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A study on the peer friendship experience of large class children in kindergarten life

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Abstract: This study focuses on the peer friendship experiences of preschoolers in large group settings, employing qualitative research methods. Data were collected through field observations and the mosaic method, analyzed using thematic analysis to explore how children perceive, express, and construct friendships during daily activities. The findings reveal that children's peer friendship experiences permeate all aspects of kindergarten life—from enrollment and teaching to play, daily routines, and departure. These experiences manifest in typical patterns such as anticipation, teacher-friend relationships, constant companionship, intimate closeness, and reluctant separation. Through symbolic interactions like language, gestures, and facial expressions, children dynamically build friendships across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, forming positive social connections. The study reveals that the essence of peer friendship lies in children's socialization process through meaning negotiation and emotional resonance during interactions. Based on these insights, the research suggests that educators and parents should update educational philosophies, respect children's agency, and create free and inclusive peer interaction environments through emotional recognition and behavioral support to promote social development. This study provides authentic life perspectives for understanding children's peer friendships and offers valuable insights for educational practice.

Keywords: Peer friendship; experiential research; symbolic interaction

1. Introduction

Peers, as significant others in children's lives, consistently play a pivotal role in their socialization process. Peer affection, as a crucial ethical dimension within peer relationships, profoundly influences young children's emotional development, social adaptation, and moral cognition. Current research on peer affection among young children predominantly focuses on theoretical discussions, lacking qualitative analyses grounded in real-life scenarios. Cosaro (2012) emphasizes that to truly grasp the inherent complexity of children's lived world and peer culture, researchers must immerse themselves in their practices, achieving deep cultural integration. Kindergartens serve as pivotal environments for children's peer relationship development and core arenas for peer affection. Only through concrete life practices, understood from children's perspectives regarding their interactive processes and emotional experiences, can the underlying mechanisms of peer affection formation be revealed. This study examines senior kindergarten children's daily experiences within the kindergarten setting, focusing on the theme of "peer affection" to explore how they perceive, express, and construct affectionate relationships during daily kindergarten activities. This study aims to collect, organize, and analyze data on senior kindergarten children's experiences of peer affection in the kindergarten setting. It seeks to reveal the authentic patterns of these experiences and deeply analyze the underlying emotional logic and interactive mechanisms. The findings can provide kindergarten teachers and parents with new perspectives for understanding children's peer affection experiences, helping educators create peer interaction environments that offer greater emotional support.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptual definition: Peer affection experiences

The New Oxford English Dictionary defines "peer" as an individual sharing a peer relationship, similar age, equal status, or comparable abilities (Oxford University Press, 2013). *The Modern Standard Chinese Dictionary* defines it as a collaborator in shared social activities or a subject coexisting in the same living or learning environment over an extended

period (Li, 2010). As an ancient ethical concept, "philia" has been extensively studied in Western culture. Derived from the verb "phileo," its root "phi" signifies a state of being loved, thus endowing "philia" with dual connotations of loving and being loved (Wang, 2021). Aristotle systematically expounded the concept of "philia" in his *Rhetoric*, defining it as a positive interpersonal relationship grounded in mutual goodwill, emotional connection, and the practice of care (Jiang, 2020). Liao (2009) noted that the Greek concept of *philia* centers on the relationship between two subjects, encompassing all forms of connection derived from interpersonal interaction and essentially functioning as a practical mechanism of engagement. Sun (2019) contends that as an extension of the essence of self-love, *philotimos* enables individuals to naturally expand this affection into emotional exchanges among peers while pursuing self-worth, thereby endowing *philotimos* with more private and emotional characteristics. Thus, within the Western ethical tradition, *philotimos* was initially understood as a political state, emphasizing the coordination of interests within a group and the realization of public virtue. As thought evolved, this concept gradually transcended the purely political sphere to focus on emotional bonds and interactions between individuals. In this transformation, fraternity ceased to be merely the adhesive binding the state and society together, instead becoming an internalized expression of equality, sincerity, and mutual aid in human relationships.

In China, Confucius established his value orientation in the opening lines of *the Analects* with the statement: "Is it not a pleasure to have friends come from afar?" (Sun, 2006), whose theoretical framework is grounded in the ethical principle of benevolence. He advocated for emotional development through extending familial affection to universal love, utilizing the principle of loyalty and forgiveness to achieve interpersonal understanding and ethical empathy, ultimately constructing a virtuous community transcending blood ties (Lin, 2023). Mo-tes proposed the doctrine of "universal love," emphasizing equal care and mutual benefit through "regarding others as oneself," aiming to resolve interpersonal conflicts and foster social harmony. Mencius, grounded in the theory of innate goodness, interpreted fraternal love as the practice of "extending benevolence"—generalizing familial ethics and achieving social emotional bonds through "trust and friendship"... Despite divergent theoretical approaches, these philosophers deepened the dual function of friendship through distinct paradigms: this ethical framework concerns both the full realization of individual moral potential and the socialization mechanism extending from familial ethics to the public sphere (Chen, 2022). Peer affection, as a form of interpersonal relationship, represents a choice and pursuit of shared existence. It cultivates profound emotional bonds through shared experiences and interactions, manifesting not only in verbal communication but more significantly in tangible support and companionship (Zhang, 2022). Peer affection experiences provide young children with a sense of security, playing a significant role in their social development (Zou, 2022). Drawing on existing definitions, this study defines peer affection experiences as positive psychological feelings and social connections formed by young children during shared activities or interactions with peers, encompassing mutual respect, understanding and tolerance, cooperation, sharing, and other positive interpersonal experiences.

