

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Quality of the Student-Teacher Relationship as a
Resilience Factor in Dealing with Ongoing Terrorism**

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Abstract

The present study evaluated the effect of the student-teacher relationship on emotional strength and coping strategies among representative samples of students from two populations, one under a constant terror threat and the other under no such immediate threat. The investigation focused on the influence of the student-teacher relationship on the level of emotional strength and the use of a variety of coping strategies among middle school students. The research was carried out in Israel one month after operation “Pillar of Cloud”, which took place in November 2012.

Both Jews and Arabs endure long days of suffering as shells are fired in the Gaza and Sderot vicinity, on both sides of the border (Lahad & Leykin, 2010). Life under constant threat of attack presents considerable difficulties and dangers to many people's lives. In the present study this situation is represented by the term “ongoing terrorism”. The study sample included 141 participants, male and female middle school students (grades 7-9) from of Israel's Jewish population. Of these, 90 pupils (63.8%) were enrolled in schools in the Gaza region that face an ongoing terrorist threat. The participating sample also included a control group of 51 male and female students (36.2%) from middle schools that do not face an ongoing terrorist threat.

The main aim of this study was to empirically assess the impact of the student-teacher relationship on emotional resilience and coping among male and female middle school students. The theoretical model on which the current investigation was based is the attachment theory of Bowlby (1969). The fundamental assumption underlying this theory is that moments of stress and threat trigger the attachment

system, with preference given to keeping in close proximity an adult who can reduce stress and establish a sense of security.

In addition, Bowlby (1988) claimed that there are “significant experiences” of attachment. In cases where an individual may be found in danger or sense other negative feelings, he will search for attachment to a "significant other" who is able to assist in coping. In this study particular focus was placed on the fundamental assumption of the attachment theory as it relates to promoting emotional health through the encounters with authority figures in the context of the "Security Basis" program (Davidovitz, Mikulincer, Shaver, Izsak, & Popper, 2007).

With this assumption, the teacher as an attachment figure was examined as a "Security Basis", being available, accepting and supporting in developing student emotional strength and more general coping abilities, particularly at moments of prolonged terrorist threats.

This investigation places a particular emphasis on the natural and unique role of the teacher as part of the educational-emotional interactions present in the schooling framework.

The research methods included:

1. A pre-built survey entitled “The Teacher and I” (CATSB), designed to test the quality of the student-teacher relationship from the student’s perspective. The survey was developed by Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2006)

2. A pre-built survey designed to measure emotional hardiness (Kobasa, 1979). This survey was translated to Hebrew by Drory & Florian (1991).
3. The variety of strategies for coping with situations of stress was evaluated using the Hebrew version of the Coping Strategies survey. The survey is based on that of Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). However, Carver et al. (1989) listed only 15 strategies. In Oren's (2002) study participants reported an additional 6 strategies for coping with situations of stress. Since the present study evaluated the range of coping strategies, we utilized a survey including 21 strategies, taken from Oren's study.

Regarding the central question of this investigation, namely whether there is an association between the quality of the student-teacher relationship and the level of emotional strength of the student, it was found that the teacher may offer a "secure basis" for developing emotional strength in students from schools with ongoing terror threats. That is, a teacher who is available to and accepting of students facing an ongoing threat of terror contributes to the development of emotional strength and coping strategies in situations of stress and danger. This finding strengthens the importance of emotional interactions in the "teacher-student relationship beyond the areas of didactics, pedagogy, and frontal interactions (Hargreaves, 1998; Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbound, 2013).

Results from this investigation also included differences in the quality of the "teacher -student" relationship between students enrolled in schools with an ongoing terrorist threat and students enrolled in schools without the ongoing terrorist threat. Students enrolled in schools with an ongoing terrorist threat reported better quality

student-teacher relationships than students enrolled in schools without an ongoing terrorist threat. Similarly, differences in the quality of the student-teacher relationships were found between male and female students, with female students reporting better quality student-teacher relationships.

No differences were observed in the level of emotional strength between students enrolled in schools with an ongoing terrorist threat and students enrolled in schools without an ongoing terrorist threat. Similarly, no differences were noted in emotional strength between male and female students.

An association was observed between the student-teacher relationship and the use of a variety of coping strategies. Students who reported a sense of availability and acceptance from their teacher also reported utilizing a wide range of strategies for coping with stress. However, no association was observed between the utilization of a wide range of coping strategies and the Rejection factor of the student-teacher relationship.

Regarding the hypothesis that there would be a positive relationship between student-teacher relationships and emotional strength, and the student's reporting of a variety of coping strategies, two statistically significant influencing variables were found in the survey reports. The PA coping strategy factor was related to both the availability factor of the student-teacher relationship and to the commitment factor of emotional strength. The distraction factor of coping strategies was also found to be related to the availability factor of the student-teacher relationship. In spite of this, the

SE and AD factors of coping strategies were not significantly related to other variables.

In addition to this investigation's questions and hypotheses regarding the quality of student-teacher relationships, it was found that the latter contributes significantly to the level of emotional strength of the student.

This investigation contributes to the theories and research on student-teacher relationships and emotional strength, further developing the theory that an attachment system aids in dealing with stress. This study provides an initial step in examining the contribution of the student-teacher relationship system to the emotional strength and resilience of the students enrolled in schools with an ongoing terrorist threat.

Finally, a number of practical applications have arisen from this investigation. The findings suggest a unique option for systematic intervention in schools facing periods of ongoing terror threats. This option lies in improving and enhancing teacher-student relationship systems, whose importance both in the day to day and in periods of ongoing tension was highlighted in this investigation. Systemic change that works to preserve continuity and functional interpersonal relationships will help the student to develop resilience and facilitate the utilization of a variety of strategies for coping with the stress caused by ongoing terrorism.