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Caregiver–child relationships in after-school care: the role of gender and the gender match

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ABSTRACT

Affective teacher–child relationships have frequently been investigated in school settings, but less attention has been devoted to these relationships in after-school care. This study explored caregiver- ($N = 90$) and child-informed reports ($N = 90$) of the affective caregiver–child relationship ($N = 180$ dyads) in Dutch after-school care, exploring gender differences at caregiver and child level and the relationship with a gender match between children and caregivers. The caregivers and children reported relatively high levels of closeness and relatively low level of conflict and dependency/autonomy support, irrespective of gender. Multilevel regression analyses revealed that a gender match between child and caregiver was associated with teacher-reported closeness: levels were highest in female-girl dyads and lowest in male-boy dyads. Further, boys indicated the highest levels of autonomy in male-boy dyads, whereas girls indicated the lowest levels in female-girl dyads. Masculinity of staff was associated with more child-reported autonomy support, whereas femininity predicted caregiver-reported closeness in the relationship.

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Child–caregiver relationship; after-school care; gender; men in childcare

Young children form multiple relationships with an attachment component with teachers in primary school and professional caregivers in childcare (Howes & Spieker, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). These supportive teacher–student relationships in early and middle childhood contribute to children’s socio-emotional development and behavioral adjustment in the early years of school, both for boys and girls (Doumen et al., 2012; Ewing & Taylor, 2009). Early teacher–child relationships in the preschool and elementary school are also determinants for school engagement and academic achievement through the elementary grades (Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, & Koomen, 2017). In this study, we focus on the dyadic relationships of boys and girls with male and female caregivers.

Gender differences: teacher and child level

Various studies have consistently found gender differences in teacher-reported views on the student–teacher relationship. Teachers experience their relationships with boys to be less close and more conflictuous than with girls (e.g. Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Harrison, Clarke, & Ungerer,

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2007; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Koomen, Verschueren, Van Schooten, Jak, & Pianta, 2012; Murray, Waas, & Murray, 2008; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005; Spilt, Koomen, & Jak, 2012). This gender disparity has also been found in studies of preschoolers (Choi & Dobbs-Oates, 2016; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Huber & Traxl, 2017; Mohamed, 2018). It should be noted that teachers from the elementary school generally report affective relationships with children in their groups (Doumen, Koomen, Buyse, Wouters, & Verschueren, 2012; Howes et al., 2000) that are often characterized by high levels of warmth and relatively low levels of conflict and dependence (Koomen et al., 2012; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015).

The gender differences as experienced by children seem less clear. A number of studies reported no significant gender differences in the child-reported student–teacher relationship (Mantzicopoulos, 2005; Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008; Papadopoulou & Gregoriadis, 2017; Spilt, Koomen, & Mantzicopoulos, 2010). However, other researchers found more closeness, as reported by girls compared to boys (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Vervoort et al., 2015; White, 2016), whereas boys reported more conflict with their teacher than girls (Koomen & Jellesma, 2015; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003; Vervoort et al., 2015). Although children generally report high levels of closeness and autonomy support and low levels of conflict (e.g. Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003; Spilt et al., 2010), the picture that emerges from educational studies is that girls have a somewhat more positive relationship than boys with teachers. Some authors have referred to this gender disparity in the feminized environment of preschool and elementary school as the ‘gender gap’ and the ‘boy crisis’ (see Carrington & McPhee, 2008; Neugebauer, Helbig, & Landmann, 2011; Spilt et al., 2012 for overviews).

Empirical studies that included both teacher- and child-reported measures have shown low levels of convergence between teacher and child perceptions of the teacher–child relationship (e.g. Murray, Murray, et al., 2008; Murray, Waas, et al., 2008; Poulou, 2017; White, 2016), although other studies have reported modest positive correlations (e.g. Harrison et al., 2007; Rey, Smith, Yoon, Somers, & Barnett, 2007; Spilt et al., 2010; Vervoort et al., 2015; Vu & Howes, 2012). This fits in with dyadic systems theory (Sabol & Pianta, 2012), which conceptualizes the mutual relationship between teacher and child as personal representations, and, hence, the teacher and the child may have different perceptions of their mutual affective relationship (Thijs et al., 2011).

