

**VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH THE SECURE ATTACHMENT
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TEACHER IN ADOLESCENT
STUDENTS: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW PROTOCOL**

**VARIÁVEIS ASSOCIADAS AO RELACIONAMENTO DE APEGO SEGURO COM
O PROFESSOR EM ALUNOS ADOLESCENTES: PROTOCOLO DE REVISÃO
SISTEMÁTICA**

**VARIABLES ASOCIADAS A LA RELACIÓN DE APEGO SEGURO CON EL
DOCENTE EN ESTUDIANTES ADOLESCENTES: PROTOCOLO DE REVISIÓN
SISTEMÁTICA**

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ABSTRACT:

This document is a systematic review protocol that aims to investigate the variables associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers. The existing systematic review on this topic found that children with a secure attachment relationship with teachers have better academic and socio-emotional indices. However, there are currently no similar reviews for adolescents. Inclusion criteria for articles include: published in peer-reviewed journals in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; from 1969 to present; a sample of adolescents (10 to 19 years old); and results related to attachment with teachers. Furthermore, studies must be empirical, have Attachment Theory as a theoretical basis, and gathered from the following databases: ERIC (EBSCO), MEDLINE (EBSCO), PsycINFO (Ovid), Web of Science, Scopus, Scielo, Redalyc. The JBI Critical Appraisal checklists will be used to verify the risk of bias as well as the quality of the studies. It intends to present the outcomes through narrative descriptions and, if possible, meta-analytical statistics.

Keywords: Attachment Theory. Secure attachment. Teacher-student relationship. Adolescents. Systematic review protocol.

RESUMO:

Este documento é o protocolo de uma revisão sistemática, cujo objetivo é investigar quais são as variáveis associadas ao relacionamento de apego seguro com os professores em alunos adolescentes. A revisão sistemática já existente sobre o assunto mostrou que crianças com um relacionamento de apego seguro com os professores têm melhores índices acadêmico e socioemocionais, porém não há ainda revisão semelhante para adolescentes. Os critérios de inclusão para os artigos são: ser escrito em português, inglês ou espanhol, ter sido publicados em revistas revisadas por pares e a partir de 1969,

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incluir uma amostra de adolescentes (10 a 19 anos) e resultados relacionados ao apego com seus professores. Os estudos, que precisam ser empíricos e ter como base teórica a Teoria do Apego, serão buscados nas bases de dados ERIC (EBSCO), MEDLINE (EBSCO), PsycInfo (Ovid), Web of Science, Scopus, Scielo, Redalyc. Para verificar o risco de enviesamento e a qualidade dos estudos, serão utilizadas as listas de verificação *JBI Critical Appraisal*. Pretende-se apresentar os resultados por meio de descrições narrativas e, se possível, por meio de estatísticas meta-analíticas.

Palavras-Chaves: Teoria do Apego. Apego seguro. Relacionamento professor-aluno. Adolescentes. Protocolo de revisão sistemática.

RESUMEN:

Este documento es el protocolo de una revisión sistemática, cuyo objetivo es investigar cuáles son las variables asociadas a la relación de apego seguro con los docentes en estudiantes adolescentes. La revisión sistemática existente sobre el tema mostró que los niños con una relación de apego seguro con los docentes tienen mejores índices académicos y socioemocionales, pero aún no existe una revisión similar para los adolescentes. Los criterios de inclusión de los artículos son: estar escritos en portugués, inglés o español, haber sido publicados en revistas revisadas por pares y a partir de 1969, incluir una muestra de adolescentes (de 10 a 19 años) y resultados relacionados con el apego con sus maestros. Los estudios, que deben ser empíricos y tener como base teórica la Teoría del Apego, se buscarán en las bases de datos ERIC (EBSCO), MEDLINE (EBSCO), PsycInfo (Ovid), Web of Science, Scopus, Scielo, Redalyc. Para verificar el riesgo de sesgo y la calidad de los estudios se utilizarán las listas de verificación del JBI Critical Appraisal. Se pretende presentar los resultados a través de descripciones narrativas y, si es posible, a través de estadísticas metaanalíticas.

