The Psychology of Parental Expectations: Examining Socioeconomic Factors in Early Childhood Education Settings

Yanjing Kang

Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai, China

Abstract: The 19th National Congress of China pointed out that the main social contradiction in China has changed into the contradiction between the people's growing need for a better life and the unbalanced and inadequate development. Pre-school education, as a public product of society, is gradually returning from the market-oriented tendency to public welfare which is facing a major reform and deployment. At the same time, parents' demand for preschool education is just the expectation of the public for social public products, which is gradually showing a trend of diversification. This research is based on the context of China's preschool education reform and the current situation of socioeconomic polarization, which studies the degree and content of parents' expectations for the role of preschool teachers. The method of hybrid research is used to explore the reasons behind the analysis of the impact of social class factors on expectations. The researcher found 9 kindergartens of all different classs in Shanghai, interviewed 31 parents in-depth, made a quantitative survey of 589 questionnaires, and finally concluded the following conclusions. In common, the common expectation of all classes is the expectation of love. Social class factors have the most significant influence on the personality and identity characteristics of teachers' roles. Parents of all classes have the highest expectation of the four characteristics of teachers' roles. The study found that "love" is a common expectation among all social classes, while higher social classes have higher and more specific expectations. Social class influences preferences, with lower-class families prioritizing academic preparation and higher-class families seeking individualized teaching and communication. These differences stem from differences in cultural, economic, and social capital that influence expectations based on school type, learning preferences, and parent involvement. The study concludes with recommendations for preschool education reform, including the introduction of a preschool education law, improved teacher status, and parent learning platforms.

1. Introduction

This study examines the relationship between parental socioeconomic status and expectations of preschool teachers, using Bourdieu's framework and a mixed-methods approach. It analyzes how parents from different social classes perceive teachers' roles across various characteristics, providing a comprehensive view of how socioeconomic status influences parental expectations in early

childhood education. By exploring similarities and differences among low, middle, and high socioeconomic classes, the research aims to offer insights and recommendations for improving preschool education across diverse social contexts, addressing gaps in the existing literature and contributing to a deeper understanding of socioeconomic factors affecting educational quality and accessibility.

2. Method

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to leverage the strengths of both.

3. Results

3.1. Qualitative research sample

(1) Classification characteristics of kindergartens
The researchers searched for 9 public kindergartens (1 municipal demonstration kindergarten, 3 first-class kindergartens, 1 second-class kindergarten) and private kindergartens (1 first-class kindergarten, 1 second-class kindergarten, 1 third-class kindergarten, and 1 international school kindergarten) in Pudong New District, which has the largest number of students in Shanghai. The way to find interviewees is to interview parents of different classes recommended by kindergarten principals or teachers. The characteristics of various types of kindergarten education are shown in the table1:

Table 1: Characteristics of kindergarten education

School Nature	Admission Method	Admission difficulty	Hardware failities	Teachers' education	Teachers' stability	Tuition per month	Bilingual
Public demonstration	Address/self	difficult	very good	bachelor	high	700	no
Public-1	address	medium	good	associate	high	225	no
Public-2	address	easy	good	associate	Medium-high	175	no
Private-1	self	difficult	good	Bachelor more	medium	5000-15000	yes
Private-2	self	medium	good	associate	medium	5000-15000	yes
Private-3	self	easy	medium	associate	medium	700-1000	no
Private-international	self	difficult	very good	Bachelor more	medium	15000-20000	yes

(2) Interview subjects and coding
This qualitative study involved 31 interviews with parents (25 mothers, 6 fathers) of preschool children, conducted in kindergarten meeting rooms, reading classrooms, or participants' homes or workplaces. The sample included parents of 16 boys and 15 girls across small (8), middle (11), and large (12) classes. Using the SES social stratification method, participants were classified into low (10), middle (12), and high (9) social classes based on maternal education, paternal occupation, and family income. To ensure ethical research practices, the study anonymized participants and institutions, using a coding system for nine kindergartens ranging from municipal demonstrations to international schools.

3.2. Quantitative research sample

A total of 720 questionnaires were distributed and 651 were collected, of which 589 were valid,

indicating that the questionnaire had an effective rate of about 90.48%.

