference to their interactions with students as forming the basis of their beliefs for teaching. Similarly, nine teachers provided statements consistent with the theme of acknowledging individual differences. Several of those teachers ($n = 5$) detailed their attempts to build rapport with students and facilitate quality teacher-child connections in the process of identifying ways to meet students' individual needs. Therefore, three of the five major themes identified in this study appear to intersect with teacher-child relationships. These findings indicate that teachers in the current study viewed maintaining healthy teacher-child relationships as central to their daily activities and teaching responsibilities.

During the individual interviews, teacher participants commented on various aspects of individual student behavior, classroom conduct, and methods they employed to facilitate student learning. As mentioned, the majority of the teachers ($n = 16$) specifically referred to teaching strategies, their efforts to promote adaptive skill development, and encourage healthy conflict resolution. Similarly, 14 teachers outlined challenges they experienced regarding disruptive student behavior and its impact on their approach to managing students' behavior and classroom learning environment. Therefore, two of the five major themes in this study directly connect to student behavior and classroom management, indicating that these constructs are salient for the teachers in the current study.

The nature of the teacher-child relationship has a direct influence on students' academic engagement, classroom behavior, and socioemotional development (Jerome et al., 2009). Healthy teacher-child

relationships can minimize maladjusted behavior and are often connected to students' learning engagement (Myers & Pianta, 2008). Additionally, teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward students' behaviors can affect the overall classroom climate (Chang, 2013). The findings in the current study support previous research, which indicated reciprocal exchanges among teacher–child relationships, teachers' perceptions of students' behaviors, and teachers' behaviors (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Gonzales-Ball & Bratton, 2019; Helker & Ray, 2009; Myers & Pianta, 2008; Yost & Mosca, 2002).

Implications for Professional School Counselors

Of note is that most of the teacher participants in the current study illustrated their desire to build relationships with students and tailor their instructions to meet individual needs. Yet, they have encountered some challenges including effective ways to manage students' classroom behavior, a lack of parental involvement, and time constraints. This indicates a need for school counselors to prepare teachers to efficiently respond to students' behavioral and social–emotional concerns, such as disruptive behavior and aggression, as well as communicate with parents about children's needs. Without proper training, teachers are likely to increase their stress, which may further influence their teaching effectiveness and classroom management.

Some teacher participants noted their strategies to manage children's academic and behavioral concerns, including identifying students' strengths and encouraging positive problem-solving skills. Although these teaching strategies appear to enhance classroom management, these approaches lack relationship-building techniques and an understanding of the root and the underlying meaning of children's challenging behavior. Children's misbehavior may stem from emotional distress, such as school environment adjustments, parental divorce, domestic violence, abuse, and loss and grief, and these stressors may lead to behavioral problems that result in a lack of academic engagement (Edwards et al., 2009). Thus, to support children's emotional, behavioral, and academic development, mental health professionals have supported teachers to learn specific skills targeted at building better teacher-child relationships, increasing teachers' awareness of students' experience and needs, and responding to students' challenging classroom behaviors (Lindo et al., 2014). Specifically, we recommend that early childhood teachers learn basic play-therapy language and skills to enhance teacher–child relationships and foster children's healthy learning and growth. Many mental health practitioners have conducted play therapy, a developmentally appropriate and relationship-focused modality, to help children aged 3–10 years prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and further achieve optimal growth and development. Thus, the use of play has extended beyond play therapy to include filial therapy, which allows significant adults, such as parents and teachers in the child's life, to be therapeutic agents.

To date, numerous research studies have shown the effectiveness of prekindergarten to elementary school teachers' use of basic play-therapy techniques for improving teacher–child relationships, children's emotional and behavioral problems, and teachers' classroom management skills (e.g., Chen & Lindo, 2018; Gonzales-Ball & Bratton, 2019; Helker & Ray, 2009; Lindo et al., 2014; Morrison Bennett & Bratton, 2011; Post et al., 2020; Pronchenko-Jain, 2012; Sepulveda et al., 2011). Due to a lack of training regarding children's mental health and wellness in teacher education programs, we suggest that school counselors provide mental health training and basic play-therapy skills training for in-service teachers. Instead of training teachers to become mental health experts or therapists, in-service training should aim at helping teachers become better equipped to build positive relationships with students, which is key to attending to children's social–emotional needs and preventing further behavioral issues.

Mental health professionals have found particular play-therapy relationship-building skills and language to be beneficial for teachers to enhance teacher–child relationships, children's classroom behavior and engagement, and overall classroom management (Chen & Lindo, 2017; Post et al., 2020). School counselors can consider incorporating play-based and relationship-focused teacher intervention models into in-service training. To date, kinder training (White et al., 1997), child-teacher relationship training (Helker & Ray, 2009; Morrison &

Bratton, 2011), relationship enhancement for learner and teacher (Ray et al., 2004), and teacher-child relationship building (Lindo et al., 2014) are existing evidence-based teacher intervention models that aim to train teachers to directly use basic play-therapy skills to improve teacher-child attachment, promote students' social-emotional and academic development, and further improve classroom management.

