“Practice what you preach”: Teachers’ perceptions of emotional competence and emotionally supportive classroom practices

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Abstract

The connections between parents’ emotional competence (emotion expression, regulation, and knowledge) and children’s social–emotional learning (SEL) have been well studied; however, the associations among teachers’ emotional competencies and children’s SEL remain widely understudied. In the present study, private preschool and Head Start teachers (N=32) were observed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Participating teachers from each center also participated in focus groups discussions about emotional competence in preschool classrooms. For analyses, teachers were divided into Moderately and Highly Supportive groups based on observed emotional support quality. Teachers’ focus group responses were compared. Comparison groups differed with regards to their discussions of emotion regulation and emotion knowledge. These differences elucidate ways that intervention programs and in-service training can be developed to help teachers better meet the SEL needs of children.
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Recent initiatives, such as the Race-to-the-Top Early Learning Challenge grants, have drawn necessary attention to the quality of expanding early childhood education opportunities. In addition to academic readiness, these initiatives emphasize the extent to which preschool teachers are able to support children’s social and emotional readiness for elementary school. Although there are evidence-based curricula designed to promote children’s social and emotional learning (SEL; CASEL, 2013), to be effective these curricula have to change how teachers and children interact around emotions and emotionally-salient events in the classroom. Previous research has examined how teachers’ perceptions of emotions and emotion socialization practices relate to supportive emotional classroom environments (Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014). However, as of yet, little is known about teachers’ perceptions of the importance of their own emotional competence and how such perceptions relate to the quality of their emotionally supportive teaching practices. The purpose of the present study is to explore how preschool teachers’ views of emotional competence, as indicated in focus groups, relates to their observed teaching practices that support children’s SEL.

Children’s Emotional Competence

In preschool classrooms, children are immersed in social interactions that are ripe with emotions (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). From pride at completing a challenging puzzle, to frustration during a sharing dispute in the block corner, preschoolers experience emotions throughout their day. These interactions assist children in acquiring crucial emotional skills that have significant ramifications for academic success and school adjustment (Denham, Zinsser, & Brown, 2010; Shields et al., 2001; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). The ability
to express, regulate, and understand emotions are all inter-related and crucial to preschoolers’ successful school experiences (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010).

Starting formal schooling with higher levels of emotional competence supports children’s cognitive development, pre-academic achievement, school readiness and adjustment (for a review see Denham et al., 2012). Children who are in better command of their emotions, more knowledgeable about emotions, and more empathetic towards others have more success making friends, are more positive about school, and have stronger grades and achievement later in elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Denham et al., 2010; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Emotional competence is integral to children’s academic and social success going forward, and great strides are made during the preschool years, primarily through social interactions.

In accordance of much of the work of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; e.g., Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007), we envision several core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Although overlap exists between these aspects of SEL, we will focus on delineating and elaborating on emotion-related skills which generally align with three SEL components: self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. In the present study, we focus on skills which we refer to as *emotional competence*; that is, we see emotional competence as fitting within SEL at the skill level.

Our identification of the following three components of emotional competence is in alignment with previous researchers (Denham, 1998; Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Saarni, 1999) and includes three competencies: emotional expression, emotion regulation, and emotion knowledge. *Emotional expression* fits well with the SEL component of self-awareness, and includes being able to identify, label, and express one’s own emotions both verbally and non-verbally. Recent
research indicates that young children are aware of and able to report on their own emotional experiences reliably (Durbin, 2010). Young children must learn to accurately send emotional messages in order to build relationships that will support their positive school experiences (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). Children who generally express more positive than negative affect are often seen as more prosocial and friendly by teachers and peers (Denham et al., 2003).

The second component of emotional competence, emotion regulation, corresponds to the SEL component of self-management. It includes monitoring and modifying feelings to meet social goals (Saarni, 1993). This component is frequently tested in preschool classrooms, with challenging behavioral expectations and a myriad of play opportunities that can deteriorate quickly into heated arguments. Children who struggle to control angry outbursts or sit still during circle time may quickly lose social status with both peers and teachers. Additionally, children who have difficulties dealing with negative emotions may not have the personal resources to focus on learning, whereas those who can maintain a positive emotional tone might remain more positively engaged with classroom tasks (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Shields et al., 2001; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007).

Finally, of paramount importance to children’s emotional and social success in the classroom is their emotion knowledge, an aspect of emotional competence that fits well with the SEL component of social awareness. Emotion knowledge includes being able to identify others’ emotions, understanding causal parameters, display rules, and appreciating more complex social-emotions such as guilt. Children who understand emotions can identify others’ expressions and predict and empathize with emotions others might feel in common social situations. Children with higher emotion knowledge tend to act more prosocially and are seen as more socially
competent by peers and teachers (Denham et al., 2003). Furthermore, emotion knowledge is associated with concurrent and later academic success (Izard et al., 2001).

**Emotionally Supportive Teaching**

With the rise in the number of children attending early childhood education programs (Campbell & Stauffenberg, 2008), preschool teachers are uniquely poised to significantly impact children’s development of these emotional competencies (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). The quality of children’s interactions with their teachers is one of the most salient features of their preschool experiences (Pianta, 1999). Quantitatively-based observational rating scales of children’s classroom environments have yielded notable associations with children’s social outcomes (NICHD, 2000; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Classroom climate research has shown impacts on children’s literacy (NICHD ECCRN, 2003), school engagement (Bryant et al., 2002), social competence (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007; Howes, 2000, Mashburn et al., 2008) and problem behavior problems (Mashburn et al., 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 2003), all in the expected directions.

