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Teacher–child relationship quality and academic achievement of Chinese American children in immigrant families[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the cross-sectional relations between teacher–child relationship quality (TCRQ) and math and reading achievement in a socio-economically diverse sample of Chinese American first- and second-grade children in immigrant families ($N=207$). Teachers completed a questionnaire measuring TCRQ dimensions including closeness, conflict, and intimacy, and children completed a questionnaire measuring overall TCRQ. Standardized tests were used to assess children's math and reading skills. Analyses were conducted to (a) test the factor structure of measures assessing TCRQ among Chinese American children, (b) examine the associations between teacher- and child-rated TCRQ and children's academic achievement, controlling for demographic characteristics, and (c) examine the potential role of child gender as a moderator in the relations between TCRQ and achievement. Results indicated that teacher-rated TCRQ Warmth was positively associated with Chinese American children's reading achievement. Two child gender-by-TCRQ interactions were found: (a) teacher-rated TCRQ Conflict was negatively associated with girls' (but not boys') math achievement, and (b) child-rated Overall TCRQ was positively associated with boys' (but not girls') reading achievement. These findings highlight the valuable role of TCRQ in the academic success of school-aged children in immigrant families.

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1. Introduction

High quality relationships between children and teachers, defined by high levels of warmth and support and low levels of conflict, have consistently been linked to children's academic achievement and academic engagement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). Although the literature has established that teachers' ratings of relationship quality predict children's academic achievement, relatively less is known about the association between child-rated teacher–child relationship quality (henceforth labeled as TCRQ) and elementary school children's academic achievement. Importantly, there is a dearth of literature examining the function of TCRQ in children from Asian American immigrant backgrounds. Using a socio-economically diverse sample of Chinese American school-aged children in immigrant families, the primary aims of the study were to (a) test the factor structure of measures assessing TCRQ among Chinese American children, (b) examine the relations between teacher- and child-rated TCRQ and Chinese American children's performance on standardized tests of reading and math achievement, and (c) test the potential role of child gender as a moderator in the relations between TCRQ and achievement.

1.1. TCRQ and children's academic achievement in the early elementary school years

Developmental theorists posit that the primary school years mark a key period for children's development and achievement (Alexander, Entwisle, Blyth, & McAdoo, 1988). Indeed, formal schooling experiences launch children into achievement trajectories that are highly stable across childhood and adolescence (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). Compared to kindergarten, first grade appears to be a particularly critical developmental stage for children, due to the greater emphasis on emerging literacy and numeracy skills and higher academic expectations (Alexander et al., 1988; Entwisle et al., 2005). These findings underline the importance of examining how early schooling experiences relate to academic adjustment.

Longitudinal research has revealed that children's achievement trajectories are subject to fluctuations and changes in the early school years (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Given the substantial amount of time that children spend in the classroom, often with the same teacher, it is not surprising that TCRQ plays a significant role in elementary school-aged children's adjustment and academic achievement. High TCRQ has the potential to shift the achievement trajectories of children at risk for retention and academic failure (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). In understanding the role of TCRQ in children's early achievement, it appears the teacher–child relationship serves a similar function to that of the parent–child relationship (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Pianta, 1992). Expanding on Ainsworth's theory of attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), researchers propose that children who experience high TCRQ utilize teachers as a secure base and a resource for actively exploring the school environment (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999). In other words, high TCRQ is expected to encourage students' learning by creating a supportive environment in which children are motivated to actively and appropriately engage in the classroom (Ladd et al., 1999).

Researchers also emphasize the importance of teachers' emotional support in students' engagement and motivation (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In addition to their instructional support, teachers who are emotionally supportive instill beliefs in children that they play integral and valuable roles in the classroom. These beliefs contribute to children's engagement in academic activities and promote higher levels of achievement over time (Wentzel, 2004). Indeed, the empirical evidence suggests that TCRQ has important implications for children's academic outcomes, particularly for children from higher risk backgrounds. Moreover, the effects of TCRQ on children's academic adjustment may be most significant during the early school grades (Baker, 2006; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010).

Researchers studying TCRQ have typically conceptualized and assessed TCRQ along different dimensions, including a positive dimension (i.e., closeness or warmth), a conflict dimension, and sometimes, an intimacy or a dependency dimension (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Pianta, 1992). Empirical support for the multi-dimensional model of TCRQ has been found in ethnically diverse samples of elementary school children (Hughes et al., 2005). In examining TCRQ throughout children's development, investigators have generally found a positive association between high TCRQ (e.g., high warmth and support, low conflict, or both) and children's cognitive abilities and academic adjustment throughout preschool (Howes et al., 1994), elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1997), and middle school

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