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Teachers' Perception of the Relationship With Pupils Having Specific Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Research Findings: The presence of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) increases the risk of scholastic failure. According to the literature, a successful relationship with the teacher can lead to greater participation, raise the pupil's motivation in school activities and have a positive effect on learning outcomes. Hence the aim of this study: to investigate teachers' perception of the relationship with primary school pupils in Years 2 and 3 who have SLD (n = 38) and to compare it with that of pupils without SLD, with an achievement level that is the same as (n = 38) or the opposite from (n = 32) the achievement of their peers diagnosed or considered as having specific learning disabilities. Teachers' perceptions of relationships were examined using the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Fraire, Longobardi, Prino, Sclavo, & Settanni, in press; Pianta, 2001). The teachers perceive a higher level of Dependency for pupils with SLD ($F = 14.252$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$), in particular for those who do not yet have an official diagnosis ($t = 2.529$; $df = 62.367$; $p < .05$). This research has enabled a start to be made on an issue that in the Italian context has yet not received the attention it deserves.

Keywords: teacher-child interaction, teacher's perception of relationship, specific learning disabilities, primary school, Italian context

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Introduction

The nosographic category of specific learning disabilities, conventionally identified with the acronym SLD, is related to the developing clinical condition and therefore excludes acquired learning pathologies.

The disabilities analysed interfere significantly both with the learning exercises done at school and with the activities of daily life involving reading, writing and arithmetic. These disabilities are therefore not due to the lack of opportunity to learn, or to mental retardation, and in cases where there is a sensorial disability, there are different kinds of problems.

The official classification systems of the American Psychiatric Association (2000) and ICD-10 (World Health Organization, 1992) identify characteristics typical in the diagnosis of SLD. In order to make a diagnosis of SLD, the DSM-IV TR states that the achievement level in reading, writing and arithmetic tests is far lower than the level expected in terms of intellectual development and schooling. This therefore highlights the criterion of the gap between the abilities that appear to be compromised, general intelligence and achievement cutoff points.

The new diagnostic directions, found in the proposed modifications of DSM-IV for the drafting of DSM-V – in line with the thinking of authors like Chin et al. (2001), Fletcher et al. (1994), Snyder and Downey (1995), Stanovich and Siegel (1994), Stuebing et al. (2002) – find the criterion of the gap inappropriate. By repositioning the role of intelligence they envisage a substantial change to this criterion.

The survey of studies by Meyer (2000) states the pros and cons of three alternative models: assessment of the gap between listening and reading comprehension, using only the scores obtained in tests requiring the recognition and decodification of words or lastly providing the population at risk of SLD with remedial interventions and considering the lack of response to this as an indicator of SLD. The latter alternative is explained by Gresham and Vellutino (2010) in a study that aims to show that IQ is not correlated with results in reading and therefore is not an indicator of the subject's future results, while the response to treatment is believed to be a useful predictive factor.

The gap criterion is currently still being used, and since the international manuals for the classification of diseases do not specify the values needed for the assessment of a gap, each country uses its own criteria (Meyer, 2000), which would greatly affect the practice of recognition of the disorder and the data on its incidence.

Having defined the nature of SLD, scholars shifted from the reductionist approach of psychological assessment to the holistic approach, typical of psychopathology, adopting the contextual model. This model highlights the dynamic, multi-faceted nature of child development and can be useful in the analysis of specific learning disabilities since it allows the child's competences and his school achievement to be considered not as intrinsic characteristics of the person, but as dynamic features of the system made up of the pupil and the context of which he is part (Pianta, 1999).

Teacher-Child Relationship

The ramifications of the relationship between pupil and teacher are not just confined to the school context; the relationship itself is considered an actual context of development (Hamilton & Howes, 1992; Kauffmann, Pullen, & Akers, 1986; Pianta, 1999), in which the teacher becomes for the child a "significant other" and, as such, can modify the operative models based on the attachment bond established with the mother, promoting new models of emotional and behavioral regulation (Cassidy, 1994; Pianta, 1999).

