Original Paper

The Relationship Between Teacher-Child Relationships and Children's Self-Esteem: The Moderating Role of Family Socioeconomic Status

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between teacher-child relationships and preschoolers' self-esteem, while examining the moderating effect of family socioeconomic status (SES). The research employed the Teacher-Child Relationship Scale, the Teacher-Rated Self-Esteem Questionnaire for Children Aged 3-9, and the SES Scale. A total of 310 senior kindergarten children and their teachers from Tianjingshan Second Kindergarten and Xinqiao Central Kindergarten participated. Findings revealed: (1) Teacher-child relationships showed a significant positive correlation with preschoolers' self-esteem;(2) Family socioeconomic status showed no significant correlation with either preschoolers' self-esteem or teacher-child relationships. The findings indicate that teacher-child relationships are a key factor influencing preschoolers' self-esteem, while family socioeconomic status does not exert a significant moderating effect.

Keywords

teacher-child relationship, self-esteem, family socioeconomic status

1. Introduction

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of self-worth, has been a central concept in psychological research since James first proposed it in 1892 (LIU, 2015). Scholars worldwide have extensively studied self-esteem levels across different age groups, yielding particularly rich findings among adolescents, college students, and adults. However, research on preschoolers' self-esteem remains relatively scarce, which contradicts the theory that early childhood is a critical period for personality development. Existing studies predominantly focus on older age groups, with insufficient exploration of measurement methods and influencing factors for preschoolers' self-esteem. Research on

the relationship between preschoolers' self-esteem and psychological characteristics remains incomplete.

Measuring preschoolers' self-esteem presents unique challenges. Due to their immature physical and psychological development, direct assessment via self-report questionnaires is difficult, typically requiring indirect evaluations from teachers or parents. Domestic research on preschoolers' self-esteem is scarce, predominantly theoretical with limited empirical studies. Concurrently, preschoolers spend the most time with teachers in educational settings, making the influence of teacher-child relationships on psychological development significant. Existing research indicates that positive teacher-child relationships foster positive self-perception in preschoolers (YANG & HU, 2018), though the direct link between these relationships and self-esteem remains under-validated.

Family socioeconomic status (SES), a critical factor influencing child development, has been demonstrated to be closely related to children's cognitive and social development (HUANG, 2025). Yin et al. found that children from high-SES families were more likely to exhibit positive self-perception, language cognition, and self-confidence (YIN, 2021). However, research on whether family SES moderates the relationship between teacher-child relationships and preschoolers' self-esteem remains limited.Domestic research has predominantly focused on the general impact of SES on child development, with limited examination of SES's moderating role within specific relationships, such as the teacher-child relationship.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to address the following questions: (1) Is there a significant correlation between teacher-child relationships and preschoolers' self-esteem? (2) Does family socioeconomic status moderate the relationship between teacher-child relationships and preschoolers' self-esteem? The study hypothesizes that: (1) Teacher-child relationships are significantly positively correlated with preschoolers' self-esteem; (2) Family socioeconomic status significantly moderates the relationship between teacher-child relationships and preschoolers' self-esteem.

2. Research Method

2.1 Participants

The study selected all senior kindergarten children from Tianjingshan Second Kindergarten and Xinqiao Central Kindergarten as research subjects, totaling 310 participants. Through questionnaire distribution and exclusion of 2 invalid responses, 308 valid samples were obtained, yielding a validity rate of 99%. Basic participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistics of Demographic Variables for Participants

		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	155	50.3%
	Female	153	49.7%

Age	5 years old	56	18.2%
	6 years old	126	40.9%
	7 years old	93	30.2%
	8 years old	33	10.7%
Birth place	Rural	144	46.8%
	Urban	164	53.2%
Whether an only child	Only child	168	54.5%
	Non-only child	140	45.5%

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Teacher-Child Relationship Scale

The Teacher-Child Relationship Scale (TCRS) translated by Zhang (2010) was adopted. Developed jointly by Pianta and Zhang Xiao, this revised scale comprises two dimensions: intimacy (11 items) and conflict (12 items). Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale, with each item scored from 1 to 5. Testing yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.773 for the intimacy dimension, 0.950 for the conflict dimension, and 0.919 for the total scale, indicating good reliability and validity.

