

Running Head: TEACHERS SEL BELIEFS AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

A mixed-method examination of preschool teacher beliefs about social emotional learning and  
relations to observed emotional support

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**Abstract**

The connections between parents' socialization practices and beliefs about emotions, and children's emotional development have been well studied; however, teachers' impacts on children's social-emotional learning (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). Comparison groups were created based on their observed emotional support and then compared on their qualitative responses in focus group discussions on beliefs about emotions and SEL strategies. Teachers acknowledged the importance of preparing children emotionally (as well as academically) for kindergarten, but substantial differences emerged between the highly emotionally supportive and moderately emotionally supportive teachers in three areas: (a) teachers' beliefs about emotions and the value of SEL; (b) teachers' socialization behaviors and SEL strategies; and (c) teachers' perceptions of their roles as emotion socializers. Understanding such differences can facilitate the development of intervention programs and in-service training to help teachers better meet students' SEL needs.

**Keywords**

Early childhood education, social-emotional development, emotional support, mixed-methods research

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Children's social-emotional learning (SEL) is promoted by interactions with their caregivers. These interactions may include overt socialization practices (such as when a teacher describes to children what to do when they're angry) or they may be demonstrative, speaking to the emotional environment (such as when a teacher hugs a child who is having a rough morning). To date, research on specific emotion socialization practices has focused on the most prominent group of caregivers – parents. These parental emotion socialization practices, including modeling, teaching and contingent reacting to emotions (Denham, 1998; Eisenberg, Cumberland & Spinrad, 1998), along with the global emotional environment of the home (Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000), play a substantial role in children's SEL. Furthermore, research has shown that parents' beliefs about emotions impact their socialization practices, as well as contribute to growth in children's SEL during early childhood (Dunsmore, Her, Halberstadt, & Perez-Rivera, 2009).

With many children spending large amounts of time in preschool settings, a separate literature has focused more on this global environment and its relations to academic and social outcomes (Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, 1999). This literature, however, has not focused on the specific emotion socialization practices (i.e., modeling, teaching, and contingent reacting) employed by teachers (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). Although there is some work examining specific curricula (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Izard, 2008; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2007), we do not know the beliefs and practices associated with children's SEL. Work examining preschool teachers' socialization practices in preschool has been limited to a few studies (Ahn, 2005; Ahn & Stifter, 2006) and

unpublished dissertations, (Demorat, 1998; Ersay, 2007) but more recently additional reviews of the literature have emerged to provide a solid theoretical background for the present study (e.g., Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Horner & Wallance, 2013). Furthermore, because teachers' emotion socialization practices have not been extensively studied, their beliefs that presumably drive some of these practices have not been investigated either. In the present study, we examine how teachers' beliefs about emotions and emotion socialization practices relate to supportive emotional classroom environments.

### **Mechanisms of Emotion Socialization**

Kindergarteners with greater emotional regulation abilities, emotion knowledge, and empathy demonstrate more success making friends, more positive beliefs about school, and stronger grades and achievement later in elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Over time, as preschool children learn social-emotional skills, they can become socially and emotionally competent. The SEL strides made during early childhood set children up for greater success in the realms of social and cognitive development, pre-academic achievement, school readiness and adjustment (Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010). Children learn emotional competence primarily through social interactions. Of all of their social partners, parents' emotional socialization practices have received the most attention from researchers.

The socialization of emotional competence in young children is described via three mechanisms: modeling, teaching and contingent reacting (Eisenberg, et al., 1998; Denham, 1998). Families, by displaying positive and negative emotions, model for children how to express and regulate emotions across a variety of social contexts. Parents are directly teaching children the labels, precedents, and consequences of emotions through discussion about emotions

as well as coaching children through emotional situations (Denham, et al., 2007). Finally, the way parents react to children's (and others') emotional displays is associated with children's social and emotional outcomes (Denham, et al., 2007). Supportive, warm and accepting responses to children's negative emotions (e.g., sadness and anger) help children develop better-regulated responses to emotions. Conversely, punitive or dismissive reactions by parents are associated with negative outcomes for children (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Parents' tendency to engage in positive socialization practices depends on several factors, including parents' own emotion knowledge, regulation, and expression; children's developmental level; and, of particular importance to this investigation, parents' beliefs about emotions.