Distribution of questionnaires

This study employed a stratified random sampling approach in Shanghai's Pudong New Area, selecting 9 kindergartens across various quality levels and types (public and private). The researchers distributed 720 questionnaires across 27 classes (9 each of large, medium, and small) in these kindergartens. The distribution ratio (64.7% public, 35.3% private) closely mirrored Shanghai's preschool education landscape, with 59.2% of public questionnaires going to first-class kindergartens. This sampling strategy aimed to ensure representativeness by maximizing heterogeneity between strata and homogeneity within strata, aligning with Shanghai's preschool education demographics and quality distribution.

The distribution and distribution are shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Kindergarten Questionnaire Distribution

School Type	Type	N	Toddler	Pre-K	Grade K	Questionnaire Distribution
Public	Demonstration	A	33	32	34	99
Public	Class-1 A	B	32	31	30	93
Public	Class-1 B	C	30	30	31	91
Public	Class-1 C	D	31	30	31	92
Public	Class-2	E	30	31	30	91
Private	Class-3	F	33	33	32	98
Private	Class-2	G	19	19	18	56
Private	Class-1	H	15	16	16	47
Private	International	I	18	17	18	53
Total			241	239	240	**720**

In this survey, a total of 720 questionnaires were distributed and 651 were collected, of which 589 were valid, indicating that the questionnaire efficiency was about 81.81%. The researchers first conducted a first round of non-statistical logical screening of the questionnaires through Excel table analysis, and screened and eliminated invalid questionnaires according to the following principles for the collected questionnaires.

3.3. Phases

(1) Phase I: Qualitative research steps

This mixed-methods study began with qualitative interviews of parents from different social classes, recommended by kindergarten principals or teachers. The sample comprised 9 upper-class, 12 middle-class, and 10 lower-class participants, totaling 31 interviewees across the three social strata.

(2) Phase II: Quantitative research steps

1) Theoretical framework of the questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire is the introduction, which explains the purpose of designing this questionnaire and the ethical decision to require anonymity for all participants. The second part of the questionnaire was designed and based on the researcher's reading of a large number of research literature on social stratification, family background, etc. Further reference was made to the ideas of sociologist Max Weber: the division of social hierarchy can be divided by wealth, prestige, and power.[1] Li Qiang's point of view: The socioeconomic status scale measures income status, educational status, and occupational status, and calculates their comprehensive value to reflect a person's comprehensive social status.[2] In addition, the "Socioeconomic Status Scale of Chinese Cities" was referenced, which divides the research subjects into 5 relatively complicated classes: high, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and low. Referring to the socioeconomic status scale framework

proposed by Fan Xiaoguang[3] and American sociologist Duncan[4], the social status of a child's family is mainly based on three factors: the father's occupation, education, and family income. Since most young children are primarily cared for and accompanied by their mothers, this study will use the mother's educational background as the basis for evaluation. Finally, it was determined that the comprehensive score of the three dimensions would be used as the stratification index for the social class of parents: The specific scoring method of the assignment standard is shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Assignment Standard Table

Content	Category	points	range
Mother education	College and below	1	1-3
	Undergraduate	2	
	Graduate and above	3	
Father occupation	Workers, farmers	1	1-3
	Professional and technical personnel	2	
	Manager, boss	3	
Family annual income	Below 200 thousand	0.75	1-3
	200-400 thousand	1.5	
	400-800 thousand	2.25	
	More 800 thousand	3	

According to the proportion of the total score, the total scores and stratification of the three items are shown in Table 3.

5 or less is the low class, 5 (inclusive) -7 is the middle class, and 7 (inclusive) -9 is the high class. The calculation formula is:

Social stratification score = father's occupation score + mother's education score + family annual income score

Table 4: Statistics of social background of valid samples

Content	Category	people	(%)	assign
Mother education	College and below	122	20.71	1
	Undergraduate	342	58.06	2
	Graduate and above	125	21.22	3
		589	100.00	
Father occupation	Workers, farmers	135	22.92	1
	Professional and technical personnel	207	35.14	2
	Manager, boss	247	41.94	3
		589	100	
Family annual income	Below 200 thousand	90	15.28	0.75
	200-400 thousand	187	31.75	1.5
	400-800 thousand	189	32.09	2.25
	More 800 thousand	123	20.88	3
Total		589	100.00	

In table 4, among the mother's education class, the percentage of undergraduates is the largest,

which is 58.06%. Among the father's occupations, the largest percentage is middle and senior management personnel of enterprises and institutions and private owners, which is 41.94%. The largest percentage of family annual income is between 200,000 and 800,000, which is about 34%.

