

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Preschool teachers' emotional intelligence and beliefs: Informing emotion socialization in the classroom

Susanne Denham

*George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA; sdenham@gmu.edu*

### ABSTRACT

Research on preschool teachers' emotion socialization is relatively sparse. In this study, one specific line of inquiry is studied: examining how teachers' beliefs about emotions, in conjunction with their own emotional competence, contribute to their fostering preschool emotional competence. Ninety-five teachers participated in this correlational study, providing self-reports on their emotion-related beliefs and emotional competence; as well, they were observed showing emotions and reacting to children's emotions, as well as sharing emotion-laden picturebooks in the classroom. Further, their emotional support and feedback to children's emotion utterances were rated. We found that preschool teachers' own emotional competence, bolstered by beliefs valuing teaching and coaching children about emotions, as well as commitment to this teaching, contributed to more positive emotion socialization, whether observed or teacher-reported. Believing in punishing emotions undergirded teachers' less frequent talking about emotions. Addressing in training early childhood educators' emotional competence and their emotion-related beliefs could support their emotion socialization behaviors that facilitate preschoolers' emotional competence.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence; beliefs; emotion socialization; early childhood; teachers

## 1. Introduction

Preschoolers' emotional competence facilitates school success and mental health, with long-lasting effects<sup>[1,2]</sup>. From a sociocultural epistemological viewpoint, socialization of such emotional competence is viewed as providing children with information on cultural patterns regarding emotions, which are integral to experiences within ourselves and especially with others<sup>[3]</sup>. Thus, socializers' expressed emotions, reactions to emotions, and teaching about emotions can promote young children's emotional competence<sup>[3]</sup>—their emotional expressiveness, emotion regulation, and emotion knowledge. For example, early childhood teachers' emotions and reactions to children's emotions contribute to the development of preschoolers' emotion knowledge<sup>[4-6]</sup>. Teachers' contributions to preschoolers' developing emotional competence may be as important as parents', although these contributions may differ from parents' and according to cultural/socioeconomic dimensions<sup>[5,7]</sup>.

Investigation of teacher emotion socialization outcomes for preschoolers is just beginning. But along with considering how emotion socialization promotes emotional competence, attention should be given to factors that could impact early childhood teachers' abilities to optimally contribute to their students' emotional competence. Specifically, more information is required on teachers' perceptions of their own emotional

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competence and ability to teach children about emotions, and their ideas about their own and children's emotions.

Early childhood teaching can be an emotionally draining and unpredictable endeavor, putting a spotlight on teachers' own emotional competence as important for promoting preschoolers' emotional competence<sup>[8,9]</sup>. An emotionally competent teacher can be more comfortable addressing emotion with children<sup>[10]</sup> and react to and utilize classroom emotional encounters more advantageously<sup>[11]</sup>.

More specifically, four main aspects of emotional competence (or intelligence) can be seen as important in teaching<sup>[12]</sup>. First, being able to accurately perceive emotions in oneself and others would be critical for teachers' abilities to take note of and react to children's emotions, and to discuss emotions with children. Second, using or generating emotions to facilitate focusing attention and communicating, or using feelings when reasoning, problem solving, and decision making could allow teachers to help children navigate their emotional worlds. Third, understanding one's own and others' emotions—their causes, combinations, and change over time has obvious application to teachers' accurate interpretation of children's emotions and their own emotional reactions to them. Fourth and finally, the ability to manage one's own and others' emotions could allow teachers to maintain their own equanimity and promote children's.

Although more investigation is needed about how teachers' emotional competence specifically contributes to their emotion socialization behaviors, some empirical work supports these suppositions. In particular, their perception of emotion has received research attention. For example, awareness of one's own emotion, an aspect of emotion perception, is related to their reactions to children's emotions<sup>[9]</sup>. Further, preschool teachers with low awareness of their own emotions were less likely to self-report that they would help children label and regulate their emotions, or to try to help solve the problem<sup>[13]</sup>; instead, they may more often ignore or minimize child emotions, less often comforting children's negative emotions or matching their positive emotions<sup>[14]</sup>.

