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PRACTITIONER PAPER

Looking beyond challenging student behaviour: Utilising the teacher relationship interview

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Abstract

Intervention is considered the ultimate goal of the diagnostic process. However, when diagnostic assessment is largely focused on student (mal)adjustment and when the role and perspective of the teacher is not systematically evaluated, the assessment may fail to generate useful recommendations for intervention or teacher consultation. Based on a descriptive case report, the potential contribution of the Teacher Relationship Interview in making the assessment phase more relevant to intervention is outlined and illustrated.

Keywords: Teacher-student interaction; student behaviour problems; needs-based assessment; teacher consultation

Building positive relationships with behaviourally challenging students is not easy. Despite a sincere motivation to be an effective teacher, a teacher and a student may end up in a downward spiral of increasing and mutually reinforcing behaviour problems, disciplinary actions, and negative feelings. For both the teacher and the student, a conflictual relationship is a source of stress. School counsellors and psychologists have an important role in supporting teachers to build positive relationships with behaviourally challenging students. In this article, the Teacher Relationship Interview (TRI) is presented as a tool to obtain in-depth insight in teacher-student interaction issues.

A Transactional Framework: Understanding Student Problems as Interaction Problems

Ecological and transactional perspectives on the origins and persistence of child problem behaviour strongly emphasise the reciprocal influence between child characteristics and contextual factors (Sutherland & Oswald, 2005). Children may evoke (negative) reactions from their environment, but the environment also influences the child's behaviour in an ongoing process. In educational psychology, the influence of the teacher is considered a key environmental factor contributing to the school adjustment of students (Verschueren, 2015).

The teacher-student relationship is particularly important for students with special needs, including students with behaviour problems (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). However, relationships between teachers and students with disruptive behaviour problems are often characterised by conflict and mistrust. Research with the TRI showed that students with disruptive problems could elicit feelings of anger and helplessness in teachers (Spilt & Koomen, 2009), which have been associated with

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behavioural expressions of anger in daily interactions (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002). Also, teachers have shown to be less sensitive to the special needs of students with behaviour problems (Sutherland & Oswald, 2005) and more inclined to adopt an authoritarian and controlling attitude (Brophy & McCaslin, 1992). The recognition of such patterns of feelings and attitudes of teachers in the interactions with a student is of great importance for assessment for intervention or needs-based assessment (Pameijer, 2017[1]). However, such patterns are difficult to discern because internalised negative feelings and perceptions of teachers are not easily witnessed by an outsider. It is therefore no sinecure to accurately evaluate and understand the quality of dyadic (one-to-one) teacher-student interactions. There is a clear need for measures that help school psychologists to elucidate these relational and internal aspects of teachers' struggles with behaviourally challenging students.

A Transactional Perspective on Assessment for Intervention: Instruments to Explore the Dynamic Interactions between Teachers and Students

Although the importance of a transactional and relational view on student behaviour problems is widely recognised, this view is not sufficiently embedded in common diagnostic assessment practices (Lebeer et al., 2012) and intervention models (Korpershoek et al., 2016). Available diagnostic instruments are far more focused on student problems (thus yielding within-child explanations) than on problems in the environment or student-environment *interaction* problems. When the role and perspective of the teacher, a contextual factor, is not systematically evaluated, diagnostic assessment fails to generate useful recommendations for intervention or teacher consultation (Lebeer et al., 2012; Pameijer, 2017). In addition, the few validated instruments that are available for the assessment of the affective qualities of teacher-student relationships are closed-ended rating scales that assess teachers' explicit evaluations of the teacher-student relationship. Narrative interviews are open-ended methods that could capture more implicit feelings and cognitions of teachers about relationships with individual students (Spilt & Koomen, 2009). As such, narrative interviews could provide a more in-depth insight into the complexities of the affective teacher-student relationship, which is essential for assessment to be relevant for intervention.

Present Study: A Case Report

In this article, the Teacher Relationship Interview (TRI; Pianta, 1999) is presented as an assessment tool that aligns with a transactional and relational perspective on student behaviour difficulties. The TRI can make assessment more relevant for intervention by analysing and elucidating the problem situation as experienced by the teacher from a relational perspective. Unlike, for example, classroom observations that offer an evaluation from an outsider's perspective, the TRI can provide a unique insight into a teacher's feelings and perceptions of the student that elicit the teacher's (negative) attitudes and (lack of) sensitivity towards a student who exhibits challenging behaviour.