The data samples after social stratification of the 589 valid samples according to the calculation formula are as follows in Table 5:

Table 5: Social stratification and school distribution of effective samples

Class	people	(%)	Main school class
low	148	25.13	Private Class 3/Public Class 1/2
middle	224	38.03	Public Demonstration/ Private Class 1/2
high	217	36.84	Public Demonstration/ Private Class 1/International
total	589	100.00	

This study on parental expectations of preschool teachers used a mixed-methods approach. The sample of 589 participants was stratified into low (25.13%), middle (38.03%), and high (36.84%) social classes based on parental occupation, education, and income. The questionnaire, developed from literature review and interview findings, used a 5-point Likert scale to measure expectations across four dimensions. (Table 6)

Table 6: Empirical analysis of parents' expectations for preschool teachers
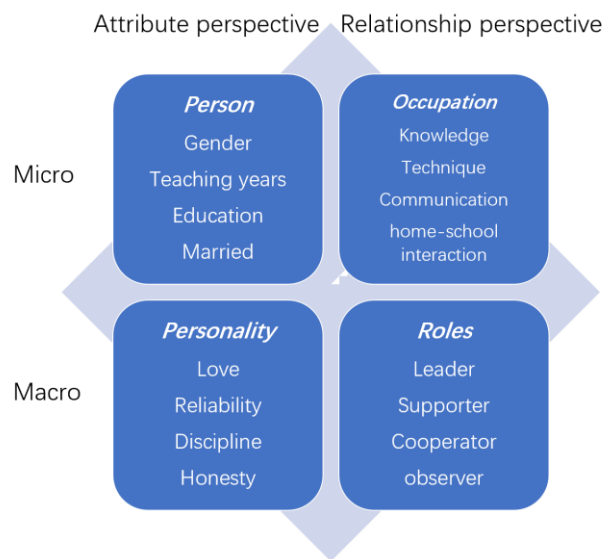
The questionnaire consists of 26 questions in three sections. The first part explains the purpose and ensures participant anonymity. The second part gathers basic parental information (6 questions) covering the child's gender, class, parental relationship, father's occupation, mother's education, and family income. The third part addresses expectations of preschool teacher characteristics across four dimensions (20 questions).

(3) Phase III: The third stage: integration of research steps

The researchers used a mixed-methods approach to analyze parental expectations for preschool teachers across social classes. Quantitative data enabled class comparisons, confirming or challenging findings from qualitative grounded theory interviews and providing deeper insights. The integration of both methods reduced biases, and supplementary interviews explored specific details, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social class and expectations in early childhood education.

3.4. Reliability and Validity Test

(1) Validity Test

The four dimensions of the second part of the questionnaire, a total of 20 questions.

Table 7: KMO and Bartlett test

KMO sampling suitability measure		0.915
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Chi-square last read	5909.885
	Degrees of Freedom	190
	Significance	0.000

Table7 shows a KMO value of 0.915 and a significant Bartlett's test (χ^2 = 5909.885, df = 190, p < 0.05), indicating the scale's suitability for factor analysis. The study employs confirmatory factor analysis to preliminarily validate the proposed research variables.

Table 8: Factor loading table

Question	Factor Loading
Teacher Gender	0.636
Longer teaching experience	0.785
Higher Education	0.793
Being a parent	0.685
Psychological knowledge	0.732
Arts and sports skills	0.763
Step by step	0.728
Teaching in advance	0.783
Fairness and justice	0.556
Teaching students in accordance with their aptitude	0.487
Communication frequency	0.442
Communication method	0.593
Love the job and be dedicated	0.753
Safety precautions	0.813
Teaching with integrity	0.722
Adherence to principles	0.790
Leader role	0.734
Supporter role	0.780
Collaborator role	0.796
Observer role	0.765

Table8 is the factor loading table. It can be seen from the table that the factor loading corresponding to each item in the scale is greater than 0.4, indicating that the scale has good validity.