2.2.2 Preschool Children's Self-Esteem Scale

The Teacher Rating Scale for Self-Esteem in Children Aged 3-9 (ZHANG, 2004), developed by Zhang Lihua, was used. It comprises 22 items across three dimensions: Sense of Importance (8 items), Sense of Self-Competence (9 items), and Sense of Appearance (5 items).Likewise, a five-point Likert scale was employed. Testing revealed Cronbach's α coefficients of 0.749 for the Sense of Importance dimension, 0.764 for Self-Competence, 0.630 for Appearance Perception, and 0.892 for the total scale, indicating good reliability and validity.

2.2.3 Family Socioeconomic Status Scale

Family socioeconomic status comprises three indicators: parental education level, occupation, and household income (LI, 2020). Educational attainment was categorized into five levels: below elementary school (1 point), junior high school (2 points), senior high school (3 points), undergraduate degree (4 points), and graduate degree or higher (5 points). Occupation was classified into five levels: unemployed/job-seeking/temporary workers and agricultural/forestry/fishery/water conservancy production personnel (1 point), production/transportation manual laborers and self-employed individuals (2 points), commercial/service sector workers and general clerical staff (3 points), scientific research and professional technical personnel (4 points), and decision-making/management personnel in enterprises, institutions, and government agencies (5 points).Annual household income is categorized into six levels: below ¥30,000 = 1 point, ¥30,000–50,000 = 2 points, ¥50,000–100,000 = 3 points, ¥100,000–150,000 = 4 points, ¥150,000–200,000 = 5 points, above ¥200,000 = 6 points. The total household socioeconomic status score ranges from 5 to 26 points, with higher scores indicating

higher socioeconomic status.

2.3 Administration and Data Analysis

This study employed class teachers to complete the Teacher-Child Relationship Scale and Child Self-Esteem Scale, ensuring consistency in data collection subjects and data authenticity. The Family Socioeconomic Status Scale was completed by parents. All questionnaires underwent data processing and analysis using SPSS 22.0, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. To examine common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted.

3. Results

3.1 Common Method Bias Test

Factor analysis was performed on all variables using the Harman single-factor test. Results revealed 50 extracted factors, with 11 factors having eigenvalues exceeding 1. The first factor explained 22.00% of the variance, significantly below the 40% critical threshold, indicating no severe common method bias in this study.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Intimacy	308	1.64	4.82	3.84	0.60
Conflict	308	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.15
Overall Teacher-Child Relationship	308	1.57	4.87	3.52	0.76
Sense of Importance	308	1.50	5.00	3.99	0.60
Self-efficacy	308	1.44	5.00	3.79	0.61
Appearance	308	1.40	5.00	3.86	0.68
Overall Child Self-Esteem	308	1.55	4.86	3.88	0.57
SES	308	9.00	25.00	16.95	3.17

Table 2 shows that the overall mean score for teacher-child relationships among participants was 3.52. Given that the theoretical median for teacher-child relationships is 3, we can conclude that the overall teacher-child relationships in the senior kindergarten classes of these two kindergartens are above average, indicating a positive relationship between teachers and children.Children's self-esteem was also measured on a 5-point scale, where higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. Compared to the

theoretical median of 3.00, the mean self-esteem score for children in both classes was 3.88, exceeding the theoretical median. This indicates that these children possess relatively high levels of self-esteem. Additionally, it is evident that the participating children place significant importance on their role within the classroom. Their scores on the sense of importance dimension were the highest among the three dimensions, followed by the sense of appearance dimension.followed by self-competence. This suggests the children's independence is not yet fully developed, or they lack confidence in themselves, believing they cannot complete certain tasks without the help of teachers or parents.The mean socioeconomic status (SES) score for the participants was 16.95, indicating that their families generally had upper-middle SES. This suggests their parents' income, occupation, and education levels were above average. They could meet the children's basic daily needs and, in terms of child-rearing, their educational attainment was generally sufficient to effectively employ educational methods for their children.