### **Parental Beliefs and Emotion Socialization**

In discussing parents' socialization practices, it is also important to consider the *intentionality* of their emotion-related behavior. Underlying each of the socialization practices identified above is a belief system about emotions. Several studies have shown that parents who value emotions and feel responsible for children's emotional development are more engaged in positive socialization practices (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997; Saarni, 1985). Parents who view emotions as positive and necessary invest time in allowing their children to experience emotions and coaching them through those experiences (Gottman et al., 1997). In contrast, parents who view emotions as irrelevant or even threatening want to protect their children from viewing and experiencing strong emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998).

These different parental beliefs about emotions have significant ramifications for children's SEL environment. In their work with preschool families, Denham and Kochanoff (2002) found that the best predictor of children's emotion knowledge was their mother's positive attitude toward actively teaching and aiding children with their emotions. Having a mother who

values teaching about emotions can help children develop early and persistent emotional competencies that will aid them in school (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002).

Parents who are less supportive in their reactions to children's emotions tend to have children prone to negative emotion displays (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Furthermore, parents who report restrictive attitudes towards children's emotion expression, meaning they try to diminish or suppress children's expression attempts, have children who know less about display rules surrounding emotion expression (Saarni, 1985) and have poorer emotion knowledge (McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007). Conversely, children who more often discuss display rules at home with their parents show greater understanding of these social norms (Saarni, 1985). Gottman indicates that parental "coaching of emotions is nested within a web of warm parenting" (Gottman et al., 1997, p. 90). When parents believe that emotion teaching and guidance is part of their job, they actively engage in it more (Dunsmore, et al., 2009).

However, with the expansion of out-of-home care for preschool-aged children, parents' SEL practices may be somewhat supplanted or augmented by preschool teachers' SEL practices (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005). Today, children in child care centers may spend even more time interacting with their teachers than they do with their own parents; therefore, teachers' roles in children's emotional development should be emphasized. Eisenberg and colleagues (1998) identify teachers as another strong socializing force in children's lives.

### **SEL in Preschool Classrooms & Early Childhood Centers**

Researchers have extended these ideas about SEL from the parenting literature to teachers, stressing teachers' important role in facilitating preschoolers' emotional development by modeling, teaching and reacting to emotions. Denham (1998) suggests that teachers have the potential to be excellent socializers, given their position as powerful role models. When teachers

show interest in children's feelings, it demonstrates respect for children's emotional experiences, positively impacting their emotional development. As Hyson (1994) highlights, teachers' roles are critical in constructing an environment within which children can strengthen their abilities to regulate their own emotions and respond appropriately to others' feelings.

Additionally, an extensive array of SEL curricula support teachers' teaching of social and emotional competencies to young children (for a review of evidence-based curricula see [www.casel.org/guide](http://www.casel.org/guide)). Several of these curricula are focused on explicit skill instruction and structure teachers' direct teaching of emotion labels, emotional regulation, and/or behavioral regulation strategies. Other curricula address particular pedagogies, such as the use of positive discipline practices, which have also been shown to enhance student academic achievement (e.g., Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011). Many of these programs also include components that promote safe, caring, engaging, and participatory learning environments that build student attachment to school, motivation to learn, and academic achievement (Zins et al., 2004).

Separately, education research has focused a great deal on what constitutes emotionally supportive preschool and early elementary classroom environments (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Quantitatively-based observational rating scales of children's classroom environments have yielded notable associations with children's social outcomes (e.g., NICHD ECCRN, 2005; Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008). Higher ratings of teacher emotional support are associated with greater student social competence (Mashburn et al., 2008) and fewer problem behaviors (Howes et al., 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 2003) in children attending both publically funded and private preschool programs. Emotionally supportive teachers tend to create positive classroom environments and balance the need for student autonomy with sensitivity to students' needs for

extra support (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Yet, a disconnect still exists in the literature – we know very little about the socialization *practices* of preschool teachers. Although Brackett and colleagues (2012) have begun the important work of taking teachers’ beliefs about SEL into account, we still know little about how those beliefs shape the emotional environment of classrooms.