Palabras clave: Teoría de apego. Apego seguro. Relación profesor-alumno. Adolescentes. Protocolo de revisión sistemática.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Attachment Theory was developed by psychologist John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) who had a great interest in understanding how the bond between child and mother (or the main caregiver) are formed. In his studies, Bowlby noticed that the relationship quality forms an Internal Working Model – IWM, also called *attachment styles* (RILEY, 2011), the parameter for the children's future relationships (HARLOW, 2021).

When there is a positive attachment with the primary caregiver, the child feels that they have a secure base. Moreover, they can explore the world trusting that there is a place to return, and that their needs will be met when necessary (BOWLBY, 1969). This bond is called *secure attachment* and, beyond forming a positive Internal Working Model, it allows the child to learn how to regulate their emotions in an effective way. However, not every child has

secure primary bonds, which could result in *insecure attachments* with their caregivers (BOWLBY, 1969, 1973; HARLOW, 2021).

Besides the *secure attachment*, other bond classifications have been developed, which are significant for this review. Understanding that not every primary bond is a secure one, Mary Ainsworth (*et al.*, 2015) developed a quality bond evaluation technique in 1978 that found patterns in attachment styles. Other than the *secure attachment*, she identified *insecure anxious* (also called *ambivalent* or *resistant*) and *insecure avoidant attachments*. Next, Main and Solomon (1986) discovered a fourth attachment style, which they coined as *disorganized*, occurring mainly with children who have suffered some kind of neglect or abuse from their caregivers.

According to Bowlby's first studies (1969, 1973, 1980), beyond the four attachment styles, a child who already has an established attachment with an adult may go through a *detachment* process as well. This might occur if they are abandoned, or in cases when the adult has passed away. It is also possible that no bond is developed, which is characterized by *non-attachment*.

Initially, it was thought that the attachment style was immutably developed by age three. Nonetheless, with the ever-evolving attachment theory research, it has been discovered that the primary attachment style could be modified throughout one's lifetime due to secondary relationships and positive experiences (HARLOW, 2021). This means that a child with an insecure primary attachment could have a secure attachment style in adulthood if they find other attachment figures that serve as a secure base.

Many authors recognize that a teacher may become a secondary secure attachment figure for children, considering the amount of time spent together and the quality of the relationship established (BERGIN; BERGIN, 2009; BOWLBY, 1969; GEDDES, 2003; HOWES; HAMILTON, 1992; RILEY, 2011). In 2023, a systematic review (GARCÍA-RODRÍGUEZ; REDÍN; ABAITUA, 2023) aimed to understand which mediation forms are used and the associated teacher-student attachment relationship variables. This review only examined school age children up to age ten. Until now, similar systematic reviews have not been performed with variables associated with the attachment relationship between teachers and adolescent students.

Adolescence is a phase in which the students are less dependent on adults, and more centered on friendships (ERIKSON, 1968; SIEGEL, 2016). Furthermore, at this age, the

school routine changes, as the students now have many different teachers, one for each discipline. With this, they lose that close contact with the main teacher, which is extremely common in those first school experiences. These changes make it less likely for students to get close to their teachers (VERSCHUEREN, 2015).

However, research carried out with children has shown that the secure attachment between teachers and students is a positive variable associated with enhanced academic performance (BERGIN; BERGIN, 2009; HOWES; SMITH, 1995; REIO; MARCUS; SANDERS-REIO, 2009; VANDENBROUCKE et al., 2017), improved social development (BERGIN; BERGIN, 2009; HARLOW, 2021; MOTA; MATOS, 2014; REIO; MARCUS; SANDERS-REIO, 2009), greater emotional development (BERGIN; BERGIN, 2009; KELLY; WATT; GIDDENS, 2020; PATTON et al., 2000), lower drop-out rates, decreased truancy, and higher graduation rates (RAMSDAL; WYNN, 2022; REIO; MARCUS; SANDERS-REIO, 2009), among others. An interesting result found in some studies (BERGIN; BERGIN, 2009; VANDENBROUCKE et al., 2017) is that these benefits associated with a secure attachment relationship with teachers could be potentialized in at-risk children, especially those who have an insecure attachment relationship with parents or primary caregivers.

