

Early Childhood Teachers as Socializers of Young Children's Emotional Competence

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Abstract Young children's emotional competence—regulation of emotional expressiveness and experience when necessary, and knowledge of their own and other's emotions—is crucial for social and academic (i.e., school) success. Thus, it is important to understand the mechanisms of how young children develop emotional competence. Both parents and teachers are considered as important socializers of emotion, providing children experiences that promote or deter the development of emotional competence. However, compared to parents, early childhood teachers' roles in socializing young children's emotional competence have not been examined. Based on the findings from research on parental socialization of emotion, in this theoretical review we explore possible teacher roles in the development of young children's emotional competence. Additionally, we suggest future research focusing on early childhood teacher socialization of emotion, and discuss theoretical and practical benefits of such research.

Keywords Emotion regulation · Emotion knowledge · Parents · Teachers · Socialization

Early learning contexts require children to sit still, attend, follow directions, and approach/enter group play—all very challenging accomplishments! Young children's emotional competence—regulation of emotional expressiveness and experience when necessary, and knowledge of emotions—supports such aspects of their social and pre-academic

competence, during preschool and thereafter (Denham et al. 2010; Hyson 2002). For example, expression and utilization of positive emotions can be very inviting to social partners, and facilitate cognitive processes (Garner 2010). Preschoolers' regulation of emotions allows them to allocate more personal energy to ongoing social or academic goals (Schutz et al. 2006). Emotion knowledge also promotes appropriate interpersonal interactions and academic success (Denham et al. 2003, in press; Trentacosta and Izard 2007). Teachers themselves assert that *lack of* emotional competence hampers young children's development (Buscemi et al. 1996; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000).

Both parents and teachers loom large as socializers of preschoolers' emotional competence, providing experiences that promote or deter its development. We know a great deal about the contributions of *parental* socialization of emotion to their children's emotional competence (Denham et al. 2007)—their *modeling* of emotional expressiveness, *teaching* about emotions, and *reactions* to children's emotions. In brief, parents' generally positive emotional expression (with “safe” expression of negative emotions), openness to, and expertise in talking about emotions, and encouraging reactions to children's emotions, all help their preschool children to become emotionally competent.

It follows that *teachers'* socialization of emotional competence will also promote social-emotional and even academic success in school. Education researchers have begun to examine linkages between emotion and cognition in classroom, such as the impacts of children's emotions on classroom engagement and learning (e.g., Schutz et al. 2006). Moreover, *emotional scaffolding* (i.e., targeted pedagogical use of emotions; Meyer and Turner 2007) is receiving attention. Research has commenced on how teachers' own emotions and classroom emotional climates,

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as well as ways of attending to children's emotions, affect school success (Sutton and Wheatley 2003). But most new thinking and research refers to older children's classrooms, with next to nothing published about how *early childhood* educators promote such emotional competence via aforementioned socialization of emotion techniques.

Thus, we do not know how early childhood educators can individually promote such competence (i.e., other than via specific curricula/programming, as important and useful as these may be). Some, but not all, teachers are intuitively aware of how important their own and children's emotions are to learning and wellbeing, and pay attention to these issues in their classrooms (Zembylas 2007). But preservice teachers report little training on promoting children's emotional competence, or managing their own feelings and displays of emotion (Garner 2010; Marlow and Inman 2002; see also Poulou 2005).

In response to these deficits, Hyson (2002) has called for early childhood educators to help young children to understand and regulate emotions, as they model genuine, appropriate emotions and responses to emotions, teach about emotions, and use positive emotions to support learning. What the field needs is coordinated efforts to move from understanding *parental* socialization of emotion to understanding *teachers'* contributions, to move toward a theory of action that could inform early childhood teacher training.

Better understanding of early childhood teachers' mechanisms of emotion socialization, and helping them maximize their own emotional competence, could lead to positive developments in teacher training (e.g., reflective supervision, mindfulness, stress reduction, and introduction of new teaching strategies; Emde 2009; Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Teachers' own emotional competence affects their abilities to be positive socializers of emotional competence (Perry and Ball 2008). Further, education-specific issues (e.g., job stress, education, staff/child ratio) could impact teachers' socialization of emotion, easing or hampering their ability to be a positive force in this area. Understanding these factors' impact could help us better train and supervise prekindergarten teachers to be excellent socializers of emotional competence.

