Parent–child and teacher–child relationships in Chinese preschoolers: The moderating role of preschool experiences and the mediating role of social competence

Xiao Zhang\textsuperscript{a,b,}\textsuperscript{*}

\textsuperscript{a Beijing Key Lab of Applied Experimental Psychology, School of Psychology, Beijing Normal University, China}
\textsuperscript{b Finnish Center of Excellence in Learning and Motivation Research, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland}

\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

Based on two samples of Chinese preschoolers (Study 1: \(N = 443\); Study 2: \(N = 118\)) and their parents and teachers, the present research examined the associations between parent–child and teacher–child relationships, and how the associations were moderated by children's preschool experiences and mediated by their social competence. Using a cross-sectional design, Study 1 showed that children's years of preschool experiences moderated the associations between parent–child and teacher–child relationships. Both father–child and mother–child relationships were associated significantly with teacher–child relationships for the first-year preschoolers, and these associations were mediated fully by children's social competence. For the second- or third-year preschoolers, however, neither father–child nor mother–child relationships correlated significantly with teacher–child relationships. Using a longitudinal design, Study 2 also showed the moderating role of children's preschool experiences in the associations between parent–child and teacher–child relationships. Relationships with mothers were associated significantly with relationships with teachers at 3 months after the children's preschool entrance and, again, this association was mediated fully by children's social competence. In contrast, neither mother–child nor father–child relationships correlated significantly with teacher–child relationships at the end of the first or second preschool year.

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Teachers, especially in children’s preschool years, often perform similar caregiving functions as parents. Like parents, teachers care for children’s safety, soothe them when they are upset, and guide them when they misbehave. A growing body of research demonstrates that young children’s failure to form positive relationships with teachers may lead to their social and emotional maladjustment (e.g., Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997), while positive relationships with teachers predict a variety of competencies, including academic and language skills (e.g., Pianta et al., 1997), peer relationships (e.g., Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994), and emotional and behavioral competence (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In the People’s Republic of China (China), where the organization of early care and education rarely involves center-based care for infants and toddlers, preschool entrance often represents children’s first time to establish relationships with teachers. Because relationships with initial teachers have extremely important implications for children’s later development (Howes, Hamilton, et al., 1994), Chinese children might be more sensitive to preschool teacher influences than their U.S. counterparts who often establish their first teacher–child relationships with childcare teachers before the age of 2 (Howes, Hamilton, et al., 1994). Recent studies conducted in China show that preschool teacher–child relationships longitudinally predict many aspects of Chinese children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development (e.g., Zhang, Chen, & Zhang, 2006).

Given the important role of preschool teacher–child relationships in a wide range of children’s developmental outcomes, further examination of factors associated with these relationships is warranted. Decades of studies conducted in the United States have increasingly documented the role of maternal attachment history in teacher–child relationships (O’Connor & McCartney, 2006; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988; Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983). The research described in this article aimed at examining the associations between Chinese preschool children’s relationships with teachers and both parents, and the moderating...
and mediating processes underlying these associations. Before the
details of the research are described, a review of studies of the asso-
ciations between parent–child and teacher–child relationships and
underlying mechanisms will be considered.

1. Parent–child relationships and teacher–child
relationships

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Bretherton,
1985), children develop internal working models within
parent–child attachment, especially maternal attachment.
These models are children's cognitive representations of their
primary caregivers' responsivity and sensitivity and their own
self-worthiness in their interactions with others. Because secure
attachment is associated with high levels of parental responsivity
and sensitivity, a child with a secure attachment history is likely
to develop models of caregivers as trustworthy and supportive
and see himself or herself as worthy of love. In contrast, because
insecure attachment is associated with low levels of parental
responsivity and sensitivity, a child with an insecure attachment
history is likely to develop models of caregivers as untrust-
worthy and rejecting and see himself or herself as unworthy
of love.

