

# The Influence of Teacher Criticism on Students' Self-esteem: The Mediating Role of Teacher-Student Relationship

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*Teacher criticism affects students' self-esteem, which is not conducive to establishing a healthy relationship between teachers and students. However, previous studies did not consider whether teacher-student relationship can reduce the negative impacts of teacher criticism on students' self-esteem. This study examined the use of teachers' critical language in a Chinese context, the predictive effects of different types of critical language on students' self-esteem, and the mediating effects of teacher-student relationship on critical language and students' self-esteem. Results showed that: (a) there were significant gender and grade differences in teacher criticism, teacher-student relations, and student self-esteem; (b) person-oriented criticism negatively predicted students' self-esteem, while process-oriented criticism positively predicted students' self-esteem; (c) teacher-student relationships played a complete mediating role between person-oriented criticism and students' self-esteem, as well as a partial mediating role between process-oriented criticism and students' self-esteem. These results indicated that teachers should be more reflective of their criticisms to maintain a healthy relationship with students and improve students' self-esteem.*

*Keywords: teacher criticism; self-esteem; teacher-student relationship; mediating effect*

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## **Introduction**

Since ancient times in China, respecting teachers and attaching importance to teaching have been emphasized, and teachers have always had a dominant position in the teaching process. With the continuous development of educational reform in recent years, China's educational philosophy has gradually changed from being "teacher-centered" to "student-centered" (Han et al., 2015), fundamentally improving the status of students, emphasizing the equal status of teachers and students. With the misconception that teacher-student relationship should be equal and the denunciation of teacher criticism of students by online media, nowadays more teachers are unwilling to criticize or dare not criticize students (Kong, 2011).

However, teacher criticism is an indispensable part of teaching. It helps students to understand teachers' views on their learning, thus improving students' academic level (Hattie & Timperley, 2007); teacher criticism can also help students adjust their behavior and their relationships with classmates to better adapt to campus life (Mizokawa, 2015). Meanwhile, teacher criticism will also affect students' self-esteem level (Hamre & Pianta, 2005) and teacher-student relationship (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). Especially for primary and middle school students, their views on right and wrong are undeveloped; they will inevitably make mistakes in their study and life, requiring teachers to correct and guide them over time. Criticism is an art, which should be based on respect for students' personalities. The purpose of criticism is to correct students' misconduct and guide their positive changes. However, inappropriate criticism will have negative impacts on students. Therefore, for the healthy growth and success of students, teachers should neither give up their right to criticize students, nor abuse their right to criticize students in inappropriate ways. Based on China's educational background, this study attempted to explore the current situation of teacher criticism and its influence on students.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Teacher Criticism***

Teacher criticism refers to a dynamic process in which teachers pass on their requirements to students through symbols such as language, to stop and change students' inappropriate words and deeds, encouraging them to make positive changes (Louden, 2008). In essence, teacher criticism of students is a kind of teacher-student interaction. Early studies

on teacher criticism mostly focused on its negative effects and contended teacher criticism of students is mostly negative evaluation. Teachers using shame, exposure, questioning, and sarcasm tend to cause students to have negative emotions such as resentment, hostility, frustration, anxiety, and withdrawal, and this will also initiate students' self-defense mechanism (Gordon, 1974) and damage their dignity, as well as mental and psychological health.

Follow-up studies paid attention to the positive role of teacher criticism, and divided teacher criticism into constructive criticism and destructive criticism. The former refers to the positive behavior of teachers trying to help correct students' mistakes and shortcomings, while the latter refers to the inability of teachers to rationally evaluate students' bad thoughts and behaviors (Ren, 1996). In addition, Dweck (1999) divided criticism into person-oriented criticism and process-oriented criticism: person-oriented criticism results to criticism about particular personality traits, such as "you are really stupid," while process-oriented criticism points out students' failure to meet the required standards and tells students what else they can do to succeed, such as "you just need to work harder."

Children who receive person-oriented criticism often experience negative self-awareness, challenge avoidance, low task persistence, low academic performance, and tend to display helpless responses (Kamins & Dweck, 1999); children who receive process-oriented criticism will show more positive reactions and insist on completing tasks (Dweck, 1999). In addition, Hu (2004) further distinguished two psychological effects of criticism, namely positive effects and negative effects, and thought that positive effects of criticism could restrain students' bad tendencies, while negative effects might restrain students' positive psychology to a certain extent. Previous studies on the consequences of teacher criticism have found teacher criticism affects students' self-esteem, self-concept, mental health, and teacher-student relationship (Weinstein et al., 1982). Teacher criticism with different orientations affects children's and adolescents' perception of self-ability and value, and a sense of ability and value are the two factors forming self-esteem (Branden, 1969), therefore teacher criticism affects children's and adolescents' self-esteem level.

### ***Influence of Teacher Criticism on Self-esteem***

Self-esteem is an individual's positive or negative evaluation of himself or herself (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is one of the most important variables in the study of children and adolescents, having an important influence on the development of self-cognition, self-judgment, and the self-concept of them (Mruk, 2013). Adolescents'

self-esteem has significant age and gender differences (Bachman et al., 2011). Studies have shown that the self-esteem scores of boys are significantly higher than that of girls (Moksnes & Lazarewicz, 2016), or the difference between the two is not significant (Mo et al., 2020). Meta-analysis also showed that students' self-esteem generally increases with age (D. Liu & Xin, 2015). Teacher criticism affects the development of children's self-esteem. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, teachers pass on their critical information (such as evaluation and dissatisfaction) to students through verbal symbols. Students recognize the teachers' critical information and make adjustment feedback, while self-esteem will be affected by the direct and indirect feedback received during interaction with others (Cooley, 1902).