As regards the pupil's scholastic adaptation, the teacher-pupil relationship is both a form of protection to reduce the effect that risk factors have on development, and also a factor that increases the risk (Pianta, 1994). The student with specific difficulties in reading and writing often encounters scholastic failure, which causes – and is caused by – low self-esteem and demotivation (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995; Humphrey, 2003; Singer, 2005). The presence of learning difficulties therefore constitutes a risk of scholastic failure, but a good relationship with the teacher, especially in terms of emotional support, can lead such pupils to greater participation and higher motivation in school activities (Baker, 1999; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Murray & Malmgren, 2005) and have a positive effect on their learning outcomes (Davis, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Molinari (2010) reports the idea that teachers adopt different interaction strategies when they are interacting with pupils they perceive as being problems: some seem to find it inevitable that a negative relationship will develop, while others are willing to make an effort to modify the critical elements in order to build up a positive relationship. According to Humphrey (2003) the teacher should establish an open warm relationship and be able to psychologically support the child with learning difficulties, showing acceptance and au-

thenticity in order to acknowledge the child's needs and to give a practical answer both in terms of scholastic and emotional support. Lastly, the teacher should show empathy, in order to reduce the sense of isolation and exclusion typical of these students.

A constructive relationship with the teacher is thought to make the pupil more cooperative, harder-working and better behaved (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998). Baker (2006) studied the specific influence that this relationship has on the scholastic adaptation of pupils with problems of behavior and learning. In view of the results in the literature about the difficulties experienced by children with SLD not only on the level of learning, but also in relating to others, it is clear that for these children it is important to be able to form relations of closeness with their teachers (Pianta, 1997).

Not many studies have regarded the teacher-pupil relationship as a "development context" with reference to the specific learning disability in the early years of schooling. Research has focused mainly on specific aspects of the teacher-pupil relationship, examining, for instance, the influence of the teacher on specific reading disability (Gwernan-Jones & Burden, 2010), or on the school results of dyslexic pupils (Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh, & Voeten, 2010), or on the self-image of these children (Humphrey, 2003). An interesting contribution comes from a qualitative study carried out by Nielsen (2011), designed to record the experience of pupils with serious reading and writing disabilities in relation to learning and to teachers, as well as to show the kind of needs they perceive and the kind of help they find useful in the school situation.

Italian School System

In Italy, compulsory education starts at the age of six with five years of primary school. Each class generally has two main teachers (one for the language area and the other for the scientific-mathematical area) who usually teach the class group for all five years, thus guaranteeing continuity in relating and teaching. The classes involved in this research attend school full-time, for a total of 40 hours a week.

All levels of schooling have the task of implementing timely interventions, after informing the families involved, in order to identify suspected cases of SLD. Law n.170 of 8 October 2010 ensures that those with SLD have equality of opportunity to develop their abilities in the scholastic, social and professional fields, guaranteeing them adequate education. This Law is the prerequisite for a change in the teaching philosophy in our country (Ghidoni & Angelini, 2011; Stella & Savelli, 2011) since it encourages a personalization of the interventions offered at school based on the needs of each child, whether the child has specific disabilities or difficulties, or only temporary special educational needs. The Law requires teachers and school administrators to provide educational and teaching support measures, in order to be able to respond successfully to the needs of students with SLD, and to coordinate their work with the health services and the pupil's family.

Aim

As the effect of the teacher-pupil relationship on the child's development is particularly important in the early years of primary school, the period when pupils consolidate competences that are important for success during their school career and develop clear cognitive representations of themselves as learners – representations that will be decisive in the years to come – (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; Pianta & Walsh, 1996), it seems even clearer that it is important to make an early study of the relationship between teachers and pupils with learning difficulties.

In view of the importance of the role of the relationship with the teacher especially in the early years of schooling for pupils with specific disabilities, the present study intends to compare the teachers' perceptions of the relationship

they establish with pupils having a specific learning disability, with those without SLD. In the light of the results reported by the studies cited above, it is hypothesized that there may be a difference in the relationship depending on to whether or not the pupils have a specific learning disability.