Specifically, emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions can have significant ramifications for children’s cognitive and emotional development (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001, 2007). Higher ratings of teacher emotional support are associated with greater social competence (Mashburn et al., 2008) and fewer problem behaviors (Howes et al., 2008; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003), in part because teachers’ develop consistent, warm, and caring attachment relationships with children (Mitchell-Copeland, Denham, DeMulder, 1997). Emotionally supportive teachers tend to create positive classroom environments and balance the need for child autonomy with sensitivity to children’s need for extra support (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Yet the field of educational research has little to say about the intentionality of these
supportive behaviors; teachers’ understanding of their own emotional competencies may impact their abilities to engage in high-quality social–emotional teaching. A starting place for such explorations is the research literature on parental socialization of emotions.

**Teachers’ Emotional Competence**

Parents who are themselves more emotionally competent are better able to socialize their children in those competencies (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002). Given the strong relationships that young children form with their early teachers, a growing literature is supporting the expectation that teachers may socialize children in similar ways to parents (Denham et al., 2012; Poulou, 2005; Zinsser, et al., 2014). From this perspective, teachers’ own emotional competence may lead them to be better social and emotional teachers (Järvelä, 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), supporting children’s development of these important competencies. When teachers believe in the value of emotions and demonstrate an interest in children’s feelings, they construct classroom environments within which children can strengthen their own emotional competencies (Hyson, 1994). Additionally, for elementary teachers, the skills of expressing, regulating, and understanding emotions positively influence their feelings of efficacy (Perry & Ball, 2007; Perry, 2008). Teachers who are more emotionally competent may either experience more success in the classroom or be better able to perceive the impact they’re having on children’s SEL, further promoting their perception of the value of teaching such skills to children.

In the present study we are particularly interested in teachers’ competence in each of the areas outlined above: expression, regulation, and knowledge. Teachers who possess strong emotion expression skills are likely more aware of their own internal states and able to communicate their feelings both verbally and non-verbally. Particularly skilled teachers may use
their emotional expressions to promote children’s engagement and enjoyment of learning and proactively manage student behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Emotionally knowledgeable teachers are aware of and attuned to the feelings of others around them. They anticipate children’s strong emotional reactions and can effectively respond to individual needs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Additionally, such teachers are cognizant of how their emotions and behavior impact their students.

With regard to emotion regulation, competent teachers are likely more in control of their emotions as well as behaviors; during times of stress or frustration these teacher could potentially manage their physiological arousal in healthy ways that do not detract from their relationships with students and co-workers; enabling them to view their work as more enjoyable (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004).

The Present Study

In this study we combine the convention of quantitatively assessing classroom quality with qualitative techniques used in the study of parental emotion socialization practices (Denham, Caal, Bassett, Benga, & Geangu, 2004; Parker et al., 2012; Zinsser et al., 2014) into a mixed-method investigation. Specifically, qualitative focus-group data about teachers’ understanding of emotional competence are combined with quantitative assessments of the quality of their emotionally supportive interactions with children. This study is an expansion of analyses previously conducted (Zinsser et al., 2014), wherein highly and moderately emotionally supportive teachers were compared across their beliefs about emotions and social-emotional teaching strategies. Presently, we seek to expand on these comparisons to see whether our comparison groups differ with regards to their conceptualizations of what emotional competence looks like in preschool teachers. By examining teachers of differing levels of emotional
supportiveness, we seek to understand whether they describe different perceptions and beliefs regarding the expression of emotion in the classroom; manage their own emotions in the classroom differently; and finally in describing their beliefs and practices, do they display differing levels of emotion knowledge?

We hypothesize that emotionally supportive teachers are also cognizant of their impact on children’s emotional competence via their emotional expression in the classroom and roles as emotion socializers – modeling high levels of positive affect and avoiding negative outbursts in front of children, respecting children’s experiences of strong emotions, and helping them manage such emotions. Teachers who invest effort in providing children with an emotionally supportive learning environment likely also feel responsible for children’s emotional development to a greater degree than teachers who make little effort to be supportive.

**Method**

**Procedures**

The sample \((N = 32)\) was composed of preschool lead teachers from Head Start and private child care centers in Northern Virginia in the 2011-2012 school year. Additional information about participants can be found in Table 1, as well as in the description of the comparison groups below. Classroom observations were conducted during a month-long period in the winter by trained and certified personnel. Focus groups were conducted separately with the lead teachers during the winter and spring.

**Measures**

**Teacher emotional support.** Observations of Emotional Support were coded using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS-PreK; Pianta et al., 2008) over four contiguous observation cycles within one day. All observations were conducted in the mornings and each
observation cycle consisted of a 20-minute observation followed by a 10-minute rating period. During each rating cycle, ten dimensions of quality in teachers’ interactions with children were coded. Each dimension was scored on a Likert-type scale from $1 = \text{low}$ to $7 = \text{high}$. Following the standard scoring procedures for the CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008), the ten dimensions were aggregated into three domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The present study focuses only on the Emotional Support domain.