The systematic review conducted by García-Rodríguez (et. al., 2023) generated similar results: the relationship quality between teachers and students is significantly associated with externalized and internalized behaviors, love of school, peer acceptance, academic performance, self-concept, and emotional regulation. This study also concluded that experiences with caregivers in early childhood (primary attachment) affects the development of new relationships in primary school, especially for insecure attachment styles. Despite this, it is possible to build new Internal Working Models (IWM) through daily interactions. In terms of teacher characteristics, the review found that their attachment style and availability for children's needs seem to be associated with school adaptation and student behavior.

Thus, as the aforementioned systematic review only included school age children up to ten years old, the current aim is to identify variables associated with adolescent students and their secure attachment relationship with teachers. Beyond the low number of studies in this area with teenagers, there is still the risk of adolescents' non-attachment with teachers, due to the limited time together, especially for the older ones.

Systematic reviews are considered the most advantageous way to synthesize knowledge and evidence from previously conducted research (AROMATARIS; MUNN,

2020; LIBERATI et al., 2009; MOHER et al., 2015). This method is reliable, and frequently used as a basis for public policies and medical decisions. This reliability is achieved by a specific systematization with the entire work carried out by two independent reviewers. It is also important that the research is unbiased. One way to avoid bias is writing and publishing a systematic review protocol before the review begins (AROMATARIS; MUNN, 2020; MOHER et al., 2015; SHAMSEER et al., 2015).

A systematic review protocol involves planning each step to be performed during the review. This protocol considers the following: expected results, search location, defined keywords, exclusion/inclusion criteria, and intended data collection, among others. In this way, arbitrary changes and bias throughout the process are avoided with the published protocol and peer review. All modifications must be reported and justified in the final article so that the reader can judge possible bias (MOHER et al., 2015; SHAMSEER et al., 2015).

This protocol follows the PRISMA-P 2015 Checklist (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols) (SHAMSEER et al., 2015) guidelines and will be registered in the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO). This register is an effective way to record both the systematic review's initial protocol and its possible changes chronologically. The PROSPERO register also allows researchers to verify whether there is another systematic review underway with the same subject matter to prevent duplicity (SHAMSEER et al., 2015).

2 OBJECTIVES

This systematic review aims to investigate and identify the variables associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers. The main question was elaborated from the PICOS strategy (Participants, Interventions, Comparisons/Control, Outcomes, Study Design and Characteristics): what are the variables associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers?

The secondary questions are based on the associated variables already found in the systematic review carried out on the same subject, but with children up to age ten, as well as in other studies found in previous research:

- Is academic performance a variable associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers?
- Are social skills a variable associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers?
- Are emotional skills a variable associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers?
- Are any adult-life variables associated with a secure attachment relationship with teachers during adolescence?
- What other variables are associated with adolescent students' secure attachment relationship with teachers?
- Are the effects of the secure attachment relationship with teachers, regarding the associated variables, different due to adolescent students' attachment style with parents or primary caregivers?

3 METHOD

The methodology used in this systematic review is the one suggested by PRISMA group (LIBERATI et al., 2009). Thus, not only the review questions, but the studies' eligibility criteria were defined according to the PICOS strategy (Participants, Interventions, Comparisons/Control, Outcomes, Study Design and Characteristics) as well as some publication characteristics.

3.1 Eligibility criteria

The population to be studied are adolescent students between ten and nineteen years old, with or without a secure attachment with parents or primary caregivers. Even if the attachment style was unmentioned, or unmeasured, the study is still eligible for inclusion. The population age was selected according to the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of adolescence, due to different countries defining different age groups, which can cause important studies to be excluded. However, if studies do not report a clear separation for this sample, or a subsample within the main sample, the study must be excluded.

The most important criteria for a study's inclusion or exclusion is the utilization of the Attachment Theory as the basis. When the article does not touch on this theory, the study must be excluded. However, the main intervention to be analyzed is the secure attachment relationship with a teacher. If this specific attachment relationship has not been mentioned, the study must be excluded. Nonetheless, any attachment style mentioned, even if non-attachment, must be part of the inclusion criteria in the review.

The comparison criteria will be other attachment styles that could be present in a teacher-student relationship, even the non-attachment, including the attachment style with parents or primary caregivers, if they are mentioned. Although, if studies do not broach any attachment styles, the study must be excluded. In terms of outcomes, any result that includes the teacher-student attachment relationship must be included in the review. Regarding study design, only empirical studies can be included. However, systematic reviews and metanalyses could be included if eligible in all other criteria.

