

Closeness and Conflict in Malaysian Preschools: Quantitative Insights into Teacher–Child Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood classrooms are pivotal contexts where teacher–child relationships shape children’s socio-emotional and behavioural development, yet Malaysian evidence on these dynamics remains limited. This study, therefore, describes the quality of teacher–child relationships in Malaysian preschools using two STRS constructs, namely Closeness and Conflict, as well as tests gender differences on both subscales and the overall STRS score (male vs. female teachers). A total of 444 preschool teachers from urban and rural settings participated in this quantitative, descriptive-correlational study. Data were collected via the Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS-SF) administered through Google Forms and analysed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, SDs) and independent-samples t-tests. Findings indicate a warm, supportive classroom climate, characterised by high Closeness ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.79$) and low to moderate Conflict ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.11$). Gender comparisons revealed significant patterns: female teachers reported higher Closeness (estimated $d \approx 0.74$), whereas male teachers reported higher Conflict (estimated $d \approx 0.94$). For the overall STRS score, the difference was small but significant in favour of male teachers (Mean = 0.15). Overall, the results underscore the centrality of relational competencies in early childhood education and point to the need for professional development focused on co-regulation, supportive language, and escalation-prevention routines to maximise children’s well-being.

Keywords: Closeness, Conflict, Teacher- Gender, Preschool, Quantitative Study.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is very important in influencing social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioural growth of children. Preschool services in Malaysia have grown enormously during the last two decades, coupled with a greater emphasis on the social-emotional learning of children and their adaptation in the classroom setting. Early preschool is a critical period of development in which both environmental and interpersonal experiences could have lifelong effects on engagement and adaptive skills (Norling et al., 2015). The teacher-child relationships have been one of these early influences and have turned out to be predictors of social skills, self-regulation, and attendance in the classroom (Iruka et al., 2025; Portilla et al., 2014). International and local studies all demonstrate that secure and affirmative teacher-child bonds are protective in promoting positive development: high rates of proximity are associated with higher levels of prosocial behavior, collaboration, and emotional competence (McNally & Slutsky, 2018) whereas relationships that are marked by frequent fight-outs are likely to be related to less engagement and withdrawal of learning opportunities ((Magro et al., 2025)..

There is increasing research in the field of socio-emotional development of preschoolers in Malaysia, but the interplay between teacher-relational perception and children in their day-to-day adjustment is not well studied. Teacher-child relations are dynamic, culturally defined, normative, institutionalized, and individualized.

Relationship behaviours like politeness, respect, and empathy are practised in the Malaysian preschools as part of the daily interactions. They can either affect the perception of teachers as being close to their students or having a conflict with them. Simultaneously, teachers are faced with workload pressures, time requirements, and scarcity of resources that may interfere with the regularity of warm and sensitive relations (Sze Wah Chan et al., 2023). It has been known that teacher social-emotional competence and stress affect classroom climate and behaviour management (Chernicoff & Labra, 2024). The teaching of how these factors are brought together to influence the quality of relationships is critical in informing the teaching preparation and classroom assistance.

Based on an Attachment Theory, warm, sensitive, and responsive relationships in the classroom, statistical relationships of a school form a kind of safe base: the more sensitive and contingently responsive teachers are, the more children internalize safety cues leading to a rise in self-regulation, cooperation, and task focus (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Brock et al., 2018). Here, the quality of relationship that is secure-base is represented by STRS Closeness and the relational strain, which may impair the regulation and participation, is represented by STRS Conflict (Pianta, 2001). In addition to this, a co-regulation/social learning strategy focuses on how the daily teacher practices of complementary praise, explicit language of emotion, short periods of restorative repair after errors, and problem-solving modeling form cues of positive contingencies enhancing prosocial behavior and decreasing disruptive reactions (Frivold Kostol & Cameron, 2020).