Teachers' ability to regulate their emotions during the daily stress of early childhood education also has been investigated; it is related to their positive emotion socialization<sup>[15,16]</sup>. For example, where teachers implement cognitive reappraisal to regulate emotions, their students show less negative emotion with peers<sup>[17]</sup>. Conversely, when teachers are not good at regulating their emotions, their emotion socialization can be more negative; for example, teachers' reports of their own negative emotional intensity were associated with their punishing of children's emotions<sup>[14]</sup>, and their use of emotion suppression as a regulation strategy is related to preschoolers' decreased positive emotions with peers<sup>[17]</sup>. In short, the emerging literature on early childhood teachers suggests that their emotional competence supports their emotion socialization.

What teachers believe about emotion socialization also can be important because beliefs can motivate behavior<sup>[18]</sup>. It makes sense that teachers' emotion socialization beliefs could motivate emotion socialization, and that their own emotional competence could work in concert with their beliefs; indeed, early childhood educators have shown congruence between their emotion socialization beliefs and behaviors<sup>[18]</sup>. As for parents, then, teachers' emotion socialization beliefs can be important foundations for specific emotion socialization behaviors. For example, accepting beliefs about children's emotions promoted teachers' supportive reactions to children's emotions<sup>[19]</sup>. Specifically, teachers reporting more accepting beliefs about children's emotions exhibited more supportive responses to children's negative emotions, but only when they also reported high levels of reappraisal in their own approach to ER. In this study, teachers' beliefs and their own emotional competence worked together to inform their positive emotion socialization behaviors<sup>[19]</sup>.

In contrast, in one study, teachers' lack of belief that instruction/modeling about emotions is important, and belief that one needs to protect children from emotions, were related to dismissing, nonsupportive

reactions<sup>[8]</sup>. So, emotion-related beliefs can underlie both supportive and nonsupportive reactions to children's emotions.

Beliefs about early childhood teachers' roles as emotion socializers, such as efficacy, comfort, and commitment regarding teaching about emotions and their feelings of support for doing so also could be important, but very little attention has been given to this aspect of their emotion-related beliefs in their relation to observed emotion socialization. Suggestive findings, however, show that (a) teachers who feel efficacy as emotion socializers employ more optimal emotion socialization behaviors<sup>[16]</sup>; (b) teachers who are comfortable, committed, and supported more readily implement emotional competence programming<sup>[20]</sup>; and (c) children in such teachers' classrooms show greater emotional competence<sup>[21]</sup>. So, emerging literature points to the importance of beliefs in early childhood teachers' emotion socialization.

In short, not only teachers' assessment of their own emotional competence, but also their ideas about socializing children's emotional competence, are likely important potential supports for optimal emotion socialization behaviors. In fact, although not a focus of this study, teachers' emotion-related beliefs also may contribute directly to preschoolers' emotional competence. For example, preschool teachers who valued teaching children about emotions also had students who exhibited more adaptive ER<sup>[22]</sup>. More recent research showed that teachers' beliefs contributed to children's emotion knowledge: when teachers valued teaching about emotions, adopting "emotion coaching" beliefs (i.e., when a child is sad, I try to help him/her explore what is making him/her sad"), children demonstrated greater emotion knowledge<sup>[5,7,23]</sup>. Such findings accentuate the importance of examining in more detail the ways that teachers' assessment of their own emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs contribute to positive emotion socialization.

### **The current study**

So, the small amount of extant research on how preschool teachers' emotion socialization has yielded tantalizing suggestions that their emotional competence and beliefs about emotions contribute to their emotion socialization behaviors. Further exploration of the importance of teachers' own emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs could increase our understanding of their emotion socialization and its contribution to preschoolers' emotional competence. Further, over and above the need for more research in the area overall, the piecemeal examination of teachers' emotional competence and beliefs should be rectified. In this preliminary study we examined the contributions of early childhood teachers' own emotional competence and beliefs about emotion socialization contributed to their self-reported and observed emotion socialization. A potentially important contribution of the study is to examine the joint contribution of both supports for optimal emotion socialization.

First, then, to simplify the domains of study, we must examine the interrelations or structure of teachers' reports of both their own emotional competence and their emotion socialization beliefs, as well as their actual socialization practices. Thus, research question one for this study is: (a) "what is the internal structure of early childhood teachers' reports on their emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs, and (b) what is the internal structure of their self-reported emotion socialization behaviors—their emotions and reactions to children's emotions in the classroom?"

Given these structural clarifications, the ultimate goal of the study is to examine how the identified dimensions of emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs contribute to both self-reported and observed emotion socialization practices. Our second research question follows from creating aggregates based on the internal structures determined in research question one: "how do teachers' beliefs and emotional competence contribute to variation in their self-reported and observed emotion socialization?"

