THE ROLE OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP IN THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND INVOLVEMENT IN BULLYING IN THE 1ST GRADE

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Abstract

The present study was aimed at investigating whether student-teacher relationship plays a role in the link between social competence and involvement in bullying in the 1st grade. Subjects were 408 Lithuanian 1st graders, 225 girls and 183 boys. Analysis of results using structural equation modeling releaved that learning-related social competence predicted bullying behavior directly, while interpersonal social competence predicted bullying indirectly, via student-teacher closeness. Bullying victimization was linked to learning-related social competence via student-teacher relationship conflict.

Keywords: *bullying; student-teacher relationship, social competence; elementary school.*

Children identify bullying as the most negative experience, which they may encounter at school (Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana, & Evans, 2010). Both perpetrators and victims of bullying experience negative effects of involvement in bullying (Werth, Nickerson, Aloe, & Swearer, 2015). While victimization experience was linked to lower self-esteem, increased depression and anxiety (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012; Werth et al., 2015), as well as difficulties in relationships with parents, peers, and school staff (e.g., Werth et al., 2015), being a bully was also related to a range of adjustment problems, including poorer relationships with teachers (Raskauskas, et al., 2010; Werth et al., 2015), increased depression and anxiety and lower self-esteem (Bouman et al., 2012).

Previous studies (e.g., Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Perren, Forrester-Krauss, & Dalsaker, 2012) linked involvement in bullying to social competence. Their results indicate that poor social competence constitutes a risk factor for victimization in two different ways. Firstly, poor social competence makes making and keeping friends more difficult, who may help to

protect from bullying. Secondly, lack of social skills impedes prompt and effective response to aggressive behavior, which makes repeat bullying more likely.

However, the link between social competence and bullying behavior is more complicated. Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) point out that there are two opposing positions concerning possible links between social competence and bullying. One position maintains that social competence rests on both empathic perspective-taking and understanding of social norms and thus is imcompatible with bullying as norm-breaking conduct. However, it may also be argued that rather than being socially incapable individuals bullies are highly skilled manipulators preying on weaknesses of their victims.

Evidence to support either of the views may be found (Perren & Malti, 2008; Polan & Sieving, McMorris, 2012). For example, at least one study found that aggressiveness in kindergarten was linked to better communication skills and higher assertiveness. However, other researchers concluded that bullies tend to have lower social competence (Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Polan, et al., 2012).

Differences in perspectives on possible links between perpetration of bullying and social competence may be due to divergent conceptualization of bullying by researchers (Arsenio, & Lemerise, 2001; Perren et al., 2012). Indeed, a very narrow conceptualization of social competence, defining it as effectiveness in pursuing own goals of interaction, suggests that in some instances a choice of aggression as means towards ends may be considered as socially competent. However, in the present paper we define social competence as a set of social skills, which are used effectively to achieve goals in social situations. The skills constituting social competence vary depending on a *situation*, in which social skills need to be applied (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007; Monnier, 2015; Rose-Krasnor, 1997), as well as on an *evaluator* (Kwon, Kim, & Sheridan, 2012; Warnes, Sheridan, Geske, & Warnes, 2005), *cultural environment* (Lim, Rodger, & Brown, 2013; Uba, Hassan, Mofrad, Abdulla, & Yaacob, 2012) and *developmental stage* (Denham, 2005; McClelland & Morrison, 2003). Assessments of social competence in school contexts is done by parents, teachers, and/or peers who tend to focus on different social skills constituting social competence depending on the context of assessment (free play, home or class) (Dirks at al., 2007; Kwon et al., 2012).

Researchers (e.g. Cooper & Farran, 1988; McClelland & Morrison, 2003) investigating social competence in elementary school identify two different aspects of social competence in elementary school contexts. Cooper and Farran (1988) believe that the concept of social competence should include classroom work-related social competence and interpersonal social competence. The former group included skills (e.g. hearing and following directions, resisting in-class distractions) necessary for successful performance of academic activities, while the latter group consisted of skills (e.g. cooperation, sharing, etc.) helpful for successful integration into a social group constituting a context of learning activities.