Despite the popularity of educational tools such as Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) to measure the quality of relationships between students and teachers, it remains a relatively new tool in Malaysian contexts in early education. Consequently, the study has revealed a significant gap in the knowledge of the relationships between preschool teachers in Malaysia and how these relationships are connected with the initial indicators of classroom behavior and adaptation. The paper fills that gap by considering the assessment of the perceptions of relationship quality of the teachers and considering observable behaviors and participation among children through a standardized classroom screening, as well as quantifying and describing gender-specific variations in STRS Closeness and STRS Conflict among the Malaysian preschool teachers. Despite the inquiry of international research that teacher-child relationships that are emotionally supportive should facilitate cooperation and self-regulation, whereas conflictual relationships impair classroom engagement, not much is known regarding whether and how these relational attributes are systematically differentiated by teacher gender in Malaysian contexts, whereby *budi bahasa* (politeness) norms and role expectations could play a part in classroom interactions and classroom responsibility. The objective is to illuminate the relationship bases of early adjustment and learning participation with the view of offering working solutions to teachers, school heads, and policymakers who wish to enhance the preschool classroom settings and foster favorable developmental progressions of young children in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

The research approach of the study was a quantitative, descriptive-correlational design which aimed at investigating the perception of the quality of relationship between Malaysian preschool teachers and children as well as gauge the mental health of children they take care of. The method made the researchers recognize patterns, determine associations, and determine the intensity of the relationship existing between teacher-child relational quality and child mental health without controlling the variables, thereby preserving the natural classroom setting. A total of 444 preschool teachers were sampled using stratified random sampling in urban and rural regions in Malaysia to have a diverse and representative sample. These teachers participated in the early childhood education and had direct interaction with the children aged between 4 and 6 years every day, which makes them very helpful in providing information on the constructs under study. The sample demographic provided the opportunity to take into account the contextual variables including teaching experience, location of school, and academic qualifications.

The data characteristic was collected through Google form, which is a virtual and accessible platform and facilitates a broad distribution and managing of the responses. The online questionnaire was distributed within the official school communication and networks of preschool teachers including a cover letter covering the objective of the study, ethical considerations, and confidentiality. The involvement was voluntary, and informed consent was gained electronically, prior to accessing the questionnaire. They were conducted by using standardized instruments such as the Student-Teacher Relationship Short Form Scale (STRS-SF) to measure teacher perceptions of their emotional attachment to children in two dimensions, which are closeness and conflict. The SPSS version 26 was used to analyze the quantitative data. The research questions were addressed using descriptive (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (T-test). Ethical approval of the study was made by the EPRD, JPN and PPD, making the study in accordance with the ethics of research such as confidentiality of the participants, voluntary participation in the study, and the right to withdraw at any moment.

FINDINGS

A total of 444 preschool teachers participated, including 406 females (91.4%) and 38 males (8.6%). Most were in the mid-late career stage (41–50 years: 45.3%), followed by ages 31–40 (21.8%), 20–30 (15.3%), and 51 and above (17.6%). Regarding qualifications, 89.0% held a Bachelor's degree, and 10.8% held a Master's degree. Teaching experience varied, with 46.6% having 11–20 years, 24.3% more than 20 years, 17.6% less than 5 years, and 11.5% with 5–10 years. Participants were from urban areas (59.3%) and rural areas (40.8%). Brief demographic details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics.

Category	n	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	38	8.6
Female	406	91.4
Age		
20–30 years old	68	15.3
31–40 years old	97	21.8
41–50 years old	201	45.3
51-year-old and above	78	17.6
Level Education		
Degree	395	89.0
Master Degree	48	10.8
Location		
Urban Areas	263	59.3
Rural Areas	181	40.8

The item pattern supports this profile (see Table 4): 73.4% of teachers often reported having a warm relationship (Item 1), 84.5% stated pupils feel proud when praised (Item 6), 68.0% reported children spontaneously share stories (Item 7), 71.6% rated that pupils value the relationship (Item 5), and 56.3% said pupils are open in sharing feelings/experiences (Item 15). Conversely, conflict markers were less prominent: 55.9% strongly disagreed that pupils easily get angry at the teacher (Item 8) and 55.6% strongly disagreed that pupils are uncomfortable with affection/physical touch (Item 4). Nevertheless, some teachers reported localized challenges: 27.3% found dealing with the pupil exhausting (Item 11), 30.9% stated the pupil remained angry/defiant after discipline (Item 10), and 40.8% rated the pupil as sly/manipulative (Item 14).

Table 2. Frequency (%) of STRS Item Response Levels.