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

Ninety-five preschool teachers participated in this correlational study. Approximately one quarter of teachers taught in organizations serving children living in poverty. Sixty-five percent of teachers had attained a BA degree or better, 51.8% had taught for less than 10 years, and 54.7% were less than 35 years old. In terms of ethnicity and race, 71.1% of teachers were Caucasian, 22.4% African American, and 6.6% Asian, with 11.8% identifying as Latina.

### **2.2. Procedure**

Data for this correlational study emanated from a larger longitudinal study of preschoolers' emotional competence and its socialization by early childhood educators. Before the beginning of the study, it was approved by the local university Institutional Review Board. Subsequently, non-probability sampling was utilized. Thus, participants from early childhood education centers within a 50-mile radius of the university were recruited near the beginning of the school year; after meeting with each center's director, we obtained consent from participating teachers. Teachers were observed regarding their emotions and reactions to children's emotions, as well as their classroom quality, in winter. They completed self-report measures and read two emotion-laden, wordless picturebooks in late spring.

### **2.3. Measures: Predictors**

For predictor measures, teachers completed validated questionnaires about: (a) their own emotional competence<sup>[24]</sup>; and (b) beliefs about emotion socialization and their role as socializers<sup>[20,25]</sup>.

#### **2.3.1. Self-rated emotional intelligence scale (SREIS)**

Teachers' perceptions of emotional intelligence were measured with the self-rated emotional intelligence scale (SREIS<sup>[24]</sup>). The SREIS is a self-report measure including four items related to perception of emotions (e.g., 'I recognize the emotions people are experiencing from looking at their facial expressions'), three items related to use of emotions (e.g., 'when making decisions, I listen to my feelings to decide if the decision feels right'), four items related to understanding of emotions (e.g., 'I have a rich vocabulary to describe my emotions'), and eight items related to management of emotions: four relating to management of one's own emotions (e.g., 'I can handle stressful situations without getting too nervous) and four relating to management others' emotions (e.g., 'I have strategies for improving other people's moods'). Participants scored each item on a response scale ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate).

There is earlier evidence of validity (e.g., relations with performance-based measures of emotional intelligence, empathy, and well-being), as well as internal consistency  $\alpha$ s = 0.66 to 0.84<sup>[24]</sup>. For this study, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.56 to 0.81. However, each scale has three to four items each, often too few items for Cronbach's alpha to necessarily be meaningful<sup>[26]</sup>. Thus, mean inter-item correlations were examined for each scale, ranging from 0.25 to 0.51; mean inter-item correlations >0.15 are considered to be acceptable internal consistency reliability for short scales<sup>[27]</sup>.

#### **2.3.2. Teacher SEL beliefs scale**

Teachers may also vary in their beliefs that they should attend to the world of emotion in their classroom, their confidence in their ability to do so, and their sense that school leadership and infrastructure support these efforts. Teachers' perceptions of their competence in implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) were therefore measured with the teacher SEL beliefs scale<sup>[20]</sup>. In current study we used all three subscales: a) SEL comfort, which relates to comfort with and regular implementation of SEL practices in the classroom (e.g., 'I

am comfortable providing instruction on social and emotional skills to my students’); b) SEL commitment, which relates to commitment to improving SEL skills (e.g., ‘I want to improve my ability to teach social and emotional skills to students’); and (c) culture (e.g., “the culture in my school supports development of children’s social-emotional skills.”). Teachers responded to questions about their SEL beliefs on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There is earlier evidence of concurrent and predictive validity (e.g., relations with burnout, teaching efficacy, principal support, program buy-in & effectiveness), as well as internal consistency  $\alpha = 0.74$  to  $0.82$  for 4-item scales<sup>[20]</sup>. In this study, Cronbach’s alphas ranged from 0.70 to 0.79, with average item intercorrelations ranging from 0.37 to 0.48.