Beyond the above criteria defined by the PICOS system, others were defined based on the studies' characteristics. Only published peer-reviewed articles (filter applied in the database search), in Portuguese, English or Spanish (languages mastered by the reviewers), and from 1969 to present can be included. The year 1969 marked the publication of the first book from the John Bowlby Attachment trilogy (1969, 1973, 1980), defining the beginning studies of this theory. A list with possible relevant titles in other languages will be provided as an appendix in the final report.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed below. The studies must:

1. Be written in Portuguese, English or Spanish.
2. Be published in a peer-reviewed journal.
3. Occur after the publication of the first book from the Bowlby Attachment trilogy (1969).
4. Include a sample of adolescents ages 10 to 19 or results with this sample or a subsample clearly defined.
5. Establish the Attachment Theory as its theoretical basis.
6. Include any teacher-student attachment relationship, even if non-attachment.
7. Be empirical, however, other systematic reviews or metanalyses could be included if they qualify in the other criteria.

3.2 Information source and search strategy

The article search will be conducted in the following databases: ERIC (EBSCO platform), MEDLINE (EBSCO platform), PsycInfo (Ovid platform), Web of Science, Scopus, Scielo, Redalyc. If necessary, authors will be contacted for complementary information. If there is no response or the information obtained is insufficient, these articles may be excluded from the review.

After the study selection, to ensure literature saturation, tracing will be carried out in the bibliographic references of selected studies for inclusion to identify any other relevant research unobtained in the initial search. These studies will undergo the same inclusion and exclusion criteria, and, if aligned, will be included for data extraction.

The previous search strategy depicted below (Chart 1) was tested in May 2023, on the EBSCOhost platform, in the ERIC and MEDLINE databases. The same strategy will be used on the other platforms, with the required modifications for each. The final search strategy for the databases and platforms will be table reported in the final article.

Chart 1 – Previous Search Strategy

Search	Consultation performed	Records recovered
#1	attachment	141,671
#2	teacher-student OR student-teacher OR teacher OR educator OR classroom	544,135
#3	teen* OR adolescen* OR youth* OR “middle school” OR “high school” OR “secondary school” OR “youth education”	2,489,289
#4	#1 AND #2 AND #3	559
Restricted to “Scientific Journals (Peer-Review)” from 1969 to 2023.		

Source: the authors.

4 STUDY REGISTRATIONS

After the database search, the collected articles will be inserted in the systematic review software, Cadima. The duplicate articles will be automatically excluded by the software. Different articles published by the same study will be identified at this moment. For

data purposes, they will be processed as one study to prevent bias. If diverse publications for the same study present inconsistent data, authors will be contacted for clarifications. If inconsistency persists, or when authors do not reply in a timely manner, the study will be excluded.

The first exclusion screening will be carried out by two independent reviewers, analyzing titles, abstracts, and keywords. Any article selected by at least one reviewer will be obtained and included in the second phase. A consistency check will be utilized to identify any incongruencies or issues concerning eligibility criteria. An exclusion criteria record will be kept for each article.

In the second phase, the full articles will be independently read by two reviewers. Those which completely fulfill the inclusion criteria will be included. For those that do not have consensus by both parties, a third reviewer will analyze to reach a final decision. For borderline literature, those that almost satisfy the inclusion criteria, the decision will be made by all three reviewers in agreement and explained in the final article. For articles lacking sufficiently explained data, the authors will be contacted for more information. A record will be kept of all exclusion criteria for each article. Cohen's Kappa coefficient will be calculated at the end of each selection phase to identify the reviewers' concordance rate and presented in the final review report.

4.1 Data extraction and management

Data extraction will be carried out independently by two reviewers as well. A consistency check will be utilized to answer any questions and modify data in the extraction table, if necessary. Any modifications from the previous table will be justified in the final article. When the collected data conflicts, the reviewers will attempt consensus or request a third reviewer if applicable. In case of inconsistency or a lack of relevant data in the articles, the authors may be contacted.

