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# The Power of Social Sources on Students' Well-being in Primary School

## The Role of Teachers and Peers in Classroom Positive Emotions and Perceptions of Future School Success

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L'INFLUENZA DELLE RELAZIONI SOCIALI SUL BENESSERE  
DEGLI ALUNNI NELLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA. IL RUOLO DI  
INSEGNANTI E COMPAGNI NELLE EMOZIONI POSITIVE  
IN CLASSE E NELLA PERCEZIONE DEL FUTURO SUCCESSO  
SCOLASTICO

## ABSTRACT

*The present study examined the role of positive classroom relationships with teachers and peers in students' adaptation. Fifty-five students in the final year of an Italian primary school (5th grade) participated in the study. The findings indicated that the quality of the teacher-student relationship was significantly associated with students' well-being, as reflected by the frequency of positive emotions in the classroom and students' self-efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to successfully transition to lower secondary school. In contrast, after accounting for the quality of the teacher-student relationship, classroom cohesion was not associated with the outcomes considered. These results highlight the crucial role of teachers in shaping students' school experiences. They also underscore the multidimensional nature of the teaching-learning process, which is essential not only for promoting knowledge acquisition and ensuring academic learning but also for providing students with the emotional support necessary for their overall development.*

**Keywords:** Classroom cohesion; Primary school; Self-efficacy; Teacher-student relationship; Well-being.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout development, children and adolescents need to establish and maintain healthy and functional social relationships with peers and adults (teachers and parents), that enable them to acquire information about themselves (Elliot *et al.*, 2017; Baumeister, 2019; Marini, Livi *et al.*, 2023) and to adapt successfully in several contexts (Zandvliet *et al.*, 2014; Wentzel, 2016; Wentzel *et al.*, 2018; Marini *et al.*, 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2000). At school, positive social relationships are associated with high academic achievement and, more generally, with the psychological and social well-being of children and adolescents (Zandvliet *et al.*, 2014; du M rac *et al.*, 2022; Lucisano & Botta, 2023; Lucisano *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, teachers and peers are an important source of emotional and instrumental support and, thus, a valuable factor in promoting and protecting positive developmental trajectories and fostering students' resilience (Masten, 2015).

In educational and psychological research, several studies have shown that teachers play a fundamental role in individual development and shaping students' social experiences (Roorda *et al.*, 2017). In the early stages of development, a «safe» relationship with teachers promotes children's ability to explore their environment and to develop their cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial potential (Wentzel, 2016). Similarly, peer relationships play a crucial role in children's positive adaptation (Killen *et al.*, 2009;

Rubin *et al.*, 2011; Wentzel *et al.*, 2018). In particular, feeling included in the classroom group is a valuable resource for understanding one's relational value and responding successfully to various developmental tasks (Zandvliet *et al.*, 2014; Baumeister, 2019; Juvonen *et al.*, 2019).

In light of the critical role that social relationships play in the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children and adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), it is essential to examine the factors shaping students' school experiences by considering the characteristics and dynamics of the social environments in which they interact daily, such as the classroom. Accordingly, the present study emphasizes the importance of socio-relational factors in students' adaptation at school. Given that research in the educational field has often placed excessive emphasis on students' cognitive outcomes in terms of academic achievement, the primary goal of this study is to expand the psychological and educational literature by providing insights into the role that social relationships – characterizing the school climate (Wang & Degol, 2016) – play in students' well-being.

## 2. THE PRESENT STUDY

Several studies have shown that positive relationships in the classroom are associated with students' emotional and subjective well-being (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 2015; Choi, 2018; OECD, 2021a, 2021b) and socio-cognitive outcomes, such as self-efficacy (e.g., Chu *et al.*, 2010; Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Chang *et al.*, 2018; Affuso *et al.*, 2023). However, the role of positive relationships with teachers and peers in shaping primary school students' experiences – particularly during key educational transitions, such as the end of primary school – remains underexplored. Given the importance of social relationships for students' adaptation throughout all stages of development (e.g., Rubin *et al.*, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Hofkens & Pianta, 2022; Marini, Di Filippo *et al.*, 2023; Marini, Livi *et al.*, 2023; Parisse *et al.*, 2024; Marini *et al.*, 2025), this study aims to address this literature gap exploring the role of the school social context in students' school experiences. Specifically, it focused on the association between positive relationships with teachers and peers with two dimensions of students' well-being: school well-being, i.e., the frequency of positive emotions in the classroom (Alivernini *et al.*, 2017); and socio-cognitive well-being, i.e., students' self-efficacy regarding their ability to successfully cope with future experiences in lower secondary school. The conceptual model of the study is shown in *Figure 1*.

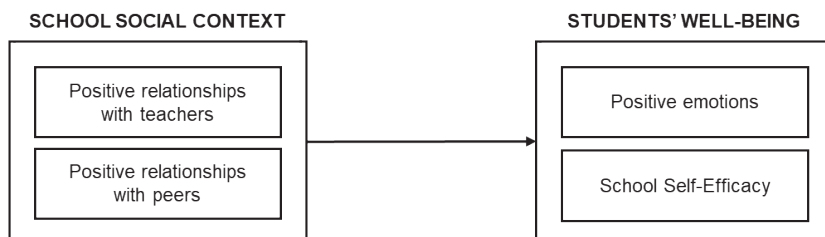


Figure 1. – Conceptual model.