2.2. Contemporary advances in peer affection research

Since modern times, scholars have consistently focused on the social significance of friendship, interpreting it as "relational goodness." He (2003) defines friendship as a horizontal interaction pattern formed between children and peers possessing equal social rights. Li (2010) emphasizes that cultivating affirmative emotions serves as the foundational basis for generating the concept of goodness. He argues that interpersonal friendship constitutes an indispensable ethical substrate for a well-ordered society, its essence lying in promoting the full realization of human potential. Ju (2012) reveals that the concepts of friendship and affection both involve networks of trust and ethics of responsibility among individuals, while also serving as the value foundation and ethical bonding mechanism for democratic political operations. Wang (2014), through comparative research on Confucian benevolence and ancient Greek *philotimia*, points out that current research on peer *philotimia* still has shortcomings in theoretical construction and practical exploration. There is an urgent need to draw nourishment from traditional ideas of *philotimia* to improve the emotional support system in modern society. Jie (2014), comparing Confucian friendship theory with Aristotle's concept of friendship, elucidated the unique value of friendship within traditional Chinese ethics. She advocated leveraging this as an opportunity to advance peer friendship research to a higher level. Jie (2015) examined the moral adaptive function of Confucian friendship in individualized societies from the perspective of transitioning from "fraternal affection" to "kindness". She noted the growing societal demand for the spirit of friendship and the increasing policy emphasis on its positive role in promoting social integration. Ladd et al. (2017) found through a longitudinal study that preschoolers who gained peer acceptance demonstrated better emotional regulation and more cooperative behaviors, while those who experienced peer rejection tended to exhibit aggressive or withdrawn behavioral patterns. Marder et al. (2017) argued that peer mentoring programs integrated into undergraduate curricula can foster positive peer relationships. Sun (2018) proposed that friendship and affection, as universal values in constructing a life community, endow human existence with transcendent meaning. Wang (2019) pointed out that despite shifts in social structures, the essence of affection remains constant. As a core trait within the ethical realm, affection possesses stability transcending time and space. This ethical relationship plays a crucial guiding role in the cultivation of individual morality, continuously shaping the fundamental paradigm of our relationships with others by embedding interpersonal interactions within a value framework of goodness and harmony. Wang et al. (2019) contends that establishing and maintaining friendships aids children's social skill development. This study provides insights for existing research by describing how children's friendships stabilize over a year-long period. Hartup (2021) found children tend to choose peers similar to themselves as friends, and those with more peers demonstrate stronger social abilities, greater sociability, and improved cooperation. Zhang (2021) noted that friendship love is essentially a process of self-affirmation for the subject, where the act itself serves both as a concrete manifestation of love and a source of existential

fulfillment. Hartup (2022) observed that preschoolers already possess distinct friendship networks, with close peer relationships emerging from shared interests and interactions. When these shared interests dissipate, children cease to associate and friendships gradually fade. Thus, friendship and affection serve as rich cognitive and emotional resources for children, fostering security and enhancing problem-solving abilities. Liu (2022) emphasizes that the development of children's affectionate abilities follows an experience-first principle, where embodied experiences like peer interactions in educational settings form the practical foundation for emotional transmission and sharing behaviors. Chen (2022) discusses the creative emergence of the concept of friendship in early Confucianism. He argues that this concept, in its contemporary transformation, offers historical insights to bridge the gap between theory and practice in peer friendship research. Chen (2023) contends that traditional fraternal love ideology has been reinterpreted within modern literary and political contexts, with its spiritual core serving as a crucial basis for contemporary policies emphasizing social responsibility and humanistic care. Li and Li (2024) point out that Confucian culture positions fraternal love as a vital component of moral practice, demanding mutual support within family ethics while also emphasizing the construction of trusting and harmonious relationships in the social public sphere.

It is evident that current research on peer affection has shifted from emphasizing macro-level affection within ethics to highlighting interpersonal goodwill and harmonious coexistence in real life. The aforementioned studies on peer affection not only reaffirm its modern ethical significance but also provide diverse research paradigms for reinterpreting peer affection within kindergarten settings today.

2.3. The theoretical framework of peer affection research: life experience theory and symbolic interactionism

As a research methodology, the experiential approach continues to evolve within the educational field. Its essence lies in observing and analyzing authentic situations, behaviors, and emotions within children's daily lives, thereby achieving effective integration between theory and practice. Wu (2018) emphasizes that experiential activities can subtly cultivate young children's problem-solving abilities and spirit of autonomous learning. The educational strategies proposed by Wu provide new insights for exploring diverse pedagogical methods. Mata et al. (2020) noted that despite growing interest in children's inner worlds, consensus remains elusive regarding their definition. Starting from authentic preschool settings, they examined how 33 kindergarten teachers in educational environments personally experience and understand children's inner worlds. Findings reveal that most surveyed early childhood educators commonly perceive children's spirituality as encompassing peer relationship-building and actively assigning meaning to life. This research holds significant implications for scholars and practitioners seeking to study or foster children's spiritual worlds, encouraging educators to actively facilitate peer relationship development, guide virtue cultivation, and deepen our understanding of how children utilize life experiences to construct selfhood and seek meaning. A systematic examination of life experiences provides researchers with diverse cognitive frameworks and pathways for interpreting meaning. Adults seeking to deeply understand children must focus on their most authentic lived experiences. Through phenomenological reduction, meticulous observation, and patient listening, we can draw closer to children's inner worlds and enter their lived realities (Chen & Yi, 2021). As van Manen (2019) emphasized in *The Mood of Education*, Children are children precisely because they continuously experience the dynamic changes of life and perceive the myriad possibilities of the lifeworld throughout their developmental journey. As a vital branch of interpretive phenomenology, life experience research centers on interpreting the meaning of everyday experiences. It aims to achieve a triple reflection on existence through the description and interpretation of phenomenological experiences: deep awareness of life's forms, poetic dwelling in the essence of living, and the ultimate inquiry into the meaning of being (van Manen, 2003). Interpreting the everyday affectionate phenomena between children and their peers offers profound insight into peer affectionate relationships.

