



Teacher–child relationships and social competence: A two-year longitudinal study of Chinese preschoolers[☆]

Xiao Zhang^{a,b,c,*}, Jari-Erik Nurmi^c

^a Department of Early Childhood Education, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong, China

^b School of Psychology, Beijing Normal University, China

^c Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Based on a two-year and three-wave longitudinal sample of 118 Chinese preschoolers, the present study examined the cross-lagged associations between teacher–child relationships and social competence, and the cross-system generalization of social competence between home and school. At each of the three waves, teachers rated the children's teacher–child relationships and social competence in school, and mothers rated the children's social competence at home. The results showed that high closeness and low conflict in teacher–child relationships at three months after preschool entry (T1) predicted children's social competence in school at the end of the first preschool year (T2). T1 teacher–child closeness also predicted social competence at home at the end of the second preschool year (T3). Although early home competence did not predict later school competence, T2 school competence was associated with T3 home competence. Finally, T2 school competence fully mediated the path from T1 teacher–child closeness to T3 home competence.

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Teachers, especially in children's preschool years, often perform caregiving functions resembling those of parents. Like parents, teachers care for children's safety, soothe them when they are upset, and guide them when they misbehave. Over the past three decades, a sizeable body of research has accumulated on the relationships between teachers and children; much of this research has focused on explicating the correlates and consequences of individual differences in teacher–child relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2010; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; Wentzel, 1998). The quality of such relationships has been linked with a host of child functioning variables. It has been found, for example, that negative relationships with teachers are associated with a variety of school adjustment difficulties, including school disengagement (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1997), poor language and academic skills (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and internalizing (e.g., Howes et al., 1994) and externalizing (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2010) problems. In this study, we assess

longitudinal, bidirectional relations between teacher–child relationships (i.e., closeness and conflict) and children's social competence in both the school and home settings. Specifically, we assess whether relationships with teachers predict change over time in children's social competence in school and at home. We also assess whether social competence predicts change over time in teacher–child relationships. Additionally, we assess whether children's social competence carries over from home to school or from school to home (i.e., cross-system generalization of competence between home and school settings).

Teacher–child relationships and children's social competence

From an attachment perspective, young children's relationships with teachers reflect the quality of the emotional connection between the two parties (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Children with secure teacher–child relationships will approach others with positive attitudes and expectations. Consequently, they will be more likely to become socially competent (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In contrast, children with insecure relationships will form negative working models of the social world and will be less likely to become socially competent (Howes et al., 1994). From a social-cognitive perspective, teachers who have high-quality teacher–child interactions may provide children with adaptive models of how to solve social problems and teach appropriate social and cognitive skills that encourage children's development of competence (O'Connor et al., 2010). By contrast, low-quality interactions may limit teachers' readiness and abilities to

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Early Childhood Education, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong, China.
E-mail address: xiao@graduate.hku.hk (X. Zhang).

provide positive behavioral supports for children's social development (O'Connor et al., 2010).

Research documenting the connections between teacher–child relationships and child outcomes has focused mainly on children's *problematic* behavioral styles (e.g., antisocial, asocial, and withdrawal behaviors; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; O'Connor et al., 2010). It has been established that the extent to which children exhibit internalizing and externalizing problems is associated strongly with the quality of their relationships with teachers. For example, Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, and Essex (2005) found that teacher–child conflict during the school transition predicted faster rates of increase in externalizing problems from kindergarten through third grade, and that teacher–child closeness contributed to decreases in externalizing problems for children with higher levels of externalizing upon school entry.

Evidence has also emerged in support of the role that teacher–child relationships play in children's *positive* behavioral styles. Closeness in teacher–child relationships has been found to contribute to both observed and teachers' perceptions of social competence skills in preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school, even after controlling for the effects of prior skills and/or other potential confounding variables (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes et al., 1994; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Moreover, high teacher–child closeness and low teacher–child conflict have been found to contribute independently to the prediction of social competence in both preschool (Ewing & Taylor, 2009) and elementary school (Howes, 2000).

