

# EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY IN STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS: ENHANCING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SERVICES FOR PRESCHOOL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Emotional dependency in student-teacher relationships (STR) is often overshadowed by the focus on closeness and conflict, leading to limited conceptual clarity, particularly in inclusive classrooms. Teachers frequently interpret dependency through behaviors perceived as disruptive or developmentally inappropriate, making it a complex phenomenon to navigate. Emotional dependency is important for special educational needs (SEN) students as it provides emotional security, supports self-regulation, promotes social and academic engagement and bridges communication gaps. This qualitative case study examines the perspectives of three preschool teachers on emotional dependency and the strategies they employ to manage it. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, guided by the Student-teacher Relationship Scale, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, and relevant literature. Findings reveal that emotional dependency manifests as a child's need for emotional support, reassurance, and warmth from a trusted adult. Teachers foster secure relationships by acknowledging emotions, promoting self-regulation, and gradually encouraging autonomy through choice-based interactions. Notably, students with special educational needs exhibit heightened emotional dependency, necessitating adaptive and individualized strategies. This study highlights the critical role of educators in balancing emotional security and autonomy to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment, ensuring that all preschoolers, particularly those with special educational needs, receive the necessary emotional scaffolding for their development.

**Keywords:** Emotional Dependency, Inclusive Education, Student-teacher Relationship

## INTRODUCTION

Emotional dependency is a significant, yet underexplored dimension of student-teacher relationship. It is defined as where students seek excessive needs for emotional support, reassurance and attention from teachers (Roorda et al., 2021; Verschueren & Split, 2020). In early childhood education, dependency may be viewed as developmentally age-appropriate, in which they seek out teachers for validation, comfort and support in emotional regulations. However, emotional dependency can manifest as the teacher feeling the child consistent needs for attention, presence and assistance even in situations where the child is able to do it independently (Rudasill et al., 2022; Sroufe, 2020). This could influence the quality of the student-teacher relationship.

Emotional dependency is one type of dependency dimension described in Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). STRS is a widely used teacher-report questionnaire where teachers rate their relationship with an individual student (Sumatic et al., 2023; Lost et al., 2022). There are three dimensions measured in STRS which are closeness, conflict and dependency. A positive student-teacher relationship is characterized as having a high closeness, low conflict and dependency. Past studies showed that a high-quality student-teacher relationship is an important indicator of the student's school adjustment, engagement, academic and psychosocial development (Xu et al., 2023; Losh et al., 2022; Split & Koomen, 2022).

Despite growing interest in student-teacher relationships, dependency is a dimension that has been less studied and often been left out compared to the other two dimensions (Rudasill et al., 2022; Split & Koomen, 2022). Although dependency has important implications for students' social, emotional and academic development (Roorda et al., 2021), most previous studies have focused on the more general aspects of student-teacher relationships. This ignores the nuances and types of dependency in student-teacher relationships. Emotional dependency can be seen in various forms (Sumatic et al., 2023; Rudasill et al., 2022). The various forms of dependency behavior are important to understand how dependency affects classroom dynamics, emotional well-being and student development, especially for special educational needs students.

Additionally, there is a lack of clarity in differentiating how dependency is assessed according to the age and development of students, especially among SEN in inclusive classrooms. Young children naturally rely on adults for emotional support. This dependency is a normal aspect of their development (Thummier et al., 2022). Preschoolers exhibit dependent behaviors as a way to seek closeness, help, or attention from teachers (Sumatic et al., 2023; Ferreira et al., 2020). These behaviors may involve frequent closeness to teachers, an excessive need to feel secure, and difficulty separating from teachers. SEN students, on the other hand, have unique emotional challenges (Split et al., 2021; Pakarinen et al., 2020). Emotional dependency may be a sign of emotional challenges underlying their behavior. Therefore, emotional dependency needs to be understood in terms of how and why they rely on.

