



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

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ABSTRACT

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

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and mediating processes underlying these associations. Before the details of the research are described, a review of studies of the associations 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' responsiveness and sensitivity and their own self-worthiness in their interactions with others. Because secure attachment is associated with high levels of parental responsiveness 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 responsiveness and sensitivity, a child with an insecure attachment history is likely to develop models of caregivers as untrustworthy and rejecting and see himself or herself as unworthy of love.

Attachment theory also posits that children apply their internal working models to subsequent intimate relationships, such as friendships, romantic relationships, and other caregiving relationships (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 behaviors 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 & McCartney, 2006; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991).

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. However, 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 relationships, the present research examined relationships with both parents. It has been found that the teacher–child relationship is related to the child's age (Saft & Pianta, 2001) and gender (Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). It was thus hypothesized that teacher–child relationships 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,

Rodning, Galluzzo, & Meyers, 1988). A review of the literature found one condition that might account for these inconsistent findings, namely, children's school experiences. Specifically, studies 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, elementary, 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 functioning 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 relationships 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- or 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 outcomes, including teacher–child relationships in later preschool or elementary years, are very likely to be moderated by their extensive 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. Specifically, 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 associations between parent–child and teacher–child relationships, relatively less empirical attention has been devoted to the mediating 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 relationships. According to attachment theory, the internal working models derived from early attachment can be generalized to new relationships 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 teachers, 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 competent (Bretherton, 1985). S/he will approach teachers with negative expectations and attitudes, which in turn likely leads to a nega-

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