Teachers' person-oriented criticism expresses dissatisfaction with individuals, making students attribute their failure or wrong undesired to their deficiencies, causing negative views of themselves and leading them to think they have no value or ability (Garbarino & deLara, 2003). As far as students are concerned, teachers are more authoritative than their peers, and their criticism can decrease students' confidence and reduce self-evaluation to a greater extent (Mizokawa, 2015). Process-oriented teacher criticism is pragmatic, not denying a person's ability, but pointing out the shortcomings in the process. Students will not doubt their ability and deny their value, attributing failure to unstable factors, thus maintaining a high level of self-esteem (Dweck, 1999; Skipper & Douglas, 2015). Therefore, different orientations of teacher criticism have different influences on students' self-esteem.

### ***Influence of Teacher Criticism on Teacher-Student Relationship***

In addition, teacher-student relationship is one of the most important social relationships for children and adolescents in school (Lee et al., 2018). As an extension of parent-child relationship, it affects campus adaptation and the prosocial behavior of children and adolescents (Pianta et al., 2003), and has significant gender and age differences. Girls scored significantly higher than boys in intimacy, support and satisfaction, and significantly lower than boys in conflict (Y. Sun & Wang, 2020). Meanwhile, as age increases, teacher-student conflict gradually increases, and teacher-student intimacy gradually decrease (Ansari et al., 2020). A high-quality teacher-student relationship is very important to student development and personal happiness (McFarland et al., 2016). Teacher criticism is an important factor affecting teacher-student relationship. Teacher-student relationship is the psychological relationship between teachers and students in the form of emotion, cognition,

and behavior interaction (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Criticism gives students a chance to understand the teacher's evaluation of them (Skipper & Douglas, 2015), affecting students' perception of their relationships with the teacher.

Person-oriented criticism will make students feel teachers are targeting them and lead to active avoidance, thus forming a negative teacher-student relationship (Burnett, 2002). When teachers classify the poor performance of students as being due to particular personality traits, students will feel they have been treated unfairly (Heyman & Legare, 2005), which may cause them to dislike the teachers. Meanwhile, students who are criticized personally will not receive teacher criticism but will refute the criticism and have more conflicts with teachers (Baron, 1988). However, students who get more process-oriented criticism from teachers get more suggestions and guidance from teacher criticism, and think teachers have higher expectations for them (Meyer, 1992). They will be more willing to communicate with teachers more and form a more active teacher-student relationship (Burnett, 2002). Students' perception of their relationships with teachers differs due to the criticism of different orientations of teachers. It can be seen that teachers' critical orientation affects students' perception of teacher-student relationship, affecting the interaction between teachers and students.

### ***Teacher Criticism, Self-esteem, and Teacher-Student Relationship***

Teacher criticism affects both teacher-student relationship and students' self-esteem (Mizokawa, 2015). Teachers' negative comments make students feel disrespected and fearful in their interactions with teachers, and they may feel worthless and lack confidence (Garbarino & deLara, 2003; Mizokawa, 2015). However, it is still unclear whether teacher criticism affects students' self-esteem through teacher-student relationship. Many studies have shown that teacher-student relationship affects students' self-esteem level (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Y. Liu, Li, et al., 2015; Pianta et al., 2003). Among them, a bad teacher-student relationship may cause students to have a negative feeling toward school, retreat from the school environment, be alienated from teachers and classmates, and display aggressive behaviors, thus affecting their academic achievements and lowering their self-esteem (Pianta et al., 2003). Whether a bad teacher-student relationship enhances the influence of person-oriented criticism on students' self-esteem requires further discussion. In addition, a good teacher-student relationship can predict students' self-esteem (Y. Liu, Li, et al., 2015). Teachers' concern and support for students will make students more interested

in learning (Luo et al., 2020), helping students achieve higher grades and reach higher self-esteem level (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). A good teacher-student relationship can regulate children's emotional and behavioral problems (Y. Liu, Li, et al., 2015), which may buffer the adverse effects of teacher criticism, thus protecting students' self-esteem. Based on this, this study suggested that teacher-student relationship may play a bridging role between teacher criticism and students' self-esteem.

### ***The Present Study***

Presently, most studies on teacher criticism and students' self-esteem are based on students' sensitivity to teacher criticism (Mizokawa, 2015), seldom considering the influence of different types of teacher criticism on students. Although there were many studies on the influence of teacher-student relationship on students' self-esteem (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pianta et al., 2003), few studies have examined the role of teacher-student relationship between teacher criticism and students' self-esteem. This study analyzed the relationship between teacher-student relationship, teacher criticism, and students' self-esteem in the Chinese context, which has two important ramifications. First of all, China's educational philosophy has gradually changed from "strictly teacher-centered" to "student-oriented." The current situation of teacher criticism and its influence may differ from those of Western countries. Second, China has always been a country that respects teachers (He, 2017). Education is placed in a very high position in China. And teachers, as the main implementor of educational practice, are also in a high and respected position (Y. Zhang, 2018). Teacher-student relationship is an important interpersonal relationship between teachers and students, which will have a greater impact on students' self-esteem. Particularly in China, students spend most of their time in school, and the influence of teacher-student relationship on students' psychological development may be more important. The specific purposes of this study were as follows:

1. Examining the current situation of teacher criticism, teacher-student relationship, and students' self-esteem;
2. Exploring whether teacher-student relationship plays a mediating role between teacher criticism and the self-esteem of students.