*Emotional Support* is a composite of four measured dimensions ($\alpha = .72$): Positive Climate, Negative Climate (reversed), Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives. Positive Climate captures the extent to which teachers create an emotional atmosphere conducive to learning. Teachers whose interactions foster relational closeness, enthusiasm, and respect score more highly on Positive Climate. Negative Climate (reversed for analysis) refers to teachers’ expressed irritability, anger, or aggression. Teacher Sensitivity captures teachers’ interactions that support children’s individual academic and emotional needs. Regard for Student Perspectives describes the degree to which teacher-child interactions and classroom activities emphasize children’s interests, motivations, and points of view, rather than being teacher-driven (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Children in classrooms with Highly Supportive teachers tend to display greater social competence (Mashburn et al., 2008).

**Training and Reliability.** All coders attended a two-day training session led by a certified trainer. During the training, videos from preschool classrooms were watched and discussed based on the instrument manual. After the training, potential raters provided ratings on 5 videos. Raters were deemed reliable if their ratings were within one scale point of the master codes 80% of the time. All raters met or exceeded this level of reliability. Furthermore, 21% of all field
observation segments were dual coded. The average correlation between raters on these dual-coded segments was .89, indicating a high level of reliability during the study.

**Teacher focus groups.** Teacher focus groups were conducted to garner a deeper understanding of teachers’ role in children’s emotion socialization. Two female senior developmental psychology graduate students conducted semi-structured focus groups. At the start of the focus groups, the lead moderator introduced the discussion by saying that the researchers were hoping the teachers could help them “understand the role of emotions in preschool classrooms, both those of the children, and teachers’ own emotional experiences” (Zinsser, Shewark, & Denham, 2011). The lead moderator asked teachers questions in a semi-structured format and posed follow-up questions for clarification. For example, to introduce the topic, teachers were asked “Tell me about some emotions that regularly come up in your classroom.” Later teachers were asked to describe the “difference between a child who struggles with his/her emotions and one who seems more competent.” The assistant moderator monitored the recording equipment and took notes of salient themes and quotes as they emerged. Separate focus groups were conducted for each lead and assistant teachers in each participating center. Therefore, the focus groups varied in size based on the number of preschool classrooms at each center and tended to be small, ranging from two to eight participants. Each focus group met once for 60-90 minutes.

A list of questions with possible probes was originally developed based on literature about parent and teacher emotion socialization practices (Zinsser et al., 2011). The script and procedures were piloted with two groups of preschool teachers (N=4 and N=6) in a school not otherwise included in the project. The final semi-structured script consisted of a total of eight questions covering emotions in the classroom, children’s emotional competence, teachers’ roles
in emotion development, teacher emotional competence, and teachers’ training experiences with SEL. Immediately following each focus group, the two moderators debriefed the session to capture the initial impressions and most salient themes. The field and debriefing notes were combined into memos and were the basis of the first draft of analysis codes.

Each focus group was video recorded and participants were identified using their unique study identification numbers. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and all utterances were attributed to the speaker’s specific identification number, which was later linked to their survey and observational data. All references to children and adults not participating in the study were redacted to maintain anonymity.

**Coding procedures.** Following inductive procedures, the field and debriefing notes were used to identify and collapse major themes emerging from the focus group discussions. These themes were delineated into primary Level-1 codes (e.g., Emotions in the Classroom) which were further defined into sub-categories (Level-2; e.g., Positive vs. Negative emotions). The final coding structure has 15 Level-1 codes. Coding was conducted using the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software package (QSR International, 2012).

**Codes relevant to the present study.** For this particular analysis of these focus group data, only certain codes were examined. In the finalized codebook for this project (Zinsser et al., 2011), the level-1 code for teachers’ emotional competence was broadly used to identify segments of the focus group discussions pertaining to characteristics of an emotionally competent teacher. Several sub-codes were used to further categorize these utterances. Three such sub-codes in particular are relevant to this analysis: (1) The code for *teachers’ emotional expression* was applied to any discussion of showing/expressing emotions. This code included expression directly to students or to coworkers/administrators either verbally or
behaviorally/non-verbally (Zinsser et al., 2011), (2) The code for *teachers’ emotion regulation* was applied to any discussion of a teacher actively regulating his/her own emotions either inside or outside of the classroom. This included down regulation/suppression of an inappropriate arousal, or up regulation of emotion to match a perceived social norm/expectation (Zinsser et al., 2011). (3) The final aspect of teachers’ emotional competence that we coded was teachers’ *emotion knowledge*, including their understanding of emotions, ability to identify others’ emotions and typical antecedents of emotions, and awareness of developmentally appropriate expectations for children’s emotional skills.

*Assessing coder reliability.* The same researchers who conducted the focus groups coded the transcripts. Coders practiced, using the pilot focus group transcripts, to adhere to a set of systematic procedures to ensure consistency in how they perceived and processed the data. To test coding reliability, one of the 13 analysis transcripts was randomly selected and double-coded. When coders applied the same code (at either Level-1 or Level-2), they were considered in agreement. When the same section of text was coded with two different Level-2 codes belonging under the same Level-1 code (e.g., one coder coded ‘Expression’ and the other coded ‘Knowledge,’ both of which are under ‘Teacher Emotional Competence’), the Level-1 codes were deemed in agreement. Because coders attached codes to specific spans of text, coders varied slightly in their indication of the beginning and end of a code-able portion of the data (e.g., where exactly in the text theme began). Thus, a five-line grace region was allowed on either side for agreement to be considered. Across all Level-1 codes, the coders agreed 62% of the time. In order to control for chance agreement of codes, Kappa was calculated to be 0.59, a moderate and acceptable level of reliability (Sim & Wright, 2005).
Following the reliability assessment, coders met again to discuss the Kappa matrix and identify Level-1 codes that could be joined based on the reliability analysis. Using the final 15 Level-1 code book (Table 1), the coders proceeded to code the remaining focus group transcripts. Notably, although all teachers participated in the focus groups, the present study only used utterances from teachers who were identified as being in high/low comparison groups based on their observed emotional support (described below).