Essential play-therapy techniques include empathic listening, reflecting feelings, self-esteem building, and limit setting. We briefly describe these skills and their benefits to teacher-child relationships and children's growth and learning. Reflecting children's emotions and needs through empathic listening and responding is a primary relationship-building skill because it helps children feel understood, valued, and accepted. It can also help teachers pay closer attention to students' behavior and have a better understanding of the purpose of students' misbehavior. To facilitate children's self-esteem, providing encouragement, not praise, is a specific skill that allows children to struggle with problems and helps them feel competent and capable. Setting consistent limits is a skill that can help children feel secure and safe in the classroom. A succinct limit-setting model proposed by Landreth (2012) can teach children self-control and self-responsibility for their own behavior by allowing them to express their feelings or desire with an acceptable outlet, while providing them an opportunity to experience the consequences of their decision.

As previously stated, teachers who receive mental health and play-therapy training can become therapeutic agents of change. In this way, school counselors are able to partner with teachers to promote systemic change in children's lives. School counselors' goals should focus on helping teachers seek alternative strategies to strengthen teacher-child attachment and becoming more cognizant of problems children are experiencing. We want to highlight that each model features different training structures and content as well as its strengths and limitations (Chen & Lindo, 2017). Consequently, school counselors should determine which model would be most appropriate and effective for implementation in their specific settings. We also caution the importance of seeking consultation from other mental health professionals when training teachers to incorporate these basic play-therapy skills and language in the classroom.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are specific limitations to this study, including the lack of generalizability and the potential for researcher and participant bias. Given the qualitative nature of the study, we determined a smaller number of participants would provide us the method to understand prekindergarten teachers' experiences and perceptions of teacher-child relationships, students' behavior, and class management. The research participants of this study represented one geographic location and limited diversity. Although we were able to gather rich descriptions of the teacher participants' experiences and perceptions, we acknowledge the limitation of the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the authors' roles as researchers and interviewers may have affected data collection and analysis procedures. Likewise, there was the potential for teacher participants to provide socially acceptable responses to the interview questions, and teachers may have felt obligated to share only positive experiences with researchers. To limit this possible bias, the researchers facilitated trustworthiness through respondent validation, audit trail, and the use of multiple coders to establish the validity and reliability of emerging themes (Patton, 2002). Moreover, the second author's consultant work at the intervention site and related immersion in the school context provided her with the opportunity for close observation of the group's culture (Nastasi et al., 2004) and may have increased her credibility as a research practitioner. A future study with independent researchers may reduce this potential bias. Having an unbiased interviewer may decrease the likelihood of social desirability that interviewees may face, thereby creating an environment for the most impartial responses to the interview questions.

Other areas for future research would include preservice teachers' experience of learning teacher-child relationship-focused strategies and the effectiveness of the play-based training curriculum on their classroom

management. Research is also needed to examine the impact of relationship-focused training in preventing students' problem behavior. Last, a mental health crisis is escalating in schools, and yet given a lack of mental health training in teacher education programs, most teachers are not trained in how to recognize or properly address students' issues arising from emotional distress. Hence, it seems beneficial to explore preservice and in-services teachers' perception of students' mental health issues and their knowledge and skills to attend to children's social–emotional difficulties.

Conclusion

Relationships with teachers can significantly impact young children's socioemotional development and academic success (Choi & Dobbs-Oates, 2016). Moreover, high-quality teacher–child relationships during early childhood education promote healthy social, emotional, and academic development (Spilt et al., 2018). Analysis of the individual interviews in the current study highlighted teacher–child relationships, student behavior, and classroom management as salient to the teacher participants. Additionally, in line with prior research (Gonzales-Ball & Bratton, 2019), the results of the current study support a reciprocal relationship among teacher–child relationships, children's behaviors, and teachers' behaviors. Although the majority of the teacher participants noted the importance of teacher–child relationships on children's learning and growth, the findings revealed a need to provide relationship-focused training opportunity for teachers to learn ways to better connect with children, understand children's behavioral and social–emotional needs, and ultimately decrease teaching stress and enhance classroom management.

Elementary school counselors are integral to the educational program. They not only provide prevention and intervention programs that meet students' needs in academic, career, and social–emotional development, but they also collaborate with teachers in the delivery of programs to support students' achievement (American School Counselor Association, 2019). Given the benefits of using play as a modality for promoting children's socioemotional and academic development in schools, incorporating relationship-focused, play-based teacher-intervention training models into professional in-service training can help teachers improve their relationships with students, learn to effectively communicate and respond to students' needs, and ultimately enhance classroom management.

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