Emotional Competence and Early School Success

Emotions are ubiquitous in early childhood classrooms; learning alongside and in collaboration with teachers and peers, young children utilize their emotions to facilitate learning. Expressing healthy emotions and regulating them, and understanding emotions of self and other, all work together to grease the cogs of successful school experiences (Denham et al. 2010). We now define each emotional

competency and review how it is related to social and academic success in school, with others' and our own empirical evidence.

Emotion Regulation

Emotion *regulation* includes abilities to: (1) handle emotions in productive ways: being aware of feelings, monitoring them, and modifying them, when necessary, so that they aid rather than impede coping in varying situations; and (2) *expressing* emotions appropriately. Children who have difficulties in this area may not have resources to focus on learning, whereas those who can maintain positive emotions may be able to better engage with classroom tasks.

Emotion regulation, as well as observed positivity of emotion, are associated with preschoolers' social effectiveness (Blair et al. 2004; Denham et al. 2003). Preschoolers' ability to remain emotionally regulated and positively engaged also relates to teacher evaluations of children's school success through kindergarten (Denham et al. 2012). Even more broadly, Head Start pupils' emotion regulation—including emotional flexibility, equanimity, and contextual appropriateness of their emotional expression—predicts later school success (preacademic progress, cooperation/engagement in the classroom, positive relationships with staff, and enjoyment of school), even with effects of age, verbal ability, emotional ability, and understanding of emotion held constant (Shields et al. 2001; see also Graziano et al. 2007; Miller et al. 2006).

Emotion Knowledge

Emotions convey crucial information that can guide interaction, and inability to interpret emotions can make the classroom a confusing place. Preschoolers who can apply emotion knowledge in emotionally charged situations have an advantage in peer interactions: they are more prosocially responsive to their peers, and rated as more likeable by peers, and more socially skilled and less aggressive by teachers (Denham et al. 2003; see also Izard et al. 2001).

Increasingly, researchers are confirming links between early academic success and young children's emotion knowledge. Head Start preschoolers' emotion knowledge predicts later classroom adjustment, even with age, verbal ability, emotional lability, and emotion regulation held constant (Shields et al. 2001). Emotion knowledge is also related to preschoolers' pre-academic achievement (Denham et al. in press; Garner and Waajid 2008; Leerkes et al. 2008). Similarly, 5-year-olds' emotion knowledge predicted age 9 social and academic competence (Izard et al. 2001).

Socialization of Emotional Competence

Emotional competencies are important to both social and academic success in school. Given these findings, we turn to how adults promote (or hinder) these abilities. Socialization of emotions is omnipresent in children's everyday contact with parents, teachers, caregivers, and peers. Persons with whom children interact exhibit diverse emotions, which the children observe. Further, children's emotions often require some kind of reaction from their social partners, and intentionally teaching about the world of emotions is considered by some adults to be very important. These three mechanisms describe socialization of emotion: modeling emotional expressiveness, reacting to emotions, and teaching about emotion (Denham 1998; Eisenberg et al. 1998; Garner 2010). Each mechanism influences components of children's emotional competence.

Parental Socialization of Emotion and Children's Emotional Competence

Parents' Modeling of Emotions

Children observe the ever-present emotions of their socializers. Via this *modeling*, socializers' emotional expressiveness implicitly teaches children which emotions are acceptable, and how to express and regulate them (Valiente et al. 2004). Both middle- and low-income preschoolers' emotion regulation is facilitated by their mothers' appropriate expressiveness (Eisenberg et al. 2003). In contrast, exposure to parental negativity may over-arouse children just learning to regulate emotions, and gives them hostile or sad templates for reacting emotionally to people and events (Luebke et al. 2011; Silk et al. 2011). In fact, positive *and* negative maternal emotions contribute to children's emotion regulation, which predicted concurrent and later social functioning (Eisenberg et al. 2003; Valiente et al. 2004).