**Results**

**Creating Comparison Groups**

Comparison groups were formed based on teachers’ CLASS scores for observed emotional support to maximize distinctions in teacher beliefs about SEL. The creation of groups only took place after all data had been collected and the transcripts had been coded. Teachers who were more than a full SD above the sample emotional support mean were labeled as Highly Supportive (Highly Supportive; \( n = 6 \)), and those greater than one SD below the sample mean were labeled as Moderately Supportive (Moderately Supportive; \( n = 5 \)). On average, the teachers in each group were one and a half standard deviations away from the full sample emotional support mean. The Highly Supportive teachers had an average emotional support score near the ceiling of the scale (\( M=6.45 \)) while the Moderately Supportive teachers fell in the mid-quality range of the CLASS scores (\( M=4.87 \)). It is important to note that the average scores for both groups fall within the bounds of moderate to high quality according to the developers of the CLASS (Pianta, et al., 2008) and that the range of scores in this study are consistent with the range found in other studies (Mashburn et al., 2008).

Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the Highly Supportive and Moderately Supportive teachers as well as the corresponding values for the full sample of teachers. Overall,
the two groups were fairly comparable. A majority of both groups of teachers were young (25-34 years old), all were female, and most were Caucasian. Their experience differed somewhat, with a larger proportion of the more supportive teachers having more experience in the field than Moderately Supportive teachers. Both groups had two teachers who had not completed a college degree and the Moderately Supportive group included one teacher who had completed a graduate degree. Also of note is that Highly Supportive group of teachers was composed of three Head Start teachers and three private teachers, whereas the Moderately Supportive group was entirely composed of private center teachers. This division may partially explain why more supportive teachers were generally paid more, as Head Start salaries in this sample tended to be higher than those in the private child care programs.

Coded portions of teachers’ focus group discussions were examined both quantitatively and qualitatively for meaning. Table 2 displays the proportion of group members who contributed to focus groups discussions under each code, as well as the average number of references across the group and the total length of each reference. Individuals varied with regard to their interest and willingness to engage in group discussions, but these descriptive statistics are provided to show the breadth of discussion and engagement. Quotes were selected that best represented a theme that emerged across speakers. The chosen quotes below are attributed to individual participants via numeric identifiers (Moderately Supportive 1-5 and Highly Supportive 1-6) and some speakers are more frequently quoted than others simply because of their conciseness or articulateness.

**Comparison of Moderately Supportive and Highly Supportive Teachers**

Once divided, the Moderately Supportive and Highly Supportive teachers were compared on their discussions of emotional competence. The code for Teacher Emotional Competence was
applied to discussions of teachers’ knowledge of emotions, expression of emotions, regulation of emotions, awareness of one’s own emotions, and awareness of an individual child’s emotional needs or sensitivity towards children’s emotional differences. Quantitative analysis of coded references showed that overall the groups spoke relatively equally across the sub-codes. The only significant quantitative difference was found between groups in the number of references teachers made that were coded as “Other Emotional Competence” (Table 2; $U = 2.0, p < .05, r = .60$). Highly Supportive teachers talked more about other topics related to emotional competence than their less supportive peers; however, no prevalent qualitative themes emerged from those discussions. Despite the overall similar quantity of coded references (Table 2), our qualitative analyses did reveal major themes around the definition of emotional competence and the three components of competence (expression, regulation, and knowledge). Across these themes our analyses revealed differences not in how much teachers talked about the different aspects of competence, but rather in how or what they talked about. Although the Moderately Supportive and Highly Supportive teachers showed many similarities in their definitions of emotional competence and discussion of emotional expression, there were quantitative and qualitative differences between the groups in their discussions of the regulation and emotion knowledge.

Defining an emotionally competent teacher. Teachers from both groups referred to aspects of the three-part definition of emotional competence mentioned previously (emotion expression, regulation, and knowledge). Highly Supportive teachers used a variety of terms to describe an emotionally competent teacher. Some focused on teachers’ own self-awareness and regulation, saying a competent teacher is “able to recognize when they need to step away” (Highly Supportive4), “flexible,” (Highly Supportive5) and “able to anticipate what’s going to make [her] emotional in the classroom” (Highly Supportive4). Other Highly Supportive teachers
focused on the key components of emotional competence, saying that an emotionally competent teacher would be “one that is willing to show and use the full spectrum of emotions” (Highly Supportive2) and able to “tune in to how [her] kids feel” (Highly Supportive3).

Among the Moderately Supportive teachers, definitions also varied. Several teachers referred to emotion regulation as a key component of teachers’ competencies. One teacher in the Moderately Supportive group defined a competent teacher as one who is “able to control [her] own emotions and to model that for the children” (Moderately Supportive1). Similarly, emotion knowledge was also identified as the most important competency for teachers, saying, “if a teacher doesn't have the language [skills] that you need to talk to children, [she’s] not being a competent teacher as far as being able to teach children about their emotions” (Moderately Supportive1).