This study will contribute to the field of inclusive education, providing a richer understanding on the nuances of dependency in student-teacher relationships, especially among SEN students. Furthermore, it will widen the past research scopes, which have mainly focused on closeness and conflict dimension in student-teacher relationships. Dependency dimension is understudied and poorly understood because it lacks a universal definition of the concept. Thus, this study focusses on emotional dependency which will contribute to the understanding of dependency and increases the quality of inclusive education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Student-teacher Relationships Scale (STRS)

Student-teacher Relationships Scale (STRS) has been widely used for measuring student-teacher relationships in the classroom. Dependency is often viewed as a single construct, particularly through observable behaviors such as excessive help seeking and frequent desire to be close to the teacher (de Ruiter et al., 2021; Verschueren & Split, 2020). This leads to a lack of consideration of emotional needs and the motivations that drive them. This lack of differentiation can also lead to misinterpretation of student behavior. The definition of emotional dependency is unclear and not universally accepted in the context of student-teacher relationships.

Previous studies have focused more on observable behaviors than emotional needs. Exploring emotional dependency can increase understanding of this understudied dimension and its implications for student well-being. In addition, being aware of emotional dependency can help teachers adjust their interactions more effectively. Teachers can move from viewing dependency as a negative behavior to addressing students' emotional needs by providing appropriate support. Therefore, this study focuses on understanding the emotional needs behind students' dependency on teachers rather than dismissing all forms of dependency.

In inclusive education, the dynamic interaction between students and teachers, especially among SEN students, is of profound importance (Quill & Kahu, 2022; Perez-Salas et al., 2021). Positive student-teacher relationships for SEN are fundamental to their educational journey, offering not only academic guidance but also emotional and social support (Haldimann, Hascher & Morinaj 2023; Losh et al., 2022). A positive relationship can help reduce negative problems associated with their unique challenges and provide stability and support in the learning environment. This is especially critical for preschool SEN, where they are exposed to formal education for the first time (Sumatic et al., 2023).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) calls for inclusive, quality and equitable lifelong education for all, especially for persons with disabilities (UNESCO, 2016). This goal recognizes the fundamental right to education for all, emphasizes the need to address barriers to learning and create environments that meet diverse needs. In Malaysia, Ministry of Education have also integrated the goal in the Education Development Plan 2013-2025. This plan enables all students, including those with SEN, to learn together from preschool to upper secondary level by 2020. The integration of SEN students into an inclusive classroom involves support from all teachers to make their adaptation successful (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2022).

While most research has focused on the quality of student-teacher relationships, it is found that studies using the STRS often exclude dependency due to reliability issues and model fit (Ferreira et al., 2020). This dimension is rarely mentioned or measured and often excluded from empirical studies. Furthermore, dependency is also excluded in the short version of the STRS, which has only 15 items and has been widely used (Split & Koomen, 2022). Due to the interpretation of dependency as a negative dimension, it is often combined with conflict or excluded from past studies (Sumatic et al., 2023).

Interestingly, studies have also showed that dependency has a positive correlation with closeness (Šumatic et al., 2023; Sroufe, 2020). Moreover, child-reported dependency has more in common with closeness than teacher-reported dependency (Sroufe, 2020). This suggests that emotional dependency may not always signify maladaptive over-reliance but can also reflect secure relational attachment. Thus, it is important to highlight the importance of understanding how teachers interpret emotional dependency, whether as a maladaptive form of emotional over-dependency or developmentally appropriate dependency. Compared to closeness and conflict, dependency is a poorly understood dimension.

Hence, the aim of this study is to explore emotional dependency among preschool teachers in inclusive classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain valuable and rich data through teachers' implicit mental representations of STR (Xu et al., 2023). This study can offer insights of the nuances and conceptualizing emotion dependency, particularly in understanding and supporting SEN students in inclusive classrooms. Moreover, previous studies often overlooked dependency, potentially limiting to fully capture how teachers perceived and interpreted the behaviors of SEN students who might express dependency differently. Thus, the current study will contribute to increasing the quality of student-teacher relationships among all students in inclusive classrooms.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that uses case study methods. The selection of this method meets the research questions to allow for a comprehensive overview and a deep understanding related to the perspective of emotional dependency among preschool teachers in inclusive classrooms.