Results of the study conducted by Blankemeyer, Flannery, and Vazsonyi (2002) suggested that children scoring higher on social competence had formed safer attachments to their teachers and were more liked by them. Other researchers (e.g. Bustin, 2007; Spilt, Koomen, 2009) pointed out that social competence of children tended to predict closer student-teacher relationships, which in turn were linked to better school adjustment, including lower school anxiety, better grades, and more positive attitudes towards school.

A number of researchers studying student-teacher relationship measure to key aspects of this relationship – relationship conflict and relationship closeness (e.g. Hamre Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Zee, Koomen, & Van der Veen, 2013). Close student-teacher

relationship involves open and positive communication and kind feelings between a teacher and a child (Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009; Howes, 2000; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and is characterized by emotional support (Brock & Curby, 2014). On the other hand, student-teacher relationship high in conflict manifests itself in negative interactions and is characterized by closed communication (Buyse et al., 2009).

Teachers in elementary school have huge authority. Not only they provide knowledge and skills, but form values and control class environment as well. Research conducted to date suggests that student-teacher relationship play significant role in childrens' involvement in bullying (Oldenburg, Bosman, & Veenstra, 2016; Sarkova, Bacikova-Sleskova, Madarasova, Katreniakova, van den Heuvel, & van Dijk, 2014).

Gage, Prykanowski, and Larson (2014) concluded that teacher support for high risk elementary school students was significant predictor of reduction of bullying in class. Teachers, who engaged in interpersonal behaviors characterized by higher in control and closeness, achieved lower levels of bullying in their classes (van der Zanden, Denessen,& Scholte, 2015). Also, Ertesvåg (2016) found that lower perceived emotional support received from teachers was linked to higher bullying behavior towards fellow students.

Peer-reported bullying was lower in those classes, in which students perceived their teachers as more efficacious in decreasing bullying (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014) and higher in those classes where teachers displayed more authoritarian behavior (Erdogdu, 2016), reported weaker leadership (Ertesvåg, Roland, 2015) and believed that bullying was caused by factors outside their control and were unsure about their abilities to handle bullying (Oldenburg et al., 2015).

On the other hand, Reavis, Keane, and Calkins (2010) concluded that student-teacher relationship did not account for additional variance in bullying once mother child-relationship was taken into account. Also, somewhat surprisingly, Wang, Leary, Taylor and Derosier (2016) found that Hispanic children reporting more positive relationship with teachers were at greater risk of victimization.

While elementary school teachers may have a power to directly cause bullying leading it by example, we believe that they rarely do so. Teacher characteristics often play a role in bullying by mediating and moderating effects of other factors. For example, Ertesvåg and Roland (2015) found that teacher's authority mediated links between aspects of school's professional culture and bullying rates at school. While previous research reported above have found links between social competence and bullying, little is known about the mechanisms of such links.

The present study

While previous research reported above has found links between social competence and bullying, little is known about the mechanisms of such links, especially among the 1st graders, even though the 1st grade is an important transition period during which a child enters a qualitatively new social environment in a form of a school. Results of longitudinal studies (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006; Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, & Maniatis, 2011) suggest that early adjustment in elementary school may have long-lasting effects. We believe that one of the mechanisms whereby lower social competence contributes to involvement in bullying involves student-teacher relationships. Specifically, we hypothese that children scoring less in social competence will have relationships with their teachers that are characterized by less closeness and more conflict, which in turn will be linked to involvement in bullying in

roles of both a perpetrator and a victim. **Thus, the aim of the present paper** is to assess the role of student-teacher relationship in links between social competence and involvement in bullying in the 1st grade. **The research object** is involvement in bullying in the 1st grade.

Method
Participants and procedure
Data was collected as a part of a larger longitudinal study at the second half of the 1st grade. The second semester was selected for data collection for two reasons. First, compared to the first semester with the regard to student-teacher relationship it is more likely that teachers and pupils would have moved past their first impressions and formed more stable relationships. Having spent more than one semester in school children are likely to have better reading skills facilitating comprehension of questionnaires.