Teacher–child gender match

In the context of primary school, Spilt et al. (2012) found that female teachers reported more closeness for girls, whereas male teachers reported no difference between boys and girls; there was no gender match effect for conflict and dependency. This study with teacher-reported outcomes suggests a specific gender match with a positive effect for female-girl dyads. This finding is in line with Ewing and Taylor (2009), who also concluded that a gender match seems beneficial for female students only. We do not know of empirical studies into childcare with similar findings, including after-school care; unfortunately, Huber and Traxl (2017) do not report their STRS findings with a focus on the match between caregivers and children.

In the context of preschool and elementary school, the gendered difference in the interpersonal relationship between boys versus girls with educators (i.e. both teachers from elementary school and caregivers from formal childcare) has been explained with gender role socialization theory (Leaper & Friedman, 2007) and gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). According to the gender role socialization perspective, girls are more cooperative in their interactions, whereas boys are more involved in interactions with other boys that involve establishing dominance in the group. Girls are more socially oriented than boys and seek close caregiver–child relationships and build relationships with teachers that are based on harmony (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Leaper & Friedman, 2007). This theory predicts more positive student–teacher relationships for girls vs. boys as perceived by teachers and this hypothesis has thus received empirical support. It is less clear, however, whether gender role socialization also predicts a negative effect for child-reported perceptions of opposite gender teacher–

child for both boys (i.e. boys with female teachers) and girls (i.e. girls with a male teacher). Gender schema theory assumes that girls would more easily identify with female teachers and boys with male teachers, and thus predicts that relationships between caregivers and children are more positive in same-sex dyads than in mixed sex dyads.

Little is known about the relation between the gender match and the student-teacher relationship (Francis et al., 2008; Neugebauer et al., 2011). It is an unresolved question whether the gender gap in elementary school contributes to less favourable student-teacher relationship for boys, as evidenced by studies with teacher-reported perceptions and a small number of studies with child-reported perceptions. Specifically, it is not clear whether boys have less supportive and more conflictual relationships due to the feminized environment of preschool and elementary school (i.e. the negative consequences of a gender mismatch for boys with female teachers, as hypothesized by gender schema theory) or due to gender-related differences between boys and girls in general (i.e. boys seek less contact with others and are more involved with domination in social groups, regardless of the gender of the teacher, as hypothesized by gender socialization theories).

Finally, educational research of the gender match has witnessed an oversimplification of gender theory, according to Skelton (2003). A mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics can be found within male and female individuals (Bem, 1981; Van Polanen, Colonesi, Tavecchio, Blokhuis, & Fukkink, 2017). Gender of teachers should therefore not be equated to masculinity and femininity in an essentialist and unidimensional way, and sex roles should be taken into account in research of gendered relationships (Skelton, 2003). Taking into account sex roles in gender research may qualify the dichotomy between male vs. female teachers and may complement our current insights into gender effects on the student-teacher relationship.

Dutch after-school care

Many studies have investigated the affective relationship between teachers and young children in kindergarten and elementary school; there has been less attention for childcare, including after-school care. Since the 1990s, after-school care has shown a significant rise in many western countries (OECD, 2006) and this type of childcare has become an important part of the lives of many young children. After the immediate context of family and schools, after-school care has become an increasingly important developmental system in the lives of young children, and the caregiver in after-school care is a key figure who supports children after school (Pierce et al., 2010). The relationship between youth and their professional caregivers in after-school care is, therefore, an integral part of the lives of many children. This also applies to the Dutch context, where about 500,000 children attend after-school care for, on average, 380 h annually (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2021).

In the Netherlands, after-school care aims to strike a balance between safety and emotional support and enrichment and is focused on relaxation after school time and social development in a program without a structured curriculum (Fukkink & Boogaard, 2020). This context is thus clearly different from elementary school with its focus on instruction and learning. In Dutch after-school care, teams with multiple caregivers are allocated to a mixed group of children, including boys and girls. The teams may be same-gender teams (often female caregivers) or mixed-gender teams. Children are usually together in mixed-age, mixed-gender groups, with boys and girls varying from 4 to 12 years, although there are also split age groups (e.g. 4–7 and 8–12 years).