3.3 Correlation Analysis of Teacher-Child Relationship, Child Self-Esteem, and Family Socioeconomic Status

Table 3. Correlation Analysis of Teacher-Child Relationships, Children's Self-Esteem, and SES

	Sense of Importance	Self-efficacy	Perceived Appearance	Overall Child Self-Esteem	Intimacy	Conflict	Teacher-Child Relationship Overall	SES
Sense of Importance	1							
Self-efficacy	.762**	1						
Perceived attractiveness	.758**	.734**	1					
Overall Child Self-Esteem	.923**	.929**	.884**	1				
Intimacy	.584**	.478**	.460**	.558**	1			
Conflict	.292**	.269**	0.098	.256**	.413**	1		
Overall Teacher-Child Relationship	.448**	.390**	.249**	.410**	.698**	.940**	1	
SES	0.046	-0.006	0.044	0.027	0.103	0.033	0.065	1

Table 3 indicates the correlation analysis of teacher-child relationships, children's self-esteem, and family socioeconomic status. Analysis of these three elements revealed that the independent variable (teacher-child relationship) showed a significant positive correlation with the dependent variable

189

(children's self-esteem) (r = 0.410, P < 0.01). Furthermore, teacher-child relationship was significantly positively correlated with three dimensions of children's self-esteem: sense of importance (r = 0.448, P < 0.01), sense of self-competence (r = 0.390, P < 0.01), and appearance perception (r = 0.249, P < 0.01). No significant correlation was found between family socioeconomic status and children's self-esteem or teacher-child relationship. Therefore, family socioeconomic status was examined as a moderating factor.

3.4 Moderation Effect Test

Table 4. Moderating Effects of Family Socioeconomic Status on Teacher-Child Relationships and Children's Self-Esteem

Moderation Effect Test		
	Child Self-Esteem	
	B	T
Intimacy	0.53	10.46
Conflict	0.02	0.62
Intimacy x SES	-0.00	-0.23
Conflict x SES	-0.01	-0.55
R^2	0.314	
F	27.686	

In the model of table 4, intimacy (B=0.53, T=10.46, p<0.001) and conflict (B=0.02, T=0.62, p>0.05) both significantly influenced children's self-esteem, indicating significant main effects of teacher-child relationships on children's self-esteem. However, after introducing the interaction term between family socioeconomic status (SES) and teacher-child relationship, neither the Intimacy × SES interaction (B = -0.00, T = -0.23, p > 0.05) nor the Conflict × SES interaction (B = -0.01, T = -0.55, p > 0.05) reached statistical significance (p > 0.05).

Regarding model fit, the R^2 value after adding interaction terms was 0.314, only marginally higher (0.002) than the model without interaction terms (R^2 = 0.312), indicating that interaction terms provided very limited enhancement to the model's explanatory power. The F-test results showed that the F-value of the model with interaction terms was 27.686 (p<0.001), indicating overall model significance. However, the individual tests for interaction terms did not reach significance. According to the criteria for assessing moderation effects, when the p-value for interaction terms exceeds 0.05, it indicates that the moderation effect is not significant. In this study, the p-value for Intimacy × SES was 0.818 (T = -0.23), and the p-value for Conflict × SES was 0.582 (T = -0.55), both exceeding 0.05. Furthermore, the incremental R^2 (0.002) was far below the 0.05 threshold, further confirming the non-significance of the moderation effect.

4. Discussion

4.1 Relationship Between Teacher-Child Relationship and Children's Self-Esteem

This study found a significant positive correlation between teacher-child relationships and children's self-esteem, consistent with previous research (Inkoo & Sunjin, 2016). A positive teacher-child relationship provides emotional support and security, fostering children's positive self-perception and self-esteem. Close teacher-child bonds make children feel accepted and valued, enhancing their sense of self-worth. Conversely, conflictual relationships may induce anxiety and insecurity, hindering self-esteem development. This aligns with Hypothesis 1, indicating that teacher-child relationships are a key determinant of children's self-esteem.

