



Can preschool socioeconomic composition moderate relationships between family environment and Chinese children's early academic and social outcomes?



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ABSTRACT

Research on primary and secondary school composition has shown that a school's socioeconomic status, as an aggregated and stratified index, has a contextual effect on children's school performance. For Chinese children, preschool is their first formal schooling experience. Preschools are segregated by the enrolled children's socioeconomic status. However, no studies have yet examined the role of preschool socioeconomic status in young Chinese children.

Taking family socioeconomic status as the structure index and the home learning environment and authoritative parenting as the process indexes, the current study aimed to examine how preschool socioeconomic status operates independently and moderates the family environment to determine Chinese children's early academic and social development. Data were obtained from 826 children aged 36–74 months from 29 urban preschools in Beijing. Hierarchical linear modeling analyses showed that preschool socioeconomic status significantly directly predicted children's academic skills but not their social skills. Participation in higher socioeconomic status preschools appeared to compensate for the literacy skills of children from a lower family socioeconomic status, and it reinforced the positive effects of authoritative parenting on the children's social skills. These results suggest that the optimal development of young children depends on the "fit" between their family's environmental characteristics and the preschool in which they enrolled.

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1. Introduction

Bio-ecological theories of development suggest that children develop through dynamic interactions within the ecological contexts in which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Among the multiple ecological contexts, family and school environments are the two main microsystems.

In families, socioeconomic status (SES) is a typical index of structural characteristics (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). In addition to its independent impact, much of the effect of family SES can be traced through family processes, which can be summarized as investments and socialization perspectives (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008). The investments perspective proposes that a high family SES enables a family to construct an instructive environment on home learning (HLE; Mistry et al., 2008; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). The socialization perspective emphasizes that family SES, acting through parenting, influences children's development (Mistry et al., 2008). A large

number of studies focusing on young children have verified the impacts of family SES, HLE and parenting on children's early developmental outcomes (e.g., Mistry et al., 2008; Oxford & Lee, 2011; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Yeung et al., 2002). Thus, we chose these three variables as typical indexes of family structure and process in the present study.

Regarding the school context, the school socioeconomic status (school SES), as an index of school composition and stratification, has attracted increasing attention since the influential Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) initially brought the topic into the spotlight (Perry, 2007). Studies have consistently shown that school SES facilitates students' academic achievement, regardless of their individual SES (OECD, 2004; Perry & McConney, 2010). However, most relevant studies sampled primary and secondary students in alphabetic language countries, such as the U.S., Europe and Australia. Thus far, only one study has examined the effect of preschool classroom SES in the U.S. (Reid & Ready, 2013). Regarding Chinese research, two studies based on primary school students validated the significant role that school SES plays in pupils' math achievement (Zhao, Valcke, Desoete, Verhaeghe, & Xu, 2011; Zhao, Valcke, Desoete, & Verhaeghe, 2012). Concerning the moderating role of school SES on family environment, past research has focused only on the family structure index (i.e., family SES) and

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has proposed that school SES moderates the effect of family SES (McConney & Perry, 2010a; Portes & Hao, 2004); no studies have examined how the effects of family processes (i.e., HLE and parenting) vary with preschool SES.

In China, preschool is the first formal and widespread educational stage, during which parents must pay tuition. Young parents in contemporary China (particularly in urban areas) greatly emphasize early education, not only by increasing their investment and supporting children's early development at home but also by working hard to send their children to better preschools. As a result, children are not randomly distributed within preschools. Those preschools that charge more (and which generally have higher quality) often include more children from higher SES families. Preventing unbalanced education opportunities at the early educational stage has become a focus of the government, and choosing a fitting preschool according to family status has become a serious concern of parents. These are the practical considerations of the present study.

Based on a Chinese preschool sample, the present study, for the first time, examines preschool SES's independent contributions to young children's development and its moderating roles in the effects of both family structure and family process. On the one hand, this study will fill an important gap in the literature about independent and moderating effects of preschool SES. On the other hand, it will highlight significant implications for politicians to help different classes of children succeed at school by balancing financial investment in education resources among preschools with different SESs. It will also provide guidance for Chinese parents to choose appropriate preschools for their children according to their family environment.