The hypotheses of the present study are as follows:

- *Hypothesis 1 (H1)* – The teacher-student relationship is positively associated with positive emotions in the classroom.
- *Hypothesis 2 (H2)* – The teacher-student relationship is positively associated with students' self-efficacy beliefs.
- *Hypothesis 3 (H3)* – Positive peer relationships are positively associated with positive emotions in the classroom.
- *Hypothesis 4 (H4)* – Positive peer relationships are positively associated with students' self-efficacy beliefs.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Participants and procedures

The study is part of a research project to investigate the role of social relationships in the classroom on various indicators of school well-being. Fifty-five students from three 5th-grade primary school classes (M age = 10.4, SD age = 0.53, age range: 10-12 years; 56.4% female) participated in the study by completing an online questionnaire. The study was conducted during the final month of the school year. Questionnaire administration took place in the school's computer lab under the supervision of both teachers and researchers. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants' parents. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Code of Ethics for Research in Psychology and the Declaration of Helsinki.



### 3.2. *Materials*

After collecting demographic data (age and sex), the following variables were measured:

- The teacher-student relationship (Marini, Livi *et al.*, 2023) was evaluated using eight items (5-point Likert-scale) to which students responded by indicating the degree to which they perceived a positive relationship with their teachers in terms of security/support (item example: «In difficulties, I know I can count on my teachers») and facilitation/help in achieving educational goals (item example: «My teachers encourage me in my studies»). Reliability was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).
- Classroom cohesion (Livi *et al.*, 2023; Marini, Di Filippo *et al.*, 2023) was measured through sixteen items (9-point Likert-scale) to which students responded by indicating the degree to which they perceived positive relationships with their classmates in terms of emotional (item example: «Some of my best friends are part of my class») and learning-oriented aspects (item example: «When the teacher assigns a difficult task, this class engages in mutual collaboration»). Reliability was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).
- School well-being was assessed by measuring the frequency of positive emotions at school (4 items; 5-point Likert-scale; item example: «I feel happy») (Alivernini & Manganelli, 2015; Alivernini *et al.*, 2017). Reliability was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ).
- Students' school self-efficacy was measured based on their perceived abilities to succeed in the subsequent school pathway, such as lower secondary school. In light of the recommendations outlined in the literature on the construction of context-specific self-efficacy measures (Bandura, 2001), five items were created ad hoc for this study (item example: «I am confident that I will do well in lower secondary school»; 5-point Likert-scale). Reliability was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Due to the nature of the recruitment process, it was not possible to conduct an a priori power analysis to determine the minimum required sample size. In studies conducted in school contexts, the sample size is generally determined by the number of classes selected by the school and the number of parents who consent to their children's participation. However, once data collection was completed, an a priori power analysis was conducted, indicating that a sample of 51 participants would be sufficient to detect a

medium effect size (for previous studies on similar topics, see Chu *et al.*, 2010; Demirtaş-Zorbaz & Ergene, 2019) in a regression model with two predictors ( $\alpha = 0.05$ , power = 0.80).

All analyses were conducted using *Jamovi* (The Jamovi project, 2024). Prior to the analysis, the assumptions for linear regression were verified. Subsequently, descriptive statistics and correlations were conducted. The results are presented in *Table 1*.

*Table 1. – Descriptive analyses and correlations.*

	MEAN	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Teacher-Student Relationship	3.605	0.844	–				
2. Classroom Cohesion	7.239	1.057	0.531***	–			
3. School Well-being	3.986	0.729	0.506***	0.338*	–		
4. Self-Efficacy	4.065	0.567	0.329*	0.103	0.287*	–	
5. Sex			-0.164	-0.055	0.021	-0.080	–

Note:  $p < .05^*$ ,  $p < .01^{**}$ ,  $p < .001^{***}$ ; sex (0 = male, 1 = female).

Subsequently, two regression models were tested. In the first model, school well-being was considered the dependent variable, and the quality of the teacher-student relationship and classroom cohesion were inserted as predictors (*Tab. 2*).

The results showed that only the relationship between teachers and students significantly predicted well-being at school (positive emotions). Although there was a significant and positive correlation between classroom cohesion and school well-being (*Tab. 1*), when classroom cohesion was considered together with the quality of the teacher-student relationship, this association was no longer significant. These results support H1 but do not confirm H3, showing that the positive relationship between teachers and students plays a determining role in the frequency of positive emotions in the classroom. The model explained 26.3% of the variance in school well-being.