Data to be collected from the articles are: study identification (title, DOI); journal where published; country where research was conducted; year of publication; authors' contact information; research type or methodological design; investigation area (psychology, education, or other); instruments used; number of recipients of applied instrument; participants' age range, age mean and gender; dimensions assessed with these instruments;

frameworks used beyond Attachment Theory and their main authors; main authors who used Attachment Theory; primary and secondary results. This data will be presented in a table or graphic, according to most appropriate, in the final report, to gain knowledge about how research in this area has been conducted.

For the results sought in this review, collected data may be primary or secondary. The primary results are related to the variables associated with a secure teacher-student attachment relationship. Secondary results are associated with modifications of these variables' effects, according to the attachment style that these adolescents have with their parents or caregivers, if these findings are recorded. In line with previous studies (BERGIN; BERGIN, 2009; VANDENBROUCKE et al., 2017), it is expected that adolescents without a secure attachment with parents, or primary caregivers, benefit even more from a secure attachment with teachers than those who have a secure attachment with parents or caregivers.

Other outcomes could be collected if considered relevant for this review. Data could be extracted and inserted in a spreadsheet or directly in the Cadima software, according to the reviewer's preference, since it is possible to integrate both. A previous data extraction spreadsheet (Chart 2) was elaborated.

Chart 2 – Previous outcome data extraction worksheet

	Positive / neutral / negative relation	Direct / indirect relation or non-relation	Effect if parent relationship is secure: increase / remain / decrease	Effect if parent relationship is not secure: increase / remain / decrease	Comments
Secure attachment with teacher and academic performance					
Grades					
Working memory					
Love of school					
Dropout					
Return after dropout					
High school completion					
Others					
Secure attachment with teacher and social skills					
Peer relationships					
Sense of security and trust					
Aggressiveness					

Social exclusion					
Delinquency					
Bullying					
Others					
Secure attachment with teacher and emotional skills					
Positive self-concept					
Emotional regulation					
Ability to ask for help					
Self-esteem					
Self-confidence					
Coping with challenges					
Others					
Secure teacher-adolescent attachment and adult-life variables					
Others					

Source: the authors.

4.2 Quality and Bias Risk Assessment

The bias risk will be verified in each study by two independent reviewers using the JBI Critical Appraisal checklists (AROMATARIS; MUNN, 2020), as there are checklists for eleven different studies and methods. Considering that the inclusion criteria do not exclude any type of methodology, as long as it is empirical, a wider checklist range is necessary. These lists encompass overall study verifications, including the results. If there is a conflict between the two reviewers' assessments, a third reviewer will analyze and make the final decision.

Beyond assessing the bias risk, the JBI Critical Appraisal checklists examine the quality of the studies as well. As the results do not aim to establish public policy or make medical decisions, it is unnecessary to have more rigorous evaluations, such as the GRADE method (Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development, and Evaluations), and no article will be excluded from the review due to low quality. However, a table will be used to present the studies' results and their classifications, according to the evidence strength in descending order, facilitating reading comprehension and evaluation. The results' synthesis will consider the quality of the obtained results.

5 DATA SYNTHESIS

As the results are qualitative or quantitative, since it is empirical research and must fulfill the inclusion criteria, various data synthesis possibilities may be used. If there are comparable quantitative data, a meta-analysis will be employed. If the results could be divided into categories, a meta-aggregation will be utilized (AROMATARIS; MUNN, 2020). However, if data are diverse, it will be carried out as a narrative synthesis with tables to compare data. This decision will be finalized before data extraction once reviewers have completed the first read of each full article. This is because the extraction data worksheet will need to be updated depending on the designated approach.

Beyond the narrative synthesis, some tables will be presented, according to what has already been described in this protocol: 1) description of modifications prior to the publication of this protocol, 2) final search strategies for each database, 3) general data and main results of each study in descending order with quality scores, 4) utilized instruments and application information, 5) additional theories and main authors in conjunction with the Attachment Theory, 6) comparative results synthesis according to this revision's questions. Other graphics and visual representations may be presented, in line with the extracted data, if necessary.

6 CONCLUSION

As previously outlined, and following the systematic review guidelines, this protocol has been recorded in the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) under the identification CRD42023396765. Any future changes will be registered there along with proper descriptions and justifications. If modifications are considerable, another protocol will be published. If not, a table with alterations in this protocol will be included in this systematic review's final version.

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