In the present study data was collected from teachers and children. Class teachers filled questionnaires assessing social competence and student-teacher relationships concerning each child participating in the study while children responded to questionnaire items concerning their involvement in bullying. Children completed questionnaires in small groups of 5-6 children under supervision of a researcher. This allowed the researcher to identify any children, who had any reading difficulties. Absolute majority of children completed questionnaires on their own. There were 4 children in the sample, whose reading skills were not sufficient to read questionnaire items independently, so the researcher read questions to them and recorded their answers.

Data was collected in 42 classes located in 14 schools, including both elementary schools and comprehensive schools containing elementary classes. The location of data collection was Kaunas, Lithuania. The schools participating in the present study schools accounted for about 28 percent of all schools having elementary classes in Kaunas, Lithuania.

Researchers distributed 962 parent consent forms in aforementioned schools. Some 446 forms containing signed parental consent were received back. This number equalled 15.8 of 1st graders in Kaunas, Lithuania. However, some 38 questionnaires were significantly incomplete, thus the final sample contained 408 subjects, including 225 girls and 183 boys aged 7 and 8 years. Modal age of all subjects was 8 years.

Measures
Involvement in bullying
In the present study Bully and Victim scales of the Peer Relations Questionnaire (PRQ) developed by Rigby and Slee (1993) were used for assessment of involvement in bullying. This scale was completed by children. The Bully scale had 6 items (e.g. "I am part of a group that goes round teasing others"). In the present study this scale demonstrated sufficient internal consistency, Cronbach α=0.76. The original Victim scale consisted of 5 items (e.g. "I get picked on by others"). However, during an earlier pilot study we found that children had difficulty in understanding one item of the Victim scale ("Others leave me out of things on purpose"), with overwhelming majority answering "never". Thus, that item was not included in the questionnaires used for the present study. Without this item the Victim scale still demonstrated good internal consistency, Cronbach α=0.79. All items on both the Bully scale and the Victim scale were scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale from "never" (1) to "very often" (4), higher scores meaning higher involvement in bullying in roles of a bully and a victim.

Social Competence

The 7 item Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version) was developed for the present study to assess social competence of children from teacher's perspective. This instrument was constructed using items selected from a larger pool of items used in a pilot study conducted by Magelinskaite-Legkauskiene, Kepalaite, and Legkauskas in 2014. The Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version) contains scales for measuring interpersonal social competence and learning-related social competence. Interpersonal social competence was measured using three items, including "Plays and works cooperatively with other children", "Tries to stop a quarrel or conflict between other children", and "When playing a game invites others to join in". This subscale was very reliable, with Cronbach α=0.85. Other 4 items were aimed at measuring learning-related social competence. These items were: "Is able to move from one activity to another without additional reminders by a teacher", "Listens attentively during a class", "Completes simple instructions without additional reminders", and "First listens to the tasks and then performs it". Reliability of the Learning-Related Social Competence Subscale was also very high, Cronbach α=0.91.

Student-Teacher Relationship

Student-teacher relationship was assessed using Student-Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (Pianta, 2001). This scale had 15 items and was completed by teachers. The scale had two subscales: Relationship Conflict Subscale (8 items, Cronbach α = 0.85) and Relationship Closeness Subscale (7 items, Cronbach α = 0.78). Relationship Closeness Subscale sample item: "This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me". Relationship Conflict Subscale sample item: "This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined". The Relationship Conflict Subscale was reverse-scored so that a higher score on the subscale would mean lower conflict. For both subscales teachers provided responses on a 4-point scale from "very rarely/never" (1) to "very often/always" (4).

Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Bully scale	7.97	3.02	6	23
Victim scale	7.11	2.76	4	16
Student-teacher relationship closeness	22.27	3.96	10	28
Student-teacher relationship conflict	29.10	3.84	13	32
Learning-related social competence	18.58	4.42	4	24
Interpersonal social competence	12.51	3.68	3	18

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and actual ranges of responses, is presented in the Table 1. Distribution of all variables failed to meet normality criteria, thus linear relationships among the variables were assessed using a Spearman correlation coefficient (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between involvement in bullying, social competence, and student-teacher relationships

Variable	Involvement in Bullying	
	Bully	**Victim**
Interpersonal social competence	-0.08	-0.09
Learning-related social competence	-0.20**	-0.15**
Student-teacher relationship closeness	0.01	-0.02
Student-teacher relationship conflict*	-0.14**	-0.20**

Notes: *higher score means lower conflict; **all correlations significant at $p < 0.01$

Results of correlation analysis indicated that only learning-related social competence and student-teacher relationship conflict were linked to involvement in bullying, albeit weakly. Somewhat surprisingly, higher involvement in bullying as either a victim or a bully was linked to lower student-teacher relationship conflict. Interpersonal social competence and student-teacher relationship closeness were not correlated with either victim or bully scores.

In order to investigate the role of student-teacher relationship in the links between social competence and involvement in bullying in the 1st grade we performed structural equation modeling (see Figure 1). Both interpersonal social competence and learning related social competence were treated as latent variables, while student-teacher relationship conflict and closeness as well as involvement in bullying as a victim or a bully were entered as observed variables. The model presented in the Figure 1 demonstrated good fit to the data - $Chi^2 = 32.95$, df = 26, p = 0.16; CFI = 0.996; TLI = .996; RMSEA = .026; SRMR = 0.018. Results of the structural equation modeling revealed that interpersonal social competence was strongly linked to student-teacher relationship closeness, while learning-related social competence was strongly linked to lower student-teacher relationship conflict. Learning-related social competence had direct negative link to bully scores. Also, learning-related social competence was linked to bullying victim scores via student-teacher conflict, as a mediator variable, i.e. those lower in student-teacher conflict tended to have lower bullying victim scores. Interpersonal social competence had no significant direct links to either bully or victim scores. However, somewhat surprisingly, there was an indirect link between interpersonal social competence and bully scores via student-teacher relationship closeness – those with higher interpersonal social competence scored higher in closeness, which in turn slightly, but significantly increased bully scale scores.
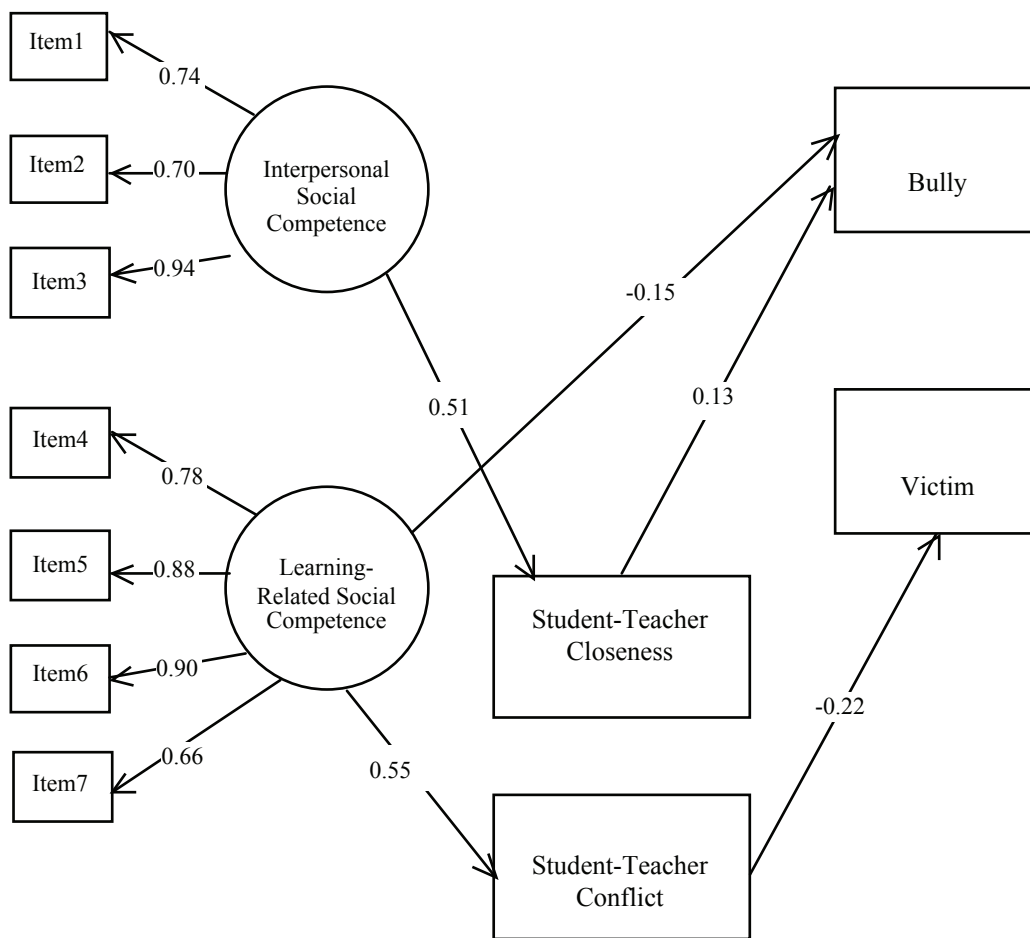
Fig. 1. Structural equation model of the links among social competence, student-teacher relationship and involvement in bullying in the 1st grade