Present study

In this study, we investigated the affective relationships between male and female professional caregivers and boys and girls in Dutch after-school care to explore the gender match, including both the perspective of caregivers and children. We include masculine and feminine sex roles of caregivers as well.

Generalizing finding from elementary school to the context of after-school care, we hypothesize that the level of closeness is higher for boys than girls (H1) and levels of conflict are higher for boys (H2). We formulate two rival hypotheses related to the gender match: the relationship is more positive for same-gender child–caregiver dyads (H3a, based on gender schema theory) or the relationship is more positive for female same-gender dyads compared to all other types (H3b, based on gender socialization theory).

In this report, we use the term ‘caregiver-child relationship’ in the context of after-school care to distinguish this dyadic relation from the teacher–student relationship in elementary school. If we refer to both caregivers and teachers, we use the phrase ‘educators’.

Method

Sample and study design

The Dutch after-school care context with mixed-gender groups and small teams of professional caregivers, including mixed-gender teams, allows an empirical study with all four possible different gender combinations in a naturalistic setting. Following the logic of multiple round-robin groups, our symmetric design allows a matched within-children and within-caregivers perspective, eliminating possible bias by a correlation between (unobserved) traits that are correlated with the gender of the teacher or child (see also Dee, 2007).

Participants in this study were 90 caregivers working in after-school care (45 male, 45 female) with mixed-gendered teams throughout the Netherlands. Caregivers were on average 34.21 years old ($SD=10.52$) and were employed for at least three months ($M=65.12$, $SD=37.42$). Eighty-six caregivers had a Dutch nationality or were of European ($n=3$) or North African ($n=1$) origin. Children ($N=90$, 45 boys) were on average 83.12 months old, i.e. about 7 years ($SD=16.10$, min–max: 55–110 months, i.e. varying between 4 and 9 years). The selected children attended the after-school care group at least three months and spent at least two days per week ($M=2.36$, $SD=0.68$, varying between 2 and 4) with the participating caregivers so there was a well-established relationships (see Doumen et al., 2012; Papadopoulou & Gregoriadis, 2017). Children were either Dutch ($n=84$) or European ($n=5$) or Asian ($n=1$) origin.

Procedure

We recruited after-school care groups through various childcare providers with the specific request for mixed-gender teams. In each recruited group both a male and female caregiver participated. Prior to participation, male caregivers and their female colleagues received a letter providing information on the goal and procedures of this study. After they agreed to participate in this study, caregiver couples were subsequently paired with a randomly selected boy and girl from their group. The included children had to attend after-school care for at least three months, spending at least 2 days per week with the participating caregivers. We subsequently requested active consent from the parents. When parents did not give permission to participate, we randomly selected another child who met our selection criteria. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Amsterdam (registration number CDE-3823).

Both caregivers completed an online survey (see Measures below). The after-school care groups were subsequently visited by a trained research assistant to assess children’s individual perception of the relationship with their male and female caregiver by conducting the Young Children’s Appraisals of Teacher Support (Y-CATS; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003). The administration of the test was conducted in a quiet, private setting outside the group, counterbalancing for caregiver and child gender.

Measures

Caregiver–child relationships (caregiver perception): student–teacher relationship scale

Caregivers' perception of their affective relationship with a child was measured with the authorized Dutch translation of the widely used STRS (Koomen, Verschueren, & Pianta, 2007; Pianta, 2001). This questionnaire assesses three dimensions of the caregiver–child relationship: Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency. Closeness refers to the teacher's experience of affection, openness and warmth in the relation with a particular child (e.g. 'I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child'; 11 items, $\alpha = .90$). Conflict reflects the level of perceived discord within teacher–child interactions (e.g. 'This child easily becomes angry with me'; 11 items, $\alpha = .89$). Dependency measures the teacher's perception of possessive, clingy behaviour of a child (e.g. 'This child is overly dependent on me'; 6 items, $.72$). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('definitely does not apply') to 5 ('definitely does apply') for each individual child. The STRS, which has been validated for children aged 3–12 years old in the Dutch population (Koomen et al., 2012), has been used in primary school and childcare. The formulation of three items was adjusted to make it suitable for a childcare setting.