Attachment theory also posits that children apply their inter-
nal working models to subsequent intimate relationships, such as
friendships, romantic relationships, and other caregiving relation-
ships (Bowlby, 1982; Bretherton, 1985). That is, the attachment
styles that children develop with parents are likely to carry over
to their relationships with others. Thus, parent–child relationships,
theoretically, should affect teacher–child relationships. Sroufe and
colleagues (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988; Sroufe et al., 1983) initially
investigated the role of children's attachment histories in preschool
teachers' behaviors, and found that teachers varied their behav-
iors according to children's attachment styles. Several subsequent
studies also revealed that children's relationships with teachers
were associated with their early maternal attachments (O’Connor

In previous research, however, less attention has been devoted
to paternal influences on teacher–child relationships. It has been
documented that relationships with fathers as well as with mothers
affect many aspects of children's development, including cognition,
language skills, and social and emotional competencies (Tamis-
LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). In particular, Main and
Weston (1981) examined the role of infant–parent attachments in
toddlers' readiness to establish new relationships. They found that
relationships with fathers, as well as with mothers, were associated
with young children's social responsiveness to new adults. How-
ever, it is unknown whether relationships with fathers can predict
relationships with teachers. In attempts to fully understand the role
of children's attachment histories in preschool teacher–child rela-
tionships, the present research examined relationships with both
parents. It has been found that the teacher–child relationship is
related to the child's age (Safit & Pianta, 2001) and gender (Pianta
& Nimetz, 1991). It was thus hypothesized that teacher–child rela-
tionships would be associated significantly with both mother–child
and father–child relationships, even after controlling for the effects
of child age and gender.

2. The moderating role of children's school
experiences

It should be noted that, although teacher–child relationships
were associated significantly with mother–child relationships in a
few studies (O’Connor & McCartney, 2006; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991),
several others failed to reveal a significant association (Howes
& Hamilton, 1992; Howes, Hamilton, & Philipsen, 1998; Howes,
found one condition that might account for these inconsistent
findings, namely, children's school experiences. Specifically, stud-
ies that targeted children during childcare or early preschool
years (i.e., children with few school experiences when they were
assessed) were more likely to find significant associations between
mother–child and teacher–child relationships (Pianta & Nimetz,
1991; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988; Sroufe et al., 1983). In contrast,
studies focusing on children in the elementary school years (i.e.,
children with more school experiences) were less likely to find
significant associations (Howes et al., 1998).

It is argued here that it might be too distal to associate
teacher–child relationships in children's late preschool, elemen-
tary, and middle school years with early attachment styles. In the
attachment literature, it has been found that attachment security
explains only a small proportion of the variance in children’s func-
tioning in later social relationships (Lamb, 1987, 2005; Thompson,
1999, 2005). The literature has even led recent attachment theorists
to question the presumptively enduring formative significance of
early attachments for later social adaptation and relationships (e.g.,
Lamb, 2005). Thompson (2005), for instance, argued that many of
the functions of early attachment might become less relevant as the
child matures. It is, therefore, possible that early attachment
relationships contribute less to the formation of teacher–child rela-
tionships as children obtain extensive school experiences.

In a recent meta-analysis, Ahnert, Pinquart, and Lamb (2006)
also suggested that the associations between parent–child and
teacher–child relationships might be more evident in children's
early than later school years. It was found that for children in home-
center-based care, attachments to parents and care providers
were significantly correlated. In contrast, the associations between
early attachment and children's long-term developmental out-
comes, including teacher–child relationships in later preschool or
elementary years, are very likely to be moderated by their exten-
sive school experiences (Howes, Matheson, & Hamilton, 1994) and
become less significant.

In the present research, I hypothesized that the associations
between parent–child and teacher–child relationships would be
moderated by children's years of preschool experiences. Specif-
ically, the association between parent–child and teacher–child
relationships is expected to be stronger in children's early than later
preschool years.

3. The mediating role of children's social
competence

Although a growing body of research has investigated the asso-
ciations between parent–child and teacher–child relationships,
relatively less empirical attention has been devoted to the medi-
ating processes underlying the associations. It is not very clear why
children's early attachment relationships are associated with their
teacher–child relationships.

It is argued here that children's competencies might mediate
the associations between parent–child and teacher–child relation-
ships. According to attachment theory, the internal working models
derived from early attachment can be generalized to new relation-
ships and guide children's expectations, feelings, and behavioral
competencies within these relationships (Bowlby, 1982, 1988;
Bretherton, 1985; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). A child with
a secure attachment history is more likely to be socially competent
(Bretherton, 1985). S/he will approach others, including teach-
ers, with positive expectations and attitudes, which in turn likely
results in a positive teacher–child relationship. In contrast, a child
with an insecure attachment history is less likely to be compe-
tent (Bretherton, 1985). S/he will approach teachers with negative
expectations and attitudes, which in turn likely leads to a nega-
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