## **Research method**

### ***Participants and Procedure***

This study selected a primary school, a junior high school, and a senior high school in Suzhou for stratified random sampling. The data was collected in 2018, and 1,200 primary and middle school students were randomly selected as the research objects; 69 invalid surveys were eliminated due to obvious regularity answer or have missing data, with 1,131 valid questionnaires being recovered (effective recovery rate was 94.25%). Among them, 208 were in Grade 2 (18.39%), 228 were in Grade 4 (20.16%), 226 were in Grade 6 (19.98%), 242 were in Grade 8 (21.40%), and 227 were in Grade 11(20.07%). There were 560 boys (49.51%) and 571 girls (50.49%). Because students in Grades 7 and 10 are in the first year of junior high and senior high academic transition period and need to adapt to a new learning pace, and students in Grades 9 and 12 are about to face entrance examinations and are under high pressure, for high school, this study only selected Grades 8 and 11 to conduct data collection.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Soochow University. The principal of each school was contacted to obtain their permission. Students in selected classes gave their consent and had the right to withdraw from the research. Research methods and questionnaire guidance were explained to students and teachers. With the assistance of class teachers, the same researchers distributed questionnaires to students in the classroom and the questionnaires were completed on the spot. All questionnaires were filled anonymously. In order to reduce the bias of social desirability, the teacher criticism questionnaire and the teacher-student relationship questionnaire were answered by students, and the teacher-student relationship questionnaire and students' self-esteem questionnaire both used straightforward scoring items and reversed scoring items to control for the participants' default response style. The results were kept confidential and were only used for this study.

### ***Measures***

#### **Teacher criticism questionnaire**

In the preliminary survey, three classes of primary school (Grades 2, 4, and 6), junior high school (Grade 8), and senior high school (Grade 11) were observed based on relevant research on teachers' critical language (Garbarino & deLara, 2003; Skipper & Douglas,

2015). A teacher criticism questionnaire was prepared based on the observation results. The questionnaire was filled out by students to examine their perception of teacher criticism. It had a total of 13 questions, including 8 questions on person-oriented criticism (e.g., “My teacher will use different phrases to attack me personally”) and 5 questions on process-oriented criticism (e.g., “My teacher will put forward constructive suggestions”). Based on their experiences, students evaluated the frequencies of each type of teacher criticism. A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The higher the score, the more frequently students perceived teachers as using such critical language (see Appendix). The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was between .73 and .88 for each dimension and the total questionnaire. Confirmatory factor analysis showed the questionnaire was structurally valid (GFI = .94, IFI = .96, NFI = .92, CFI = .96, REMSA = .05).

### **Teacher-student relationship scale**

This study used a teacher-student relationship survey revised by Zou et al. (2007) from that of Pianta and Nimetz (1991). There were 23 items in the revised questionnaire, divided into four dimensions: intimacy, low conflict, support, and satisfaction. For example, “My relationship with my teacher is intimate and warm.” According to the students’ relationship with their teacher, they used a 5-point Likert scale to rate the degree of conformity of the situation described, ranging from 1 (completely inconsistent) to 5 (completely consistent). High scores on all dimensions indicated high levels of intimacy, support, satisfaction, and low conflict with teachers. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of each dimension is between .71 and .87 respectively. Confirmatory factor analysis showed the questionnaire was structurally valid (GFI = .91, TLI = .91, CFI = .92, REMSA = .06).

### **Self-esteem scale**

In this study, the self-esteem scale (Shen & Cai, 2008) revised from Rosenberg (1965) was used to assess the overall feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance. The scale consisted of 10 items, and participants directly reported whether these descriptions were consistent with themselves. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 4 (completely agree). The overall score ranged from 10 to 40, with a higher score indicating higher self-esteem. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of the scale was .88, and the retest reliability was .85.



## **Data analysis**

SPSS 20.0 and AMOS 23.0 were used to process the data. Firstly, independent *t*-test and ANOVA were used to explore the differences of person-oriented/process-oriented criticism, teacher-student relationship, and self-esteem among different genders and grades. Secondly, by converting the data of variables into Z-score, a line chart was constructed to analyze the changing trend of students' perceived teacher criticism, teacher-student relationship, and self-esteem at each grade. Finally, after the correlation analysis, maximum likelihood estimation was used to construct a structural equation model of person-oriented/process-oriented criticism, teacher-student relationship, and self-esteem to explore whether the teacher-student relationship plays a mediating role in teacher criticism and student self-esteem. Model fit was evaluated based upon several commonly used fit indices, including the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), the normed fit index (NFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), with the former five indices  $\geq .90$  and  $RMSEA \leq .08$  considered favorable (Kline, 2005).

Harman's single factor method (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was used to perform a common method deviation test before statistical analysis. After the factor analysis, 9 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were obtained, and the variance explained by the first factor was 19.75%, which was much less than the critical value of 40.00%. It can be seen that there is no serious common method bias in this study, which is suitable for testing the mediation effect. Maximum likelihood estimation was used to handle missing values.