The TRI (Pianta, 1999; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002) was developed in line with attachment theory. According to attachment theory, mental representations or internal working models of dyadic relationships encompass internalised beliefs, expectations, and feelings about the self, the other, and the self-other relationship (Button et al., 2001; Main et al., 1985; Pianta et al., 2003). Mental representations guide a person's perceptions and interpretations of the other's behaviours, as well as this person's responses in daily interactions with the other. Such relationship representations should be distinguished from externally observable interaction processes, although they are clearly interconnected (Pianta et al., 2003). Mental representations are believed to be automatically activated in interactions with the other and to operate largely outside conscious awareness. Applied to teacher-student interactions, a teacher may not be aware of how his or her behaviour is influenced by internalised feelings and cognitions about the student and the self in relation to the student. When a teacher has negative interactions with a student on a daily basis, there is the risk that the teacher internalises negative beliefs about the student (e.g., recurrent negative expectations and explanations for the student's behaviour), negative beliefs about the self in relation to the student, and negative feelings such as anger and helplessness. Relatively minor misbehaviour is then easily perceived as problematic, threatening, and stressful. Accordingly, the teacher's reaction will be more corrective and restrictive, aimed at gaining control over the student rather than being supportive and accommodating to help the student to develop self-control (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002; Sutherland & Oswald, 2005).

The overarching goal of this case report was to illustrate the potential value of the TRI for practitioners. Specifically, the aim was to show how this interview could be used to understand discordant teacher-student interactions and to identify what a teacher may need to improve his or her relationship with a student. A case was chosen of a student who was having adjustment problems and had a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. In such a case, the adjustment problems of the student could be easily attributed to the diagnosis (i.e., a within-child explanation), thereby overlooking the teacher's need for support to be 'an agent of change'. The TRI focuses on the quality of the interactions and describes the difficulties and needs from the teacher's perspective, thereby acknowledging the teacher's important role in students' school relationships and adjustment.

Method

Case Description

Student C (10 years old) was selected for participation in a larger study on students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Student C was in Grade 3 of a regular primary school in the Netherlands. His teachers were Teacher A (3 days a week) and Teacher B (2 days a week). Student C had good grades (Level A), but displayed challenging behaviour and a negative school attitude (i.e., it was reported by the teacher that the student disturbed the teacher and other children by inappropriate and off-task behaviour such as making distracting noises and talking out of turn during lessons and by his restlessness in general). He was formally diagnosed (by a qualified clinician) with Asperger syndrome, one of the former subtypes of ASD in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.; DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Student C received a budget for special needs services. He showed serious internalising and externalising problems (Child Behaviour Checklist [CBCL] scores in the clinical area, Teacher Report Form [TRF] scores in the borderline or subclinical range; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). High (clinical) scores on the Dutch normed version of the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 2001) were obtained for conflict and dependency, and a low-average score on closeness. The teachers and the parents of the student provided active written consent.

Measures

The TRI (Pianta, 1999) is a semistructured narrative interview of 12 questions to examine teachers' mental representations of dyadic teacher-student relationships. The interviewer combined a semistructured approach with a nondirective style. The teacher did not get the opportunity to prepare answers in advance but was asked to respond spontaneously on the spot. The teacher was asked, for example, to name three characteristics of the relationship with the student, or to describe a situation in which he or she really had (or had not) 'clicked' with the student, or to provide examples of specific moments when the student was misbehaving or upset. There were follow-up questions prompting the teacher to describe (everyday) situations that recently had occurred and to describe the experienced emotions and the emotions observed in the student in these situations. In general, by asking teachers to provide detailed descriptions of events that actually happened (and not about what happens 'generally'), it is relatively easy for teachers to follow this up by talking about emotions, including (sometimes intense) negative emotions. The interview took about 30–40 minutes. The authors' experience in previous research with the TRI indicated that teachers considered it a pleasant interview: many teachers affirmed that the interview questions were thought-provoking.

