



Teacher–child interaction quality, attitudes toward reading, and literacy achievement of Chinese preschool children: Mediation and moderation analysis



Bi Ying Hu^a, Huiping Wu^{b,*}, Timothy W. Curby^c, Zhongling Wu^d, Xiao Zhang^e

^a University of Macau, China

^b Fujian Normal University, China

^c George Mason University, USA

^d Shandong Normal University, China

^e The University of Hong Kong, China

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how classroom teaching quality and preschoolers' attitudes toward reading contribute to their literacy achievement in the Chinese context. A moderated mediation model is hypothesized where teacher-child interaction quality predicts children's literacy outcomes via their reading attitudes, but the strength of this whole mediation process is moderated by the level of teacher-child interaction quality. A sample of 567 Chinese kindergarteners from 29 classrooms was recruited to test the hypothesized model using a longitudinal design. The results support our assumptions: teacher's emotional support had a positive effect on children's reading attitudes, which in turn had a positive effect on their reading and vocabulary learning outcomes. Three domains of teacher-child interaction quality at the baseline together were associated with children's Chinese reading through later classroom organization. Moreover, children with better reading attitudes benefited more from higher instructional support and then gained more vocabulary learning achievement. Implication for preschool teaching training and professional development are included.

1. Introduction

The benefits of quality classroom experiences in support of literacy achievement have been well documented (Belsky et al., 2007; Kush, Watkins, & Brookhart, 2005; Martinez, Aricak, & Jewell, 2008; Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, & Curby, 2009). Additionally, children's positive attitudes toward reading have been related to literacy achievement (Conlon, Zimmer-Gembeck, Creed, & Tucker, 2006; Kocaarslan, 2016; Martinez et al., 2008). However, studies in early childhood have not taken a holistic view whereby children's attitudes and the quality of classroom experiences combine to promote children's literacy achievement. The purpose of the present study is to explore the associations among the quality of the three domains of classroom level teacher–child interaction (emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support), attitudes toward reading, and Chinese preschool children's literacy skills. To do so, we will explore the extent to which attitudes toward reading mediates the association between the quality of the three domains of teacher–child interactions and literacy skills. We will then elaborate on that model to explore the possibility that in this

mediated model, the three domains of teacher–child interaction quality moderates the associations between attitudes toward reading and children's literacy skills.

The present study explores these associations in the context of Chinese preschools. Chinese children aged 3 to 6 typically receive a three-year full-day early childhood education program near home before they enter formal grade school. The most prevalent form of learning activities in Chinese preschool classrooms is delivered through whole-group, teacher-directed instruction – a consequence of the large class sizes (averaging 30–35 children), high student–teacher ratios (15–20:1), and the traditional collective culture (Hu, 2015). Despite these constraints, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2001) has issued the *New Guidelines* which require subjects (developmental domains) to be taught through thematic units whereby children are encouraged to learn through play. This emphasis on play-based learning and children's active role in learning represents a paradigm shift in terms of theory and practice of the Chinese early childhood education (ECE). As a result, it is anticipated that teachers' perceptions toward quality of classroom level teacher–child interaction have changed to embrace

* Corresponding author at: College of Mathematics and Informatics, Fujian Normal University, University Town, Fuzhou, Fujian Province, China.
E-mail address: hpwu168@163.com (H. Wu).

child-centered beliefs and practice.

Nevertheless, recent observational studies have shown that Chinese teachers, even those in early childhood classrooms, stress discipline and order among young children (Hu, Fan, Li, & Leong, 2015). With respect to reading, during the last year of preschool in China (i.e., equivalent to the kindergarten year in the US), teachers might stress taking a traditional character recognition approach in teaching reading to help children transition to formal elementary years, despite the *New Guidelines*. This traditional character recognition approach tends to focus on drilling children on the recognition of characters in a decontextualized manner. In addition, Chinese parents might emphasize traditional character recognition, and even teach writing characters at home, especially in the kindergarten year, to help prepare children to transition into elementary school. These traditional approaches may be reflected in both the quality of teacher–child interactions and children's attitudes toward reading and their associations with preschoolers' literacy skills.

1.1. Teacher–child interaction quality

In an early childhood classroom, children's learning gains are associated with the quality of teaching they experience (Hamre et al., 2013). Inspired by previous research on effective teaching (Brophy, 1999; Pressley et al., 2003), Hamre et al. (2013) have developed a conceptual framework called *Teaching Through Interactions Framework*. This framework states that children learn through their interactions with teachers and that these interactions can be delineated into three domains—emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008).