Although many emotion socialization practices within a preschool classroom are at the discretion of the lead teacher, it is important to acknowledge that there are several ways in which *where* a teacher works will meaningfully impact his/her teaching practices. Foremost is the selection of an SEL curriculum. Typically a whole school staff will be trained on one or more curricula (e.g. Second Step, Al’s Pals, etc.). A teacher may be required to complete a set number of lessons per week from whichever program the center administrator has selected. Such curricula could possibly influence how a teacher perceives children’s behavior and emotions in the classroom.

Administrators may also stipulate program-wide standards with regard to quantity and breadth of professional development, use of an assessment tool to track children’s progress, or means by which teachers are evaluated – all of which may impact emotion socialization practices. Finally, administrators themselves hold varying opinions on the values of SEL (Zinsser, Curby, & Ullrich, in press), which they may communicate explicitly or implicitly and thereby influence teachers’ classroom practices around SEL.

### **The Present Study**

The present study combined the quantitative precedent of recent teacher emotional support research and qualitative techniques used in the study of parental socialization practices (e.g. Denham, Caal, Bassett, Benga, Geangu, 2004; Parker et al., 2012) into a mixed-method



investigation. These approaches provide research findings that have greater potential for informing educational practitioners because they are realistic and ecologically valid in the eyes of teachers and administrators (Maxwell, 2005).

In the present study, qualitative data about teachers' beliefs collected from focus groups are combined with quantitative assessments of their classroom emotional environments. In combination, the qualitative information may inform the underlying differences between more emotionally supportive and less emotionally supportive teachers. To do this, comparison groups of more and less emotionally supportive teachers were selected. These groups were then compared along the following dimensions: (1) their beliefs about the value of SEL; (2) their perceptions/discussions of socialization practices and SEL strategies; and (3) their beliefs regarding their role in children's emotional development.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

The full study sample ( $N = 44$ ) was comprised of preschool teachers from ten centers in Northern Virginia in the 2011-2012 school year. Teachers and children from these centers were recruited to participate in a large multi-year study of teachers' impact on children's social and emotional learning. While the larger project involves both lead and assistant teachers, these analyses only utilize data from lead teachers participating in Year 1 ( $N = 32$ ; Table 2).

The centers participating in Year 1 included a Head Start center, eight private child care centers all operated by a local chain, and a private tuition-based University child development center. These particular centers were recruited based on prior research involvement and diversity of student populations served. Although a second Head Start center was recruited to participate, the center withdrew from the study prior to the start of data collection indicating that the

combination of participating in the study and completing the site visits for their upcoming performance review would be too much for the center's staff to manage. Additional Head Start programs were recruited for Years 2 and 3 of the project.

The Head Start center served approximately 150 children in nine classrooms with two co-lead full time teachers for every 18-child class. Children attended the Head Start between 8:30am and 4:00pm. The private centers each housed between two and five classrooms serving three- and four-year-old children (approximately 40-100 children). Additionally, the private centers served toddlers and/or infants in separate rooms. Each classroom was staffed with one lead and one assistant teacher for every 20-child class. Regular care hours at the private centers were from 9am to 4pm; however, early drop-off and late pick-up services were available to parents for a fee. Additional information about the participating teachers can be found in the description of the comparison groups below and in Table 2.

In Year 1 of the larger project, classroom observations were conducted over a two-week period in the winter by trained and certified personnel. All classroom observations were completed during the morning. Focus groups were conducted with the lead teachers during the winter and early spring. Focus groups were carried out independently from classroom observations and moderators were blind to observational ratings until all focus group coding and analysis was complete.

## **Measures**

**Teacher emotional support.** Observations of emotional support were coded using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS-PreK; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 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 = *low* to 7 = *high*. Following the standard scoring procedures for the CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008; Hamre, Pianta, Mashburn, & Downer, 2007), 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 of the classroom as it captures many relational aspects of a preschool classroom. Such aspects are important factors in helping children learn about emotions and are key to understanding teachers' roles in emotion socialization.

Emotional Support is a composite of four 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 rate 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 individual student academic and emotional needs. Regard for Student Perspectives describes the degree to which the teachers' interactions with students and classroom activities place an emphasis on students' interests, motivations and points of view, rather than being teacher-driven (Hamre et al., 2007). For full descriptions of each dimension see the CLASS coding manual (Pianta et al., 2008).