Symbolic interactionism, as a theoretical framework examining the construction of symbolic meaning in interpersonal communication, offers profound insights into understanding children's socialization processes. Within this theoretical system, symbolic representations serve not only as vehicles for information transmission but also as crucial tools through which individuals continually shape their self-identity and social recognition during interactions (Ao, 2011). Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes how individuals, through symbols such as language, writing, expressions, and actions, assign meaning to objects in social interactions and how these meanings guide their behaviors and attitudes. Symbolic interaction scholars contend that humanity's core distinguishing trait from other species lies in the acquisition of symbolic creation abilities, with linguistic symbols regarded as the most significant symbolic invention. This capacity confirms the essential characteristic of how humans construct relationships with the world—through symbolic practices, humans transform objective reality, mental activities, and experiential processes into transmissible representational systems (Turner, 2001). Symbolic interaction theory offers a unique perspective and theoretical foundation for understanding children's peer relationships. Building upon symbolic interactionism, Denzin (2015) posits that young children possess distinct conceptions of language, self, and others. He describes a phased, hierarchical model of language acquisition, viewing young children as active participants in linguistic symbol experiences and proposing a socialization model of language behavior. Guo (2025) proposed that children, through role-substitution behaviors, acquire the ability to shift perspectives between self and others. This enables the internalization of group cognitive schemas into individual cognitive structures, gradually developing the capacity to reflect on oneself from others' standpoints. In peer interactions, children achieve perspective-taking and cognitive coordination. This demonstrates that peer interactions both cultivate children's role-cognitive abilities and advance the development of their self-unity. Jodi (2022) empirically investigated 16 preschoolers' perceptions of friendship, revealing through visual representations like children's drawings the importance of outdoor

activities for friendship formation. Deng et al. (2021) examining teacher-child interactions in tattling situations, revealed the significant impact of symbolic interaction on situational representation and behavioral adjustment. Their research provides concrete case studies and theoretical support for effectively utilizing symbols to convey positive messages in educational practice. In social interactions, children employ not only verbal symbols but also nonverbal symbols (facial expressions, gestures, voice intonation, etc.) to convey information. Through these exchanges, they develop perceptions of themselves and others, perceive and understand others' roles, and achieve bidirectional information transmission. The application of symbolic interactionism to children's peer relationships deepens our understanding of young children's social interactions and emotional regulation. In peer interactions, children's verbal and nonverbal behaviors, along with their feedback patterns, convey information symbolically. This influences the formation of children's self-concepts and concepts of others, subtly shaping their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. Collectively, these studies reveal the significant value of symbolic interaction theory in preschool education, providing theoretical support for deepening our understanding and analysis of peer affection experiences among young children.

3. Methodology

This study employs field research within qualitative methodology, utilizing participant observation and multiple data collection methods to obtain firsthand data from the children's perspective. The methodological framework adopts a nested structure: field research provides the contextual foundation, the mosaic method serves as the data generation tool, and thematic analysis ultimately refines and elevates meaning. These three components are interlinked, collectively serving the research objective of deeply understanding and interpreting children's experiential world. To ensure the validity of this essential research, the investigator collected data through long-term, objective, and direct field observations. The entire fieldwork spanned four months from February 2024 to June 2024, involving continuous, immersive on-site observation three days per week. To enhance the study's reliability, three forms of triangulation (Patton, 2002) were employed:

- Multi-source data validation within the same methodology (data triangulation);
- Multi-perspective validation of data interpretation (theoretical triangulation);
- Methodological triangulation to validate data consistency across different collection methods.

3.1 Participants

This study selected 29 preschoolers (14 boys, 15 girls) from the senior kindergarten class at T Kindergarten as research subjects. As senior kindergarteners are in the final stage of preschool, their physiological functions and psychological development have reached new levels of maturity. Compared to younger kindergarteners, they possess basic cognitive abilities and a certain degree of de-centering, enabling simple perspective-taking and emotional empathy. They have the cognitive and emotional foundations to develop prosocial behavioral tendencies. Moreover, their language expression skills have significantly developed, enabling them to articulate the motivations and processes behind their behaviors with relative clarity. These factors collectively provide a feasible basis for researchers to collect data on peer affection experiences.

3.2 Data collection tools

This study adheres to dual ethical standards in data collection: First, naturalistic observation follows the non-intervention principle, where researchers refrain from interfering with children's behavior to ensure no psychological or behavioral burden is imposed on participants. Observation activities are strictly confined within a non-participatory framework to avoid disrupting normal educational routines. Second, interview design adheres to the principle of developmental appropriateness, focusing on social interaction and peer engagement domains. It employs dialogue techniques within a developmental psychology framework to prevent any form of physical or psychological harm to participants.

Data analysis and processing adhered to strict ethical protocols: The study rigorously followed informed consent and privacy protection principles. Prior to commencement, complete informed consent was provided to participants' guardians, and all image materials were used only with legal guardian authorization. Personal privacy information underwent data anonymization: sensitive details were obscured using image blurring techniques, and identities were anonymized through alphanumeric coding. A dual-insurance mechanism ensured data security.

Table 1. Tools utilized in mosaic research methodology

Tools	Introduction
Observation	Narrative Documentation
Children's photography	Children holding "Friendship" cameras to take pictures
Child interviews	Researchers conduct on-site interviews with children based on events or behaviors occurring in natural settings; researchers utilize contextual cues such as tangible materials (children's drawings, photographs, constructions, etc.) to guide children in recall narratives or emotional expression
Children's drawings	Children's daily drawings; children create drawings on relevant themes

Methodologically, this study adopts the "Mosaic Method" as its core framework. Grounded in the principle that

"children are experts in their own lives," this approach combines participatory observation, child interviews, child-led photography, and child drawing (Table 1). It invites young children to actively "speak" as research participants, collaboratively constructing a "polyphonic" data system integrating language, behavior, and visual symbols. Here, field research provides the temporal, spatial, and contextual vehicle for the Mosaic Method's implementation, while the Mosaic Method itself constitutes the concrete action plan for collecting child-perspective data within the field setting. Together, they ensure this study's methodological ecological validity and child-centeredness.

3.3 Data collection and analysis process

Text analysis within the educational phenomenological framework encompasses three core dimensions: thematic elevation, meaning interpretation, and educational reflection. This methodology aims to restore children's most authentic experiences through phenomenological description, reveal the deeper implications underlying their experiences, and thereby enhance the sensitivity of educational practitioners, fostering the generation and development of educational wisdom (Chen and Yi, 2021). In analyzing research materials, this study utilizes data collected through participant observation as the primary source, supplemented by children's photography, interviews, and drawings for interpretation. Through repeated reading, analysis, and categorization of raw data, the research employs thematic analysis to code, classify, and deeply interpret textual and visual materials after obtaining rich, diverse data. This analytical process aimed to identify, refine, and connect core experiential patterns and thematic structures from the fragmented, granular data collected through the mosaic method. This enabled a systematic interpretation and presentation of the inner world and meaning-making processes of the preschool group. Guided by thematic analysis methodology, the overarching theme of "peer affection experiences" was established. Key themes were distilled from the data: "Eager Anticipation" during arrival routines, "Both Friend and Mentor" in teaching activities, "Inseparable Companions" during play, "Intimate Bonding" in daily routines, and "Heart-Wrenching Goodbyes" at departure. and "reluctant parting" during dismissal. The most representative events were selected to further condense the data, extracting subthemes that progressively constructed the authentic patterns of peer affection experiences in preschool life (See Fig. 1). Following descriptions and analyses of these subthemes, fundamental reflections on peer affection experiences were conducted across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, leading to interpretive insights.