### Participants

Three preschool teachers from three different preschools located in Lembah Klang have been selected as participants by using the purposive sampling method. The selection of the location is based on its accessibility by researchers and participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Next, the selection of the research participants is based on criteria determined by the researcher. The teachers are preschool teachers in inclusive classrooms aged 4-6 years old, with a minimum of 2 years teaching experience, with a minimum of diploma certificate and are willing to participate in this study. The sample size selected in this study is based on Braun and Clarke (2021) statements that researchers must be comfortable with uncertainty and understand that meaning is not simply discovered within data but rather constructed through interpretation. As a result, decisions about how many data items are sufficient are inherently context-dependent and shaped by subjective judgment. Therefore, three participants were considered sufficient for this study.

### Interview

Each participant has an individual approximately 40 to 60 minutes long online interview. The interview protocol was designed following the Kallio et al. (2016)'s five phases and guided by STRS (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta et al., 2008) and literature reviews. It contained questions to explore teachers' perspectives on emotional dependency including behavioral observed, their responses and their relationships with their students. The open-ended questions kept the discussion focused while allowing participants

to discuss issues that were important to them, including those unanticipated by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Topics covered included exploring teachers' perspectives on emotional dependency, the nature of their relationships developed with children, behavioral observed as emotional dependency and influences on relationships. Throughout the interview process, participants were encouraged to provide examples from their teaching experiences to illustrate their points. The names and details of the schools or children were not mentioned to protect confidentiality. Participants chose pseudonyms.

## Analysis

All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed for coding. The data obtained were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first phase, researchers read the transcripts and familiarize them with the data. In the second phase, researchers developed initial coding, followed by categorizing the codes with similar picture into themes. In the fourth phase, the themes were repeatedly reviewed to validate relationships. Then, researchers define and name the themes.

## RESULTS AND FINDING

The findings of this study are presented based on the objective of the study, which was to explore the perspective of preschool teachers towards emotional dependency in an inclusive classroom. Upon analysis of the semi-structured interviews, most of the teachers' descriptions can be put into four themes, namely, (a) teacher as a safe haven, (b) home dynamics and (c) SEN students showed needs for emotional dependency.

### a) Teacher as a safe haven

The second theme described the teacher as an individual that can offer safety, comfort and protection. In moments of distress or uncertainty, students seek out both emotional and physical closeness from the teacher, highlighting the teacher's role as a co-regulator and secure base. This indicates that students perceive teachers as an attachment figure, rather than an authority figure. Emotional dependency manifests in different behaviors such as:

*If they can speak, okay, I try to talk to them. Oh, where did you go this weekend? Or what's your favorite ice cream? Or if they're playing, I'll be like, oh, can you make me chocolate cake? That's my favorite. What's your favorite? (Teacher Ani)*

*It's like when they cry, right. The boy I mentioned just now cried because someone cried and then he will cover his ear and then sometimes when I go to sit beside him and then I was like he's crying and then I sit there only then I noticed that he will like slightly calm down. (Teacher Yen)*

### b) Home dynamics

Interestingly, emotional dependency behaviors in classroom may be influenced by their home environment. Teachers described the students that are depending on them emotionally because students' emotional needs at home are not met. The quality of parental attachment and family interactions impacted the students' dependency on teachers in classrooms. This shows that

emotional dependency among preschool students may have developmental roots linked to family dynamics at home.

*They react that way based on what is happening from home. So, I wouldn't, I think it's very normal to have like busy parents. Yeah, and she's also like the only child. So, maybe she doesn't get that much attention at home. And she's the only child, so she doesn't play with anyone at home. So, I would just say it's that or, if it's something related to school, then we would know, but there's nothing like out of sorts, I would say. (Teacher Ani)*

In a situation where students are not getting attention at home, they would attempt to seek them from teachers to fill in the emotional gaps. Thus, the classroom becomes a space for which unmet emotional needs are projected.

### **c) SEN students showed need for emotional dependency**

SEN students often showcased increased emotional dependency on their teachers. Teachers described these students as constantly seeking reassurance, proximity and physical presence when they are experiencing overwhelming social-emotional situations. However, interestingly, teachers highlighted that non-verbal SEN students displayed a heightened emotional dependency, due to their limited speech abilities. Teachers find the students' difficulties in communication as an increased dependency on them to understand the students. Moreover, these students would resort to behaviors such as withdrawal and clinging that reflect their unspoken dependency.