Caregiver–child relationship (child perception): Y-CATS

Children's perception of their relationship with participating male and female caregivers was assessed using the Dutch translated, version of the validated Y-CATS measure (Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003; Spilt et al., 2010). This measure distinguishes between three dimensions: Warmth, Autonomy Support and Conflict. Warmth indicates children's perceived extent of teacher's support, encouragement, and acceptance (e.g. 'My teacher likes me'; 11 items, $\alpha = .72$). The subscale Autonomy Support assesses children's perception of the teacher providing opportunities for choice and autonomy in activities (e.g. 'My teacher lets me choose work I want to do'; 6 items, $\alpha = .64$). Conflict refers to children's perception of conflict and negativity in the relationship with their teacher (e.g. 'My teacher gets angry with me'; 10 items, $\alpha = .71$). Using a dichotomous response format, the researcher asked the child to indicate agreement or disagreement with an item by placing a card in either a mini treasure box (true, score 1) or a mini trash can (untrue, score 0). We calculated proportion scores between 0 and 1 for each scale. Prior to conducting the interview, the researcher tested the child's understanding of the concept with two practice items. Findings from Dutch studies have shown support for the three-dimensional structure of the Y-CATS (Spilt et al., 2010; see also Vervoort et al., 2015).

Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire

Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997; Van Widenfelt, Goedhart, Treffers, & Goodman, 2003) was used as a caregiver-reported screening measure for problem behaviour of children. The SDQ consists of five scales, each with five items: Emotional Symptoms ($\alpha = .65$), Conduct Problems (.77), Hyperactivity-Inattention (.83), Peer Relationship Problems (.66), and Prosocial Behaviour (.80). All items were scored on a 3-point Likert scale, with 1 = 'not true', 2 = 'somewhat true' and 3 = 'certainly true'. Scores of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity-inattention and peer relationships problems were combined to obtain a total difficulties scale score. The SDQ has shown good internal consistency, test–retest reliability, convergent and discriminant construct validity and predictive validity in various studies (see Stone, Otten, Engels, Vermulst, & Janssens, 2010 for an overview).

Sex roles

Caregivers' sex roles were examined using the short Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1978). This questionnaire consists of 20 personality characteristics of which 10 are considered stereotypically masculine (e.g. dominant, aggressive) and the other ten stereotypically feminine (e.g. gentle, affectionate). Respondents indicated how well each item described himself or herself on a scale ranging

from 1 ('never or almost never true') to 7 ('always or almost always true'). Cronbach's alpha was .80 for the Masculinity score and .83 for the Femininity score.

Analysis

We analyzed the data with a multilevel model, taking into account the hierarchical nature of four persons (2 caregivers, 2 children) from the same group. For the Y-CATS data, level 1 pertains to individual children (boy and girl), for STRS data level 1 pertains to caregivers. Gender of children and teachers and also the gender match were dummy-coded; we also added a variable with effect coding to analyze the means for both types of gender match (−1 for female gender match, +1 for male gender match and 0 for no gender match). SDQ scores (behavioral problems and prosocial behaviour) and masculinity and femininity scores were also included in the model.

In a preliminary analysis, we explored a possible relationship between the caregiver–child relationship and the number of days children and caregivers shared the group. No significant relation was found with either boys' or girls' perception of warmth, conflict and autonomy or male or female caregivers' perception of closeness, conflict and dependency. This variable was therefore not included as covariate.

Results

Child–caregiver relationship: caregiver perspective

Descriptive statistics of caregivers' perspectives on child–caregiver relationships are shown in Table 1. A medium-to-large difference, expressed as the effect size d , is found for caregivers' closeness: female caregivers experienced more closeness with girls than with boys (see Table 2 for a corresponding result from children's perspective). Both male and female caregivers perceived girls as

Table 1. Descriptives (mean, SD and Cohen's d) for caregiver measures for male and female caregivers ($N = 45 + 45$) and boys and girls ($N = 45 + 45$).