Emotional support refers to the interactions that suggest warm and safe relationships between teachers and children, as well as the sensitivity and freedom with which teachers treat children (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). When adults are responsive to children's needs and provide them with adequate support, children feel more competent, independent, and willing to take risks by initiating tasks. With respect to language and literacy, research indicates that higher levels of emotional support contribute to children's vocabulary and reading development, including receptive vocabulary, expressive language, and reading comprehension (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). For example, teachers' warmth and responsiveness to children's needs in the classroom have a positive effect on children's expressive vocabulary achievement (Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005).

Classroom organization reflects how teachers conduct behavior management, organize instructional time and routines, and promote children's engagement and interest in activities (Pianta et al., 2008). Evidence has shown that higher levels of classroom organization were positively related to prekindergarten children's emergent literacy achievement (Dobbs-Oates, Kaderavek, Guo, & Justice, 2011). In first-grade classrooms, higher levels of classroom organization have been associated with language and literacy outcomes including higher scores on reading achievement as well as vocabulary and print concepts (Cadima, Leal, & Burchinal, 2010; Ponitz et al., 2009).

Instructional support refers to the ways in which teachers promote children's higher-order thinking skills, provide specific feedback in the learning process, and how teachers model and encourage language use (Pianta et al., 2008). Empirical research has found that instructional support predicts preschoolers' language skills including receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary achievement, rhyming, and letter naming (Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). Burchinal et al. (2008) found that children showed better performance in reading skills, receptive vocabulary, and expressive vocabulary at the end of the kindergarten year when they were in preschool classrooms with higher levels of instructional support. Also, researchers reported positive associations between instructional support and prekindergarten children's gains in early writing in Chile (Leyva et al., 2015). Further, Cadima

et al. (2010) found that instructional support in the first-grade classrooms was positively associated with children's print concepts in a Portuguese sample.

Using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008) – a measurement tool aligned with the Teaching Through Interactions Framework – researchers have investigated the quality of teacher–child interactions worldwide, including China. A validation study of the CLASS (Hu, Fan, Gu, & Yang, 2016) evidenced the same three-domain structure and good to excellent internal consistency in Chinese preschool samples. Furthermore, the study showed a similar pattern of scores compared to those in the US, Finland, Germany and Chile for the three domains of interactions. Despite the similar score patterns of teacher–child interactions for the three domains, Chinese preschool teachers scored particularly low on the instructional support domain. To investigate this further, Hu et al. (2017) examined the quality of instructional support in China across settings (group vs. free play) and activities (language, math/science, art, and others). They found that Chinese teachers provided higher quality instructional support during structured group activities. Furthermore, during group activities, they received the highest score for language lessons. Such findings suggest that despite the recent initiative to promote play-based learning as evidenced in the *New Guidelines*, Chinese ECE teachers are deeply influenced by traditional practice of subject-based whole-group teaching.

1.2. Classroom teaching quality and children's attitudes toward reading

Though many studies have suggested that teachers' higher levels of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support are associated with better academic outcomes – including reading and language (Burchinal et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008), only a few studies have been carried out to investigate the mechanism, such as children's motivation, through which teacher–child interaction quality may contribute to children's outcomes. Consistent with the self-determination theory, children are thought to be more likely to achieve higher levels of performance when the classroom teaching features practices that support their autonomy, competence, and relational security and thereby foster their motivation for and positive attitudes toward learning (Maulana, Opdenakker, Stroet, & Bosker, 2013; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2013). In this study, we focus on children's attitudes toward reading, defined as a state of readiness and affect that exerts a directive influence upon their reading behavior.

In early childhood classrooms, two approaches to teaching have been most frequently studied with respect to reading attitudes and motivation: child-centered or teacher-centered practices. Child-centered practices include activities that give children more opportunities to make choices that reflect their individual wants, such as choosing which book to read or which station to work at. Teacher-centered practices tend to involve less choice for children and tend to be whole group. While high quality classroom interactions can occur with either approach, child-centered practices tend to be more effective and appropriate in early childhood in terms of fostering children's learning motivation and positive attitudes (Baggerly, Ray, & Bratton, 2010). According to guidelines for developmentally appropriate teaching for young children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), teachers should meet young children where they are, follow their lead, and help each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals. When teachers practice more child-centered teaching, children score higher on interest scales for reading and mathematics (Kikas, Pakarinen, Soodla, Peets, & Lerkkanen, 2017; Lerkkanen et al., 2012).

Furthermore, clearly stating and consistently implementing classroom rules are related to children's development of positive learning attitudes over time (Fauth, Decristan, Rieser, Klieme, & Büttner, 2014; Kunter, Baumert, & Köller, 2007). Pakarinen et al. (2010) found that lower stress of teachers and higher-quality classroom organization

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