***Training and reliability.*** All coders attended a two-day training session by a certified trainer. During the training, videos from pre-k classrooms were watched and discussed based on the manual for the instrument. After the training, potential raters had to provide ratings on five videos. Raters were deemed reliable if their ratings were within one scale point on 80% of codes

of the master-coded segments. 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 high reliability.

**Teacher focus groups.** Teacher focus groups were conducted to garner a deeper understanding of the teacher's role in children's emotion socialization. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted by two female senior developmental psychology graduate students. 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 then asked teachers questions in a semi-structured format and posed follow-up questions for clarification. 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 center as well as for lead and assistant teachers to control for the impact of supervisory relationships. Therefore, these focus groups tended to be small in size, ranging from 2 to 8 participants, based on the number of preschool classrooms at each center.

A list of questions with possible probes was originally developed based on literature about parent and teacher emotion socialization practices (e.g. Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). 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 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 notes 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 & reliability.*** 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 and can be found in Table 1. Coding was conducted using the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software package (Version 10; QSR International, 2012).

The same researchers who conducted the focus groups coded the transcripts. Coders were trained, 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. Reliability was assessed on the Level-1 codes. 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. Due to the nature of the data, 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), so 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 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 either the more- or less-emotionally-supportive comparison groups. Through repeated readings and examinations of the coded content, three areas of difference emerged and will be discussed in detail below.

## **Results**

### **Comparison Groups**

Comparison groups were formed based on the aggregated CLASS ratings of teachers' Emotional Support. 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 standard deviation (SD) above the sample mean were considered Highly Supportive (HS;  $n = 6$ ), and those one SD below the sample mean were considered Moderately Supportive (MS;  $n = 5$ ). On average, the teachers in each group were one-and-a-half standard deviations away from the full sample Emotional Support mean. The HS teachers had an average Emotional Support score near the ceiling of the scale ( $\mu=6.45$ ) while the MS teachers fell in the middle quality range of the CLASS scores ( $\mu=$

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).

Table 2 shows the general characteristics of the HS and MS 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 HS teachers having held longer tenure in the field than teachers who were deemed MS. Both groups included two teachers who had not completed a college degree and the MS group of teachers included one who had completed a graduate degree.

Teachers classified as HS or MS were compared along the following dimensions: their center membership; their beliefs about the value of SEL; their perceptions/discussions of socialization practices and SEL strategies; and their beliefs regarding their role in children's emotional development. Coded portions of teachers' focus group discussions were examined both quantitatively and qualitatively for meaning. Table 3 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 vary 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 (MS 1-5 and HS 1-6) and some speakers are more frequently quoted than others simply because of their conciseness or articulateness.

**Center membership and programmatic differences.** It is important to note that the HS group of teachers was composed of three Head Start teachers who all worked at a single large center and three private-school teachers who each worked at separate centers. The MS group was entirely composed of private-center teachers, each from separate centers. The Head Start/Private center distribution may partially explain why HS teachers were generally paid more, as Head Start salaries in this sample tended to be more competitive than those in the private child-care programs. Although the three Head Start teachers in the HS group all worked at a single center, the remaining eight teachers represented separate private preschool centers. This indicates the possibility of program type effects. In fact, in the full sample Head Start teachers were rated more highly both on the domain of Emotional Support ( $t(30) = -2.42, p < .05$ ) and on the overall CLASS quality composite ( $t(30) = -2.17, p < .05$ ).

In light of the center-level factors discussed above that may impact teachers' classroom practices, we also examined structural differences between Head Start and the private programs with regard to SEL curricula. The Head Start center included in this sample did not use a specific curriculum; however teachers from that center reported (under the "Training" code, Table 1) attending annual in-service professional development, some of which included topics about children's emotions and behaviors. Teachers at the private centers all reported using some form of SEL curriculum, often in combination. These programs included *AI's Pals*, *Second Step*, *I Can Problem Solve*, and *Adventures in Peace Making*. Although each program varies slightly with regard to content, they are all explicit instruction programs that are delivered on a regular schedule through a pre-determined lesson plan.