In order to verify the influence exerted on the teacher's perception of the relationship with the pupil in terms of Closeness (aspects of sharing, communication and affection), Conflict (anger, tension, and lack of mutual comprehension)and Dependency (the operational and emotive autonomy of the pupil), this study also examined some of the teacher and pupil characteristics, such as age, gender, pupil's level of effort, the stage of diagnosis certifying the learning disability (diagnosis issued or underway), the teacher's subject-area (language or math). Various authors have in fact indicated that according to both teachers and pupils, during primary school the degree of Closeness characterising the teacher-pupil relationship gradually diminishes as the pupils get older (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). As regards pupil gender, Kesner (2000) found that teachers talk to male pupils more and give them more encouragement to become independent, while with females they mainly adopt a relational mode based on helping and supporting. This is confirmed by numerous research works that describe the relationship between teachers and girls as being marked by warm, non-conflicting attitudes, unlike the treatment of boys, which is more hostile (Baker, 2006; Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Kesner, 2000).

This research has allowed an initiation in dealing with an issue that in the Italian context has yet not received the attention it deserves, the emotional role of the teacher's relationship in the early years of schooling for pupils with learning difficulties.

Methods

Participants

Teachers — For each class, except for four where there was only one teacher, the two main teachers (in the language or math area) participated in the study, for a total of 36 teachers involved (16 Italian, 16 Math and 4 "sole" teachers) and 193 teacher-pupil relationships were analysed. All the teachers are female. Of the teachers, 21 are non-graduates and 15 are graduates. The average teacher age is 46.56 (*SD* = 8.065) and ranges from a minimum of 27 to a maximum of 60.The average teaching experience is 22.32 years (*SD* = 10.455; range: 4-40). The teachers work with the classes involved for 19.23 hours on average per week (*SD* = 5.168; range: 7-22).

Pupils — The total number of participants was 108 pupils attending Years 2 and 3 in state primary schools in the north-west of Italy (see Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of the Pupils in EG, CG1 and CG2

	Gender		Year		Age in months
Groups *(n)*	**Males**	**Females**	**Two**	**Three**	**Mean (*SD*)**
EG *(38)*	23	15	16	22	100.24 (5.83)
CG1 *(38)*	20	18	16	22	99.00 (6.87)
CG2 *(32)*	20	12	10	22	101.00 (6.12)
Total *(108)*	63	45	42	66	100.03 (6.29)

Note. Amongst the three groups there are no statistically significant differences in average age.

All the subjects are Italian and none of them present special educational needs apart from those recorded for the purpose of this study. The sample is divided into three groups: an experimental group (EG) made up of 38 pupils with a specific learning disability (diagnosed or with certification underway); the first control group (CG1) composed of the same number of pupils (n = 38) with no learning difficulties but with the same achievement level as the EG pupils; the second control group (CG2) of 32 pupils whose achievement level is the opposite of that of the EG group. The pupils' achievement level was recorded by the main teachers in each class, with reference to Italian and Mathematics, using a 3-point Likert scale (low, medium and high levels). In order to identify the pupils belonging to the different research groups, school achievement was broken down into two categories: high and low (where low includes low and medium levels). 98.6% of the members of the EG (and therefore of CG1) present a low level of school achievement.

From the diagnosis and the information provided by the teachers, it emerges that the pupils in EG mainly have difficulties in the language area (reading, writing and text comprehension). Only one pupil has specific difficulty with arithmetic, while three pupils have mixed SLD.

Of the 38 EG pupils, 16 are in Year 2. The pupils in this class are undergoing a diagnostic process and do not yet have official certification. Of the 22 Year 3 pupils, 14 have an official diagnosis.

The control group (CG) is formed by classmates of the children with SLD, drawn at random from amongst those with parental authorization and the required characteristics: to be part of CG1, scholastic achievement at the same level as their classmates with SLD; for CG2, scholastic achievement at the opposite level from that of the EG pupils. Whenever possible, the different groups also have the same gender distribution. Overall, most of the children in the sample (58.3%) are male (n = 63), while there are 45 females (41.7%).

The perception of the level of effort at school was recorded by the class teachers using a three-point Likert scale (low, medium and high). As regards effort, there are no statistically significant differences between the results obtained from pupils in the EG and CG1 (high effort in 23.9% and 14.5% respectively). The CG2 however have different figures, presenting high effort in 84.9% of the cases.