### **2.3.3. Beliefs about children’s emotions**

To measure teachers’ beliefs about teaching about emotions and contingent responding to children’s emotions, we created the Teacher Emotion Socialization Self-Test (TESST) based on a well-validated measure for parents<sup>[25,28]</sup>. Items were lightly edited for use in a classroom setting. The TESST consists of 20 statements to which teachers respond on a seven-point scale of endorsement, from “1, strongly disagree” to “7, strongly agree”. Four five-item subscales are generated, consonant with the parent measure: accepting negative emotion (e.g., “children have a right to feel angry”), punishing negative emotion (e.g., “when a child gets angry, my goal is to get him/her to stop”), laissez-faire/dismissive (e.g., “when my child is angry, I wish he or she would learn to roll with the punches... accept things as they are”), and emotion coaching (e.g., “when a child is sad, I try to help him/her explore what is making him/her sad”) style. In this study, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for five-item scales ranged from 0.65 to 0.81, with average interitem correlations ranging from 0.29 to 0.45.

## **2.4. Measures: Emotion socialization criteria**

Criterion variables were previously validated questionnaires on: (a) positive and negative emotions expressed in the classroom (Classroom Expressiveness Questionnaire, CEQ<sup>[29]</sup>); (b) supportive and nonsupportive reactions to students’ negative emotions (Teachers’ Coping with Children’s Negative Emotions Scale, TCCNES<sup>[30]</sup>).

### **2.4.1. Emotion socialization: Modeling**

To investigate emotions modeled in the classroom, we used the Classroom Expressiveness Questionnaire (CEQ<sup>[29]</sup>). Adapted for teachers from the well-validated Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ<sup>[31]</sup>), the CEQ examines the frequency of teachers’ emotional expressiveness in the classroom. The 30 hypothetical scenarios depicted in the questionnaire represent a range of positive and negative emotions, and teachers indicate on a 9-point scale the frequency with which they express indicated emotions in their classroom (from “1, not at all frequently” to “9, very frequently”). For example, one negative emotion scenario is “expressing anger at a student’s carelessness”; a positive emotion scenario is “expressing excitement over future classroom plans”.

Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ s for this sample were 0.73 for positive expressiveness (12 items) and 0.72 for negative expressiveness (17 items, with one item, “crying at the end of the year when students leave”, removed).

### **2.4.2. Self-reported reactions to children’s emotions**

To investigate teachers’ reactions to children’s emotions, we used the Coping with Children’s Negative Emotions Scale, Teacher Version (TCCNES). Designed for research with parent but adapted for use with teachers in this and earlier studies under the guidance of the original authors<sup>[32]</sup>, the TCCNES contains 10 items describing hypothetical situations in which a child in their classroom is expressing a negative emotion. Teachers are asked to indicate their likelihood of response to six choices within each item on a 7-point response scale, from “1, very unlikely” to “7, very likely”. Their responses are aggregated to create six subscales as

follows: distress reactions (e.g., “feel uncomfortable, embarrassed myself”), punitive reactions (e.g., “tell child to straighten up or s/he’ll have to sit out for a while”), minimization reactions (e.g., “tell child that s/he is overreacting”), expressive encouragement (e.g., “encourage child to talk about his/her nervous feelings”), emotion-focused reactions (e.g., “suggest child think about something relaxing...”), and problem-focused reactions (e.g., “help child think of places s/he hasn’t looked yet”).

The measure’s authors found good-to-excellent internal reliability for the original scales, as well as significant test-retest reliability across four months<sup>[32]</sup>. They also reported, as evidence of construct validity, interrelations with other self-report indices of parental reactions to children’s emotions. For this study, aggregates for nonsupportive reactions (i.e., punitive and minimizing; excluding the distress subscale because of its low reliability) and supportive reactions (i.e., emotion encouragement, emotion-focused, and problem-focused) were used to examine the overall contribution of these techniques. ( $\alpha$ s = 0.68 and 0.94, respectively).

Further criterion variables were derived from observations using valid systems for teachers: (a) showing emotions and reacting to children’s emotions in their classroom across several days and eight, 10-minute trials; and (b) teaching about emotions.

#### **2.4.3. Observation of teachers’ and children’s emotions and reactions to each other’s emotions**

Using a previously validated observational system called FOCAL-T<sup>[4,5,33]</sup>, teachers were observed interacting with children in their classroom during regular activities over a period of approximately three to four weeks, predominantly during circle time, center time, and lunch. FOCAL-T is designed to capture preschool teachers’ discrete emotion socialization behaviors: expression of discrete emotions and reactions to children’s emotions. Teachers are observed in their classroom setting by coders using tablet computers and specialized software<sup>[34]</sup>. For each teacher, there were four, 5-minute trials with the teacher as focal person, counting his/her expressed emotions and children’s reactions, alternating with four, 5-minute trials with children as focal person(s) counting children’s emotions toward the teacher and the teacher’s reactions to their emotions.