To fully consider how other potential center-level factors may influence teachers' discussions of SEL and emotion socialization practices in their classrooms, we extended our



analysis to include references coded as “Center/Program” or “Training” (Table 1). As can be seen in Table 3, proportional discussions of these codes did not differ substantially. Teachers in both groups (40% of MS and 50% of HS) referred to center-level factors that impact their teaching practices, including teacher-child ratios, time management and assessment challenges, and relationships with supervisors, but no meaningful differences were apparent between the groups.

Teachers in both groups contributed to discussions of their training experiences and needs. Teachers from both the HS and MS group referenced relevant in-service training opportunities (including teachers from the Head Start center). Interestingly, teachers in the MS group consistently (60%) referenced their pre-service training and undergraduate coursework as being most influential on their practice. As one teacher said, “my degree is in child psychology so I think maybe that why it’s a little easier for me to pick up on or see the things [going on] with the kids” (MS3). Conversely, the HS teachers spoke about the content of their professional development course and the benefit of having the opportunity to learn from their peers. Based on teacher descriptions, there appeared to be no center type differences (Head Start vs. Private) in the types of training attended.

### **Teachers’ Beliefs about SEL**

The numerical results of the coding of teachers’ comments (Table 3) reveal that HS discussions of beliefs about the value of SEL were slightly more extensive, with a greater proportion of teachers participating and greater average number of references per participant. The value-of-SEL code was defined as “any discussion of beliefs about the importance of SEL/competence in children’s school success or overall development.” Additional differences emerged between the two groups of teachers regarding the importance of SEL. HS teachers

emphasized that SEL was important for later in life. As one teacher put it, “we’re trying to teach these children how to perform in a classroom and survive, basically. I mean they need those skills to move up to kindergarten and on” (HS2). Another teacher echoed, “But here, you’re not babysitting them. You’re actually teaching them skills in life and get them prepared to go to kindergarten and on” (HS1). One teacher expressed how she saw social-emotional competencies as more important for children’s long-term success in school. She also highlighted the link between her personal views and her enjoyment of the SEL aspects of her teaching:

HS2: I feel like the social part and emotional part is so much more important getting into kindergarten than whether I can write my 'L' the right way or anything like that. And I enjoy seeing my kids grow in that respect... That is more fulfilling...

Several of the HS teachers expressed the sentiment that SEL is something they constantly engaged in and felt was particularly important in early childhood. One teacher explained that she engaged in SEL, “every day...social-emotional is a big deal for us in the classroom, especially around three to five [years old]...how they feel is so much related to [how they act] that [teaching them about emotions] helps them a lot.” (HS6). There was a singular sentiment among the HS teachers that not only was SEL valuable and important, but it is thoroughly woven into their daily activities in the classroom.

MS teachers also acknowledged the importance of SEL for future success in kindergarten: “when I talk to kindergarten teachers, they say that at the top of their list is really that social-emotional aspect...because the educational part, it will come” (MS4). Another teacher emphasized the importance of training children in social-emotional competencies even beyond their start of formal schooling in kindergarten:

MS1: I mean we're training children to be adults and to be able to manage in the world. And so if they can't solve problems, that's a huge problem because they're never going to make it.

As with the above quote, there was a tendency for MS teachers to focus on specific aspects of emotional learning that are valued in their classrooms; teachers listed skills such as, “Being able to sit next to someone...being able to interact with your other classmates....be able to handle their emotions--handle their friends' emotions” (MS4) as being important. These comments indicate that these teachers highly value SEL and understand the skills that comprise social-emotional competence. However, their comments do not emphasize integration of SEL into classroom interactions, as HS teachers’ comments did.

### **Teachers’ Socialization Practices and SEL Strategies**

In our coding strategy we divided SEL activities in the classroom into two broad categories: Interactional SEL and Structured SEL. Interactional SEL consists of teacher-child interactions which may influence children’s social-emotional competencies, including the aspects of socialization identified in the parenting literature (i.e., contingent reactions, modeling, and teaching about emotions) and any additional interactions that teachers discussed. Such Interactional SEL in the classroom codes were often applied to discussions of how teachers coach or scaffold children through emotional altercations with peers or help children find words to express their feelings.