*But for my class, quite a lot of that, speech delay, they don't know how to express themselves. So they will like, taking the book and then come to you. Then some kind of like read together or he showing you. (Teacher Yen)*

## **DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study highlights the critical role of teachers as attachment figures, as outlined in Bowlby's attachment theory. According to Bowlby (1969), children in emotionally secure relationships are more likely to take risks, regulate their emotions independently, and explore their environment confidently. In inclusive classroom settings, however, managing emotional dependency becomes more complex, especially as SEN students often struggles with emotional regulation (Bailey et al., 2022). In such contexts, the teacher's role as a safe haven becomes particularly significant. Teachers must ensure consistency and emotional responsiveness, which can gradually support students in shifting from emotional dependency toward greater independence.

While students' emotional dependency is often rooted in a sense of trust and safety with their teachers, this dynamic can also increase the emotional demands placed on teachers (Zhong & Zhong, 2024). Over time, this emotional labor may contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Purper et al., 2022). Moreover, if not carefully managed, efforts to provide emotional security might unintentionally limit opportunities for students to develop autonomy. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to strike a balance between offering emotional support and encouraging self-regulation, nurturing both dependency and independence in their students.

Home environments also play a significant role in shaping how students form attachments and manage emotions in school. Teachers frequently describe behaviors such as attention-seeking and emotional dependency as being rooted in inconsistent caregiving at home. This underscores that students' capacity for emotional regulation is not only influenced by in-school interactions but also shaped by the broader relational contexts they experience. Teachers' emotional availability and sensitivity thus become crucial in supporting students' emotional development (Ansari et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the finding reveals that emotional dependency extends beyond the classroom. Factors such as family routines, lifestyle, and socio-emotional challenges contribute to emotional distress and behavior in school (Chen et al., 2024). However, it is important to avoid pathologizing family dynamics or overgeneralizing the role of home life in student behavior. Instead, this highlights the need for strong, empathetic school-home communication that supports students' social-emotional development in a holistic manner.

SEN students, in particular, display a higher need for emotional dependency due to their challenges with emotional regulation (Bailey et al., 2022). Students with emotional and behavioral disturbances may especially struggle to identify and manage their emotions (Split, Bosmans, & Verschueren, 2021). Lacking adequate self-regulation skills, they often rely on teachers as co-regulators—an adaptive response to unmet emotional needs rather than a sign of maladaptive behavior.

Teachers also noted that emotional dependency is especially pronounced among students with limited speech abilities. Difficulties in expressing emotions coherently can influence how teachers perceive and respond to these students' emotional needs. This emphasizes the importance of teachers understanding each student's background, temperament, emotional triggers, and non-verbal communication skills (Kostøl & Cameron, 2021). With such insights, teachers can respond with sensitivity, providing tailored emotional support that fosters growth and resilience.

## **Limitations and Recommendations**

The study has a few limitations to be discussed. Firstly, this study only focused on emotional dependency, one of two forms of dependency, the other being instrumental dependency. Secondly, the semi-structured interview provided data from the teachers' perspectives and experiences only. There is no multi-perspectives data that could contribute to a richer understanding of emotional dependency.

Future research should consider exploring both emotional and instrumental dependency to categorize and compare these two types of dependency, which then provide a deeper insight into emotional dependency in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, a multi-perspectives study, such as teachers and students' perspectives, could broaden the scope of this study. Students' view of emotional dependency may or may not conform to the teachers' view. Thus, a multi-perspective study is significant to explore the nuances of emotional dependency.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to explore emotional dependency among preschool teachers in inclusive classrooms. Emotional dependency is not well understood but shows a significant importance in fostering a high-quality student-teacher relationship, especially among SEN students. The findings illuminate that emotional dependency is not frequently viewed as a negative dimension; in fact, it is a type of dependency that requires careful consideration to understand the underlying dynamic of student-teacher relationship. This study lays a foundation for future research to build upon and explore the effect strategies to promote positive relationship between student and teacher in inclusive classrooms.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The commitment of the respondents is sincerely appreciated. Gratitude is extended to the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for supporting the publication of this article. Appreciation is also given to all parties who directly contributed to the success of this publication. This research was funded by the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia under Grant GG-2024-054.

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