Although the Highly Supportive and Moderately Supportive teachers’ definitions of emotional competence did not seem to differ, some distinctions did emerge as the teachers spoke at length about how their emotions and emotional competencies impact their classroom behavior. Below, we explore the similarities and differences between the two groups of teachers by examining each aspect of competence in turn: expression, regulation, and knowledge.

**Teachers’ emotional expression.** Teachers in both the Highly Supportive and Moderately Supportive groups discussed incidences of expressing emotions in their classrooms. The code for Teacher Emotional Expression was relatively equally applied to both groups (Table 2) and there appeared to be more similarities between the groups than differences. Both Highly Supportive and Moderately Supportive teachers discussed purposeful expression of emotions throughout the focus groups, but in particular, these topics emerged in response to questions about what constitutes an emotionally competent teacher and how that teacher demonstrates her
competencies to the children in her classroom. They stated that emotional expression served at least two purposes: modeling appropriate emotional communication skills for children and normalizing emotional experiences.

Both groups reported that they share some preschool-appropriate emotions with children purposefully, to demonstrate and model appropriate emotional communication. As one of the Highly Supportive teachers said, “You have to be willing to investigate those emotions and feel those emotions and show them to the children just like they show them to us. And they have to buy what you're selling” (Highly Supportive2). This idea of “practicing what you preach” appeared with such frequency in the transcripts that a separate sub-code was created for it underneath the emotional competence code.

Although their preschool classrooms were described as positive, happy, and warm places, many of the Highly Supportive teachers outlined their reasoning for expressing some negative feelings in front of children. For example:

Highly Supportive3: You're really just modeling and setting good examples for children. But it's also so that they understand that teachers and adults are people, too, like they feel the same that they do, that we can have these emotions. I know they can definitely tell when I'm feeling frustrated if no one's listening, so I try to use like, "I feel frustrated when no one is listening," or things like that. And they sort of tune in to it, and they realize, "Oh, my teacher is upset," just so they have an example of what it could look like.

Such purposeful expression of negative emotions was similarly discussed among the Moderately Supportive teachers. One Moderately Supportive teacher referred to her purposeful expression of frustration as a way of normalizing emotional experiences for the children in her classroom,
saying, “I don't mask everything from the kids…I think it's important instead of just telling them all the time, to model things…so they can see that grownups have the same feelings as them, and how to appropriately handle it” (Moderately Supportive3). Another teacher saw her own expression in the classroom as a means by which she could counteract children’s negative perceptions of emotions and emotion management strategies:

Moderately Supportive1: I think that sometimes they're taught maybe by society or by their parents that it's not okay to be angry or it's not okay to be upset. And we're teaching them it is okay to be angry or upset. The behaviors that go along with those emotions sometimes are not okay. But it's okay to be upset with something or disappointed or happy.

Finally, emotional expression by teachers also served a classroom management purpose. Teachers in both groups indicated that there were times when they preemptively warned children about their own emotions, often originating from sickness or factors outside of the classroom, in order to regulate children’s expectations. As one teacher put it:

Moderately Supportive4: I'll let them know ahead of time if I'm not feeling well, “…boys and girls. I’m not feeling very well today. Could you please be very understanding? I will help you in all your wants and needs, but understand that I may not be able to get to you right away."

Teachers from both the Highly Supportive and Moderately Supportive groups discussed expressing mostly positive emotions, with limited, purposeful expression of negative emotions in some instances. Their intentional expression of emotions not only modeled for children how to appropriately express emotions, but also served to normalize some emotional experiences for children and demonstrate realistic consequences of emotional expression. Several of these
themes were also apparent across both groups in discussions of teachers’ regulation of their own emotions.

**Teachers’ emotion regulation.** Across both groups, teachers agreed on the importance of emotion regulation in the classroom, especially regulating negative feelings such as frustration. As one teacher said, “You’ve got to control your actions before you can help control the kids.” (Moderately Supportive5). However, there were evident differences between the Highly Supportive teachers and their Moderately Supportive peers with regards to their discussions of emotion regulation in the classroom. Highly Supportive teachers discussed regulation twice as often (Table 2) as those in the Moderately Supportive group. Although a Mann-Whitney test of rank differences showed no difference between groups, they did vary in the themes of their discussions. Highly Supportive teachers adopted a *practice what you preach* approach to regulation in the classroom, similar to that seen in their expression of emotions. Many Highly Supportive teachers discussed purposefully using the exact regulation strategies they wanted children to use, including those included in their SEL curriculum. In the following quote the teacher is referring to the “turtle” technique which is taught to children to help them regulate feelings of anger or frustration:

Highly Supportive2: When I get upset in the classroom, I will sometimes ask the children, "Do I need [to] turtle right now? I need to take a break right now. I'm getting a little upset and frustrated. I'm going to take a break." I have to be willing to do the same things that I'm trying to teach them to do. I have to be willing to do that, otherwise it's just a bunch of talk.