	Min–max	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	Cohen's d (male vs. female)
STRS				
Closeness	11–55			
Boys		39.24 (4.75)	37.07 (6.10)	0.40
Girls		39.47 (6.35)	40.91 (5.32)	−0.25
Cohen's d (boys vs. girls)		−0.04	−0.67	
Conflict	11–55			
Boys		14.31 (4.42)	17.76 (8.30)	−0.52
Girls		14.28 (4.38)	16.27 (5.59)	−0.40
Cohen's d (boys vs. girls)		0.01	0.21	
Dependency	6–30			
Boys		8.76 (3.08)	8.29 (2.91)	0.16
Girls		9.82 (4.79)	9.62 (3.39)	0.05
Cohen's d (boys vs. girls)		−0.26	−0.42	
SDQ				
Behavioral problems	20–60			
Boys		27.27 (5.28)	28.29 (5.28)	−0.19
Girls		24.73 (4.24)	26.07 (4.90)	−0.29
Cohen's d (boys vs. girls)		0.53	0.44	
Prosocial behavior	5–15			
Boys		11.40 (2.25)	11.42 (2.34)	−0.01
Girls		12.84 (1.87)	12.56 (1.80)	0.15
Cohen's d (boys vs. girls)		−0.69	−0.55	
BSRI				
Masculinity	10–70	46.91 (5.33)	45.20 (6.61)	0.28
Femininity		54.13 (6.16)	56.18 (5.61)	−0.35

Table 2. Descriptives for child measures for boys and girls and male and female caregivers.

	Min-max	Boys <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Girls <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Cohen's <i>d</i> (boys vs. girls)
Y-CATS				
Warmth				
Male caregivers	0–1	0.85 (0.16)	0.85 (0.17)	0.00
Female caregivers		0.86 (0.17)	0.91 (0.14)	–0.32
Cohen's <i>d</i> (male vs. female)		0.00	–0.38	
Conflict				
Male caregivers	0–1	0.19 (0.17)	0.11 (0.16)	0.48
Female caregiver		0.20 (0.20)	0.10 (0.14)	0.57
Cohen's <i>d</i> (male vs. female)		–0.05	0.07	
Autonomy				
Male caregivers	0–1	0.84 (0.17)	0.85 (0.18)	0.00
Female caregivers		0.81 (0.24)	0.90 (0.14)	–0.52
Cohen's <i>d</i> (male vs. female)		0.20	–0.37	

more prosocial than boys. Female caregivers perceived their relationships with children as more conflictuous than their male colleagues, both with boys and girls.

Child-caregiver relationship: child perspective

Descriptive statistics of children's perspective on their relationship with their male and female caregivers are presented in Table 2.

Girls experienced their relationships with female caregivers with higher levels of warmth than with male caregivers (see Table 1 for a corresponding result from the caregivers' perspective); boys did not indicate a similar difference. Boys perceived their relationship with caregivers as more conflictuous than girls, both with male and female caregivers.

The caregivers and children generally agreed on the positive aspects of their dyadic relationship, as indicated by the mutual high scores for closeness and lower scores for conflict and dependency/autonomy support. However, there was a low convergence within this range, as indicated by the low correlations between STRS and Y-CATS scores. No relation was found between child-reported warmth and caregiver-reported closeness, $r = .018$, $p = .435$. The correlation for child- and caregiver-reported conflict, $r = -.175$, $p = .049$, and autonomy and dependency, $r = -.155$, $p = .073$, were negative (Table 3).

Regression models of affective caregiver-child relation

Our regression model of the STRS data indicated only one gender effect, taking into account background characteristics of children and caregivers: caregivers indicated they have more conflicts with girls than with boys, which contradicts H2. No significant differences were found for closeness, and, hence, H1 was not supported by our data. Further, the gender match was significant for closeness: female-girl dyads reported the highest levels of closeness (estimated mean: 43.98), followed by mixed-gender dyads (38.18), and male-boy dyads had the lowest levels (36.27). This finding is in line with H3b.