In the literature, three organising dimensions of mental representations have been distinguished (Button et al., 2001; Spilt & Koomen, 2009). The first dimension concerns the *content* of the mental representation and describes *what* is being said. Content is rated along relational-pedagogical themes (Sensitivity of Discipline, Secure Base, Perspective-Taking) and the extent to which the teacher tries to influence the development of the student (Agency/Intentionality). The second dimension refers to the *affective valence* of what is being said and includes the scales Positive Affect, Helplessness, and Anger/Hostility. The third dimension refers to the *process* or to *how* information is presented (e.g., denial or preoccupation with certain themes or feelings) and includes the scales Neutralising Negative Affect and Global Coherence. Definitions of the scales are provided in Table S1 in the supplementary material.

For each scale, coders made an overall judgment based on all the information in the interview using the coding manual. The manual provides a qualitative description of each scale along with a rating scale: Scores at the high end (6–7) refer to clear evidence of the construct in the teacher's narrative, scores in the mid range (3–5) refer to a mixed presentation, and scores at the low end (1–2) indicate very little or no evidence of the construct. The manual can be used for both qualitative (description and interpretation) and quantitative assessment (numerical scores). If quantitative assessment is preferred (e.g., for research purposes), training is needed to ensure interrater reliability (see supplementary material).

The interview with Teacher A was transcribed, interpreted and coded by the authors.

Results

Below, brief passages are provided of the TRI with Teacher A per scale in the context of a qualitative (interpretative) assessment followed by a quantitative assessment (low, mid, or high range).

Sensitivity of Discipline

Teacher A gave several examples of situations in which Student C displayed disruptive behaviour and was not task-oriented: 'You have to regulate his behaviour all day through. . . . He's awfully clever, but you have to help him keep working. Sometimes he does not start at all.' The teacher's way to deal with those situations was primarily by regulating and controlling Student C's behaviour. The teacher gave little proof of proactive behaviour management, had no conversations with Student C about what happened, and did not explain to Student C alternatives for his behaviour.

But, on the other hand, the teacher was not excessively fixated on behavioural and classroom rules and appeared to be thoughtful of Student C's inabilities and special needs: 'Sometimes when he comes to school, he is already very restless. . . . If he has started fighting before the day begins, he does not have to join the circle conversation. He may sit in his usual place in the classroom, or in the hallway, to make a drawing.'

Although the teacher showed a sense for the need for rules in the classroom and at times described that he adjusted his behaviour management to the capabilities and needs of Student C, in most cases the approach was more reactive than proactive. This meant that there was a mixed presentation of this construct, resulting in a score in the mid range.

Secure Base

There was little and only mixed evidence of the 'secure base' construct in this interview. Teacher A outlined two situations in which Student C was upset and came to the teacher: 'He comes to me anyway. So he obviously trusts that coming to me will bring him something.' The teacher did not further explain what the teacher did to help Student C cope with his emotions and the teacher also did not link this to his social or emotional development. In the second situation that was described, the teacher did not mention the student's feelings in this situation.

So, there was some evidence that the teacher acts in a supportive manner to Student C, but this was not consistently the case and seemed to be more linked to the teacher's standard role as a teacher rather than to an understanding of the importance of relational security for Student C's further development in school. This corresponded with a score at the lower end of the mid range.

Perspective-Taking

Teacher A generally indicated finding it hard to 'read' Student C and to understand what he thinks: 'Well, I think he also found it quite nice. Yes. You cannot see much on his face. But we had a good time.' Sometimes the teacher tried to understand his feelings reasoning from his own perspective: 'He'll … I think he finds it quite annoying. Seems to me.'

Although the teacher often did not know what the student felt and often did not understand him, on several occasions the teacher notified that he will feel different than other students and that he has a different perspective. This meant that there was some evidence for perspective taking, without providing details, which corresponded with a score at the lower end of the mid range.

Agency/Intentionality

Teacher A indicated being too busy to regulate Student C's behaviour all day through. The teacher described situations in which they could only get Student C to work by continuously sitting down by his side. But if Student C did not want to, the teacher readily accepted the situation; for example: 'I don't make a fuss about that. But that is easy of course if you know that he has A level [highest level on a national standardised test].'

There were some moments in which the teacher did try to influence Student C, and the teacher described one single situation when the teacher was alone with him and really felt effective: 'He had to complete a questionnaire. But he didn't understand. We started discussing that together. Well, he really was coming somewhere now.' However, the teacher also indicated he felt unable to influence Student C.

Although the teacher described a few moments of being able to influence Student C's behaviour, in many situations the teacher reported ineffective attempts. Moreover, there were no examples during the interview of the teacher really feeling able to influence the cognitive or socioemotional development of Student C. This mixed evidence corresponded with a score at the lower end of the mid-range.