4.2 Moderating Role of Family Socioeconomic Status

Contrary to expectations, family socioeconomic status did not significantly moderate the relationship between teacher-child relationships and children's self-esteem. This finding diverges from Kraus et al.'s (2012) research indicating that children from high-SES families are more likely to exhibit positive self-perceptions. Possible reasons include: (1) In preschool settings, the quality of teacher-child interactions may outweigh the influence of family SES; (2) The young age of participants (5–8 years) in this study, where the effects of family SES may not yet be fully manifested; (3) The professional competence of teachers as educators may have partially offset the negative impact of family SES.

4.3 Influence of Other Variables

Age showed a significant positive correlation with children's self-esteem and teacher-child relationships, indicating that as children grow older, their self-awareness and social skills develop, leading to higher self-esteem levels and more harmonious relationships with teachers. Urban-rural differences were significantly correlated with teacher-child relationships, possibly due to urban kindergartens having more abundant resources and higher-quality teacher-child interactions. Gender and whether a child was an only child had no significant impact on self-esteem or teacher-child relationships, consistent with some previous studies.

4.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study holds significant value both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it empirically demonstrates the substantial positive influence of teacher-child relationships on young children's self-esteem, thereby enriching research in the domains of early childhood social development and self-concept formation. This addresses the current relative scarcity of empirical research on preschoolers' self-esteem. Concurrently, findings indicate that family socioeconomic status does not mediate the relationship between teacher-child interactions and children's self-esteem. This challenges conventional perspectives treating family background as a decisive factor, suggesting that within the specific educational setting of kindergarten, the quality of teacher-child interactions may exert an independent influence surpassing that of family SES. This provides a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the multidimensional mechanisms of early childhood psychological development.

At the practical level, this study underscores the pivotal role of high-quality teacher-child relationships

in fostering positive self-perception and healthy psychological development among young children, offering clear directional guidance for kindergarten educators. Teachers should prioritise establishing warm, supportive, and low-conflict interaction patterns. Through daily communication, emotional responsiveness, and positive feedback, they can enhance children's feelings of importance, competence, and physical appearance, thereby elevating their overall self-esteem. Furthermore, the findings suggest that educational administrators should prioritise teacher professional development, strengthen training in teacher-child interaction skills, and foster a kindergarten culture conducive to building positive relationships. For parents, even amidst varying socio-economic backgrounds, home-school collaboration can support teachers' work, jointly creating a secure and respectful environment for children's growth. In summary, this study not only deepens our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development of self-esteem in young children but also provides practical pathways for enhancing the quality of early childhood education and promoting children's psychological well-being.

4.5 Research Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study achieved certain results in methodology and theoretical framework, multidimensional limitations warrant further reflection.First, the sample origin is notably limited. The study selected only two kindergartens located in the same urban area, both public institutions, failing to encompass diverse types such as private international kindergartens. It also did not account for urban-rural differences or regional cultural characteristics. This singular sample structure may restrict the external validity of the findings, limiting their generalizability to broader urban or rural kindergarten settings.Second, the study primarily relied on teachers' evaluations of children's self-esteem. As a subjective psychological state, children's self-esteem is susceptible to influences from teachers' personal educational philosophies, emotional biases, and assessment criteria. This may introduce observer bias or the expectancy effect. For instance, teachers might overestimate certain children's self-esteem due to personal preferences or underestimate it due to misinterpretations of children's behaviors.Furthermore, the study failed to fully incorporate multiple factors influencing children's self-esteem, such as key variables including kindergarten environmental characteristics (spatial layout, educational atmosphere, facility conditions), teacher professional competence (educational philosophy, emotional support capacity, communication skills), and peer relationship quality. These factors may interact complexly with teacher-child relationships, jointly shaping children's self-esteem development trajectories.