Focal emotions included (1) happy, (2) sad, (3) angry, (4) tense, (5) tender, (6) pain, (7) other, and (8) neutral. Two types of reactions to focal persons were coded: behavioral and emotional reactions. Behavioral reactions included: (1) punitive reactions (e.g., threaten a child for showing emotion), (2) problem-focused reactions (e.g., help a child solve an emotion eliciting problem), (3) emotion-focused reactions (e.g., try to make a child feel better), (4) validating reactions (e.g., acknowledge a child emotion), (5) minimizing reactions (e.g., tease a child for expressing emotion), and emotional reactions included, (6) distress reactions (e.g., show frustration to a child emotion), (7) matching positive reactions (e.g., smile back to a smiling child). Intensive training was required to become a reliable FOCAL-T coder. Post-training inter-observer reliability via videos was kappa = 0.85 for emotions and 0.67 for reactions. Before starting data collection, observers also demonstrated live reliability, with observer pairs coding actual teacher’s and children’s emotions and reactions (kappa = 0.74 for emotions and 0.85 for reactions).

Given summed scores across all observation trials, proportions for each observed teacher emotion and reaction were calculated (i.e., percentage per total across trials). Regarding indicators of emotions expressed by teachers, proportions for sad and tender emotions were utilized, as well as an aggregate of teachers’ affective balance (i.e., the difference between their standard scores for proportion of happiness minus proportion of anger).

Reaction aggregates emanating from similarly calculated proportions were created based a principal components analysis: nonsupportive behavioral reactions (punitive reactions + minimizing reactions), (2) supportive behavioral reactions (problem-focused reactions + emotion-focused reactions + validating

reactions). We also created the positive emotional responsiveness aggregative (positive emotional reactions-distressed reactions). Reliability of all observational aggregates is acceptable (i.e.,  $\alpha > 0.60$ ).

#### **2.4.4. Emotion socialization: Teaching about emotions**

Teaching about emotions was gleaned from teachers' reading to their classes two emotionally evocative wordless picturebooks. These books included pictures only, and portrayed situations involving happiness, surprise, sadness, anger, and fear. Instructions to the teachers were deliberately vague to allow maximum flexibility; they were simply asked to talk with the children about these books in whatever manner they wished. Reading sessions were audiorecorded and transcribed professionally. See similar procedures in the literature<sup>[5,35-37]</sup>.

The coding system used for the picturebook task was derived from the Parent-Child Affect Communication Task (PACT<sup>[38]</sup>), which is well-established in the parent emotion socialization literature, and has been used to track teachers' emotion language as well<sup>[39]</sup>. Words that referred to discrete emotions and to behavioral expressions (e.g., hitting, crying, hugging) of emotion were counted, along with their positive or negative valence (repetitions of the children's emotion labels were not included in the tally for emotion words). In addition, functions of utterances containing emotion words were tallied, focusing in this study on questioning/clarifying (e.g., "his face actually looks sad instead of angry, doesn't it?"). Total number of emotion words, and positive and negative emotion words, across the two book readings, along with percentage of questions/clarifications per emotion utterance, were scores used in analyses. Quality of feedback given the children's participation in the book reading was also rated. Inter-rater reliability coefficients were expressed as intraclass correlations; for coding positive and negative emotion terms, these were 0.95 and 0.93, respectively. For positive feedback, the ICC was 0.92.

#### **2.4.5. Teacher emotional support**

Observations of teachers' emotional support were coded using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS-PreK<sup>[40]</sup>) 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 = low to 7 = high.

Emotional support is a composite of four measured dimensions ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ): 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<sup>[41]</sup>. Research suggests that this macro-level classroom rating reflects positive emotion socialization, with emotionally supportive teachers' behavior reflecting a supportive view of children's emotional competence and how to achieve it<sup>[42]</sup>; further, children in classrooms with highly emotionally supportive teachers tend to display greater social competence<sup>[43]</sup>.

During a two-day training, videos from preschool classrooms were watched and discussed based on the instrument manual. After the training, 5 videos were rated, with raters 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 0.89, indicating a high level of reliability during the study.

### 3. Analysis plan

For research question one, two principal component analyses with oblique promax rotation were performed, including scales as follows: (1) teachers’ self-reported emotional competence, beliefs about teaching social-emotional topics, and beliefs about children’s emotions, for predictor variables; and (2) teachers’ self-reported emotions and reactions to children’s emotions in the classroom, for criterion variables. Component loadings greater than 0.40 are interpreted.