Conclusions

Analysis of the role of student-teacher relationships in the link between social competence and involvement in bullying in the 1st grade revealed different patterns of links for learning-related social competence and interpersonal social competence. Learning-related social competence was linked to involvement in bullying as both a bully and a victim, while interpersonal social competence was linked only to bullying behavior. Student-teacher relationship conflict mediated the link between learning-related social competence and victim scores, while student-teacher relationship conflict mediated the link between interpersonal social competence and bully scores. In general these results corroborate a large body of recent research highlighting the importance of student-teacher relationships for involvement in bullying (Gage et al., 2014; Oldenburg et al., 2016; Sarkova et al., 2014; van der Zanden et al., 2015).

Results of the present study indicate that those, who scored higher in learning-related social competence experienced lower levels of conflict with their teachers, which in turn reduced their chances of being victimized by their peers. These data suggest that interplay between child's social competence and student-teacher relationship may play a role in bullying victimization. We interpret these results as indicating, that lack of learning-related

social competence makes a child more difficult to work with and some teachers may employ their overwhelming in-class authority to turn classmates into a pressure tool against an underperforming child. In some cases at least such pressure may cross the line into bullying. Indeed, results of the study conducted by Erdogdu (2016) also indicated that bullying was higher in those classes where teachers displayed more authoritarian behavior (Erdogdu, 2016).

High social competence is usually seen as one of protective factors with the regard to involvement in bullying (e.g., Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Perren et al., 2012; Polan et al., 2012). In this context our finding that higher learning-related social competence was linked to more closeness in student-teacher relationship, which in turn was linked to higher bully scores, was unexpected. However, this finding did corroborate findings by other researchers that bullies may be high in at least some aspects of social competence (Perren & Malti, 2008) and that student-teacher relationship closeness may actually increase involvement in bullying (Wang et al., 2016). While Wang et al. (2016) found that those having closer relationship with their teachers are more likely to be victimized, results of our study suggest that they may also be slightly but significantly likely to engage in bullying behavior. It is possible, that teachers are more lenient to transgressions of those children they have close relationships with, particularly if bullying behavior of such children is directed towards those children, who have more conflicts with their teachers due to lack of learning-related social competence.