Adults' emotions (i.e., their overall expressiveness and particular profile of expressed emotions) give children information about which situations evoke certain emotions, and the more personalized causes of certain emotions (e.g., "spiders scare *me*, but not everyone"). From adult emotional expressions, children also learn the behaviors that may accompany differing emotions, and others' likely reactions. Thus, expressive patterns of others are associated with children's emotion knowledge (Denham et al. 1994; Nixon and Watson 2001). In particular, family positivity seems to promote emotion knowledge, perhaps through affecting children's receptivity to learning. Although exposure to *well-modulated* negative emotion can be

positively related to emotion knowledge (Garner et al. 1994), parents' frequent, intense negative emotions may disturb children, and discourage self-reflection, so that little is learned about emotions (Raver and Spagnola 2003). At the same time, emotionally inexpressive parents impart little information about emotions.

Parents' Reactions to Children's Emotions

Contingent responding (i.e., reacting) refers to socializers' encouragement or discouragement of children's emotional expression. Encouragement of emotions, such as accepting children's emotions or comforting upset children, teaches them both to tolerate and to control their emotions, is positively associated with preschoolers' expressiveness (Gottman et al. 1997). Such optimal responses are a supportive breeding ground for children's emotion regulation (Fabes et al. 2001).

Adults also may punish children's experiences and expressions of emotions, or dismiss the world of emotions (Denham et al. 1994). Parents who respond to children's emotions by minimizing or dismissing them may have more subdued, sadder, more fearful children (Berlin and Cassidy 2003; Gottman et al. 1997); these children are, unfortunately, already "getting the message." Parents who are unsupportive of their children's emotions also sow seeds of diminished emotion regulation. Children who receive such reactions are likely to suppress showing feelings, but remain physiologically aroused, without skills to rectify the situation or their emotional response (Fabes et al. 2001).

Children of parents who encourage emotional expression have more access to their own emotions, than those whose parents value maintenance of a more stoic, unemotional mien; the former children better understand emotions (Gottman et al. 1997). In contrast, parents' punitive socialization of emotion, such as reacting with anger to the child's sadness or anger, or with happiness in response to their sadness, hampers learning about emotion (Denham and Kochanoff 2002; Fabes et al. 2001; Perlman et al. 2008).

Parents' Teaching About Emotions

Teaching entails adults' use of deliberate instruction to help children link expressions, situations, and words into coherent scripts about emotional experience. Participating in discussions about emotions gives children new tools for modulating expression of emotions; with age and assistance from caregivers, regulation is transferred from external (e.g., parents calming a crying child) to internal (e.g., children using language to calm themselves). Parents also may highlight, validate, or clarify children's emotions,

helping them to express emotions authentically, in a regulated manner. Thus, conversations about feelings are important for coaching children about how to regulate emotions (Brown and Dunn 1992).

Teaching about emotions may direct attention to specific emotional cues, helping children to parse social interactions into manageable components. When parents' admonitions about emotions are misleading or idiosyncratic; however, children may develop distorted emotion knowledge. Parental, especially mothers', discussions of emotions are in fact related to children's emotion knowledge—often independent of children's linguistic ability, across socioeconomic and ethnic variations, and even more strongly within warm, secure mother–child relationships (Havighurst et al. 2010; Ontai and Thompson 2002). Children of emotion-coaching parents formulate coherent knowledge about emotional expressions, situations, and causes (Denham et al. 1994). Dunsmore and Karn (2004; see also Denham and Kochanoff 2002) have shown that even *valuing* teaching about emotions is related to young children's emotion knowledge.

Teacher Socialization of Emotion and Teacher Emotional Competence

Given preschoolers' increasing time spent in group settings and the quantity of accumulated findings on parental socialization of emotion, it is surprising that teachers' socialization of young children's emotional competence has hardly been studied at all. The sparse published material on the topic often relates to teacher socialization only obliquely. As already noted, early childhood teachers do consider it crucial to teach skills of emotional competence (Poulou 2005). Greater understanding of teachers' mechanisms of emotion socialization, as well as maximization of their own emotional competence, could lead to needed developments in teacher training, and ultimately to changes in research-based practice.