Measures

To measure the teacher's perception of the quality of her relationship with the EG pupil, the CG1 and the CG2 pupil, the instrument used was the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 2001) in the Italian version (Fraire, Longobardi, Prino, Sclavo, & Settanni, in press; Fraire, Longobardi, & Sclavo, 2008). This scale assesses three relational dimensions: Conflict (10 items), Closeness (8 items) and Dependency (4 items). Each item is evaluated throughout a 5-point Likert scale (raging from "definitely does not apply" to "definitely applies").

High scores on the Conflict sub-scale (theoretical minimum 10, maximum 50) suggest problem behavior on the part of the pupil during lessons both because of a negative emotional atmosphere, or even hostile; the teacher perceives the pupil as being angry and unpredictable, but does not know how to control such feelings or their manifestations, and as a result feels ineffective and frustrated. Closeness (theoretical minimum 8, maximum 40), on the other hand, assesses the positive emotional aspects of the relationship. If it is marked by mutual trust and good communication, the teacher feels she is a figure of support for the child, who turns to her when in difficulty. The Dependency sub-scale (theoretical minimum score 4, maximum 20) shows whether the teacher judges the pupil over-dependent on her in doing activities; in this case the teacher believes that the pupil asks for help too often or calls for her attention even when it is not necessary.

For the Italian version of STRS, internal consistency has positive values, especially in the dimensions of closeness (α = .91) and conflict (α = .86). The scores related to the factor of dependence is lower (α = .69).

Procedures

Schools in the Piedmont area were contacted. With the authorization of the Principal, the children's parents were asked for permission. The teachers compiled the appropriate tools in April. Mono and bivariate analysis was carried out on the data collected, using the statistical software SPSS 20.0.

Results

As regards the main purpose of this study, i.e. to compare teacher perceptions of their relationship with a pupil with SLD as against the relationship with pupils without SLD, it was found that on average teachers perceive the relationships with the EG pupils as being marked by less Closeness and more Conflict (see Table 2), but these differences are not statistically significant.

Table 2

Averages, Standard Deviations and Minimum and Maximum Scores Given by Teachers on the STRS Aspects, Separately for the Pupils of the Three Groups (GS, GC1, GC2) and Overall

STRS features	Group	*n*	Mean	*SD*	Range
Closeness	EG	71	28.87	7.02	13-40
	CG1	69	29.12	7.96	11-40
	CG2	53	30.89	6.73	13-40
	Total	193	29.51	7.31	11-40
Conflict	EG	71	16.18	7.27	10-45
	CG1	69	15.32	7.92	10-40
	CG2	53	13.51	7.50	10-42
	Total	193	15.14	7.61	10-45
Dependency	**EG**	**71**	**7.82**	**3.42**	**4-19**
	CG1	69	6.16	2.89	4-16
	CG2	53	5.06	2.05	4-13
	Total	193	6.47	3.10	4-19

Note. In bold the statistically significant differences.

Statistically significant, however, is the difference between the relationship with EG and CG pupils (considering CG1 and CG2 together) on Dependency ($t = 4.545$; $df = 117.585$; $p < .001$). The analysis of the teachers' perceptions regarding the three groups (EG, CG1 and CG2) confirms that it is the average score for Dependency given to EG pupils that determines the statistically significant difference ($F = 14.252$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$), since this score is higher than the score for the other two groups (see Table 2).

Specifically, it is the teachers from the language area that report relationships with pupils with SLD having higher levels of Dependency compared to those with pupils with no specific learning disabilities. This could be associated to the fact that the great majority of EG pupils (81.6%) have a specific disability in reading or writing. It is reasonable to assume that this creates greater difficulty in the learning activities organized by the teacher of the language area. The Math teachers, on the other hand, make no significant differentiation between the relationships established with the EG pupils and the CG children.

Since the average overall scores on single items of the Dependency sub-scale are not significant as regards item number 8 *"The child protests and rebels when we part"* and item number 17 *"The child shows he is hurt and jealous when I spend time with other children"*, this suggests that the higher scores for Dependency in relationships with EG pupils (compared to relationships with pupils of the whole CG group) are not associated either to a special attempt by the pupils to stay physically close to the teacher, or to negative emotional reactions when they have to part from the teacher. The higher scores for Dependency given to the EG pupils would be explained by the fact that they make more requests for help even when it is not necessary; there are in fact statistically significant differences as regards item number 10 *"The child is over-dependent on me"* (t = 4.772; df = 102.281; p < .001) and number 14 *"The child asks me for help even when he does not really need it"* (t = 4.738; df = 111.747; p < .001).