In this example, the teacher is reiterating the importance of modeling exactly how she wants the children to manage their negative feelings like anger and frustration.
Given the similarities between Highly Supportive and Moderately Supportive teachers’ beliefs about modeling emotional expressions, it was interesting to find that the Moderately Supportive teachers held contradictory beliefs about modeling emotion regulation. Several Moderately Supportive teachers who discussed purposefully expressing negative emotions like frustration, also implied that they regulate their emotions to the point of not displaying them. Across both groups, teachers repeatedly used the metaphor of a mask or face to describe the ultimate goal of their emotion regulation. We coded this approach to shielding children from the teacher’s emotions as adopting the “Teacher Façade.” Moderately Supportive teachers referred to this Façade more consistently, using phrases like “No matter how you're feeling, once you come into the classroom you have to put your face on” (Moderately Supportive2) and “You need to always have a smile” (Moderately Supportive5). This teacher went on to describe her attempts to up-regulate her emotions, saying that as a teacher she gives herself a pep-talk; she has to “go in with a smile on my face, it’s going to be fun. A fun-filled day” (Moderately Supportive5). One teacher took the face metaphor further, saying that teachers need to “mask when [they] don’t enjoy one of the kids in [their] class” (Moderately Supportive3). Adopting the Façade and regulating their own emotions served as an important classroom management tool for these teachers; as one put it, “If you’re upset, then they seem to be rowdier. And if you stay calm, they seem to stay calm” (Moderately Supportive5).

Interestingly, several of the Highly Supportive teachers joked about the Façade adopted by preschool teachers who appear stereotypically overly cheerful. One even drew the connection from unnatural up-regulation of positivity to her children’s authentic experience in the classroom:
Highly Supportive2: It's not real. And the kids pick up on that... they know me well enough. They know when they draw me a picture and they've done a really good job and I'll be so excited for them...If I fake it with them, they see that. I can't pretend it. I can't pretend. I have to be it.

Based on these comments, emotion regulation by teachers in the classroom is a complex balancing act. Teachers agreed on both the importance of expressing some emotions to children and regulating other emotions. Highly Supportive teachers advocated for deliberately and overtly regulating certain emotions in front of children through the use of specific curriculum-based strategies. Moderately Supportive teachers favored exhaustive regulation, reducing emotions across the board and adopting the Façade of a happy, positive teacher while in the classroom. There was some evidence of teachers also acknowledging that certain emotions they regulate, and in which direction, directly influences the environment of their classrooms and their children’s experiences.

**Teachers’ emotion knowledge.** The codes for teachers’ emotion knowledge arose out of an indication that teachers adapted their interaction styles to fit the individual needs or skills of specific children. One teacher expanded on the idea of sensitivity, saying it was important for teachers to be able to “tune in to [the emotions of] those around you, your children and also your other staff members” (Highly Supportive2). Teachers in both groups discussed their empathy and sensitivity towards children and knowledge of emotions, although Highly Supportive teachers discussed these skills more extensively (Table 2).

Highly Supportive teachers were aware of family and environmental differences that may impact children’s emotions in the classroom and explained how they differentiated their approach from child to child. For example, one teacher (Highly Supportive3) noted that children
with no siblings tended to need more practice and repetition while learning to master challenging social rules like sharing. Teachers in this group also adjusted their interactions with children based on children’s emotional needs. One Highly Supportive teacher explained that “instead of standing up high, looking down, if you get down at their level, you can see that it’s kind of scary down there. Maybe we need to bring it down some. That way we can see what they’re feeling” (Highly Supportive1). This comment is especially representative of the CLASS dimension of Teacher Sensitivity, and by acknowledging the importance of proximity this teacher highlights her sense of empathy, a key indicator of high emotion knowledge.

Highly Supportive teachers’ emotion knowledge was also evident in their description of the pacing of their activities, reflecting high degrees of sensitivity towards children’s needs and empathy for their perspectives. Although many expressed the importance of having routines and schedules, they also underlined the importance of being flexible. One teacher emphasized this flexibility specifically with regards to developing children’s emotional competencies, saying:

Highly Supportive6: We have to do it not only in our own time and in our own place but in the children’s time. Give them the time to work [through their emotions]. Sometimes it’s stressful for whatever reason in the classroom, and you want it to move [along]. But we have to talk to ourselves and say, ‘No, just give my time. I’m working for him right now. I’m going to help him. I’m going to support him right now.’

With less knowledge about emotions and sensitivity to the child’s emotional needs, this teacher may have rushed a child on to the next activity, eliminating an important SEL opportunity for him/her. As with the previous example, this quote epitomizes the CLASS dimensions, which make up the Emotional Support domain, including Regard for Student
Perspectives. Highly Supportive teachers seem to have a greater understanding of emotions and are more willing to explore children’s feelings in their classrooms.

There were fewer instances of Moderately Supportive teachers demonstrating substantial emotion knowledge. The discussions by these teachers, which were coded with the Emotion Knowledge code, were qualitatively different from those of Highly Supportive teachers. Rather than displaying high regard for children’s emotions, Moderately Supportive teachers’ discussions of emotion knowledge tended to center around their beliefs about child characteristics related to emotions, such as gender. One teacher acknowledged these differences in her classroom while explaining a regulation skill she was teaching to girls, saying, “We're getting them to put their hands on their tummy and getting them to take a deep breath and count to ten…I say girls because it's really mostly my girls who get really upset very easily over some of the littlest things” (Moderately Supportive4). This teacher was acknowledging the fact that she invests more time in teaching girls how to control their breathing and regulate their emotions. Notably, this teacher is additionally minimizing the girls’ emotions by judging the roots of their feelings as unimportant.