1.1. School SES and Its effect on children's school performance

Coleman and his group conducted the Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (EEOS) in 1964 to assess the availability of equal educational opportunities to children of different origin in America. According to data of 600,000 students from 4000 schools, they wrote the famous Coleman Report. The report showed that "the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's own social background, than is any school factor" (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 325). This statement underlined the importance of school composition. Educational researchers have identified school SES as an important stratified index of school composition, constituting the aggregate influence of school peers on students' school performances (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

Research has consistently found that school SES is an important predictor of students' academic achievement (Ryabov & Van Hook, 2007; Zhao et al., 2011), even over and beyond the effects of individual students' background characteristics, such as race (Okamoto, Herda, & Hartzog, 2013; Portes & Hao, 2004), family income and parental education (McConney & Perry, 2010b). A series of studies based on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) database found that in most countries, 15-year-old students performed better in schools with higher mean school SES (McConney & Perry, 2010b; OECD, 2004, 2005; Perry & McConney, 2010). A meta-analysis that integrated 30 studies on school SES in primary or secondary school showed that increases in school SES were consistently associated with increases in students' academic performance (Van Ewijk & Sleegers, 2010). In China, Zhao et al. (2011) carried out multilevel analyses on a sample of 10,959 Chinese primary school students in sixth grade and found that the aggregated SES of a school was a significant predictor of students' math performance.

Compared with academic achievement, far fewer studies have investigated the relationship between school SES and children's social behaviors. As an example, Greenman (2011) investigated the relationships between school characteristics and the substance use and delinquency patterns of 7–12th grade immigrant adolescents in America. Her analyses showed that both Asian and Hispanic immigrant youths were less

assimilated to native youths' substance use and delinquency patterns in lower-SES schools. Hoffmann's (2006) study used data from the 1990–1992 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of America and demonstrated that adolescents attending schools with a higher level of average student SES were more likely to use alcohol.

The studies mentioned above were mainly conducted regarding students in elementary and secondary schools. In many Western countries, such as the U.S. and Australia, pre-K programs are not formal and compulsory, as is K–12 education. Therefore, far less attention has been devoted to preschool SES. Only one related study, conducted by Reid and Ready (2013), investigated the effect of prekindergarten classroom SES on 4-year-old children's cognitive and social development over a sample of 2966 American children in 704 prekindergarten classrooms. The results indicated significantly positive associations between the mean SES of the class and children's language and mathematics skills. However, no associations were found between preschool class SES and children's social competence.

1.2. The moderating role of school SES in the family environment

As indicated by bio-ecological theory, family and school are not two independent systems. Instead, they influence each other (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and work together to promote children's development. The "goodness of fit" between family and school can be described from two perspectives (Bradley, McKelvey, & Whiteside-Mansell, 2011). One perspective is the "accumulating effect", or the "Matthew effect", where those who bring more from the family are likely to derive more benefit at school. Another perspective is the "compensatory effect", or the "attenuating effect", where those who bring less from the family are likely to benefit more at school.

Several studies have explored how the relationships between family SES and children's developmental outcomes vary with primary and secondary school SES (McConney & Perry, 2010b; Portes & Hao, 2004; Zhao et al., 2012). Mixed findings have emerged and supporting both the "Matthew effect" and the "compensatory effect". Using data from 5266 8th and 9th graders of the Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) in the United States, Portes and Hao (2004) found that schools of very-low SES neutralize the positive influence of family SES on academic achievement. Additionally, the positive interaction between family SES and students' academic achievement was most visible in high-status schools, which indicated that a high-SES school reinforced the positive effects of high family SES. However, research based on the PISA database of Australia showed that the association between 15-year-old students' math achievement and school SES tended to be stronger for lower-SES students than for their more privileged peers, which demonstrated that a high-SES school compensated for weaknesses such as low-SES students' math achievement (McConney & Perry, 2010a). Zhao et al. (2011) examined 10,959 Chinese primary school students' math achievements and found that Chinese students from disadvantaged families achieved more in schools with higher SES than did those who were enrolled in schools with lower and average SES.

Although no studies have directly investigated the moderating role of preschool SES on family SES, two studies about disadvantaged and low-income children attending different types of preschool programs have provided some enlightening insights. Schechter and Bye (2007) assessed the receptive language growth of two groups of low-income children, one attending target programs for low-income families and the other attending economically mixed preschool programs. The results indicated that children in the mixed preschool programs learned more than did those in low-income programs. Similar results were found by De Haan, Elbers, Hoofs, and Leseman (2013).

However, thus far, no researchers have directly explored the moderating role of school SES in family processes. One study that examined the moderating role of school characteristics (i.e., school poverty level) in the relationship between family support and adolescents'

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