A more detailed analysis in order to compare the scores for EG pupils with those for pupils without SLD but with the same achievement level (CG1), confirms the statistically significant differences between the scores obtained both for item number 10 (t = 3.207; df = 127.124; p < .01) and for item number 14 (t = 3.389; df = 131.361; p < .01). As a result, it seems plausible to rule out the possibility that the high Dependency scores given to pupils with SLD are due to the low achievement level, since the CG1 pupils have the same level, and to accept that the main explanation lies in the presence of a specific learning disability.

The findings on the three STRS aspects for teachers in the language area correlate positively and significantly with those of the teachers in the mathematical area, with reference to the pupils of all three groups in the sample (Closeness: EG: r = .546, p < .01, CG1: r = .636, p < .01, CG2: r = .438, p < .05; Conflict: EG: r = .754, CG1: r = .728, CG2: r = .674, for all of them p < .01; Dependency: EG: r = .436, CG1: r = .394, for all of them p < .05).

Examining the correlations existing between the scores given by the teachers (globally, regardless of subject area) on the three STRS features, with reference to relationships with CG pupils, it emerges that as the perceived Dependency grows, Conflict levels also rise (r = .322; p < .001), while as Conflict scores increase, those for Closeness fall (r = -.493; p < .001).

The relationships with EG pupils, however, only show a positive linear relation between Dependency and Conflict (r = .468; p < .01), since the negative linear relation between Conflict and Closeness is not statistically significant.

Moreover, though the teachers from the language area perceive that the increase in Dependency corresponds to a greater increase in Conflict in the relationship with the pupils with SLD (r = .546; p < .01) compared to what happens with the CG pupils (r = .360; p < .01), it is only in the relationships involving EG pupils that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between levels of Dependency and Closeness (r = .360; p < .05).

When the analyses are repeated with the CG divided into CG1 and CG2, it is found that for CG2 children, who have the opposite achievement level from the EG group, there is not the clear positive relation expected between Dependency and Conflict. This positive correlation emerges however in relationships with CG1 pupils (r = .337; p < .01), who have the same achievement level as the EG pupils.

The results obtained from the analyses carried out to verify whether the class level (see Table 3) can affect the way teachers evaluate the relationship, show in a statistically significant way (t = 2.795; df = 49.662; p < .01) that Year 2 EG pupils (M = 9.06; SD = 4.00) are perceived as being more dependent than Year 3 children (M = 6.79; SD = 2.48).

Table 3

STRS Scores (Mean and SD) for Pupils in the Three Groups (EG, CG1, CG2) Considered Separately by Year (Second, Third), Gender (Males, Females) and Effort Level

	Closeness			Conflict			Dependency		
	EG	CG1	CG2	EG	CG1	CG2	EG	CG1	CG2
Year (class)									
Second	28.41 (7.80)	30.06 (7.68)	30.22 (7.97)	17.41 (7.48)	13.75 (5.72)	**16.72 (10.14)**	**9.06 (4.00)**	6.16 (2.65)	5.56 (2.73)
Third	29.26 (6.38)	28.30 (8.20)	31.23 (6.10)	15.18 (7.02)	16.68 (9.28)	**11.86 (5.12)**	**6.80 (2.48)**	6.16 (3.12)	4.80 (1.59)
Gender									
Males	28.19 (6.36)	29.70 (7.50)	30.45 (7.25)	**17.95 (8.45)**	14.53 (6.94)	14.48 (8.63)	7.70 (3.25)	6.19 (2.87)	5.24 (2.01)
Females	17.95 (8.45)	28.48 (8.49	31.60 (5.87)	**13.46 (3.64)**	16.18 (8.90)	11.90 (4.89)	8.00 (3.73)	6.12 (2.97)	4.75 (2.15)
Effort									
Low	**21.67 (7.54)**	29.67 (6.89)	-	18.42 (4.06)	11.33 (3.64)	-	9.17 (4.43)	4.78 (1.30)	-
Medium	**29.24 (5.71)**	28.96 (8.24)	27.75 (7.92)	16.81 (8.63)	16.54 (8.68)	16.13 (9.58)	7.62 (3.21)	6.44 (3.08)	4.75 (1.49)
High	**33.06 (5.93)**	29.40 (8.10)	31.44 (6.44)	13.06 (3.70)	12.80 (4.59)	13.04 (7.09)	7.82 (3.42)	6.16 (2.90)	5.11 (2.15)

Note. In bold the statistically significant differences.