Structured SEL includes three components: (a) the use of pre-packaged SEL curricula to directly teach children about emotions and social problem solving (Direct Curriculum), (b) the inclusion of emotional competency skills into other, non-curricular direct teaching activities, such as using emotion-laden story books to prompt discussions of emotions (Direct Non-

Curriculum), and (c) the use of routines, classroom rules, and structure to help children develop competencies (e.g. using songs at morning circle time to practice emotion expressions).

**Interactional SEL.** Table 3 shows that a large proportion of participants in both groups engaged in discussions about the ways by which teachers socialize children's emotional competence through interactions. Individual socialization practices (Modeling, Teaching and Reacting) were coded less extensively. This was especially true of contingent reacting, which only one participant referenced briefly, possibly indicating a general lack of awareness of the impact of their responses to children's expressed emotions.

*Teaching.* The Teaching code was defined as "socialization by teacher through pointing out, labeling, questioning, scaffolding, or otherwise teaching about emotions during interactions with a child (or children) outside of structured classroom routines." As shown in Table 3, only one participant in the MS group made a brief reference to such a behavior, while in the HS two teachers talked more extensively about it.

Nine references were coded for Teaching, eight of which were contributed by the HS teachers. References touched on a variety of teaching techniques including coaching children through resolution of a conflict, talking about emotions and feelings one-on-one or in a group, and talking about non-verbal cues about how someone might be feeling. One teacher in the HS group gave the following example of how she taught children about emotions when two boys were struggling to communicate their feelings in the block area:

HS2: A lot of what we do is [saying to children], you don't have to tell somebody that you're mad; you can show them. So even if you don't have the language skills, you cross your arms and give them a frown face, they're going to know that you're upset. They may not care, but they know.

In this example, the teacher is not only intervening in an emotional altercation, but she is also coaching the children on how to display their emotions. She has referenced both the emotion label (mad) and the non-verbal ways of demonstrating one's feelings (cross arms, etc.), building the students' emotion knowledge. She is also displaying a high level of sensitivity to the varying skills of students in her classroom – they may not all know how to express their feelings but she wants to make sure they have the ability to make their feelings known even before they develop the vocabulary. In this example the teacher is also teaching children about the potential reactions of the targets of emotional expression. Even if you effectively communicate your feelings, the other child “may not care.” This teacher is realistically shaping her students' expectations about how others will react to emotional communication and ultimately helping them to regulate their emotions.

Conversely, the only reference to Teaching in the MS group was from teacher MS1 who said “I think that always reminding the children about what their emotions are, because they're showing us emotions all day long. And I'm just constantly naming those emotions.” By comparison, this teacher is only focused on one aspect of teaching (labeling) and not including any other aspects of this form of emotion socialization (scaffolding and coaching, questioning, etc.).

*Modeling.* Half of HS teachers referred to their intentional modeling of social and emotional competencies to their students. They saw modeling as an important tool for “setting good examples for children” (HS3), showing them that “adults are people, too, that we can have these emotions” (HS3), and “reminding [children] of what is appropriate in the classroom and what is not” (HS2). One teacher even emphasized how her relationship with her co-worker was a model for her students:

HS6: They see how you treat your coworker, how you talk to that person, if you scream to that person, if you're throwing stuff to the person, they see that stuff. And the way that you have that communication with your partner, believe it or not, they are looking at you.

Among the MS teachers, only one teacher discussed modeling and her focus was solely on modeling the expression of emotions and did not include behavioral modeling or relationship skills.

**Structural SEL.** In addition to differences in the Interactional SEL coding, there were also meaningful differences in the Structural SEL codes. The Direct Curriculum SEL code was defined as “the discussion of using, or descriptions of any packaged SEL curriculum program.” Many teachers in the MS group described how they use these programs to teach children about labeling emotions, for example:

MS1: We use the Second Step Program. It includes a picture card and on the back of it are the instructions for the teacher. And usually start with a warm-up, which is usually like a review of something you've talked about....and then you'll get into a story discussion, which is the picture card on the front. So that will display something like a child looking sad or happy, and we say, ‘What can you see on the face?’ You know, we talk a lot about looking at people's faces or their bodies to kind of see what their emotions are.