## **Results**

### ***The Present Situation of Teacher Criticism, Teacher-Student Relationship, and Self-esteem in a Chinese Context***

This study found significant differences in person-oriented teacher criticism, process-oriented teacher criticism, teacher-student relationship, and self-esteem between different genders. Boys received less process-oriented criticism from teachers than girls ( $t = -2.76, p < .01$ ), and more person-oriented criticism from teachers than girls ( $t = 3.50, p < .001$ ). The quality of teacher-student relationships between boys and teachers was lower than that between girls and teachers ( $t = -3.37, p < .01$ ). The self-esteem of boys was significantly lower than that of girls ( $t = -2.59, p < .05$ ). There were significant differences

**Table 1: Differences in Teacher Criticism, Teacher-Student Relationship, and Self-esteem by Gender and Grade (N = 1,131)**

	Boy		Girl		t	Grade 2		Grade 4		Grade 6		Grade 8		Grade 11		F	$\eta^2$
	n = 560		n = 571			n = 208		n = 228		n = 226		n = 242		n = 227			
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Pr-OC	15.31	4.93	16.14	5.19	-2.76**	13.79	5.55	14.72	4.99	17.91	4.89	16.57	4.72	15.45	4.24	23.85***	.08
Ps-OC	16.95	7.48	15.51	6.25	3.50***	12.89	6.43	13.61	5.03	15.52	6.46	19.38	6.98	19.24	6.74	52.13***	.16
TSR-I	2.87	0.91	3.03	0.94	-3.00**	3.33	0.96	3.35	0.84	3.21	0.85	2.62	0.75	2.29	0.93	75.71***	.21
TSR-Spt	3.45	0.87	3.63	0.87	-2.42*	3.80	0.86	3.81	0.76	3.98	0.71	3.46	0.79	2.79	0.70	87.05***	.24
TSR-Stf	3.33	0.77	3.33	0.82	-0.12	3.52	0.72	3.52	0.79	3.56	0.79	3.06	0.78	3.00	0.70	30.60***	.10
TSR-C	2.33	0.90	2.07	0.72	5.43***	2.23	0.93	1.94	0.72	1.94	0.79	2.39	0.80	2.46	0.73	21.16***	.07
TSR	3.42	0.63	3.55	0.64	-3.37**	3.68	0.59	3.75	0.56	3.77	0.58	3.27	0.58	2.99	0.47	86.91***	.24
SE	23.35	2.57	23.77	2.88	-2.59*	22.72	3.65	23.87	2.30	23.84	2.74	23.99	2.36	23.27	2.34	8.57***	.03

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Note: Pr-OC = process-oriented criticism; Ps-OC = person-oriented criticism; TSR-I = teacher-student relationship — intimacy; TSR-Spt = teacher-student relationship — support; TSR-Stf = teacher-student relationship — satisfaction; TSR-C = teacher-student relationship — low conflict; TSR = total score of teacher-student relationship; SE = self-esteem.

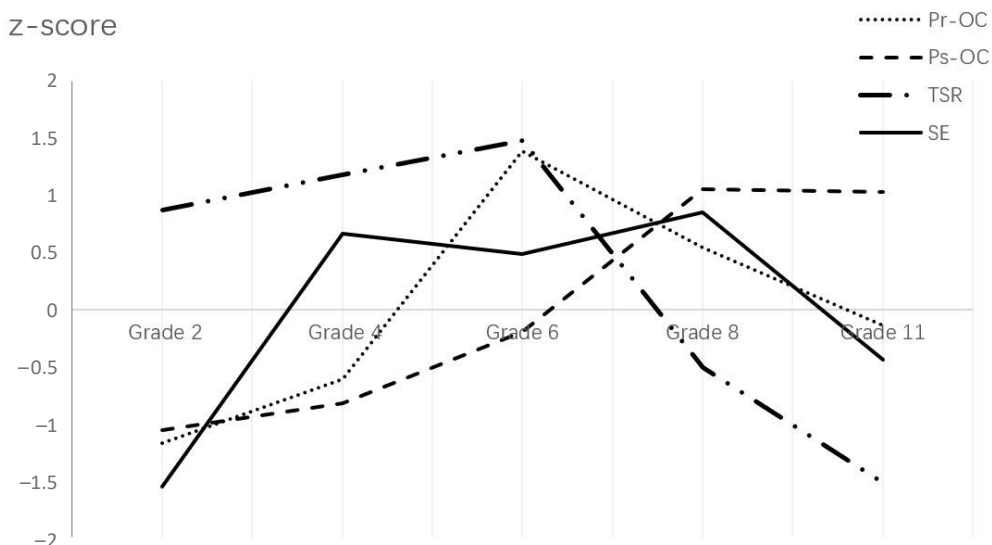
in person-oriented criticism, process-oriented criticism, the dimensions of teacher criticism, teacher-student relationship, and self-esteem in different grades (see Table 1). However, different grades and genders had no interaction with these variables.

In order to more intuitively show the changes in the frequency of different teacher criticisms, the changes in the quality of teacher-student relationships, and the changing trend of students' self-esteem, this study converted the average scores of various variables into Z-scores, which were represented by a line chart (see Figure 1). The frequency of teachers' process-oriented criticism and the quality of teacher-student relationship gradually increased before Grade 6, and then showed a downward trend. The frequency of teachers' person-oriented criticism gradually increased before Grade 8, and then stabilized. On the whole, students' self-esteem is stable. However, the self-esteem level of Grade 2 and Grade 11 students is low.