Another teacher in this group also indicated her beliefs about gender differences saying, “My boys are different than the girls…they can be a little more rowdier, a little more aggressive than the girls. They like to do wrestling and jumping and kicking” (Moderately Supportive5). Moderately Supportive teachers’ focus on gender may indicate an extreme sensitivity to gender roles and societal expectations in emotion socialization; however, none of these teachers went into enough detail to fully explore this with these data. Unlike the Highly Supportive teachers, Moderately Supportive teachers did not demonstrate the more complex perspective taking aspects of emotion knowledge.
Discussion

In this mixed-method examination we found that teachers exhibiting high emotional support had similar beliefs as those exhibiting moderate emotional support with respect to their definition of emotional competence and their purposeful expression of emotions in the classroom. However, differences did emerge between the two groups with regards to their regulation of emotion and knowledge of emotions. More emotionally supportive teachers revealed a more nuanced understanding of emotions and a pedagogical approach to the management of their own emotions in the classroom. Finally, it is notable that differences emerged between the comparison groups even though they only represented the moderate and high ranges of classroom quality.

Similarities across Comparison Groups

When asked to define what an emotionally competent teacher would look like, teachers at both levels of emotional supportiveness referenced all three aspects of emotional competence: expression, regulation, and knowledge. In their definitions, they demonstrated an understanding of the connections between teachers’ competencies and their abilities to manage the classroom and effectively support children throughout the school day. This finding points to a general awareness of the importance of teachers being prepared emotionally for their sometimes challenging work. Similarly, teachers in the comparison group did not differ significantly in the quantity or quality of discussions of expressing emotions in their classrooms. Both groups identified emotional expression as serving multiple purposes in their classrooms, including: modeling appropriate emotional communication skills for children, normalizing emotional experiences, and managing children’s expectations to support classroom management. Overall, teachers are very cognizant of their purposeful expression of emotion in the classroom across
emotional support groups. Emotional expression may be the most tangible aspect of competence for teachers and, especially for positive expression, may be the emotion skill on which they receive the most training and feedback.

**Differences in Emotion Regulation and Knowledge**

**Regulation.** Both groups discussed experiencing negative emotions in the classroom, but they handled these emotions differently. When Highly Supportive teachers discussed experiencing frustration or disappointment in their classrooms, they described purposely regulating negative emotions by using the strategies they wanted children to use. Some even described using the strategies they were teaching as part of an SEL curriculum. These teachers were aware that they were serving as models for children, not only by demonstrating how to appropriately express negative emotions, but also by demonstrating successful strategies to calm themselves down. In contrast, less emotionally supportive teachers describe down regulating negative emotions and adopting the Façade of a happy, positive teacher while in the classroom.

**Knowledge.** Research on the socialization of emotional competence has routinely drawn connections between a caregiver’s knowledge of and appreciation for emotions and children’s resultant emotional ability (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002; Dunsmore, Her, Halberstadt, & Perez-Rivera, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Valiente, Fabes, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2004). Our findings extend this connection to preschool classrooms. Teachers’ tendency to engage in emotionally supportive teaching practices depends on their knowledge of emotions. Compared to their less emotionally supportive peers, Highly Supportive teachers displayed greater understanding of the basis of children’s emotions and appeared more accepting of emotions in general. Promoting teachers’ own emotional ability would likely contribute to their ability to perceive their own and others’ emotions accurately, which in turn would enhance their ability to support children’s SEL.
As we originally hypothesized, these results provide preliminary evidence of highly emotionally supportive teachers being more cognizant of their impact on children’s emotional competence. They report being both purposeful and more nuanced in their modeling of emotional expression and use of regulation strategies. Compared to their moderately supportive peers, highly supportive teachers report a greater degree of responsibility for their children’s emotional development and thus invest a greater amount of effort in providing an emotionally supportive learning environment. Further research will be necessary to determine what personal characteristics may account for this increased sense of responsibility and whether these teachers feel at all burdened by it.

**Differences within Quality Thresholds**

Our results demonstrate that there are meaningful differences among teachers’ whose emotional support quality ratings are generally considered adequate. In this study, relatively small variations in teacher emotional support quality were related to differences in emotional competencies and emotion understanding among teachers. This finding is meaningful when combined with research showing that even relatively small differences in classroom quality impact children’s experiences and outcomes (Curby et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008). The findings of this study are particularly relevant given the recent attention to quality thresholds (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2009; Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, Vitiello, & Greenberg, 2014).

Many states have moved towards implementing quality rating improvement systems (QRIS; Yoshikawa et al., 2013), which use quality thresholds, and motivate centers to make continual upward improvement in the services they provide. QRISs primarily focus on quality aggregated at the center-level but our results indicate that teacher beliefs about emotions and
engagement in socialization practices may help to explain the variable experiences children have across classrooms in an on-average high-quality center. For example, within the Illinois QRIS (called ExceleRate Illinois), a center with CLASS Emotional Support (and Classroom Organization) scores average above a 5 (out of 7) with no classroom below a 4, will likely be included in the highest (Gold) circle of quality (assuming other requirements are also met). Based on this cutoff, most teachers from our sample including both moderately supportive and highly supportive teachers could be employed by Gold circle centers. However, our findings indicate there may be meaningful underlying differences in how teachers within a given Gold center conceptualize their roles in the emotional lives of children. As extensive resources and marshalled to support centers moving upward in the QRIS, focused pre-service and in-service training for teachers and administrators on their own emotional competence may meaningfully impact on overall center quality ratings and decrease classroom to classroom variability.