No.	Item	Not at all	Rarely	Neutral	Sometimes	Often
1	My relationship with the child is warm	0.0	0.7	15.3	10.6	73.4
2	It is hard to be with this child	30.4	35.8	10.8	20.9	2.0
3	Child seeks me when angry/sad	0.9	2.3	15.8	27.7	53.4
4	Child is uncomfortable with affection/touch	55.6	25.0	11.3	6.5	1.6
5	Child values the relationship with me	0.7	0.9	11.7	15.1	71.6
6	Child feels proud when I praise them	0.2	0.5	6.3	8.6	84.5
7	Child spontaneously shares stories	0.5	0.7	9.2	21.6	68.0
8	Child easily gets angry at me	55.9	30.4	9.9	3.2	0.7
9	I easily understand the child's feelings	0.7	1.1	18.0	34.2	45.9
10	Child remains angry/defiant after discipline	19.4	30.9	18.7	28.2	2.9
11	Dealing with this child is very exhausting	27.3	18.7	24.3	24.1	5.6
12	My day is difficult when child arrives in a bad mood	7.2	23.4	22.7	34.2	12.4
13	Child's feelings toward me are unpredictable	22.5	24.1	22.1	24.5	6.8
14	Child is sly/manipulative toward me	40.8	28.4	19.1	10.4	1.4
15	Child is open about feelings/experiences	1.1	3.8	15.1	23.6	56.3

Subscale mapping: Closeness = 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 15; Conflict = 2, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14.

Overall, the quality of teacher–child relationships was at a moderately high level (Overall mean = 3.34, SD = 0.44). By STRS subscales, Closeness was high (Mean = 4.47, SD = 0.79), while Conflict was low–moderate (Mean = 2.35, SD = 1.11), as shown in Table 2.

Table 3. Descriptives for STRS Subscales.

Construct	Items	Mean	SD
Closeness	7	4.47	0.79
Conflict	8	2.35	1.11
Overall	15	3.34	0.44

An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference in the Closeness of teacher–child relationships based on teacher gender, with female teachers reporting higher closeness (Mean = 4.51, SD = 0.54, $n = 406$) than male teachers (Mean = 4.09, SD = 0.79, $n = 38$), $t(442) = -4.353$, $p < .001$.

Table 4. Gender Differences in STRS Closeness (Independent-Samples t-Test).

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	38	4.09	0.79	-4.353	<0.001
Female	406	4.51	0.54		

A t-test also revealed a significant difference in Conflict, with male teachers reporting higher conflict (Mean = 2.94, SD = 0.84) than female teachers (Mean = 2.29, SD = 0.68), $t(442) = 5.416$, $p < .001$.

Table 5. Gender Differences in STRS Conflict (Independent-Samples t-Test).

Jantina	n	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	38	2.94	0.84	5.416	<0.001
Female	406	2.29	0.68		

DISCUSSION

In this study, it is demonstrated that the nature of the relationship in the Malaysian preschool classrooms is close and involves low levels of conflict; this implies that there is an emotionally supportive teacher-child relationship. Teachers were found to have a strong attachment towards low to moderate levels of conflict. This trend coincides with the fact that quality teacher-child relationships are necessary to the social, emotional and behavioral development of children. In the Malaysian cultural setup, high proximity and low to medium conflict is regarded as normal. The culture of politeness, empathy, and face-saving talk influences teacher-teacher relationships and makes the process of interaction sensitive and relationship-oriented, building a safe and respectful environment that helps kids look closer and open up (Ramli, 2013). Meaningful routines of the school environment as greetings, contemplation, songs, and storytelling give everyday chances of co-regulation which stabilizes mood and keeps minor disagreements at bay. These affectionate behaviours reinforce studies indicating that emotionally supportive teacher-child relationships improve the behavioral and academic adaptations of children (Bonilla et al., 2020).

The culturally favored indirect, face-saving forms of discipline promoted by the teachers culturally supported role as quasi-parental caregiver suits the wider Malay values of face and face-saving that are reported in Malaysian communication literature. These dynamics underscore the reason why the closeness is highly supported and the degree of conflict is low with some tensions that can be addressed through relationship-based practices. These practices are aligned with the international approaches to connect teacher social-emotional skills with positive classroom environments (Beckh & Becker-Stoll, 2016; Brock et al., 2018).