*Table 2. – Regression analyses: social predictors of school well-being.*

DEPENDENT VARIABLE – SCHOOL WELL-BEING					
PREDICTOR	ESTIMATE	SE	t	p	STAND. ESTIMATE
Teacher-Student Relationship	0.393	0.121	3.238	0.002	0.455
Classroom Cohesion	0.066	0.097	0.683	0.498	0.096

In the second regression model (*Tab. 3*), school self-efficacy related to the perceived ability to succeed in the subsequent school cycle was considered as the dependent variable. As in the previous model, the quality of the teacher-student relationship and classroom cohesion were inserted as predictors. Consistent with the previous model's results, only the teacher-student relationship emerged as a significant predictor of students' school self-efficacy beliefs. H2 was therefore confirmed, whereas H4 was not supported. The model explained 11.5% of the variance in students' school self-efficacy beliefs.

Table 3. – Regression analyses: social predictors of school self-efficacy.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE – SCHOOL SELF-EFFICACY					
PREDICTOR	ESTIMATE	SE	t	p	STAND. ESTIMATE
Teacher-Student Relationship	0.257	0.103	2.483	0.016	0.382
Classroom Cohesion	-0.054	0.083	-0.651	0.518	-0.100

## 5. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the role of the school social context in children's adaptation throughout their educational experience. The results demonstrated that the quality of teacher-student relationships plays a pivotal role in promoting students' school well-being and self-efficacy. Contrary to our hypotheses, no significant associations were found between classroom cohesion and school well-being or self-efficacy.

Overall, our findings underscore the importance of positive relationships with teachers in primary school as a key factor in promoting students' well-being. Consistent with international research, the results confirm the significant role of teachers not only in secondary education but also during earlier stages of schooling (Roorda *et al.*, 2017; Hofkens & Pianta, 2022). With regard to the role of peer relationships in students' adaptation, the absence of a significant association between classroom cohesion and the indicators examined in this study may be explained by the fact that, as suggested in the literature, peers tend to exert a greater influence in later school years (Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Furrer & Marchand, 2020), whereas teachers serve as essential reference figures during primary school. Moreover, it is plausible to hypothesize that the role of positive peer relationships might emerge more clearly when considering other dimensions of adaptation, such as socio-emotional competencies or prosocial behaviour (Rubin *et al.*, 2011).

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. Firstly, its cross-sectional nature does not provide information on the causal relationships between the variables examined. Furthermore, the small sample size suggests that the participants may not adequately represent the study population. Additionally, no specific information was collected from the sample, referring, for example, to the socio-economic status of the families, which was strongly associated with the well-being of children and adolescents (Alivernini *et al.*, 2017). Finally, data were collected from a single source, without including the perspectives of teachers and families.

Future studies should overcome these limitations to better understand the role of the school social context in the well-being of children and adolescents. Specifically, it would be useful to involve larger samples and include the whole school community in the research, i.e., students, parents, teachers, and the school principal. Moreover, future studies should adopt mixed-method research designs, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. It is also important to explore further the relationship between the quality of teacher-student relationships and peer relationships, as recent studies suggest that teachers influence the classroom climate (Endedijk *et al.*, 2022). Finally, additional outcomes of both dimensions of school climate should be identified to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences within school classrooms.

Despite these limitations, from a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that, in addition to creating an educational environment where students can develop positive relationships with each other, it is essential to foster a positive school climate that actively involves key adult figures – namely, teachers. Consequently, teacher training should include targeted activities aimed at enhancing their socio-relational competencies, which are essential for students' well-being. Given the complexity of the teaching profession and the «added value» it brings to the school context (OECD, 2021a; 2021b), it is important to support teachers in fostering positive relationships with all students, thereby contributing not only to students' well-being but also to the well-being of society as a whole.

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- Project 1: *La percezione sociale del contesto da parte degli studenti e degli insegnanti come strumento per l'autoformazione dei docenti.*

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- Project 2: *Relazione educativa e impatto sulla didattica: aspetti professionali e percezione del contesto lavorativo da parte dei docenti.*

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## RIASSUNTO

*Il presente studio ha analizzato il ruolo delle relazioni positive in classe, sia con gli insegnanti sia con il gruppo dei pari, nell'adattamento degli studenti. Cinquantacinque studenti dell'ultimo anno di una scuola primaria italiana (classi quinte) hanno partecipato allo studio. I risultati hanno indicato che la qualità della relazione insegnante-studente era significativamente associata al benessere degli studenti, come evidenziato dalla frequenza delle emozioni positive in classe e dalle convinzioni di autoefficacia degli studenti riguardo alla loro capacità di affrontare con successo il passaggio alla scuola secondaria di primo grado. Al contrario, tenendo conto della qualità della relazione insegnante-studente, la coesione tra pari in classe non risultava associata agli esiti considerati. Tali risultati evidenziano il ruolo cruciale degli insegnanti nelle esperienze scolastiche degli studenti, sottolineando la natura multidimensionale del processo di insegnamento-apprendimento, fondamentale non solo per promuovere l'acquisizione di conoscenze e garantire l'apprendimento, ma anche per offrire agli studenti il supporto emotivo necessario al loro sviluppo.*



*Parole chiave:* Autoefficacia; Benessere; Coesione in classe; Relazione insegnante-studente; Scuola primaria.

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