Limitations

The use of a semi-structured focus group methodology poses limitations to our ability to draw conclusions from these findings. The number of coded references is partially influenced by the fact that not every teacher had the chance to participate in identical conversations. The small number of teachers in the final analysis sample additionally limits the generalizability of the contrasts between the two comparison groups. Future research utilizing a more structured individual interview method with a larger sample of teachers will be needed.

Another important threat to the validity of our conclusions is social desirability. Many of the participating teachers are familiar with the domains and behaviors captured by the CLASS observational assessment. This familiarity was likely especially true for those teachers at the Head Start centers, which use the CLASS to measure classroom quality in accordance with the
2007 Head Start Act. Although the teachers were not told what type of observational assessment was being used, nor were CLASS terms used in the focus group, such familiarity may have influenced their responses in the focus groups. However, teachers in the private centers in this sample were relatively unfamiliar with the CLASS and yet showed similar responses in the focus groups to the Head Start teachers. Along these lines, CLASS observations for this study were all conducted with a single morning. It is possible that if the observation has been stretched over longer periods, teachers’ behaviors would have varied more substantially. However, previous research using this methodology has yielded significant findings regarding inconsistency in teaching practices over a single day (e.g., Curby, Grimm, & Pianta, 2010).

A final limitation to this analysis is that we are unable to examine associations between teachers’ observed behaviors and their discussions of emotion-related classroom practices. The CLASS was not designed to explicitly capture the aspects of teachers’ emotional competence discussed in the present study, but future analyses may be able to reveal the degree of alignment between teachers’ classroom practices and their beliefs about emotions.

**Significance & Implications**

These findings are particularly important in light of the recent focus on early learning program quality and social and emotional development at federal, state, and local levels. With so many stakeholders interested in promoting children’s SEL, it is important to consider the role that teachers play in socializing these competencies. Most relevant to this discussion, enhancing teachers’ positive socialization practices in the classroom will depend, in part, on cultivating teachers’ understanding of SEL and their own emotional competence.

Teachers struggling to engage in high-quality emotionally supportive interactions with children may benefit from emotion-focused in-service professional development opportunities
that explicitly focus on acknowledging one’s own emotional competencies and enhancing emotion knowledge and regulation skills. Similarly, existing training programs that aim to increase teachers’ emotionally supportive behaviors may be more effective if they first help teachers acquire positive attitudes towards, and greater understanding of emotions, including their own.

It is important to consider direct and indirect influences on children’s emotional development, prominent among which is the emotional competence of adults most responsible for children’s learning. Just as children learn to value emotions through their interactions with emotion socializers (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997), teachers have the opportunity to enhance their own competence through training. The success of programs designed to support children’s emotional competence through parent training may prove to be a good model for teacher professional development (e.g., Havighurst, Harley & Prior, 2004). To date, however, teachers report little pre-service training on how to help children develop emotional skills (Garner, 2010), let alone support their own competencies. It is possible that Moderately Supportive teachers in this study are themselves not fully knowledgeable about emotions and do not understand how to be an emotion socializer in ways that positively impact children’s SEL.

Conclusion

In this study, we utilized a component mixed-methods design, integrating classroom observation ratings of emotional supportiveness with qualitative focus group data about teachers’ understanding of their own emotional competence and its importance in the preschool classroom. Our findings suggested that although all participating teachers acknowledge the importance of teacher emotional competence, highly emotionally supportive teachers conceptualize emotional competencies differently from Moderately Supportive teachers. More specifically, their
emotional supportiveness may be impacted by their greater knowledge of emotions and their decisions regarding which emotions to express and how to regulate their emotions in the classroom.
References


Perry, C., & Ball, I. (2007). Dealing constructively with negatively evaluated emotional situations: the key to understanding the different reactions of teachers with high and low
doi:10.1007/s11218-007-9025-z

*Promotion & Education, 15*(1), 5. doi:10.1177/1025382307088091


doi:10.1080/02667360500035181


Table 1

*Characteristics of Highly and Moderately Supportive Teacher Comparison Groups.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Highly Supportive (N=6)</th>
<th>Moderately Supportive (N=5)</th>
<th>Total Sample (N=32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Center Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Start</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-62</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>96.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of Experience in ECE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 6 years</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-12 years</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 or more years</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Degree Earned</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school/GED</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Earnings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10K</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10K-$20K</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$30K</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30K-$40K</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $40K</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Level Course Work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ Early Childhood Education Courses</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ Early Elementary Courses</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ Child Development Courses</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional Support (SD)</strong></td>
<td>6.45 (.11)</td>
<td>4.87 (.31)</td>
<td>5.68 (.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Z-score Emotional Support (SD)</strong></td>
<td>+1.46 (.21)</td>
<td>-1.54 (.58)</td>
<td>0.0 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Matrix Analysis of References Coded and Words per Reference by Comparison Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Emotional Competence All</th>
<th>Emotion Expression</th>
<th>Emotion Regulation</th>
<th>Emotion Knowledge</th>
<th>Other Emotional Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Words</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>Words</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly Emotionally Supportive % Participation 100%</td>
<td>Group Total 3570</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median 399.50</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>63.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min 48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max 1742</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Supportive % Participation 100%</td>
<td>Group Total 3198</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median 667.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>81.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min 25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max 1162</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a Groups differ significantly according to Mann-Whitney test; p < .05