

Preschool teacher attachment and learning difficulties risk

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Summary

This article presents the results of a study investigating the relationships between preschool teacher attachment and risk of developing learning difficulties. It aimed at verifying findings of a previous study on the role of preschool teacher attachment in a child learning difficulties risk. Results showed that children securely attached to their preschool teachers presented a lower risk of developing learning difficulties, and higher level of linguistic and psychomotor skills compared to their peers with insecure attachment.

Introduction

Attachment theory has shown that children usually develop more than one selective attachment. Most children form a network of attachment relationships with their family and other people who take care of them. These attachment relationships, including those between children and teachers, influence a child's cognitive and social acquisitions (DeMulder, Dehnam, Schmidt, & Mitchell, 2000; Seibert & Kerns, 2009; Marvin & Britner, 1999; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010).

Within a school context, children use their teacher as a secure base, and children who are securely attached attachment to their teacher are more successful in school. Moreover, early learning establishes the basis for school success. In this regard, some longitudinal studies have found that the quality of the relationships between preschool teacher and children facilitates school readiness (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Duncan et al., 2007).

School readiness is the set of skills involved in school learning. It comprises not only cognitive abilities but also social and emotional skills. For this reason, there is an increasing interest in children relationships as a predictor of their educational competences (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, 1999). In this regards, research has evidenced that learning difficulties can be related to early acquired experiential and instructional deficits. Moreover, the adverse

effects of inadequate preschool experiences can lead to skill deficiencies that mimic the effects of basic cognitive deficits.

Research aim

Children struggle to learn at school for many reasons, including emotional difficulties. On the basis of the consideration that a child's socio-emotional well-being is critical to school success, and attachment is the foundation of socio-emotional well-being, the study aimed at investigating the relationships between children/preschool teacher attachment and risk of developing learning difficulties. It aimed at confirming the results of a previous study (Commodari 2013), and analyzed whether a child's attachment security to their preschool teachers influences the risk of developing learning difficulties. In particular it sought to provide a better understanding of the role of attachment in early detection of the risk of developing learning difficulties.

Participants

Research involved a sample of preschoolers aged 4 and 5. In Italy children go to preschool from 4 to 5 years old, and begin primary school at 6. Participants were 156 children, 81 males and 75 females. All children aged 4 and 5 who went to the schools involved in the study participated. Children with certification of physical or mental disability were excluded from the study. All children were Italian and of two parent intact families.

Measures

Research was conducted using three measures the Attachment Q Sort (Italian version, Cassibba & D'Odorico, 2000; Waters, 1987), the School Readiness Battery (SR 4-5 (S-R 4-5, Zanetti & Mazzia, 2002), and the Precocious Identification of Learning Difficulties Risk (IPDA, Terreni, Tretti, Corcella, Cornoldi, & Tressoldi, 2002).

With regard to the AQS, the Italian form to evaluate attachment to professional caregivers was used. Criterion sort scores were used. *R* scores were converted to *z* scores.

To evaluate the risk of learning difficulties two measures were used: the S-R 4-5 Battery (Zanetti & Mazzia, 2002) and the IPDA questionnaire (Terreni et al., 2002). The SR 4-5 battery assesses "linguistic skills", "phonological skills", "logical-mathematic skills", and "psychomotor development". The IPDA (Terreni et al., 2002) assesses the risk of developing learning difficulties. Psychometric characteristics of the measures were satisfactory.

Procedures

Trained observers monitored the children for a prolonged time in their classroom. Tests were administered in a familiar, well known setting at the preschool, away from distracting noises. Three observers systematically and independently observed each child. Each observer administered one of the research instruments. The sequence of observations and test administration were counterbalanced across all participants.

RESULTS

Descriptive analyses by attachment security were calculated. ANOVA using “AQS” security as the independent variables and IPDA and S-R battery scores as the dependent variable were also conducted.

Similarly to the previous study, children were classified in two groups following Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo, and Myers (1990) and Ahnert et al. (2006) indications. Children with AQS values $> .33$ were deemed as securely attached; those with AQS values $< .33$ were deemed as insecurely attached. Among all participants, 63 children were classified as “secure” and 93 children were classified as “insecure”. The large number of children categorized as “insecure” children was not surprising. This result is similar to that obtained by Ahnert et al. (2006) in their meta-analysis, and it agrees with that obtained in the previous study, which results this study aimed at verify.

Results showed that children who were classified as “secure” showed better performance on many of the skills involved in school readiness. Furthermore, these children presented a lower risk of developing learning difficulties (see Table 1) compared to their “insecure” peers. These results confirm the results of the previous study.

Discussion

Results of the present study confirmed previous findings on the relationships between attachment to preschool teacher and risk of developing learning difficulties. My results showed that a child's attachment to their preschool teachers is related to acquiring the basic skills involved in school learning. This is a very interesting result. It contributes to confirm the hypothesis that socio-emotional development influences significantly cognitive competence involved in school learning. Children with secure attachments presented a lower risk of developing learning difficulties and high-

er levels of language and psycho-motor ability, compared with their peers with insecure attachments. Secure attachment can influence the development of skills involved in school learning. Moreover, high levels of skill involved in school readiness favour a child developing positive relationships with teachers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the present study revealed that a child's secure base behaviour in relationship to their preschool teachers is related to social competence and most of the cognitive and behavioural skills involved in school readiness. Not acquiring these skills might cause learning difficulties when these children begin primary school.

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Table 1 Mean comparisons with AQS security as an independent variable and either the S-R or IPDA scores as the dependent variables.

Measures	Secure children		Insecure children		<i>t</i>	95% CI	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
S-R battery scores							
Linguistic	35.23	9.81	30.97	9.09	2.14*	.27	6.83
Phonological	16.02	3.10	12.27	3.57	2.43*	.26	2.48
Logical-mathematical	17.12	4.15	15.73	3.68	1.93	.02	2.56
Psycho-motor	14.56	2.60	10.44	4.41	6.18**	2.65	5.15
IPDA scores							
Total	144.01	22.99	116.42	23.51	7.03**	19.49	34.81
Total percentiles	59.67	33.61	23.18	27.51	7.13**	26.49	46.48