The hypothesis that the higher Dependency scores are due to the particular characteristics of relationships with younger children (less autonomous in school work and daily activities), loses ground when it is seen that this statement is not applicable to CG pupils. Moreover, the great difference between the average Dependency score given to relationships with Year 2 and Year 3 EG pupils, may reflect the variable "stage of certified diagnosis". The results of the analyses in fact confirm that pupils for whom recognition of the disability is underway but who do not yet have an official diagnosis, are perceived to a statistically significant degree (t = 2.529; df = 62.367; p < .05) as being more dependent (M = 8.42; SD = 3.69) than their peers whose diagnosis is complete (M = 6.57; SD = 2.41). Since the group of pupils who have not yet completed the process of recognition of the disability is made up of all the Year 2 pupils and only 8 in Year 3 out of a total of 22, one might be justified in attributing the greater Dependency found in EG pupils from Year 2 to the lack of a confirmed diagnosis.

Taking into consideration the variable of the child's sex, the findings (see Table 3) confirm the results found in the literature (Baker, 2006; Hughes et al., 2001; Hughes et al., 2005; Kesner, 2000) which show that the relationship between teachers and girls is marked by warm non conflicting behavior, unlike that with boys which seems more hostile. What must be stressed is that the results are statistically significant (t = 3.074; df = 61.546; p < .01) only for Conflict in relation to the EG pupils. The sex variable does not in fact seem to influence teachers' assessment of levels of Conflict in the relationship with members of the CG (as a whole), since the average scores given to males (M = 14.51; SD = 7.74) and females (M = 14.57; SD = 7.86) in this group are almost the same.

When seeking to verify whether the teacher's evaluation of the pupil's effort affects the perception of the relationship (see Table 3), a statistically significant difference was found (F = 12.496; df = 2; p < .001) concerning the relationship with EG pupils, showing that those with learning difficulties and low levels of effort obtain considerably lower total scores on Closeness compared to the scores for pupils with SLD who are given a level score on effort medium or high.

Discussion and Conclusions

The original hypothesis, which held that the perception of the relationship between the teacher and the pupil with SLD is different from that established with a pupil without SLD, was partially confirmed. In fact, it was found that teachers perceive, in a statistically significant way, higher levels of Dependency in EG pupils.

The results of the analyses suggest that the difficulties caused by the learning disability should be seen as the reason for the high scores on Dependency given to pupils with SLD, since their medium-low achievement level alone does not appear to have a significant effect. This conclusion was reached by comparing the data concerning relationships with EG pupils with relationships involving pupils without SLD but having the same achievement level as the EG group. We therefore wish to stress the usefulness of conducting the analyses on a double control sample (the first, CG1, made up of pupils whose achievement is the same as that of the EG pupils; the second, CG2, formed by children whose achievement level is the opposite of that of the EG pupils), in order to consider not only the difficulties due to SLD but also the pupils' achievement level.

For the control group the correlations between the dimensions of the STRS are in line both with the data reported by Pianta (2001) and with the results of the studies by Fraire et al. (in press) in the Italian context. With reference only to relationships with EG pupils, as Conflict levels in the relationship rise, the teachers do not perceive a significant decrease in Closeness, which means that teachers do not let themselves be influenced by aspects of conflict when relating to pupils with specific learning disabilities and maintain a relationship marked by more stable levels of Closeness. In a recent research, also Roeden, Maaskant, Koomen, Candel, and Curfs (2012) in verifying the applicability of the STRS questionnaire to the assessment of the relationship between educators and children with intellectual disabilities, found that the negative linear relationship expected between Conflict and Closeness was extremely weak and not statistically significant. Applied to our situation, we could interpret this as an sign of the fact that the teachers participating in the research understand the difficulties caused by having a SLD and although they recognize that the greater Dependency of these students towards them create the conditions for higher levels of Conflict, they perceive the relationship with the EG pupils as being marked by relatively constant levels of Closeness.