### ***Testing the Mediating Effect of Teacher-Student Relationship***

Table 2 shows the correlation between teacher criticism, teacher-student relationship, and students' self-esteem. There were significant correlations between students' self-esteem and the two kinds of teacher criticism, teacher-student relationship and its sub-dimensions. Person-oriented teacher criticism is negatively correlated with all dimensions of teacher-student relationship and students' self-esteem, while process-oriented teacher criticism is

**Figure 1: Differences in Teacher Criticism, Teacher-Student Relationship, and Self-esteem by Grade**



**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations Among Variables (N = 1,131)**

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Ps-OC	16.22	6.92	NA							
2. Pr-OC	15.73	5.08	-.09**	NA						
3. TSR-I	2.95	0.93	-.37***	.26***	NA					
4. TSR-Spt	3.56	0.87	-.41***	.34***	.67***	NA				
5. TSR-Stf	3.33	0.80	-.34***	.96***	.37***	.41***	NA			
6. TSR-C	4.1	0.73	-.39***	.23***	.35***	.42***	.43***	NA		
7. TSR	3.49	0.64	-.50***	.31***	.81***	.83***	.71***	.69***	NA	
8. SE	23.56	2.74	-.10**	.10**	.01	.10**	.06	.17***	.10**	NA

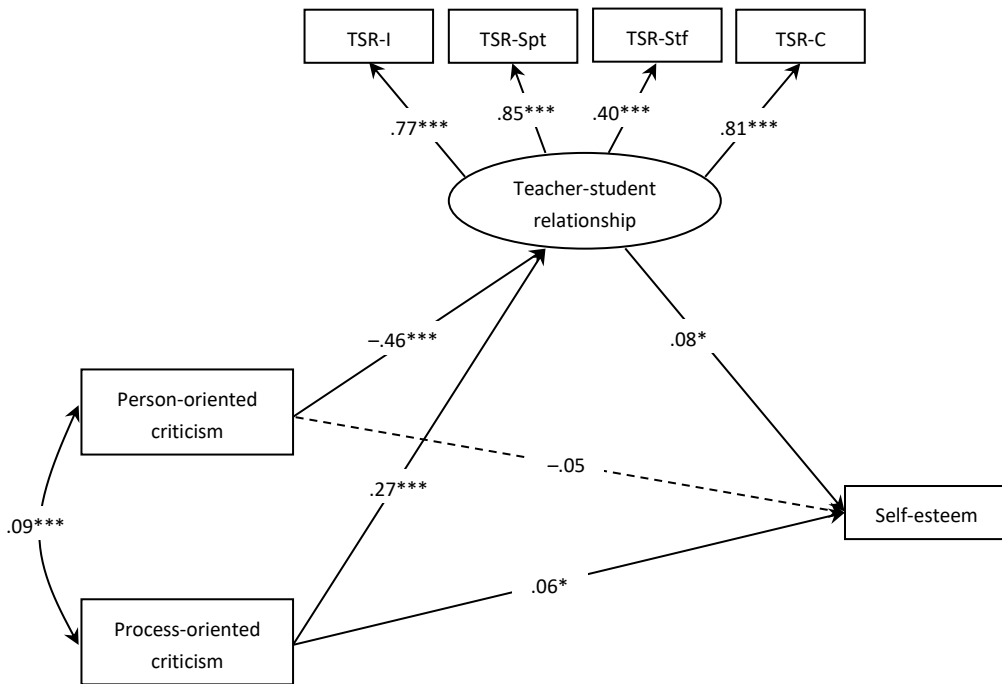
\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

positively correlated with all dimensions of teacher-student relationship and students' self-esteem. The supportive dimension and low conflict dimension of teacher-student relationship are positively correlated with students' self-esteem.

Structural equation modeling analyses were conducted to test whether teacher-student relationship would mediate the relationship between teacher criticism and self-esteem. The fit indices indicated that the model had an adequate fit to the data (GFI = .992, CFI = .985,

TLI = .948, NFI = .982, IFI = .985, RMSEA = .062). As illustrated in Figure 2, process-oriented criticism significantly positively predicted students' self-esteem ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ), but person-oriented criticism did not have a significant effect on students' self-esteem ( $\beta = -.05, p > .05$ ). Person-oriented criticism negatively predicted teacher-student relationship significantly ( $\beta = -.46, p < .001$ ), while process-oriented criticism positively predicted teacher-student relationship significantly ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ). Finally, teacher-student relationship have a positive and significant effect on students' self-esteem ( $\beta = .08, p < .05$ ). Above all, teacher-student relationship mediated the relationship between criticism and self-esteem; specifically, teacher-student relationship played a complete mediating role between person-oriented criticism and students' self-esteem, and also played a partial mediating role between process-oriented teacher criticism and students' self-esteem.