The regression analysis of the child-reported Y-CATS data showed that boys in after-school care reported slightly more warmth with caregivers than girls; again, this finding does not support H1. Further, boys also reported higher levels of conflicts with caregivers, compared to girls; this finding support H2, but is thus opposite to the teacher-reported outcome for conflicts. The gender match was not significant for closeness and conflict, but there was a relationship with child-reported autonomy support from the staff. Further analysis revealed that boys experienced the highest levels of autonomy in male-boy dyads (estimated mean: 1.05), whereas girls indicated

Table 3. Multilevel models for dyadic staff–child relationships: young children's appraisals of teacher support and student teacher relationship scale.

	Warmth	Y-CATS Conflict	Autonomy support	Closeness	STRS Conflict	Dependency
Fixed						
Intercept	0.616*** (0.165)	0.612*** (0.17)	0.240 (0.175)	12.890* (6.226)	2.780 (4.504)	5.570 (5.532)
Caregiver gender (male vs. female)	0.039* (0.017)	0.001 (0.018)	0.011 (0.170)	0.432 (0.805)	0.499 (0.623)	−0.850 (0.703)
Child gender (boy vs. girl)	−0.027 (0.029)	0.082** (0.030)	−0.042 (0.035)	−0.680 (0.729)	−1.668*** (0.421)	−0.589 (0.687)
Gender match	−0.026 (0.016)	0.013 (0.017)	−0.047** (0.016)	2.000** (0.699)	0.109 (0.393)	0.142 (0.653)
Femininity of caregiver	−0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	0.189** (0.068)	−0.016 (0.053)	−0.010 (0.060)
Masculinity of caregiver	0.004* (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)	0.005** (0.002)	0.119 (0.066)	0.023 (0.051)	−0.144 (0.058)
Problem behaviour child	0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.003)	0.005 (0.089)	0.199*** (0.058)	0.753*** (0.080)
Prosocial behaviour child	0.002 (0.006)	−0.010 (0.006)	0.012* (0.006)	1.063*** (0.216)	.010 (0.139)	−0.470* (0.196)
Age of child	0.001 (0.001)	−0.002** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	−0.020 (0.025)	0.003 (0.019)	0.021 (0.021)
Random						
Residual	0.012*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)	0.012*** (0.002)	21.361*** (3.213)	6.915*** (1.031)	19.160*** (2.891)
Variance intercept	0.012*** (0.003)	0.127*** (0.003)	0.200*** (0.004)	2.990 (2.632)	4.823*** (1.340)	0.827 (2.160)
Model improvement						
$\Delta-2 LL (\Delta df = 8)$	15.44*	19.79*	23.02**	55.64***	37.70***	125.13***
R^2	.069	.142	.085	.260	.110	.513
ICC	.466	.557	.591	.000	.017	.222

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.

the lowest levels in female-girl dyads (0.70); the mixed-gender dyads were a middle category (0.82). This pattern is not predicted by H3a and is more in line with H3b (see Discussion).

Our regression analyses showed some other significant moderators of the affective caregiver–child relationship for child- and caregiver-reported data. Femininity was positively related to caregiver-reported closeness, whereas masculinity was positively related to child-reported warmth and autonomy support. Further, children experienced somewhat less conflict when they were older. Finally, teacher-reported prosocial behaviour was positively related to caregiver-reported closeness and both caregiver- and child-reported autonomy support. From the perspective of the caregivers (i.e. STRS), children’s prosocial behaviour was positively related to closeness and was negatively related to dependency. As expected, teacher-reported problem behaviour of the child predicted teacher-reported conflict and dependency.

Discussion

Our study of the affective caregiver–child relationship in Dutch after-school care both staff and children evaluated their mutual relationships positively along the dimensions of closeness, conflict and dependency/autonomy support. We did not find strong support for our first two hypotheses based on previous studies into elementary school. First, there was no gender difference related to closeness (H1). Second, we found conflicting outcomes related to conflict: boys reported higher levels of conflict than girls (i.e. supporting H2), whereas caregivers reported an opposite effect (i.e. contradicting H2).