For research question two, multiple regression analyses were conducted to predict: (a) self-reported emotion socialization; (b) teachers’ observed emotions and reactions to children’s emotions; (c) emotion language used in picturebook reading; and (d) overall emotional support. In each equation, the components pinpointed in research question one were predictors, with emotion socialization behaviors/ratings as in section 2.3 as criterion variables. Reported results are significant or borderline significant beta weights from these equations, along with  $R^2$  for each equation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Research question one: Structure of emotional competence/beliefs and emotion socialization practices

#### 4.1.1. Teacher emotional competence and beliefs

As seen in **Table 1**, four components encompassed beliefs and emotional competence: (a) emotionally competent, believes in overall teaching about emotions; (b) committed to teaching about emotions and believes specifically in emotion coaching; (c) doesn’t use emotions to aid thinking and believes in punishing emotion; and (d) believes in accepting negative emotion. These components explained 57 percent of the variance in these scores.

**Table 1.** Principal components analysis: loadings for teachers’ emotional competence, emotion socialization beliefs, and beliefs in teaching about emotions.

Emotional competence/belief scales	Component one Emotionally competent, belief in teaching about emotions	Component two Committed to teaching about emotions, belief in emotion coaching technique	Component three Don’t use emotion to aid thinking, belief in punishing emotions	Component four Belief in accepting/ dismissing emotions
Managing emotions: social	0.777	-	-	-
Managing emotions: self	0.703	-	-	-
Perceiving emotion	0.619	-	-	-
Understanding emotion	0.599	-	-	-
Use of emotion in thinking	-	-	-0.614	-
Emotion coaching teaching style	-	0.622	-	-
Accepting/dismissing negative emotions	-	-	-	0.855
Rejecting negative emotions	-	-	0.768	-
Uncertainty about emotion socialization	-0.642	-	-	-
Comfortable teaching about emotions	0.650	-	-	-
Committed to teaching about emotions	-	0.779	-	-
Situated in an emotion-supportive culture	-	0.425	-	-



### 4.1.2. Teacher self-reported emotion socialization

As seen in **Table 2**, self-reported emotion socialization components included: (a) positive expressiveness and positive reactions to children’s emotions in the classroom (specifically, positive emotional expressiveness and emotion-focused, problem-focused, and emotion encouragement reactions); and (b) negative expressiveness and reactions (specifically, negative expressiveness, and punitive and minimizing reactions). These components explained 70 percent of the variance in these scores.

**Table 2.** Principal components analysis: loadings for teachers’ emotion socialization behaviors.

Emotion socialization behaviors	Component one Positive emotions and reactions to emotions	Component two Negative emotions and reactions to emotions
Classroom Expressiveness Questionnaire: positive	0.839	-
Positive reactions to children’s emotions	0.797	-
Classroom Expressiveness Questionnaire: negative (dominant + submissive)	-	0.809
Negative reactions to children’s emotions	-0.496	0.598

### 4.2. Research question two: Emotional competence/beliefs contributions to emotion socialization practices

As evident in **Table 3**, variability in teachers’ self-reported positive expressiveness and reactions was contributed to by two of the principal components found for research question one: (a) their emotional competence/belief in teaching about emotions; and (b) belief in emotion coaching and commitment to teaching about emotions. Emotional competence/belief in teaching about emotions contributed negatively to their self-reported negative expressions and reactions. Belief in emotion coaching and commitment to teaching about emotions negatively contributed to observed negative reactions to children’s emotions. Punishing emotion and not using emotions to aid thinking negatively contributed to mean number of emotion words used in picturebook reading, as well as positive and negative emotion words considered separately, were predicted negatively. In terms of functions of emotion language, teachers’ use of questions about emotions was contributed to by their acceptance of children’s emotions. The quality of feedback teachers gave children while reading emotion-laden picture books was negative contributed to by their use of emotions in thinking and not punishing emotions, as well as accepting negative emotions. Finally, overall emotional support as measured by the CLASS was contributed to by their use of emotions in thinking and not punishing emotions.

**Table 3.** Summary of emotional competence and beliefs components predicting self-reported and observed emotion socialization.