Relationships between teachers and children develop as the two parties interact with each other. It is not surprising that both teacher and child attributes contribute to these relationships. Again, research connecting child attributes to teacher–child relationships has focused heavily on children's *problematic* behavioral styles: Both internalizing and externalizing problems have been found to be predictive of high conflict and low closeness in these relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2007; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). Relatively little attention has been paid to *positive* behavioral styles. As far as we know, only three studies have examined the role of social competence in teacher–child relationships. One cross-sectional study found that primary children's social competence predicted their perceptions of their relationships with teachers (Blankemeyer, Flannery, & Vazsonyi, 2002). By contrast, two longitudinal studies of pre-primary children found that early social competence (i.e., sociability, prosocial behavior) did not predict any aspects of later teacher–child relationships after controlling for the effects of early relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000).

The evidence supporting both the effects of teacher–child relationships on social competence and the effects of competence on teacher–child relationships suggests that the two constructs might be reciprocally related. Several adult–child interaction models also posit such bidirectional effects. Patterson's coercion model suggests that, in the interactions between children and their significant adults (e.g., teachers), both parties are active participants (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). In his four-step process of escape conditioning, Patterson illustrated the mutual influences between adult and child. Sameroff's (1975) transactional model also supports the reciprocal influences between social competence and teacher–child relationships. Central to this model are the bidirectional effects between individuals and their social context. These two models have been applied to examine mutual influences between teacher–child relationships and children's behavior problems (e.g., Zhang & Sun, 2011). In a study of kindergarten children, for example, aggressive behavior at the beginning of kindergarten significantly predicted teacher–child conflict, which, in turn, predicted aggressive behavior at the end of the kindergarten year (Doumen et al., 2008). The theoretical perspectives and corresponding research suggest that social competence and relationships with teachers might be mutually influenced. Yet previous research has predominantly investigated either the effects

of teacher–child relationships on competence or the effects of competence on teacher–child relationships, and little attention has been paid to bidirectional effects. Only two studies (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes et al., 2000) have investigated simultaneously the effects of teacher–child relationships on children's competence behavior and the effects of competent behavior on teacher–child relationships. However, both studies focused on elementary-school-age children. No studies have systematically examined such bidirectional effects in preschool children. Moreover, both studies used unidirectional analyses to test the effects in each direction separately and did not consider bidirectional statistical analyses.

One goal of this study is to examine the bidirectional links between teacher–child relationships and social competence during the preschool years by employing bidirectional analyses. Three competing hypotheses were generated for the study: (1) early positive teacher–child relationships predict later social competence (i.e., teacher-driven effect); (2) early competence predicts later positive teacher–child relationships (i.e., child-driven effect); and (3) competence and teacher–child relationships are reciprocally related (i.e., bidirectional effects). To test these hypotheses, we applied a model comparison approach within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework in a cross-lagged design with both teachers' and parents' reports on core variables.

Teachers' and parents' reports of children's social competence

It is acknowledged widely that multiple informants contribute valuable information to the examination of childhood functioning in both research and practice (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Renk & Phares, 2004). Children often exhibit different strengths and competencies in different settings, where they are observed by different people. Parents observe their children at home but rarely see them in the classroom. Teachers rarely interact with students in the students' homes but observe a variety of student behaviors in the classroom. Although children's setting-specific competencies may result in a certain degree of disagreement between informants (Renk & Phares, 2004), it is a common practice for both researchers and practitioners to administer competence assessments to multiple informants.

In this study, we use parents' and teachers' reports to assess children's social competence at home and in school, respectively. Although it has been found that relationships with teachers provide a basis for children's later school competence (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Howes et al., 1994; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), it remains unclear whether these relationships contribute to the competence that children display at home and is observed by parents. Similarly, although evidence suggests that school competence plays a role in teacher–child relationships (Blankemeyer et al., 2002), it is unclear whether these relationships can be predicted by competence at home. In this study, we measure social competence at home and in school to fully understand the prospective associations between teacher–child relationships and social competence at both settings.

Our second goal is to examine the cross-system generalization of social competence between home and school settings. Developmental and clinical researchers have long been interested in the generalization of social skills learned in one environment to other environments (i.e., the setting generalization; Sheridan, Warnes, & Dowd, 2004). It is acknowledged in the literature that skill use in natural social settings is more likely to promote generalization across settings than that in decontextualized settings (Sheridan et al., 2004). In both longitudinal and intervention studies, it has been found that children's competence, when established early in the family, can carry over to their classrooms (e.g., Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001) and that competence that is fostered through school training can also be generalized to the home environment (e.g., Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). Hence, we anticipate both directions of

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