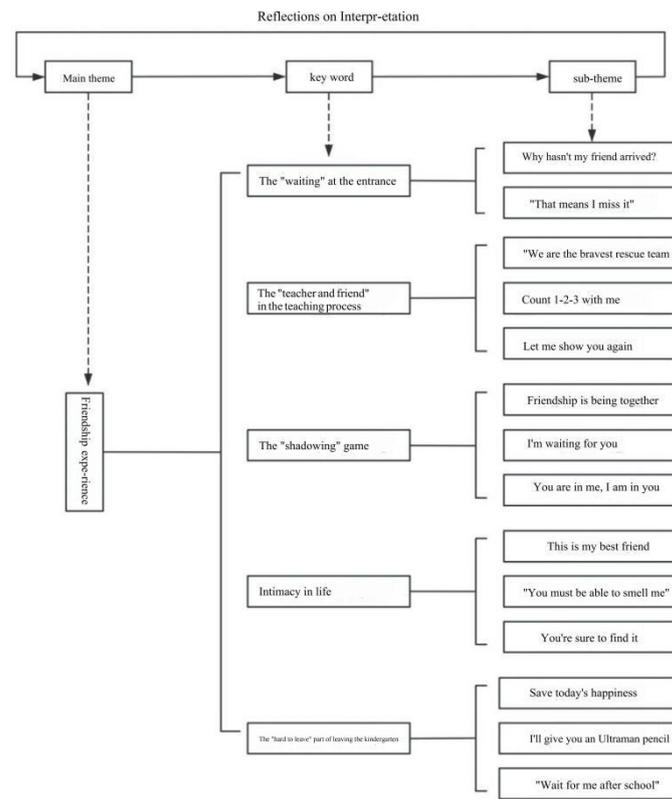


Figure 1 Analysis of Research Data

During the study period, the researcher maintained three days of on-site presence weekly, collecting over 80 segments of children's interview recordings, 134 observation records, 785 photographic images, and 164 images of children's artwork from various activities. By the end of June, the total textual data comprised 45,369 words transcribed from participatory observation records, child interviews, child photography, and child drawings, along with 13,562 words transcribed from field diaries. To ensure observational validity, the researcher employed a "two-tier calibration mechanism": field notes were organized immediately after each day's observation, with ambiguous entries reviewed within 24 hours; weekly retrospective reviews corrected deviations in real-time documentation. Collected primary data were

categorized and coded, with each entry sequentially noting source, child's initials, and collection date. Event data from participatory observation were coded as "S" during analysis, formatted as "S-NAME (child's initials)-ABC (observation date: A Year B Month C Day)"; child interview data is coded as F-NAME (child's initials)-ABC (observation date: A Year B Month C Day); child Drawing data is coded as H-NAME (child's initials)-ABC (observation date: A Year B Month C Day); photographs taken by children are coded as Z-NAME (child's initials)-ABC (observation date: A Year B Month C Day) (Table 2). For example, an instance of peer affection observed during the arrival routine involving children AAA and BBB on March 14, 2024, would be coded as "S—AAA/BBB—20240314".

Table 2. Data coding

Data	Coding Method
Observation (S)	S-NAME-ABC
Child Interview (F)	F-NAME-ABC
Child Drawing (H)	H-NAME-ABC
Child Photography (Z)	Z-NAME-ABC

4. Results and interpretation of data

To truly understand children, one must begin with their most natural state of being. By capturing and grasping the authentic patterns of children's daily lives in kindergarten, we uncover the significance of peer affection experiences within their most ordinary, everyday behaviors. This study adheres to the principle of "returning to the thing itself" (van Manen, 2003), maintaining continuous attention to the genuine patterns of children's kindergarten life. It strives to restore the most authentic peer affection experiences within the kindergarten setting. Professor Gu Mingyuan notes in the *Encyclopedia of Education* that "a typical day of kindergarten activities" encompasses arrival, group instruction, outdoor activities and play, personal hygiene, meals, rest periods, and departure (Ge, 2024). Vivid scenes of peer affection among senior kindergarten children emerge from collected data across all these segments.

Theme: "Eagerly Awaiting" During Arrival

Sub-theme: "Why Aren't My Friends Here Yet?"

For children, kindergarten is not only a place of learning but also a place to live alongside good friends. Good friends can be a driving force for children to attend kindergarten. Their mutual anticipation of meeting each other mirrors the fox's longing for the Little Prince in the fairy tale *The Little Prince*: "If we meet at four o'clock in the afternoon, then I will feel happy at three o'clock, and the closer the time comes, the happier I will be." During morning drop-off, friends show mutual care, eagerly anticipating playtime together. The following field diary excerpt captures the complex emotions—concern, worry, anticipation, and restlessness—reflected in children's language, embodying peer affection.

On the playground at dawn, FWX invited ZAR, who had just finished skipping rope, to join their zombie game. ZAR shook his head at FWX's invitation, then paced near the water cup rack, craning his neck repeatedly to peer toward the kindergarten entrance. Teacher Chen asked ZAR why he wasn't joining the others. ZAR blurted out, "Teacher Chen, why isn't SG here yet?" Teacher Chen glanced at her watch and reassured him, "SG might just be running a little late today. Why don't you go play?" ZAR pursed his lips and nodded, then looked toward the kindergarten entrance again, his brow furrowed. He asked, "Teacher Chen, is SG sick?" Teacher Chen immediately checked her phone and said, "No way, SG didn't take a day off today. Don't worry, ZAR. Maybe SG will be here soon." As she spoke, Teacher Chen patted ZAR on the head. (S-ZAR/SG-20240607)

In this field diary excerpt, peer friendship manifests as sustained concern and deep affection for a companion. While waiting for SG, ZAR's body language and words repeatedly revealed inner anxiety and care. This proactive "eager anticipation" not only expresses attachment to a familiar peer but also reflects the sense of belonging and security formed through interpersonal connections. When the friend hasn't arrived, even play cannot fully capture the child's attention. ZAR's waiting behavior transcends the appeal of immediate activities, revealing the significant place peer relationships hold in his heart. This emotion of care and worry springs from the purest concern deep within the child's heart.