Criterion variable	Significant predictors—belief and emotional competence components	$\beta$ s	$R^2_{TOT}$
Self-reported positive expressiveness and reactions <sup>a</sup>	Emotionally competent, belief in teaching about emotions	0.384***	0.333***
	Committed to teaching about emotions, believe in emotion coaching techniques	0.375***	0.333***
Self-reported negative expressiveness and reactions <sup>a</sup>	Emotionally competent, belief in teaching about emotions	-0.248**	0.107+
Observed negative reactions	Committed to teaching about emotions, believe in emotion coaching techniques	-0.247*	0.069
Mean emotion words across picturebooks	Doesn’t use emotions to aid thinking and believes in punishing emotion	-0.281**	0.153*
Mean positive emotion words	Doesn’t use emotions to aid thinking and believes in punishing emotion	-0.43271*	0.126*
Mean negative emotion words	Doesn’t use emotions to aid thinking and believes in punishing emotion	-0.259*	0.113*

**Table 3.** (Continued).

Criterion variable	Significant predictors—belief and emotional competence components	$\beta$ s	$R^2_{TOT}$
Percent questions per emotion utterance	Accept negative emotions	0.243*	0.105+
Quality of feedback during book reading	Doesn't punish emotions, uses in thinking	0.220+	0.147*
	Accepts negative emotions	0.291*	0.147*
Class emotional support	Doesn't punish emotions, uses in thinking	0.256*	0.084

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; +  $p < 0.10$ .

## 5. Discussion

Research on preschool teachers' emotion socialization remains relatively sparse. There have been calls to further this line of inquiry, considering how teachers' beliefs about emotions, in conjunction with their own emotional competence, contributes to their fostering preschool emotional competence<sup>[44]</sup>.

The current study begins to answer these calls. We found, first, that early childhood educators' evaluations of their own emotional competence, along with their beliefs about emotion socialization and their efficacy at providing it, were organized into four easily interpretable aggregates. These joint considerations of teachers' emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs included the following characterizations of teachers who were: (a) teachers emotionally competent (i.e., able to regulate, perceive, and understand emotions), as well as asserting their comfort in teaching about emotions); (b) committed to teaching about emotions via coaching, in a supportive educational setting; (c) believed that emotions should be punished, and did not use emotions to aid their thinking; and (d) accepted negative emotions. Further, and similarly, their reports of their actual emotion socialization behaviors were similarly interpretable in two aggregates.

Armed with these categorizations, along with observations of the teachers' emotion socialization (i.e., their emotions, reactions to children's emotions, discussions of emotions depicted in picturebooks, and overall emotional support provided in the classroom), we uncovered the following results of our main research questions: that preschool teachers' own emotional competence, bolstered by beliefs valuing teaching and coaching children about emotions, as well as commitment to this teaching, supported more positive emotion socialization, whether observed or teacher-reported. In contrast, believing in punishing emotions undergirded teachers' less frequent talking about emotions, and teachers displayed more negative emotions around children when neither committed to teaching about emotions nor believing in emotion coaching techniques. Finally, teachers were more likely to ask children facilitative questions and give them high quality feedback during picturebook reading, as well as show more overall classroom support, when they reported belief in accepting negative emotions and not punishing emotions (as well as using them in their own thinking).

How do these results extend earlier investigation? The sparse earlier research largely implicated narrower aspects of early childhood teachers' emotional competence (i.e., their awareness of their emotions and ability to regulate them<sup>[9,12-17]</sup>), and their beliefs (i.e., their acceptance of children's emotions, beliefs that instruction about emotions is unimportant or dangerous<sup>[8,19]</sup>). Although these early findings are important, the current study goes further to look at teachers' emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs together, including more aspects of both constructs, and predicting more aspects of emotion socialization—both self-reported and observed expressiveness and reactions to children's emotions, teachers' talk about emotions in classroom routines, and even more distal outcomes such as their quality of feedback to children's remarks about emotions and their overall classroom emotional support.

In short, there were interpretable combined contributions of emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs to both teacher-reported and observed emotion socialization behaviors. This report is among the first

examining these linkages. Discovering these linkages suggests the need for training, both pre- and in-service, for teachers' own emotional competence, as well as their beliefs about their emotion socialization<sup>[8]</sup>. Building from the current findings, such training could conceivably promote more positive emotion socialization behaviors, and ultimately, young children's developing emotional competence.