**Figure 2: Mediating Effect of Teacher-Student Relationship on the Relationship Between Teacher Criticisms and Self-esteem**



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Then, non-parameter percentile bootstrap method was used to test the mediating effect of teacher-student relationship (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). First, 5,000 samples were extracted from the original data ( $N = 1,131$ ) by repeated random sampling Bootstrap samples; these samples were then used to fit the model. A total of 5,000 estimated values

of the mediation effect were generated and saved, forming an approximate sampling distribution. Meanwhile, the average path value of the mediating effect was calculated, and the confidence interval (CI) of the mediating effect was estimated at 95%. In the path where person-oriented criticism affected students' self-esteem through teacher-student relationship, the direct effect was not significant ( $\beta = -.021$ , 95% CI  $[-.047, .005]$ ), but the mediating effect was significant ( $\beta = -.015$ , 95% CI  $[-.028, -.003]$ ). The 95% CI did not include 0, accounting for 56.76% and 40.54% of the total effect respectively, proving that teacher-student relationship had a complete mediating effect between person-oriented criticism and students' self-esteem. In the path where process-oriented criticism affected students' self-esteem through teacher-student relationship, the direct effect was significant ( $\beta = .035$ , 95% CI  $[.002, .068]$ ), and the indirect effect was also significant ( $\beta = .012$ , 95% CI  $[.003, .023]$ ). The 95% CI did not include 0, accounting for 74.47% and 25.53% of the total effect respectively, proving that teacher-student relationship had a partial mediating effect between process-oriented criticism and students' self-esteem (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Bootstrap Mediating Effect Test (N = 1,131)**

Mediation model		Effect quantity	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Relative effect value
Ps-OC→TSR→SE	Direct effect	-.021	.013	-.047	.005	56.76%
	Mediating effect	-.015	.006	-.028	-.003	40.54%
	Total effect	-.037	.012	-.060	-.013	
Pr-OC→TSR→SE	Direct effect	.035	.017	.002	.068	74.47%
	Mediating effect	.012	.005	.003	.023	25.53%
	Total effect	.047	.017	.013	.080	

## Discussion

### *The Current Status of Teacher Criticism, Teacher-Student Relationship, and Self-esteem*

This study found teachers were more critical of boys in a person-oriented way and more critical of girls in a process-oriented manner. This may be because there are gender differences in social expectations and requirements for individuals, so teachers' attitudes toward male students and female students differ (Negovan et al., 2010). It is also possible that boys are more aggressive and destructive, so they receive more personal criticism (Birch & Ladd, 1998). In this study, compared with boys, girls felt a stronger teacher-

student relationship, showing higher intimacy, support, satisfaction, and low conflict. This is consistent with previous research (Seyhan et al., 2019). This may be because of girls being naturally quiet and obedient, and having less conflict with teachers, while boys being more antisocial and having more conflict and interaction with teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1998). W. D. Li & Sun (2012) synthesized a number of empirical studies and found that, from primary school, middle school to university, the academic performance of boys in Chinese schools was significantly lower than that of girls. At a time when students' grades determine the quality of teachers' teaching (Lei & Ma, 2022), girls, being more able to get good grades in examinations, tend to get more attention from teachers and have a better cognition of teacher-student relationship. In addition, the academic achievement of girls is better than that of boys, and their teacher-student relationship is closer (Hajovsky et al., 2017). It can also be found that gender differences in teacher-student relationship are common in both Eastern and Western culture, which may be due to the differences in social skills cultivated by gender socialization across cultures (R. Y. H. Li & Wong, 2016) and characteristic differences (Hyde, 2014). Having more empathy ability and comforting skills, showing quietness and obedience, these characteristics of girls are conducive to communication with teachers, so girls feel more harmonious teacher-student relationship than boys. The self-esteem level of boys was lower than that of girls in this study, which is consistent with the research results of L. H. Zhang et al. (2009). They found that the self-esteem level developed by girls in social recognition, self-ability, and sense of belonging was higher than that of boys. However, studies of Western countries have shown different results on gender differences in adolescent self-esteem. Bachman et al. (2011) analyzed a large sample of data from Grades 8, 10, and 12 in the United States. Results indicated that the self-esteem score of boys was significantly higher than that of girls. This may be because of the tendency of boys to have higher self-evaluation than girls in Western countries. The completely opposite difference shown in China may be due to the fact that with the deepening of the Chinese women's liberation movement, more and more parents have a parenting attitude to invest in daughters, with the same gender expectations as boys (Wang & Yang, 2020); parents' changes of daughter's cultivation concept have played an important role in promoting daughter's growth. Girls are cultivated to develop both feminine traits (such as well-behaved, kind, gentle) and masculine traits (such as independent, confident, brave). Teachers are also willing to give girls more opportunities to gain positive self-esteem experience (F. H. Sun, 2013), which makes the self-esteem of girls significantly higher than that of boys.