Positive Affect

Teacher A described the relationship with Student C as 'entertaining', but the teacher's explanation was mixed with annoyance: 'Whenever I say something, he takes it literally. … Because that's the way he thinks it is … it also makes you laugh. … When everyone is working pretty quiet, it's entertaining. But when it's just another disturbance, then I've had it up to here [making hand gesture above the head].'

In response to the question about what the teacher liked best or found most satisfying about being Student C's teacher, the teacher responded: 'It's special. I have not had such a child in class before.' The teacher described experiencing some positive feelings with Student C when being alone with him: 'That was real fun. But then you have only Student C. … That's incredibly funny. … It felt really good to have some time to talk to each other for a while.'

There was little evidence of positive affect throughout the interview. Positive feelings were rather superficial and brief, and the teacher elaborated much less on positive events and feelings than on negative events and feelings. This corresponded with a score at the low end.

Helplessness

There were expressions of helplessness: 'Yes, I feel bad about it. In the beginning I tended to think that this is a defeat.' In response to a question about doubts, the teacher said: 'Then you feel inadequate. While you know rationally that you cannot do better. But it does not feel right.' With regard to Student C, the teacher said: 'He might need more intellectual challenge because of his high grades … but I'm trying to discount that. Because you cannot do more than you already do.'

These comments indicated that the teacher felt that he had not responded effectively on several occasions. At the same time, the teacher had not considered new strategies on the basis that he did not believe he could improve on interventions taken. However, the teacher did try to put things in perspective, realising that Student C is not a typical student. This meant that the teacher's feelings of concern were less obvious and pervasive than those corresponding with a score at the high end, resulting in a score in the mid range.

Anger/Hostility

When asked to characterise the relationship with Student C in three words, Teacher A remained silent for a long time: 'To be honest, the first word that comes to my mind is "annoyance".' The teacher described how Student C always misbehaved during circle time: 'Then I just send him away, out of the circle. After five minutes I go to him: "Are you okay, Student C?". Because then the irritation has vanished. Sometimes you have to do this for yourself too.'

The negative feelings expressed by Teacher A do not have the valence of clear-cut 'anger' or 'hostility', and the teacher did not consider Student C as 'guilty'. Therefore, a score at the high end is not indicated. However, negative feelings were expressed regularly during the interview, and at times, these negative feelings appeared to undermine the teacher's emotional stability. Therefore, the teacher's feelings of anger/hostility corresponded best to a score at the higher end of the mid range.

Neutralising Negative Affect

Generally, Teacher A was very honest about negative feelings. At one time, the teacher did not finish the sentence when talking about a negative event but ended with 'well then …' as if to let the interviewer draw their own conclusions.

Since the teacher generally did not hesitate to discuss negative feelings and since there was little evidence of contradictions between the teacher's adjectives and the described examples, a score at the low end was most appropriate.

Coherence

Teacher A described the experiences with Student C in a coherent and understandable manner, although there were several indications of incoherence and contradictions. For example, when the teacher described many situations in the classroom when things were not going well, the teacher added suddenly: 'There are also group discussions that go really well, in which he is very much involved.'

The teacher showed coherence through most of the interview, with brief violations of quality, relevance and clarity. This corresponded with a score in the mid-range.

Discussion

Diagnostic assessments should yield information that is useful for intervention or problem solving (Pameijer, 2017). In this discussion, the kind of insights the TRI produced and how these insights could be used to deduce recommendations for intervention and teacher consultation is explained.

First, a rather deep insight was obtained in how the teacher thinks and feels about Student C and how the teacher tries to cope with his disruptive behaviour. The interview hinted that there were deficiencies in the pedagogical-relational practices of the teacher (e.g., perspective taking, secure base, sensitive discipline) and pointed to a predominance of negative over positive feelings. Supporting the teacher in changing these practices and helping the teacher cope with negative feelings could improve the interaction quality between the teacher and the student.