Early childhood education research does indicate that teachers are likely to engage in many emotion socialization behaviors previously observed in parents, and to be important socializers of emotion. They spend significant amounts of time with children, performing many emotion-laden caregiving tasks, and have been shown to be sources of emotional security to young children. They are trained to deal with emotionally charged events and even have specific curricula, training them and giving them supports to address emotional development of their charges. Thus, although early childhood educators' emotional influence is probably less permanent than that of parents, and could be said to be “diluted” because of teachers' need to attend to groups of children and assume an instructive role, our

reasoning points to teachers as important socializers of emotional competence.

Given the parent literature, we can make informed predictions about contributions of early childhood teacher socialization to young children's emotional competence. We also have expectations of how teachers' own emotional ability contributes to their socialization of emotion, as well as how each aspect of teacher socialization of emotion promotes children's emotional competence and social competence.

Teacher Emotional Ability

As we have already implied, ways that teachers deal with their own emotional lives undoubtedly contribute to their socialization of pupils' emotional competence. Such emotional ability includes (a) perceiving emotions of self and others via facial and postural expressions; (b) utilizing emotions to facilitate cognition and action; (c) understanding emotions—appreciating their time course and consequences; and (d) managing emotions (Mayer et al. 2001). These skills are in fact related to teachers' feelings of efficacy in their role (Penrose et al. 2007; Perry and Ball 2008).

Preschool teachers' emotional ability also is related to their reactions to children's emotions; in Ersay's work (2007), teachers with low awareness of their own emotions more often ignored children's emotions, and less often comforted children's negative emotions or matched their positive emotions. Further, teachers' reports of their negative emotional intensity were associated with their punishing of children's emotions, and lack of attention to their own emotions was related to their greater minimization of children's emotions. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest ways to promote teacher emotional ability, including mindfulness training, reflective supervision, stress reduction and direct training (Brackett and Katulak 2006).

Teacher Socialization of Emotion: Modeling

We expect that teachers' positive expressiveness would be positively related to children's emotional competence in the classroom: their positive expressiveness, emotion regulation, and understanding of emotions. Specifically, teachers' positive emotionality would help children express and experience calmer, more regulated positivity themselves, and render them receptive to learning about emotions in the new school environment. In contrast, intense teacher negativity would create an atmosphere where regulation is difficult. Mild teacher negativity might help children learn about emotions, but inexpressive teachers would not provide a welcoming platform for such learning. We would also expect more readiness to learn in classrooms where teachers are emotionally positive.

Despite these predictions, very little research has yet targeted expressive modeling by teachers. DeMorat (1998) did, however, examine kindergarten teacher emotions and four students' responses, over 3 months. The teacher most frequently showed emotions of pride and happiness; students matched her interest and happiness. She showed pride to acknowledge student achievements, and used happiness to encourage their good behavior.

To promote emotional competence, teacher training could focus on helping teachers to be willing to show emotions, remain emotionally positive in the classroom despite challenges, and modulate understandable negative emotions. Promotion of their emotional ability could be useful, increasing their abilities to accurately express emotions, generate positivity, reflect on, and manage emotions. Mindfulness techniques could help teachers maintain positivity, and reflective supervision could help teachers gain access to and understand their own emotions.

Teacher Socialization of Emotion: Teaching About Emotions

We expect that teachers' teaching about emotions would be positively related to children's positive expressiveness. Teachers who discuss emotions would help children feel better or figure out ways to do so, and give them tools to use in expressing/regulating emotions. Via such direct tutelage, if not misleading or idiosyncratic, teachers also would help children acquire emotion knowledge. We also expect that children with teachers more willing and adept at teaching about emotions would be rated as more socially competent and ready to learn.