This study found that with the higher in grade level, the criticism of teachers' person-oriented criticism also increased, reaching the highest level in Grade 8. Teachers' process-oriented criticism increased gradually in Grades 2–6, reaching the highest level in Grade 6, and then dropped significantly. Grade 8 students are in adolescence, and their behavior is the most reckless and risky (Smith et al., 2015), so they perceive the most person-oriented criticism. Grade 6 students are in the initial stage of junior high school. This group is the most likely to receive process-oriented criticism from teachers when encountering difficulties or failures, and encouragement are given for them to study hard. The changing trend of teacher-student relationship is consistent with the changing trend of teacher's process-oriented criticism. In Grade 6, the teacher-student relationship is the best, and the relationship in primary school is better than that in middle school. There is a higher degree of intimacy and less conflict with teachers, which is consistent with previous research results (Zou et al., 2007). With the higher grades, students' dependence on teachers is reduced, and teachers are no longer regarded as having absolute authority (G. Z. Liu, Hu, et al., 2016). The intimacy of the teacher-student relationship gradually decreases and conflicts increase. In this study, the self-esteem score in Grade 2 to Grade 6 has risen continuously, and reached the peak in Grade 8, but suddenly decreased in Grade 11 (see Figure 1). This result is partially consistent with the conclusion obtained by Bachman et al. (2011) that Grade 12 students have higher self-esteem than Grade 10 and Grade 8 students. With the higher grades, children's self-awareness is gradually enhanced, and they slowly realize a sense of accomplishment brought about by autonomy, thus promoting the development of self-esteem (Chen & Shi, 2016); this is applicable to both Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds. After entering junior high school, students' sense of independence and self-worth is further improved, so their self-esteem is stronger (G. Z. Liu, Hu, et al., 2016). However, by Grade 11, students' self-esteem clearly declined, which is different from the finding of Bachman et al. (2011). This may be due to the college entrance examination. If they cannot meet the expectations of their teachers and their families, the academic pressure will affect their self-cognition, thereby reducing their self-esteem.

### ***The Mediating Effect of Teacher-Student Relationship Between Teacher Criticism and Self-esteem***

In this study, teacher-student relationship had a complete mediating role between person-oriented teacher criticism and students' self-esteem. Person-oriented criticism will not directly affect a student's self-esteem but will negatively impact teacher-student

relationship, in turn indirectly affecting students' self-esteem. Person-oriented criticism was shown to have a significant negative correlation with teacher-student relationship, which corroborates with previous research (Burnett, 2002). This is because students may feel singled out by excessive personal criticisms, leading to lower frequencies of teacher-student interactions. In some cases, students may even retort against teacher criticisms, causing their relationship to deteriorate (Burnett, 2002). Past research also suggests that after failing a task, person-oriented criticisms can cause students to view teachers negatively (Skipper & Douglas, 2015), thus worsening their relationship. At the same time, teacher-student relationship was shown to have a significant positive correlation with students' self-esteem. When there is conflict within the teacher-student relationship or when students feel belittled and attacked by teachers, students may feel negatively about their academic achievement and school. This in turn leads to strained relationships between teachers and peers and displaying withdrawn or aggressive behavior (Bambaeroo & Shokrpour, 2017), affecting academic behavior and achievement, ultimately lowering students' self-esteem (Pianta et al., 2003). This study suggests that person-oriented criticism does not have a direct negative correlation with students' self-esteem. One possible explanation is that self-esteem, as a mental state, steadily rises in the developmental stage of adolescents. When their cognitive level matures, their evaluation of themselves stabilizes (Pan, 2015), making them less susceptible to negative impact caused by criticism on students' personal traits. However, self-esteem is an individual's evaluation of oneself, based on explicit or implicit feedback from others. When the teacher-student relationship is conflicted, students may have lower self-evaluation after criticisms, causing self-esteem to fall. Leary et al. (2006) suggest that after repetitive denials, one may feel defeated, and lower their self-evaluation. Likewise, as criticisms focus on students' traits, they may perceive criticisms as a denial of their value, ability, or characteristics, leading to lower self-esteem. As a result, person-oriented criticism may affect student self-esteem indirectly through worsening the student-teacher relationship.

In this study, teacher-student relationship acted as a partial mediating effect between process-oriented criticisms and students' self-esteem. Process-oriented criticism had a significant positive correlation with teacher-student relationship. Process-oriented criticism places greater emphasis on the learning experience; failures are often presented not as students' personal flaws, but as a problem within the learning process. Past research suggests that teachers' suggestions and guidance during the learning process make students feel more recognized and valued through feedback on students' problems in the learning process, thereby encouraging students to view themselves with a developmental and growth



mindset. Students will feel happier and more accomplished (Dweck, 1999), leading to improved teacher-student relationship (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). This study also found that teacher-student relationship also positively predicted students' self-esteem. As conflict decreases within the relationship, students may experience more positive social interactions. This allows for more accurate self-evaluation, leading to higher self-esteem. Previous research also suggests that positive teacher-student relationship can help high-risk teenagers manage emotional problems, lessen the negative effect of the separation of parents, and positively predict student self-esteem (Y. Liu, Li, et al., 2015). Additionally, process-oriented criticism had a significant positive correlation with self-esteem. This may be because this type of criticisms arises from compassion, care, and understanding. As a result, students will feel more recognized and valued by teachers, which is conducive to the development of self-esteem. When students realize that teachers are criticizing the learning process instead of themselves, they will feel themselves as important and being accepted, leading to improved emotional experiences and self-esteem (Leary et al., 2006). If teachers focus their criticisms on the learning process, students may discover that they can alter their behaviors to improve their ability, leading to more satisfactory achievement. This allows for increased self-acceptance and self-recognition. Students' recognition of teachers' suggestions and help will lead to more accurate self-evaluation and improve self-esteem (McFarland et al., 2016). It is evident that process-oriented criticism can usher in the healthy development of teacher-student relationship, in turn improving student self-esteem. By avoiding person-oriented criticisms, students will feel that teachers are willing to guide and help them, thus improving their relationship (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). Consequently, teacher-student relationship plays a partial mediating role between process-oriented teacher criticism and students' self-esteem.