The literature (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes et al., 2008; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007) reports that the perception of the level of the pupil's school achievement can affect the relationship with the teacher. One of the aims of our study was to ascertain whether the relationship was affected by the level of achievement perceived by the teachers or by the presence of specific learning difficulties, in view of the link recognized between specific difficulties and low scholastic achievement. The positive correlation between Dependency and Conflict which data shows both for GS and GC1, but not for GC2, could be due to the pupils' low achievement level and not only or mainly to the difficulties caused by SLD. Secondly, it could be hypothesized that the lack of a positive correlation between Dependency and Conflict found in the scores concerning the relationships with CG2 pupils may be due to the low average scores on Dependency given by the teachers for the relationships with the CG2 children. In the teachers' impressions in fact the pupils whose achievement is the opposite of the EG group are unlikely to ask for help or seek the teacher's attention unnecessarily. It could therefore be concluded that it is the status of the "best in the class", in the sense of an independent, autonomous pupil, that prevents teachers from considering the (few) requests from such pupils as signs of conflict.

The variables related to pupil gender and age seem to have a significant influence only as regards relationships involving pupils with SLD. The teachers' perceptions in fact show higher levels of conflict for male EG pupils and higher levels of Dependency for EG pupils in Year 2 compared to those in Year 3. This fact in particular must be interpreted in the light of the fact that teacher perceptions of relationships with EG pupils change depending on whether or not there is a certified diagnosis, since pupils whose diagnosis is still underway are considered significantly more dependent than their classmates who have already received a diagnosis. The different perception of the Dependency level between pupils already diagnosed and those with certification underway, however, underlines the importance of having a diagnosis attesting the pupils' difficulties. The diagnosis is often a prerequisite for the implementation of measures to help the pupil, enabling him/her to deal more independently with the difficulties caused by the disability. In the Italian context, in fact, teachers have to design an individual learning pathway for "certified" pupils, stating the aims and methodologies in the Individual Teaching Plan. For those who have a learning difficulty but have not yet received the official diagnostic certification, on the other hand, although national legislation (Law 170/2010) recommends that schools provide specifically designed remedial activities, suitable measures are not always taken. These could include syllabus design that takes into account the pupil's potential level and envisages compensatory and/or dispensatory measures and appropriate forms of assessment, which would enable the pupil to engage with the learning difficulties encountered with greater confidence, awareness and support. For these reasons it would be plausible to expect pupils awaiting diagnostic certification to adopt behaviors of greater dependency on the teachers.

We wish to underline two specific **limitations** to this work: firstly, the low number of pupils with certified diagnosis; secondly, the methodology used to ascertain the pupils' achievement level. As regards the first point, the number of pupils diagnosed is low because in Italy the request for certification starts when the child has had enough time to learn to read and write (usually midway through the second year of primary school). In addition, the process of obtaining the certified diagnosis is particularly long and slow. The sample could have been extended by involving older children, but given the importance of the teacher-pupil relationship in the early years of schooling and the target age of the STRS tool, the research chose to focus on pupils in the first three years of primary school. Moreover, the small size of the sample did not allow for an analysis of the teacher's perception of relationships with children having different kinds of SLD (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, etc.). The decision to base the assessment of pupil achievement on the teacher's perception made it possible to identify a group of children that on this dimension were comparable to those with SLD as well as a group of the opposite level. This enabled the links between the perception of the relationship and the presence of specific learning disabilities to be highlighted, without the influence of the teacher's perception of the pupil's achievement.

The study **enabled us to show** that the teacher's perception of the relationship with a pupil with SLD differs from the perception of the relationship with low-achieving pupils. Specifically, the results highlight the fact that the certification of specific learning disabilities is connected to an improvement in the quality of the teacher's perceived relationship with the pupil. Certification, in fact, has advantages for both the child and the teacher, giving them access to individualized programs and teaching assistance that respond to the needs of the pupils and enable them to become more autonomous.

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