(2) Reliability Analysis

Table 9: Reliability Analysis Table

Scale	Cronbach's coefficient	Number of items
Person	0.705	4
Occupation	0.724	8
Personality	0.899	4
Roles	0.885	4
Total table	0.844	20

Reliability analysis is the main method to test the reliability and stability of the scale. The most commonly used method for reliability analysis is Cronbach's coefficient. As shown in Table 9, the

Cronbach's coefficients of the person, occupation, personality, roles and the total scale are 0.705, 0.724, 0.899, 0.885, and 0.844, respectively, all greater than 0.7, indicating that the internal reliability of each scale is good, which can explain that the internal consistency of these 20 questions is good.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

There are a lot of data need to be analysis in the procedure, here is one analysis procedure of one spot. This data is about the gender, the high class prefer the male teachers. Professor Wu Kangning pointed out that there are gender role differences between men and women, so much so that they form a sharp contrast in many industries.[5] (Table 10)

Table 10: Frequency analysis of parents' expectations of teachers' gender

Expected value	Sample size	%
1	65	11.0%
2	30	5.1%
3	163	27.7%
4	121	20.5%
5	210	35.7%

Table 11: Cross-analysis of parents' expectations of teachers' gender in different social classes

Expected value	Low class(n=148)	Middle class(n=224)	High class(n=217)	p	χ^2
1	22(14.9%)	30(13.4%)	13(6.0%)	<0.001	34.689
2	15(10.1%)	8(3.6%)	7(3.2%)		
3	46(31.1%)	66(29.5%)	51(23.5%)		
4	32(21.6%)	43(19.2%)	46(21.2%)		
5	33(22.3%)	77(34.4%)	100(46.1%)		

As shown in Table11, based on the cross-analysis of different expectations of teachers' gender by parents from different social classes, we obtained χ2=34.689, P<0.001. Different social classes have different views on "a certain proportion of male teachers in kindergartens". (Table 12)

Table 12: Variance analysis of parents' expectations of teachers' gender in different social classes

project	Low class(n=148)		Middle class(n=224)		High class(n=217)		total(N=589)		Significance	Pairwise comparisons between groups(P)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Sig	Low:middle	Low:high	Middle:high
Male teacher	3.405	1.250	3.612	1.237	4.005	1.137	3.705	1.227	0.000	0.107	0.000	0.001

This study reveals significant class-based differences in parental expectations for male preschool teachers. Upper-class parents show the highest expectation (mean 4.005) for a certain proportion of male teachers, followed by middle-class (3.612) and lower-class parents (3.405). Statistical analysis (F-test, p<0.05) confirms significant differences between classes, with pairwise comparisons showing significant disparities between upper and lower classes (p=0.000) and upper and middle classes (p=0.001). These findings suggest that higher social class correlates with stronger expectations for gender diversity among preschool teachers, potentially reflecting broader views on gender roles in early childhood education. The interview content is excerpted as follows:

"I think if kindergartens can take safety measures, it would be good to have more male teachers. Kindergarten children can't speak clearly, sometimes they don't understand what's going on, and sometimes they don't know how to tell their parents when they encounter some problems." -D1 Parent, lower class

"Because we have a daughter, if the gender is a male teacher, of course, apart from the negative social news, purely from the perspective of gender, I accept male teachers. I think male teachers may be quite different from female teachers in the teaching process." -I2 Parent, upper class

4. Conclusion

1) Conclusion

Dong Caisheng and others pointed out that the core of contemporary Chinese sociology is harmonious social order and its construction.[6] This study reveals significant class-based disparities in parental expectations of preschool teachers. Lower-class parents prioritize basic care and safety, often feeling powerless to express demands, while upper-class parents have high expectations for teachers' moral character and actively engage in their children's education. These differences reflect how socioeconomic status influences perceptions of early childhood education. Across all classes, "love" is universally prioritized as the most important teacher quality. The research highlights how education tends to reproduce existing social hierarchies through class-based expectations, with higher-class parents often choosing private schools to convert economic capital into cultural capital. Additionally, factors such as family structure, child characteristics, and family dynamics further shape parental expectations, illustrating the complex interplay of influences beyond socioeconomic status in early childhood education.

2) Suggestions

The government's plan pointed out that preschool education publicity activities should be carried out from multiple perspectives, channels and forms. That meeting the different choice needs of parents is based on the different expectations of parents from different classes for education.[7]

Based on the study's findings, five key recommendations are proposed: 1) Expedite the Preschool Education Law to establish a comprehensive legal framework; 2) Standardize private kindergarten management to ensure quality across socioeconomic classes; 3) Promote a positive image of preschool teachers through media campaigns; 4) Enhance the social status of kindergarten teachers by improving professional standards and compensation; and 5) Develop parent learning platforms to bridge knowledge gaps and encourage involvement across all social classes. These measures aim to create a more equitable preschool education system that respects diverse needs while maintaining high standards of care and education for all children.

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