Sub-theme: "This means I'll miss them so much"

In the study, researchers examined photos taken by children using the "Friendship Camera" and discovered that more than one preschooler had photographed the "attendance sheet." YJY looked at the photo and said, "This is our class attendance sheet. When I sign it, the teacher knows I've come to kindergarten. Then every day when I sign in, I can see if my good friends have come to kindergarten. If they haven't, I miss them a lot." (Z-YJY-20240507) YJY earnestly explained the attendance sheet's purpose, noting that teachers use it to track children's attendance. She also mentioned how she immediately "checks" the sheet upon arrival to see if her friends are present. XGG smiled and added: Well, it's like this—it's the very first thing I do when I arrive at kindergarten each morning. I count how many children arrived before me, then check if PLZ is here. If he's here, I sign in right away and rush over to play with him!" (Z-XGG-20240528) This demonstrates that the attendance sheet serves not only as a classroom rule but also as a bond of friendship between children. The emotional significance children attach to it transforms it into a tangible symbol of their emotional connection. It functions not merely as a tool for teachers to record attendance but as a vital medium through which children express their longing and affirm their relationships.

Theme: "Teacher and Friend" in Teaching Activities

Sub-theme: "We Are the Bravest Rescue Squad"

During teaching sessions, camaraderie among peers often manifests in collaboratively reimagining teacher-set rules with friends. For instance, when teacher-led activities fail to fully engage all children, they may discuss and adapt the activity based on their preferences. The following field diary entry captures interactions between children during a routine crawling activity organized by the teacher.

Afternoon: Teacher Huang organized a crawling challenge on the playground, where children had to crawl under a taut rope without touching it. After explaining the key points, the children from Class 1 shouted excitedly, "I already know how to do this!" and "Let's start now, Teacher Huang!" Yet LYQ, who usually loved outdoor activities, stood silently apart, keeping his distance from the lively crowd. XJJ approached LYQ, tugged his sleeve, and asked curiously, "LYQ, why don't you come closer?" LYQ stared at the ground, frowned, and said, "I don't want to crawl on the ground." XJJ glanced at LYQ, then at the ground, tugged his sleeve again, and crouched down. Pointing at the pavement, she said, "LYQ, look! Doesn't it look like flames? This one, this one, and this one too! Let's pretend we're firefighters rescuing people from a fire!" Hearing this, LYQ crouched down and examined the ground closely. "Wow, it really does look like it!" XJJ added, "Just like in our drawings—a rescue team!" She beckoned LYQ to lie down beside her: "Come on, LYQ! Let's start our challenge here!" LYQ glanced at the other children preparing to lie down, then slowly settled beside XJJ. He squeezed her hand and said, "Here I come." XJJ smiled at LYQ, squeezed his hand back, and encouraged, "Go for it, LYQ! Let's rescue bravely together!" At Teacher Huang's signal, the two friends crawled forward with all their might, dodging the "flames" on the ground. After reaching the finish line, LYQ reached out to pull XJJ, who was a step behind, and raised XJJ's hands high, saying, "XJJ, that was awesome! We rescued successfully!! I wanna do it again!!!" XJJ smiled back, saying, "See? We're the best rescue team!" (S-XJJ/LYQ-20240510)

Young children transform ordinary, monotonous crawling exercises into a "fire rescue challenge," enthusiastically inviting friends to join in. This demonstrates how children exercise their agency to adapt and reimagine adult-set rules. Their boundless imagination freely "remakes" their world, turning dull activities into vibrant adventures. During the activity, children keenly notice their peers' emotional shifts and proactively create game scenarios to invite and engage others. This spontaneous cooperation and empathy demonstrate their unique social intelligence in group settings.

Sub-theme: "Count with Me: 1-2-3—"

Lewis (2009) posits that friendship is not innate affection but a relationship formed when personalities reach their highest level, pulling individuals out of collective "harmony". During group teaching sessions, selective altruism drew CXW and FWX out of the collective. Through genuine acts of assistance, the purest experience of peer altruism emerged.

During the group jump rope activity, CXW was watching the other children jump rope. FWX approached to invite her: "CXW, let's jump rope together!" CXW remained silent, head bowed, gripping the rope tightly. Seeing no response, FWX leaned in to observe her expression: "What's wrong, CXW? Don't you want to jump?" CXW nodded then shook her head: "I kept getting tangled earlier." FWX lifted the rope, wrapped her arms around CXW's waist, demonstrated a few times, then smiled as she took CXW's hand: "XW, why don't you try jumping with me? We'll jump together. When more people join, you'll learn how!" CXW looked up at FWX and asked: "Can I hold onto you?" FWX took CXW's hands and pulled them to her waist. "Come on! Hold tight!" FWX continued, "When I say 'ready,' listen carefully, then we'll count together: 1-2-3!" FWX added, "You must count with me: 1-2-3-!" CXW gripped her hands tightly and whispered, "I'll follow your lead!" FWX shouted, "Ready, jump! 1-2-3-4-5-6-7..." They counted all the way to seven before stopping. Then, holding hands, they exclaimed together, "We actually jumped seven times!" FWX smiled, cupping CXW's face. "See? See? When we count together, you won't get stuck!" CXW exclaimed in realization, "Oh, that's how it works!" With that, the two girls hugged each other again, cheering and spinning in circles on the spot. (S-FWX/CXW-20240429)

In this incident, CXW fell into self-doubt after the group jump rope failure and chose to stand blankly. FWX proactively approached her partner, expressing sincere concern with genuine emotion. After understanding her friend's fear stemming from the setback, FWX actively conveyed support through body language—grabbing CXW's hand and guiding it to their waist." During free play within the teaching session, they created a shared "learning" space. FWX repeatedly instructed CXW on the technique, emphasizing, "You must count with me: 1-2-3-," ultimately enabling both children to successfully complete seven synchronized jumps. In this moment, their experience of peer affection crystallized into a seamless, mutual interaction.