Simultaneously, the data indicate some controllable areas of friction that should be addressed. Significant numbers of teachers said that they felt exhaustion, persistent defiance following discipline and that they felt manipulative behavior. This data is a manifestation of one, self-motivating interaction loop and not three independent phenomena. In case of a limit, there is dysregulation of some children (increased arousal; lack of executive control) (Tonacci et al., 2019). When the adult response largely inhibits the overt behavior (e.g. compliance is obtained) without the regulation being restored, residual emotional arousal will be left. The Noncompliance or defiance which then is an unresolved arousal is experienced as less satisfying or irritating by the teachers, who then find it difficult and exhausting to handle (Karasova and Nehyba, 2025; Nele Flamant et al., 2023). In this situation, children get to know that certain strategies such as bargaining, splitting adults, avoidance occasionally, work (they postpone demands, seek attention or avoid) are easily recognized as manipulative.

Therefore, Items 10 and 14 demonstrate behavioral indications of insufficient control and poor repair of relationships, whereas Item 11 indicates the general load that the episodes put on teachers. This chain is supported by studies that associate teacher stress with reduced responsiveness and higher conflict (Kim and Hong, 2025), further emphasizing the role of teacher-child relationships quality in de-escalation and breaking coercive or negative reinforcement loops in which occasional rewards support oppositional behaviors (Williford and Vitiello, 2020). In practice, it implies that all the three indicators can be minimized simultaneously through strategies, including improving predictability, pre-regulating prior to any consequences, and finishing with short-lived restorative repair and explicit teaching of replacement skills help in reducing all three (a reduction in arousal (lessening defiance), a reduction in adult effectiveness (lessening exhaustion), and the elimination of the necessity of instrumental tactics).

In Malaysia, teacher-child relationship gender differences depict that female teachers indicate greater degrees of closeness, and male teachers indicate greater degrees of conflict. Three factors are connected and explain these differences. Sociocultural interaction scripts, in particular, norms of politeness and face-saving talk, are more likely to lead to verbally responsive, validating interactions that make warmth and proximity-seeking more frequent. But, when boundaries are imposed with less emphasis on emotional repair, the conflict in the transitions becomes more evident, especially with a teacher talk shorter and more task-oriented (refer to the association between emotion supportive teacher-child relationships and adaptive behavior). Second, due to the minority of men in early childhood education and care, role expectations and classroom roles can put them in high stress, big group, or outdoor leadership positions in which the threat of dysregulation and corrective encounters is increased. Perceptions of conflict can also be increased by teacher stress in such settings. Third, under time constraint, teachers might be driven to halting misbehavior in the moment instead of co-regulating and mending relationships. This may result in silent class rooms which contain untapped emotive strains that later come out as unceasing protests. These escalation cycles may be interrupted by applying preventive routines and brief restorative conversations.

IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATION

The trend of close and moderate conflict with low conflict and high coachable friction and a gendered interaction profile indicates that Malaysian preschools already have a high degree of relational capital that can be tapped instead of lost. Schools can transform daily warmth into disruptive capacity of the systematic de-escalation by sequencing discipline through predictability, co-regulation, brief restorative repairing and success re-entry, ultimately reducing residual arousal and teacher strain and maintaining cultural fit. On the system level, the consideration of the gender gap as contextual and task-dependent and not a trait issue shifts policy focus towards normalising high-leverage routines, implanting micro-coaching, and assessing results with unbiased measures (e.g., STRS with measurement-invariance tests). This method could enhance a better classroom climate, equity, and socio-emotional outcomes of children without diminishing culturally cherished practices.

Role-sensitive supports should be implemented in schools in order to reduce gender-associated disparities without augmenting stereotypes. The early coaching that male teachers who tend to be appointed to a higher-arousal or outdoor leadership position should get is to employ warm talk and co-regulation strategies in those contexts. Task rotation ought to be exercised in a way that leadership tasks of high-arousal are distributed more equally, avoiding the high-level exposure to escalation. Pairs of peer shadowing should be formed by matching high-closeness classrooms of teachers with those that have a higher level of conflict based on a brief one-page observation checklist.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper highlights the considerable impact of the quality of teacher-child relationship on mental well-being of preschoolers in the context of Malaysian early childhood education. Warm and supportive and emotionally connected interactions are closely related to the perception of teachers with the low levels of emotional and behavioral difficulties in children. This reinforces what is meant by the essential importance of educators not only as teachers, but as emotional representatives in the early development. Thus, training, policy support, and structural change to improve relational skills in teachers are not optional activities, but important investment in the mental health and future well-being of young children. Establishing good and caring teacher-child connections plays a vital role in the success of early learning and is a preventative strategy with long-term mental health consequences.

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