Second, the TRI provided clues for concrete advice and feedback. For example, the interview specifically pointed to the importance of more proactive behaviour management by using cues, reminders and scaffolding of tasks to help Student C to start and continue working on tasks. The interview also pointed to the need to more closely attend to the emotional experiences of Student C; for example, by labelling emotions when Student C is upset and by modelling and supporting adequate coping strategies. The teacher could also be encouraged in attempts to explain experiences from the student's perspective in order to grow in perspective taking and empathy. Furthermore, the teacher could be encouraged to shift the focus from attempts to influence Student C's behaviour in the moment to attempts to support the growth and development of Student C over time. This could stimulate the teacher to develop strategies that promote Student C's development based on a long-term perspective of the developmental needs of Student C, which could simultaneously enhance the teacher's sense of agency. Finally, it seemed important to start searching for situations in which positive feelings are present. If, for example, positive feelings are more easily experienced during one-to-one contact, one can look for opportunities to organise one-to-one contact on a more regular basis. In this way, positive and negative emotions could become more balanced (Pianta, 1999).

Third, the TRI illuminated positive (protective) factors. The explicit mapping of positive factors or strengths in assessment increases the efficacy feelings of teachers, which can be an incentive for teachers to develop more effective practices. It is striking how open Teacher A was about negative feelings, which could be considered a strength. After all, a reluctance to talk about negative emotions can considerably complicate the consultation process and may obstruct positive change. The sincerity of the teacher indicated that the teacher is open to work for change (Slade, 2007). Even so, the teacher's feelings of anger might hinder the motivation to change and the teacher's helplessness might foster passivity (Schutz et al., 2006).

In the literature on parent-child relationships, understanding one's own feelings and (implicit) cognitions is considered a prerequisite for behavioural change (Slade, 2007). This reasoning can be extended to teacher-student relationships. It is important that Teacher A recognises how internalised affect is linked to thoughts and actions. To this end, intervention techniques such as emotion-focused therapy (Lander, 2009) or relationship-focused reflection could be used (Spilt et al., 2012). In relationship-focused reflection, coaches use the TRI to engage teachers in a process of reflection on the relationship with a specific student. It is based on the ideas of Pianta (1999) that consultants could facilitate teacher reflection by summarising and labelling the teacher's narrative elicited with the TRI in more general terms, guided by scientific theory. Previous research has shown that such reflection-stimulating interventions improved the sensitivity of mothers (Slade, 2007) and teachers (Bosman et al., 2021; Spilt et al., 2012).

The TRI does not provide direct suggestions for specific types of interventions like, for example, psycho-education, ABC (antecedent, behaviour, and consequence) training, or interventions that are specific for the treatment of the child's disorder. The consultant needs to combine information from the TRI with information from other assessment tools and integrate this with knowledge of evidence-based practices and interventions (e.g., for teaching high-functioning students with ASD; see, for example, Moreno & O'Neal, 2000) in order to develop a route for intervention that is tailored to the needs of both the student and the teacher. When considering the possibilities for intervention, it needs to be recognised that the quality of the teacher-student relationship is influenced by contextual factors (Pianta et al., 2003) and should therefore not be considered the sole responsibility of the teacher. Following a systems perspective, it is important to take into account the (lack of) training, services and support (from colleagues, school leaders, and specialised staff) that are available to assist the teacher in interactions with the student. Thus, the question is not only what the teacher needs but also what the school needs to provide a supportive and inclusive context for the student and the student's teacher.

Although a case report is an effective method to illustrate the application of the TRI, it should be noted that the conclusions cannot be generalised to other cases. This report is a single case example only and the conclusions are valid only for the unique relationship between this student and this teacher. A case of a student with classroom adjustment problems was chosen to illustrate the TRI. Although this student had an ASD diagnosis, the study did not specifically focus on ASD. We consider the TRI useful for teachers of students with classroom adjustment problems whether the student has ASD or another developmental disorder or no diagnosis at all. Moreover, there were no empirical data that could demonstrate whether the TRI truly facilitated the intervention phase and ultimately produced improved outcomes for the student.

To conclude, it became clear that an interaction and relationship problem had developed between Student C and the teacher in which the teacher's behaviour played a role that should not be ignored. Consistent with current perspectives on diagnostic services for students with special education needs, empirical research is needed to examine whether the TRI can bridge the gap between assessment and intervention in such a way that both students and teachers benefit.

Supplementary material. For supplementary material accompanying this paper visit https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2022.14

Conflict of interest. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Compliance with ethical standards. All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional committee of the second author, and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Note

1. Assessment for intervention implies that information, gathered during the assessment phase, should be relevant not only for diagnostic purposes but also for intervention purposes.

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