Sub-theme: "Let me show you again"

During the senior kindergarten social activity "Backpack Packing Competition," everyone aimed to win and be "number one." Yet in an unnoticed corner, the exchange between WYW and JZY was particularly heartwarming.

WYW fidgeted with his fingers, muttering, "I'll definitely be last. I can't do this..." JZY crouched beside him, gently patting his shoulder. Pointing to the children organizing their bags, he said, "WYW, look—Teacher Chen just showed everyone how. I'll teach you again, and you'll get it." Taking WYW's backpack, he pulled out stationery while explaining, "Put your books in first, then the pencil case and water bottle last. That way it'll be quick." After demonstrating once, he emptied everything back out, patted WYW, and said, "Here, want to try?" WYW looked at JZY, slowly unzipped the backpack, and took things out while watching JZY: "First the books... then put... right?" JZY interrupted, "No, no. See, there's a big pocket inside the backpack. You need to put the books in the big pocket so the pencil case and water bottle will fit." He guided WYW's hand into the large pocket: "See? It's really spacious. This is where the books go." WYW nodded, stuffed the books into the large pocket, and exclaimed, "Wow, the big pocket is awesome! I'm gonna put my books in the big pocket from now on!" (S-JZY/WYW-20240607)

JZY noticed WYW's emotional shift and stepped forward to offer comfort with a gentle pat on the shoulder: "WYW,

"I'll show you again—the teacher just demonstrated it." This proactive care demonstrated not only JZY's keen observation of her peer's state but also her empathy. Rather than pressuring WYW to join the competition, she offered tangible support through action. JZY's patient guidance and positive affirmation not only eased WYW's anxiety but also fostered his confidence, transforming his initial resistance into eager participation. With JZY's help, WYW gradually mastered the skill of organizing his backpack. During the competition, he performed with ease and displayed a genuine smile. The affection between child peers manifests in warm acts of mutual support.

Theme: "Shadowing Each Other" in Playtime

Sub-theme: "Friendship Means Being Together"

For preschoolers in the senior class, play is not merely entertainment but a vital opportunity for developing social skills and emotional connection. "Inseparable companionship" emerges as the most frequently observed dynamic during playtime. These scenes of constant togetherness offer rich insights into how children experience peer affection during play. XJJ said, "SYY and LYQ played zombie tag, running around until SYY was finally caught. LYQ hugged him tightly and wouldn't let go. Both children were having a great time" (Z-XJJ-20240506). To XJJ, peer affection meant the intimate contact of "hugging each other" during the chase and roughhousing of zombie tag, along with the joyful emotional experience of playing happily together; FWX observed, "Sisters ZAR and SG play sandbag toss facing each other, always catching with perfect coordination" (F-FWX-20240514). To FWX, peer affection manifests as the seamless teamwork in successfully catching the tossed ball during the game. ZAR shared, "SG and YSY said they're princesses participating in the Bravery Challenge together. They cheer each other on—true friends stay together through danger" (Z-ZAR-20240515). Analysis of the Children's Friendship Camera and children's drawings reveals that the peer affection experienced during play fundamentally constitutes a state of "inseparable companionship" formed through physical co-presence, behavioral synchronization, and emotional resonance.

Sub-theme: "I'll Wait for You"

As White (2007) noted: "Some children aged 3 to 6 insist on leading during shared activities and refuse to follow. Others enjoy following but lack leadership skills. Still others struggle with both. Well-developed children in this age group should be able to lead and follow effectively and effortlessly." During playtime, the interaction between YJY and JZY demonstrated this coordinated pattern hidden within their actions and words.

During outdoor playtime, JZY and YJY strolled hand-in-hand across the playground. YJY turned sideways and asked, "JZY, where do you want to play first?" JZY replied, "Anywhere is fine." YJY pointed to the slide and said, "Then let's play on the slide first." JZY softly responded, "Okay." They stopped before the slide and released their tightly clasped hands. YJY climbed up first, sat on the left slide, and beckoned to JZY with her hand: "JZY, come on over!" Suddenly, a girl from another class came up the stairs on the other side of the slide and sat down directly on the right slide. YJY and JZY looked at each other, staring blankly at the girl. YJY gripped the slide's handrails tightly to keep herself from sliding down and turned to JZY, saying, "JZY, I'll wait for you." JZY replied, "Okay." (S-YJY/JZY-20240622)

At that moment, "I'll wait for you" transcended mere words, crystallizing into an action-bound promise rooted in trust and empathy. Compared to solitary exploration, this mutual waiting and coordinated play infused the game with the warmth of shared meaning. The brief pause before play concealed a child's anticipation for the unfolding experience of camaraderie.

Subtheme: "You in Me, Me in You"

Analysis of research materials reveals children often express peer affection through the concept of "merging." For instance, YJY and JZY shared a story about a "merged fairy": YJY said, "We're merged flower fairies. A big wind blew us to kindergarten, blowing us from the slide to the big class. We're fairies who protect WYN and other kids from getting sick", JZY added, "Me, YJY, and HAR are merged fairies. WYN was supposed to be with us, but she's not here. Merged fairies never separate. No matter how strong the wind blows, we hold hands tightly and protect each other" (F-JZY-20240515). Beyond storytelling, children also placed building blocks representing themselves and their peers together. Many photos taken by children also depict scenes like "two people holding hands" or "best friends sitting side by side." To children, "merging" signifies a strength greater than that of an individual and represents a deeper level of intimacy between friends.

Theme: "Inseparable" in Daily Life

Subtheme: "This Is My Good Friend"

As an open educational space, daily life activities possess dynamic forms and evolving processes that can constructively influence peer interactions. Any manifestation or shift within these activities may subtly shape peer relationships (Zhang & He, 2019). Research reveals that when children act as photographers capturing their best friends and interactions (such as giving thumbs-up, making faces, or posing), they transform abstract emotional bonds into concrete symbolic representations. Young children capture perspectives often overlooked by adults. For instance, JYC meticulously documented his friend TJY's routine of undressing before bed and dressing upon waking. This attention to daily details reflects JYC's most fundamental understanding of "friendship." XJJ shared: "This is JYC. He sleeps right beside me every night, always falling asleep quickly and quietly. Sometimes he wakes up first and touches my feet, which wakes me up too." "And if we both can't sleep, we whisper secrets to each other." (Z-XJJ-20240506) In the daily routines of Class 1 at Kindergarten T, "close as can be" ceases to be an abstract phrase, transforming into an unspoken social code among the children.