### **5.1. Training**

Many early childhood teachers are aware of the characteristics of children's social-emotional competence, as well as the importance of children's and their own emotions to learning and well-being<sup>[42,45-48]</sup>. However, not all preschool teachers share this level of awareness, and there are marked differences in their enactment of adaptive emotion socialization<sup>[42,48]</sup>. Even when acknowledging the vital importance of preschoolers' emotional competence, teachers often also report feeling very unprepared to promote it, asserting the need for emotion-specific training<sup>[45,47,49]</sup>. Thus, evidence-based practices for both pre- and in-service professional development regarding teacher emotional competence and emotion socialization also are much needed<sup>[9,50-53]</sup>.

What aspects of the constructs focused upon here should be addressed usefully in training? Among the predictors of emotion socialization behavior, whether teacher-reported or observed, teachers' emotional competence looms large as a training component<sup>[54-57]</sup>. Several means can promote teachers' emotional competence<sup>[58]</sup>. First, mindfulness training could assist teachers in maintaining positivity, being willing to accurately express emotions, and modulating their understandable negative emotions. Mindfulness training is effective in promoting teachers' own emotional competence, with lasting effect<sup>[59]</sup>.

Second, in reflective supervision, teachers reflect on their classroom practice, share challenges, and brainstorm potential solutions with their supervisors—in short, they tend together to teachers' emotional competence and emotional self-efficacy<sup>[56,60,61]</sup>. These techniques can be very useful, to help early childhood teachers become aware of and understand their own emotions, as well as to gain access to a broader emotion vocabulary<sup>[9,62,63]</sup>. These outcomes could increase their belief and ease in discussing feelings with children, among other positive emotion socialization beliefs and techniques.

Third, stress reduction is vital to aid teachers for their own well-being and subsequent for optimal reactions to children's emotions<sup>[15]</sup>. Practice recommendations could include concrete steps to deal with stress, such as training in mindful attention and awareness, physical relaxation, gratitude, and cognitive reappraisal<sup>[42,48,59,63,64]</sup>.

Training possibilities also should more clearly consider the connection of teachers' emotional competence and emotion-related beliefs with emotion socialization behaviors. For example, 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<sup>[42,48]</sup>. Further, training could focus on ways of helping teachers to value teacher-child emotion conversations.

Finally, training also can promote teachers' self-efficacy regarding their abilities to be effective emotion socializers—beliefs that teachers should openly express their emotions, talk about, and label emotions, and not protect children from emotions, as well as their confidence about their abilities to socialize emotional competence<sup>[8,16]</sup>. In fact, in one study training at least partly accounted for a significant association between beliefs and self-reported emotion socialization styles<sup>[8]</sup>.

All of these findings and assertions regarding training suggest the importance of fostering early childhood educators' emotional competence and their adaptive emotion-related beliefs, in an effort to yield beneficial emotion socialization enacted in the classroom. More specific focus on these important predictors of emotion socialization behaviors, as highlighted in the present study, is sorely needed in future research<sup>[16]</sup>. Further, in

all these considerations, the culturally/ethnically bound nature of emotion socialization must be acknowledged and addressed sensitively<sup>[5,65]</sup>.

## 5.2. Limitations of this study

This research had several limitations that also should be addressed in future studies. First, much of the methodology, other than observations of teachers and their “reading” of picturebooks, was obtained via teacher-report. Mono-rater bias could perhaps be an issue; future research should employ means of obtaining information on teachers’ emotional competence more directly, although both this construct and that of emotion-related beliefs are quite internal to the person involved.

Second, there are measurement issues specific to accessing beliefs. It would be profitable to create assessments that even more clearly differentiated emotion-related beliefs from actual emotion socialization behaviors. Third, the current results do not specify the actual processes that allow emotion-related beliefs and teacher emotional competence to promote emotion socialization behaviors. Because the current study cannot specify direction of effect, longitudinal examination would be beneficial. Attention to these three issues could move this line of inquiry forward.

## 6. Conclusion

Research on preschool teachers’ emotion socialization remains sparse. There is great need to consider how teachers’ beliefs about emotions, in conjunction with their own emotional competence, contribute to their ability to foster preschoolers’ emotional competence. The current findings begin to shed light on this important topic, but also assert the need to expand knowledge in this area. Continued research, given attention to this study’s limitations, could support both basic and applied goals. First, it is vital to better understand how these elements contribute to young children’s developing emotional competence. Second, accumulating knowledge in the area also could assist in creating or fine-tuning professional development.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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