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THE ROLE OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP IN THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND INVOLVEMENT IN BULLYING IN THE 1ST GRADE

Summary

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Children identify bullying as the most negative experience, which they may encounter at school (Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana, & Evans, 2010). Both perpetrators and viltims of bullying experience negative effects of involvement in bullying (Werth, Nickerson, Aloe, & Swearer, 2015). Previous studies (e.g., Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Perren, Forrester-Krauss, & Dalsaker, 2012) linked involvement in bullying to social competence. In the present paper we define social competence as a set of social skills, which are used effectively to achieve goals in social situation. The skills constituting social competence vary depending on a context, in which social skills need to be applied and evaluated (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007; Monnier, 2015; Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

Researchers (e.g. Cooper & Farran, 1988; McClelland & Morrison, 2003) identify two sets of social skills as constituting different aspects of social competence in elementary school contexts – work-related skills and interpersonal skills. The former group included skills (e.g. hearing and following directions, resisting in-class distractions) necessary for successful performance of academic activities, while the latter group consisted of skills (e.g. cooperation, sharing, etc.) helpful for successful integration into a social group constituting a context of learning activities.

Social competence of children tended to predict closer student-teacher relationships. A number of researchers studying student-teacher relationship measure to key aspects of this relationship – relationship conflict and relationship closeness (e.g. Hamre Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Zee, Koomen, & Van der Veen, 2013). Close student-teacher relationship involves open and positive

communication as well as warm feelings between a teacher and a child (Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009; Howes, 2000; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and is characterized by emotional support (Brock & Curby, 2014).

Teachers in elementary school have huge authority. Not only they provide knowledge and skills, but form values and control class environment as well. Research conducted to date suggests that student-teacher relationship play significant role in childrens' involvement in bullying (Oldenburg, Bosman, & Veenstra, 2016; Sarkova, Bacikova-Sleskova, Madarasova, Katreniakova, van den Heuvel, & van Dijk, 2014). While elementary school teachers may have a power to directly cause bullying leading it by example, we believe that they rarely do so. Teacher characteristics often play a role in bullying by mediating and moderating effects of other factors. For example, Ertesvåg and Roland (2015) found that teacher authority mediated links between aspects of professional culture and rates of bullying.

While previous research reported above have found links between social competence and bullying, little is known about the mechanisms of such links, especially among the 1st graders, even though the 1st grade is an important transition period during which a child enters a qualitatively new social environment in a form of a school. Results of longitudinal studies (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006; Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, & Maniatis, 2011) suggest that early adjustment in elementary school may have long-lasting effects. We believe that one of the mechanisms whereby lower social competence contributes to involvement in bullying, involves student-teacher relationships. Specifically, we hypothese that children scoring less in social competence will have relationships with their teachers that are characterized by less closeness and more conflict, which in turn will be linked to involvement in bullying in roles of both a perpetrator and a victim. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to assess the role of student-teacher relationship closeness and conflict in the links between interpersonal and learning-related aspects of social competence and involvement in bullying in the 1st grade. The research object is involvement in bullying in the 1st grade.

Data was collected from 42 classes in 14 schools of Kaunas, Lithuania. Subjects were 408 first graders, including 225 girls and 183 boys aged 7 and 8 years, modal age 8 years. Social competence was measured by a 7 item Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version) developed for the present study. The scale contained subscales for learning-related social competence and interpersonal social competence. Student-teacher relationship was assessed using Student-Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (Pianta, 2001). Bully and Victim scales of the Peer Relations Questionnaire (PRQ) developed by K. Rigby and P.T. Slee (1993) were used for assessment of involvement in bullying.

Results of the structural equation modeling revealed that interpersonal social competence was strongly linked to student-teacher relationship closeness, while learning-related social competence was strongly linked to lower student-teacher relationship conflict. Learning-related social competence had direct negative link to bully scores. Also, learning-related social competence was linked to bullying victim scores via student-teacher conflict, as a mediator variable, i.e. those lower in student-teacher conflict tended to have lower bullying victim scores. Interpersonal social competence had no significant direct links to either bully or victim scores. However, somewhat surprisingly, there was an indirect link between interpersonal social competence and bully scores via student-teacher relationship closeness – those with higher interpersonal social competence scored higher in closeness, which in turn slightly, but significantly increased bully scale scores.

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