Subtheme: "You Can Surely Smell My Scent"

During transition time, unclaimed clothes caused Teacher Gui, the daily life teacher, no end of trouble. Yet this also

provided an opportunity for TJY and JYC to develop their peer affection experience. Unlike the adult world, where social rules rely on verbal negotiation and prioritizing interests, young children build affectionate experiences through their primal sensory functions.

During cleanup, Teacher Gui was troubled by an unclaimed denim jacket left in the coat basket. TJY sat at his spot, nudged JYC's chair, and said, "JYC, JYC, go try it! You have superpowers, right?" JYC paused briefly before replying, "Sure!" Both children then stood up and approached Teacher Gui. TJY spoke first: "Teacher, JYC has an amazing nose—superpowers! He can find the owner of any garment just by sniffing it." JYC nodded earnestly beside him. Teacher Gui looked at them with a mix of amusement and exasperation, exchanged a knowing glance with Teacher Chen, then smiled as she handed over the jacket. Once it was in his hands, JYC held it under his nose and sniffed intently. He lifted it away, brought it back closer, and repeated this several times before declaring, "I, I feel... I feel like this jacket belongs to XJJ." JYC held the jacket out toward XJJ. "It's definitely yours—it smells exactly like you. Try it yourself." He handed it to TJY, who sniffed it, then pressed it against XJJ's body. Nodding, TJY slung an arm around JYC's shoulder. "Your superpowers are amazing!" JYC chuckled, leaning in close to whisper, "But here's a secret—I can only smell my best friends." TJY leaned back toward JYC and murmured, "Then you must be able to smell me!" JYC nodded vigorously. "Of course! We're best buddies!" (S-JYC/TJY-20240626)

This "finding the jacket" incident unfolded like a detective game led entirely by the children themselves, vividly showcasing how young children build unique patterns of peer affection through special mutual assistance and collaboration in group settings.

Sub-theme: "You'll definitely find it"

We all know good friends bring positive emotional experiences, while "bad friends" often bring negative ones. Yet, in a way, some "bad friends" act like seasoning in daily life. Their teasing and playful banter toward friends is sometimes not malicious; it simply stems from immature cognitive and emotional development, making them emotionally less attuned and slower to react. In the life segment, the interaction between TJY and XDD offers insight into the complexities of peer affection.

During a break in their outdoor activities, XDD sighed while drinking water: "TJY, did you know? My turtle is missing." TJY stared blankly at the basketball hoop, expressionless, and said, "Your turtle must have fallen into the toilet." XDD hurriedly protested, "No way! This room is huge, and I locked everything—the doors, the windows..." TJY continued staring into the distance, repeating, "Your turtle fell into the toilet." XDD waved his hands and shouted back, "No, I locked the bathroom door! I locked everything!" TJY glanced back at XDD but kept repeating, "No, your turtle fell into the toilet." XDD's voice trembled slightly as he frowned deeply and yelled, "No, it didn't!! My turtle can't climb up such a high toilet!" TJY turned to look at XDD's face, paused for a few seconds, his lips moving slightly but no sound coming out. Then he cupped XDD's face with both hands and said, "XDD, don't be sad. But my... my... my goldfish fell into the toilet before, and he couldn't climb up such a high toilet either." XDD's furrowed brow relaxed. He placed his hand over TJY's and asked, "Is that true?" TJY nodded vigorously, clasped XDD's hand back, and added in a louder voice, "It's true! Grandpa and Grandma saw it too!" XDD looked up, holding the water cup. After a few seconds, he replied, "Alright then. TJY squeezed XDD's hand tightly and nodded emphatically, "It's true! Go home and look carefully again, you'll definitely find it!" XDD replied softly, "Okay, when I get home I'll search thoroughly with Grandma and XGG." (S-TJY-XDD-20240628)

In this incident, the interaction between TJY and XDD reveals the complex and authentic emotional experiences within early childhood peer relationships. When XDD was anxious about the missing turtle, TJY's initial response seemed cold—merely mechanically repeating "Your turtle fell into the toilet." This behavior is a classic manifestation of the "egocentric" stage in early cognitive development. TJY simply projected his own experience (a goldfish falling into the toilet) onto his friend's predicament, lacking the appropriate means to express empathy. Behind this seemingly "bad friend" behavior lies TJY's effort to explain an unknown event through familiar experiences. Over time, upon seeing XDD's furrowed brow and hearing his trembling voice exclaim, "No, it didn't!!!" TJY finally recognized XDD's deep sadness. TJY paused briefly before comforting the hurt XDD through "face-cupping and gazing"—a nonverbal physical interaction that reflects both young children's innate instinct for physical contact and their intuitive capacity to perceive others' emotions. Ultimately, TJY comforted XDD by adjusting his tone and sharing personal experiences, marking a shift from self-centeredness to understanding and empathizing with his peer. XDD's expression softened from a furrowed brow to gradual acceptance of TJY's words, indicating not only emotional soothing but also a cognitive restructuring of the event's meaning. This interaction reveals the deeper significance of peer affection: it transcends simple mutual aid, embodying a dynamic process where children learn to understand others and adjust themselves through continuous trial and error.

Theme: "Reluctant Goodbyes" During Departure Time

Sub-theme: "Preserving Today's Joy"

Compared to the relatively calm emotional state at arrival, children often display excitement and joy during departure, exhibiting a unique pattern of reluctance to part. Children might enthusiastically share amusing incidents from the day or sincerely promise to continue playing after school or tomorrow. These subtle interactions quietly deepen peer friendships, offering glimpses into children's rich emotional worlds and social needs.

Sub-theme: "I'll Give You My Ultraman Pencil"

Research has found that during the departure routine, children express affection and reluctance to part with peers through gift-giving, hugging, and making promises. Gifts and hugs serve as symbols for young children to convey feelings

of friendship. As humans are relational beings and communicative creatures relying on symbolic processing, the act of gift-giving itself constitutes a process of meaningful symbolic exchange (Tao & Pan, 2016).