Ahn (2005) conducted qualitative observations in which teachers' emotion-related discourse with children was extracted from extensive field notes. Preschool teachers' emotion-related discussions, as opposed to toddlers', more frequently helped children infer causes of their negative emotions, and taught them constructive ways of expressing negative emotion. Moreover, Kolmodin (2007) found that teachers differ in propensity to talk about emotions with preschoolers. Preschool teachers who value teaching children about emotions also promote children's more adaptive emotion regulation patterns (Denham et al. 2002).

Promoting teachers' own emotional ability would likely contribute to their ability perceive their own and others' emotions accurately, so that they could usefully talk about emotions with children. Use of reflective supervision could also aid teachers in giving them access to emotion vocabulary, and increasing their ease in discussing feelings (Emde 2009; Gilkerson 2004). Further teacher training could focus on ways of helping teachers to value teacher-child emotion conversations, and sustain such interchanges

about emotions in classroom activities and dialogues about ongoing classroom interactions.

Teacher Socialization of Emotion: Reactions

We expect that teachers' supportive reactions to children's emotions would be positively related to children's positive expressiveness, ability to regulate emotions, and their emotion knowledge, with the converse true for their punishing or minimizing reactions. Encouraging responses from teachers would assist children in both tolerating and regulating emotions, teaching them that emotions are moments for sharing, that emotions are manageable and even useful. Finally, supportive reactions would help children "stay in the moment" in order to learn more about emotions. Adaptive responses to children's emotions would also support their social competence and academic success.

Even very young children do notice teachers' reactions to their emotions. Dunn (1994) found that young children absorb not only content, but also form and quality, of teachers' emotional support during child care transitions. Ahn (2005; Ahn and Stifter 2006) has described such contingent responding to children's emotions. In her work, teachers encouraged both positive emotional expression and responded empathically to it. In responses to children's negative emotional expressions, they demonstrated empathy, physical comfort, distraction, problem-solving, ignoring, and negative responses such as restriction, threatening, ridicule, punishment, or minimization of children's expression.

Further, teacher responses to child emotions differed by child age (e.g., toddlers' teachers were more encouraging, and used physical comfort and distraction in response to children's negative emotions more often than preschool teachers, who relied more on verbal mediation); early childhood teachers in this research were also very focused on their students' developing emotion regulation (Ahn 2005, Ahn and Stifter 2006; Reimer 1997). Finally, Ahn's work demonstrates that early childhood teachers do not validate children's negative emotion very often—one of the major tenets of emotion coaching.

To promote this aspect of socialization of emotion, teacher training could focus on ways of assisting teachers in valuing their supportive role concerning children's emotions, and give them specific strategies to use in reacting to children's more difficult emotions (e.g. anger, fear, sadness, even over-excitement). Promoting teachers' own emotional ability would likely contribute to assist them in utilizing emotional encounters more advantageously. Stress reduction could help teachers in their expression of positive reactions to children's emotions.

An Agenda for Research

The importance of emotional competence for preschoolers' early school success in social and academic domains is clear. Contributions of research on parenting strongly suggest that adults' socialization behaviors can promote or hinder such competence. However, research into the contributions of another vital socializer—the early childhood teacher—lags far behind, despite its potential to help make preschool a place where emotional competence is fostered. Further, issues of teachers' own emotional ability and its contribution to classroom outcomes has begun focusing on older children, and deserves scrutiny in early childhood settings.

Thus, we call for research in this area; work paralleling that with parents would be a beginning, although of course the nested characteristics of such data (i.e., children nested in teachers' classrooms) would necessitate new analytical methods. At the same time, work examining the impact of teacher emotional ability specifically on child emotional competence outcomes is needed. After initial outcomes of such research, examining the influence of several structural/demographic issues—teacher age, experience, education, race/ethnicity, and income range, as well as self-perceived role as an emotion socializer, confidence in promoting emotional competence, and supervisory support for this role—would be logical next steps. Findings from such programs of research could lead to reflective supervision, stress reduction, direct training in emotional ability, and other means of assisting teachers in becoming skilled, assured emotion socializers.

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