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzed the development trend of teacher criticism and teacher-student relationship in different grades. Further, the mediating role of teacher-student relationship between teacher criticism and students' self-esteem was found, providing a two-way method to protect students' self-esteem. In particular, teacher-student relationship played a complete mediating role between person-oriented criticism and students' self-esteem, and a partial mediating role between process-oriented teacher criticism and students' self-esteem.

This study showed that person-oriented criticism will negatively impact students' physical and mental health, and process-oriented criticism will positively promote students' self-esteem. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the frequency and emotional state of criticism when giving criticism. Person-oriented criticism may have a long-term influence on students' physical and mental development (Leary et al., 2006). Teachers should reflect on their own critical ways, and adopt more constructive criticisms for students' improper behaviors. When criticizing in education, teachers should not criticize students with violent, derogatory, and aggressive words, but should give positive guidance and suggestions. Besides, teachers should pay special attention to reflect on the criticism methods of senior students. Students at senior grades are under great pressure and psychologically sensitive, and inappropriate criticism methods are likely to have adverse effects on their psychological development.

### ***Limitations and Further Research***

A cross-sectional design was adopted in this study, and the influence over time was not taken into account. Future research can use a longitudinal survey to further study the influence of teacher criticism and teacher-student relationship on students' self-esteem. Second, this study only selected three schools of Suzhou for data collection, Suzhou's economic level and level of educational development are relatively high in China, so the results of this study are more suitable for applying to other places with the same conditions. Future research can investigate in other areas of China to obtain more comprehensive and universal results. Third, considering that the current data included students of different grades in different schools, it did not take into account the potential non-independency issue that may exist between the data. Therefore, in future research, a multi-layer linear nested model can be constructed to better deal with the potential non-independency issue between classes and students. Fourth, academic performance plays an important impact on the development of students' self-esteem and the shaping of teacher-student relationships. Future research can control the impact of academic performance on teacher criticism, or incorporate student grades into the analysis, to explore the relationship between academic performance and teacher criticism. Finally, this study only discussed the factors affecting students' self-esteem in schools. Future research can also explore the influence of other independent variables on students' self-esteem, especially those variables directly affecting students. These factors can include peer relations, family rearing patterns, and so on.

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## Appendix

### 教師批評言語使用情形問卷

自從你開始上學以來，你是否聽過老師對你或班級同學說過類似以下的話？老師講這些話的次數多嗎？請根據實際情況在相應的選項中打「✓」。請放心作答。

	從不	偶爾	有時	經常	總是
1. 我的老師會對我（們）講攻擊性的話。 例：「笨蛋」、「白痴」、「你傻啊」					
2. 我的老師會拿我（們）和別人做比較。 例：「你跟別人怎麼差這麼遠」、「你們看看其他班的學生」					
3. 我的老師會以玩笑式的話嘲笑或諷刺我（們）。 例：「你可真是有能耐啊」、「你也不嫌丟人啊」、「哪天你要是能……，那太陽真是從西邊出來了」、「你沒有病吧」					
4. 我的老師會用威脅性的話語。 例：「再敢這樣，把家長叫過來」、「下次再這樣，乾脆別來上學了」					
5. 我的老師會翻舊賬或者誇大事實。 例：「你上次也是這樣」、「真是甚麼事情都做不好」					
6. 我的老師會對我（們）做負面的預言。 例：「你就不是學習的料」、「你這樣的，長大了也沒啥大出息」					
7. 我的老師會要求我（們）對他絕對服從。 例：「我說你錯了，你就是錯了」、「我講話的時候不准插嘴」					
8. 我的老師會對我（們）說驅逐性的話。 例：「不想學趕緊回家」、「你學不學跟我沒關係，我就當沒有你這個學生」					
9. 我的老師會委婉指出我（們）的不足。 例：「你某些方面很好，但是有些方面需要注意一下」、「你有些缺點，可整體是不錯的」					
10. 我的老師會提出建設性的意見。 例：「如果你……，會達到更好的效果」、「你嘗試……去做，會有更大的收穫」					
11. 我的老師會對我（們）抱有希望與期許。 例：「你一直很認真的，希望下次……」、「我希望能看到你的進步」、「希望能看到你的改變」					



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從不 偶爾 有時 經常 總是

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12. 我的老師會對我（們）表示信任。

例：「我相信你能做到」、「我相信你下次會做得更好」

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13. 我的老師會鼓勵我（們）。

例：「這次不要緊，下次（以後）……」、「我想你會懂這些道理的」

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## 教師批評對學生自尊的影響：師生關係的中介作用

陳羿君、王肖肖、楊夢萍、孫之胤、魏冰思

### 摘要

教師批評會影響學生的自尊，不利於建立健康的師生關係。然而，以往的研究沒有考慮師生關係是否可以減少教師批評對學生自尊的負面影響。本研究考察了中國背景下教師批判性語言的使用情況，不同類型批判性語言對學生自尊的預測作用，以及師生關係在批判性語言與學生自尊之間的中介作用。結果表明：(1)在教師批評、師生關係和學生自尊方面存在顯著的性別和年級差異；(2)個人取向的教師批評會負向預測學生自尊，而過程取向的教師批評則正向預測學生自尊；(3)師生關係在個人取向的批評與學生自尊之間起完全中介作用，在過程取向批評與學生自尊之間起部分中介作用。這些結果表明，教師應該更多反思其批評以保持與學生的健康關係，提高學生的自尊心。

關鍵詞：教師批評；自尊；師生關係；中介關係

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