To address these limitations, future research can systematically expand in five dimensions. First, construct a multi-tiered, multi-regional sample framework incorporating public, private, and international kindergartens across eastern, central, and western regions with varying economic development levels, while accounting for urban-rural differences to enhance the generalizability and representativeness of findings. Second, establish a multi-dimensional assessment system integrating teacher evaluations with direct observations of children's self-esteem (e.g., through play behavior and emotional responses), peer assessments, parent questionnaires, and structured interviews. Employ

triangulation to enhance the reliability and validity of evaluations.Third, construct a multi-factor moderation model to examine the dynamic influence mechanisms of moderating variables—including teachers' professional competence, emotional support capacity, and teaching reflection ability; kindergarten environmental factors such as spatial openness and cultural atmosphere; and peer relationship factors like peer acceptance and cooperation levels—on the relationship between teacher-child interactions and children's self-esteem.Fourth, design longitudinal tracking studies with periodic data collection every 3-6 months to trace the dynamic evolution of children's self-esteem and teacher-child relationships. Employ lag effect analysis to uncover causal relationships between them, rather than relying solely on cross-sectional data.Fifth, conduct cross-cultural comparative studies in kindergartens with diverse cultural contexts—such as urban versus rural settings and Han Chinese versus ethnic minority regions—to examine how cultural values (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism) mediate the relationship between teacher-child interactions and children's self-esteem. This provides empirical foundations for developing culturally adaptive psychological support systems for early childhood development. Through these multidimensional extensions, future research will comprehensively unravel the complex mechanisms underlying children's self-esteem development, offering more targeted theoretical guidance for preschool education practice.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examined the relationship between teacher-child relationships and children's self-esteem, while investigating the moderating role of family socioeconomic status. Empirical findings yielded the following conclusions:

First, teacher-child relationships exhibit a significant positive correlation with preschoolers' self-esteem, providing crucial empirical support for research on self-esteem development. This finding not only validates the study's hypotheses but also deepens our understanding of the developmental mechanisms of preschoolers' self-esteem. During the critical period of early psychological development, teachers serve as the most significant social relationship figures in preschool settings. The quality of their interactions directly influences children's self-perception and value judgments.When children perceive teachers' care, respect, and support, these positive interactions internalize into a sense of self-worth, thereby elevating self-esteem. Conversely, frequent conflictual interactions may foster self-doubt and diminish self-esteem. This finding offers direct guidance for kindergarten educational practice, suggesting that the quality of teacher-child relationships should be central to children's mental health education.

Second, family socioeconomic status (SES) does not significantly moderate the relationship between teacher-child interactions and children's self-esteem—a finding representing a significant theoretical breakthrough. Zhang Qianyang argues that family SES is a key determinant of child development, with children from high-SES families often exhibiting stronger self-awareness[9].However, this study reveals that within the specific educational setting of kindergarten, the quality of teacher-child interactions may

transcend the influence of family SES. This may be because: (1) As professional educational institutions, kindergartens employ systematically trained teachers who can provide high-quality interactions, partially offsetting differences in family SES; (2) Self-esteem development in early childhood relies more on immediate interactive experiences than family background, with the self-esteem of 5- to 8-year-olds being more influenced by current social relationships;(3) Factors such as peer interactions and group activities within the kindergarten setting may mitigate the direct impact of family SES. This finding challenges the "family SES determinism" perspective and offers new insights into the multidimensional mechanisms influencing preschoolers' self-esteem development.

Additionally, this study found a significant positive correlation between age and children's self-esteem as well as teacher-child relationships. This indicates that as children grow older, their self-awareness, social skills, and emotional expression abilities develop, leading to increased self-esteem levels and more harmonious relationships with teachers.Urban-rural differences showed a significant positive correlation with teacher-child relationship closeness, suggesting that urban kindergartens may possess richer educational resources and more professional teaching staff, thereby facilitating higher-quality teacher-child interactions. These findings provide important clues for understanding the dynamic changes in young children's self-esteem development.

In summary, this study confirms that the teacher-child relationship is a key factor influencing preschoolers' self-esteem, while family socioeconomic status does not play a significant moderating role in this relationship. This finding has direct implications for kindergarten educational practice, suggesting that the quality of the teacher-child relationship should be prioritized as a core strategy for enhancing preschoolers' self-esteem, rather than overemphasizing family background.Future research should further explore multidimensional factors affecting preschoolers' self-esteem, constructing a more comprehensive psychological development support system for young children and providing scientific foundations for their healthy growth. In an era where early childhood education is increasingly valued, the findings of this study hold not only theoretical significance but also important practical implications for advancing the scientific and professional development of kindergarten educational practices.

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