As dismissal approached, the children busily organized their clothes and packed their backpacks following the teacher's instructions. LYQ pulled out three Ultraman pencils from his backpack, walked up to WYW, and said: "My mom bought me these Ultraman pencils. WYW, here's one for you." Handing one over, WYW accepted it with both hands, hopping excitedly in place and exclaiming, "LYQ, thank you! Next time I'll invite you to play at my new house!" (S-LYQ/WYW/CQJ-20240523)

Sub-theme: "Wait for me after school to play together"

In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett (2020) has Dickon utter this innocent, romantic promise: "If you want me to come, rain or shine, I'll come every day." This pure agreement, transcending practical constraints, is precisely children's most authentic expression of "peer affection." During kindergarten dismissal, I often witness such pure and beautiful agreements among children. A casual invitation or a simple pinky promise becomes a precious commitment for them, naturally fostering the most fundamental peer bonding experience. Here is an example:

At dismissal time, children line up by student number at the kindergarten gate, waiting for their parents. SG taps FWX standing in front of her and asks, "FWX, wanna go play in the little square after school?" FWX shakes her head. "No, I have dance class tonight and need to get home early." SG pursed her lips, hands tucked behind her backpack, and said, "Alright then, we'll play together next time." She then turned and patted ZAR's shoulder: "ZAR, wanna go to the little square after school?" ZAR smiled, held out her hand to SG, and said, "SG, whenever you invite me, I'll always play with you." (S-SG/ZAR-20240605)

The departure ritual is far more than a simple "end" to the children's day at kindergarten; it is a temporal and spatial extension of their peer friendships. Taking selfies together preserves the joy of their kindergarten life, while exchanging special gifts and making warm after-school plans all contribute to the genuine, reluctant farewells seen during this departure ritual.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 An interpretation of the essence of peer love experience among kindergarten seniors in the classroom

Whether it is the "eager anticipation" at the entrance, the "friend and mentor" relationship during teaching, the "constant companionship" during play, the "intimate closeness" in daily life, or the "reluctant parting" at the exit, all these reveal the essence of the experience of peer friendship among children as a process of intersubjective meaning construction through symbolic interaction such as language, actions, and expressions, interwoven by cognition, emotion, and behavior. It is manifested as a circular feedback of interactive understanding, emotional exchange, and behavioral collaboration, ultimately internalizing into a socialized emotional connection pattern. Among them, the cognition of peer friendship provides a meaning framework for the emotion of peer friendship, the emotion of peer friendship drives the choice of peer friendship behavior, and the peer friendship behavior in turn nourishes the cognition and emotion of peer friendship, further deepening and elevating them (Peng, 2012). This dynamic interweaving of the three dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior enables the experience of peer friendship among children to transcend static presentation and become a vivid manifestation of children's social development in the kindergarten life field, thereby revealing the essence of children's peer friendship experience in the kindergarten: from the perspective of "seeking common ground while reserving differences" at the cognitive level, children consider peers as those who are on the same wavelength; from the perspective of "empathy" at the emotional level, children long for emotional interaction with peers; from the perspective of "co-progression" at the behavioral level, children achieve growth together through friendly interaction.

5.2 Prospects for research on children's affection and recommendations for educational improvement

The findings reveal that children's experiences of peer affection are not innate but emerge through a social construction process in the kindergarten setting. This involves sustained interactions, symbolic communication, and meaning negotiation, closely tied to children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. Drawing insights from kindergarten teachers and parents, this study proposes three educational recommendations to enhance children's peer affection experiences:

Revision of Concepts: Teachers and parents should recognize that children are "experts" in peer relationships, capable of keenly perceiving details overlooked by adults. Young children are not merely participants in social activities but also "interpreters" and "constructors" of peer relationships. They possess the ability to sensitively detect subtle shifts in group interactions, often transcending adults' preconceived frameworks.

To maintain emotional resonance, teachers and parents must connect with children through their childhood experiences. When recounting their own childhoods, adults often interpret and reconstruct those memories through an adult lens and logic, overlooking children's unique emotional experiences and modes of expression. Therefore, merely adopting an equal stance by crouching down to interact with children may not necessarily earn their genuine recognition (Liu, 2010). What children genuinely recognize and welcome are adults who meet them at eye level while demonstrating strength when needed. The affection between young children and their peers is a two-way bond of goodwill—the purest reflection of human emotional ecology. Adults should set aside preconceptions, listen to the emotional signals children express during interactions, understand their emotional logic, and respect their autonomy in choosing friends and resolving conflicts. Support through empathy, not intervention.

To achieve behavioral transformation, educators and parents must shift from "interveners" to "listeners." An excellent

educator often embodies both the roles of acceptor and listener, creating a safe and open dialogue space through gentle guidance. This non-oppressive interaction model effectively alleviates children's psychological defense mechanisms, enabling them to voluntarily reveal their authentic selves when they feel respected and valued (Jin, 2020). The secret to children's peer affection lies in the subtleties of daily interactions. Only by granting children sufficient space and time for social engagement can adults truly grasp the essence of their affection. Future research on childhood affection should further focus on children's autonomous expression within authentic social contexts, delving deeper into the symbolic meanings behind their linguistic, physical, and emotional interactions.

5.3 Conclusion

Qualitative data analysis shows that the experience of peer affection among senior kindergarten children runs through all aspects of their daily life, including entering the kindergarten, teaching, playing, living and leaving the kindergarten. It is specifically manifested in typical forms such as "looking forward with anticipation", "being both teacher and friend", "sticking together like shadows", "being intimate and close" and "being reluctant to part". The essence of the experience of peer affection among senior kindergarten children lies in their ability to express and construct the intimate relationship and emotions between peers through various interactive symbols such as language, actions and materials. Children hope to establish a "synchronized" interaction relationship with their peers, and they will use symbols to establish a friendly and affectionate relationship with their peers. Children have a psychological need for peer interaction and a spiritual need for peer affection. They will use various symbols to "write" the script of friendly relationships and achieve common growth through friendly interaction rituals. The research findings provide an authentic life perspective for understanding young children's peer friendship and offer valuable insights for educational practice. These research findings provide educators with a perspective close to real life for understanding the affectionate feelings among young children's peers, and also bring valuable insights to educational practice.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies

No AI tools were utilized for this paper.

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