The research design from our study with matched dyads of male and female caregivers and boys and girls from the same group revealed two significant gender match effects. Our findings suggest that female caregivers may feel more close with girls in the context of after-school care, whereas boys experience that male caregivers provide more autonomy support than their female colleagues. The observed gender match pattern with higher closeness levels in female-girl dyads and higher levels of autonomy support for male-boy dyads does not fit in with the gender schema theory (H3a), because this framework predicts a general positive difference for all same-sex dyads. Our results seem more in line, however, with the theory of gender role socialization (H3b), which stresses the social orientation of girls who seek close relationships, whereas boys are more oriented on peers and may need autonomy from their caregivers. Boys indicated the predicted autonomy with male caregivers indeed, but the girls did not indicate higher levels of closeness with female caregivers even though the female caregivers felt more close to them. These different perspectives from caregivers vs. children on their mutual relationship illustrates that, also in the context of after-school care, dyadic relationships have two unique and complementary sides and, relatedly, different within-informant and cross-informant associations are found in empirical studies (e.g. Murray, Murray, et al., 2008; Poulou, 2017).

An alternative hypothesis that explains our gender match findings is that male caregivers may be more aware of children’s need for autonomy and focus specifically on boys in this respect, whereas female caregivers are more oriented to close relationships and focus specifically on girls. This explanation, which blends gender socialization theory with gender schema theory, assumes thus that caregivers have a gendered profile of affective caregiver–child relationships with advantages for same-sex dyads, as predicted by gender schema theory, but with a specific focus on children’s socialization needs, as predicted by socialization theory.

Our gender match finding for closeness is not identical to the often reported higher levels of closeness for girls vs. boys from elementary school studies, and suggests instead that the positive ‘girl effect’ for closeness is restricted to the dyadic relationship between female staff and girls. The caregivers in our study did not perceive strong differences in their affective relationship with boys vs. girls, which is different from many primary school studies in which teachers, both female and male, often report more closeness with girls than with boys (e.g. Spilt et al., 2012). Possibly, teachers face lower levels of academic engagement and more problem behaviour in their classrooms with

boys in the school context, whereas their colleagues in the setting of after-school care with an emphasis on relaxation and play experience less difficulties in their interactions with boys.

A new finding in this study of after-school care was that both male and female caregivers experience more conflict in relationships with girls than with boys, which contradicts our second hypothesis. An explanation for this unexpected finding might be that girls seek more closeness towards caregivers and may have slightly more conflicts during their relatively frequent contact. Boys may be more involved with peer play and they may have less conflicts with caregivers in the after-school care setting. However, our finding and post-hoc explanation warrant further observational study into an after-school care context.

The perspectives of children and after-school care caregivers were not strongly related in our study. Boys experienced more conflictual relationships, where the caregivers reported more conflict with girls. Possibly, boys may be more sensitive to conflicts than caregivers may realize and they may be more sensitive to potential negative implications of conflictuous relationships with after-school staff for children's adjustment (Liu, Simpkins, & Vandell, 2020). It should be noted, though, that both children and staff experienced that the female-girl relationship is more close than mixed-gender and male-boy relationships. Also, the positive relationship between prosocial behaviour and autonomy was found for both children- and caregiver-reported data.

Strengths and limitations of this study

Our study design included a systematic and balanced comparison between male vs. female staff and boys vs. girls by selecting mixed-gender caregiver teams and pairing them with boys and girls from mixed-gender groups. The matched design from our study may be replicated in childcare studies with mixed-gender teams and in educational studies (e.g. with classes with part-time working female and male teachers). A further strength of our study is that we included not only the perspective of caregivers, but also children's perspective on their mutual relationship. This latter perspective needs more attention as the majority of studies have generally relied on staff perceptions (Huber & Traxl, 2017). A final strength of our study is that we complemented gender with sex roles to focus not only on the biological difference between male and female educators and to explore the role of masculinity and femininity as well (Skelton, 2003).

We do not know whether our findings from mixed-gender settings can be generalized to other settings. From a theoretical and a practical perspective, it is interesting to include mixed-gender settings, all-female and all-male settings (see also Huber & Traxl, 2017; Spilt et al., 2012). Obviously, this requires additional logistic effort due to the feminization of childcare and, at least in the Netherlands, teams with all-male staff may be very hard to find.

The use of multiple data would have deepened our understanding of gendered relationships in the childcare context (Rohrman & Brody, 2015). Specifically, it seems interesting to add semi-structured interviews about closeness, autonomy support and particularly conflict with children and caregivers to gain more insight into key experiences for children and staff and the different perceptions of their relationship. This qualitative study may gain more insight into the different perceptions of conflict.

Finally, our study involved only after-school care and it seems interesting to collect data with similar measures (e.g. STRS and Y-CATS) in multiple settings like after-school care and elementary school (see Liu et al., 2020, for example). This strategy enables a direct comparison between caregivers from after-school care and teachers from primary school. For example, this study design would allow a direct test of different levels of conflict of educators with boys and girls in the context of after-school care versus school.

Practical implications

According to some stakeholders in the academic and public debate, there is a so-called 'boy crisis' in education due to the feminization of primary school and the related lack of male role models.

Assuming positive benefits from a gender match, some stakeholders have argued that men may be the solution for this crisis (see Neugebauer et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2012 for overviews). How do our findings from after-school care fit in with this debate?

The gender match findings from our study suggest that male and female caregivers offer specific advantages for the affective dyadic relationship with boys and girls. Put simply, boys get autonomy from male caregivers and girls get closeness from female caregiver, and this gendered pattern may fit in with the developmental needs of both boys and girls. One may be tempted to conclude then, simply put, that men may be the 'solution' for boys and women for girls. However, we suggest a different and less straightforward interpretation of our findings for after-school practice.

The findings from our study indicated for all dimensions a positive relationship, acknowledging minor individual differences. Put simply, there were no 'problems', or let alone a crisis, in the dyadic relationship and there is no 'solution' needed. In addition, there were no significant main effects for conflicts and dependency. Boys and girls had thus similarly close relationships with their male and female caregivers (see also Carrington & McPhee, 2008), which suggest that – with the exception of a small effect for closeness in favour of male caregivers – children's perception of relationships with caregivers in after-school care are not gendered along all dimensions of the affective caregiver–child relationship (see also Francis et al., 2008).

Further, we found that female-male differences were minor for all dimensions of the affective relationship; differences in favour of male or female caregivers were limited to one specific dimension only; one gender match effect turned out positive for men and boys, whereas another effect was positive for women and girls; and, finally, not all differences from the perspective of the caregivers were 'mirrored' in the children's perceptions. In addition, both masculinity and femininity proved a promotive and independent factor for children's experiences of warmth and autonomy in the affective caregiver–child relationship, irrespective of gender. Gender did matter for the affective caregiver–child relationship in our study but did so in different and sometimes complex ways. The subtlety of differences, the limited scope of demonstrated differences, the complementarity of gender match for boys and girls, the relativity of the adult/child perspectives, and the complementary role of sex roles do not lend themselves to framing boys' issues straightforward as a 'boys problem' and male caregivers as the 'men solution'. Finally, we know yet too little about the causal consequences of the relationship between caregiver–child for children's wellbeing and development in childcare. Whereas several studies have demonstrated that the student–teacher relationship is a determinant for children's school engagement and problem behaviour in the classroom, this relationship needs longitudinal study in the context of after-school care.

It seems important to discuss with caregivers in pre- and in-service development the beliefs of children, staff and parents related to gender and the gender match, including popular and firm beliefs related to the 'boys crisis' and 'men as solution'. A practical skill is how caregivers can discuss with children issues related to gender of peers and adults. Equally important, it is important to make (future) professionals aware of the child vs. adult perspective of mutual caregiver–child relationships, gendered profiles of male and female educators with boys and girls, and the importance of gender and sex roles in childcare.

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