Teachers in the MS group also described using curricula to help children develop regulation skills. In this example, the teacher is describing how she encourages students to utilize the puppets included in the Second Step program:

MS3: So we try to get them, instead of immediately going to hitting or screaming going--stepping away and getting the puppet, which gives them a little time to kind of cool down, regroup, and think about what the issue really is. They'll bring the puppet over to the person and say, you know, 'That made me sad.'

One teacher even emphasized the importance of her knowledge of the curricula for her ability to help children learn about emotions:

MS1: If you don't really understand the program, that's going to hurt you because you can't talk about [emotions] to the children, and the children aren't going to benefit.

To some degree, comments like this imply a heavy reliance on the program by teachers, such that, without the curriculum, they would be at a loss as to how to help children develop emotional competencies.

Within the HS group, only the private-center teachers had access to such curricula and among those three, two referenced SEL curricula when describing how they help their children develop these skills. For these two teachers, the curricula were seen as additional SEL opportunities for children. For example, one summarized the curriculum's role in this way, "It's really the teacher and the parents that work together to help strengthen [SEL] in their kids. And then Al's Pals is like an add-on to reinforce everything that [the children] learn." (HS3).

Based on the comments of teachers in the HS and MS groups, the Teaching code and the Direct Curriculum code appear to capture two contrasting approaches to SEL in the classroom. HS teachers discussed purposefully incorporating SEL into their daily interactions with students through modeling, coaching and scaffolding children's emotional experiences, knowledge acquisition, and regulation. Conversely, MS teachers tended to rely heavily on the utilization of

specific curriculum during times of day set aside for SEL. The other codes under Structural SEL (Direct Non-Curriculum SEL and Routines) were not referenced with enough frequency by either group to warrant a comparison.

### **Teachers' Role in Emotional Development**

A contrast emerged between the two groups with regard to the respective roles they saw for teachers and parents in assisting children's SEL (Table 3). MS teachers discussed their socialization role slightly more than did HS teachers, and much of this discussion centered on parents' inability to be the primary emotion socializers. Conversely, the HS teachers discussed collaboration with parents much more comprehensively than did the MS teachers.

As was evident in the analysis of teachers' valuing of SEL, HS teachers emphasized their constant engagement in socialization, thus viewing it as part of their jobs simply because they are already engaging in it frequently. However, HS teachers elaborated on the delineation of socialization responsibilities, implying that there is a degree of shared accountability between parents and teachers. One teacher said, "it's sort of like working as a team, parents and teachers together, to help just whatever the parents want for their children...we all...want the best for their child so it's about achieving what goals they have for their children" (HS3). Another teacher alluded to some variability between parents, but stated that overall she felt that the responsibility of emotion socialization "should be [split] 50/50. It should be, but in some parents you can tell they struggle. Some have to work two, three jobs" (HS1). However, these teachers acknowledged that a collaborative relationship is in part dependent on the parent's willingness to engage. One HS teacher summarized it this way: "And I would like to know more about what the parents expect or what they want, what works for them at home, because I feel like I'm not the expert on your child, you know?" (HS4). This quote additionally underlined a substantial



difference between the HS and MS teachers: HS teachers approached emotion socialization as a joint venture, requiring involvement of both parents and teachers and depending on parents' wishes for their children.

MS teachers seemed to believe that the work of emotion socialization *should be* predominantly carried out by parents; however, instead of working with parents, many of these teachers sounded as though they had resigned themselves to carrying the full task of socializing their students:

MS3: A lot of the parents ...that I've met with [are] having a hard time with the child...They'll readily admit, 'You guys have them more than we do.' So I think a lot of them are kind of depending on the preschools to give them those tools and to work through the emotional parts.

The theme of Time with Parents was highlighted with its own code, reflecting the extensive and lengthy discussions of how much time children in these centers spend away from home. Many of the private centers in our sample opened their doors before 6am and many children were not picked up until 7pm. These discussions were most extensive among the MS teachers, possibly reflecting the fact that this group consists entirely of private center teachers, while the HS teachers group included three Head Start teachers, whose centers have shorter school days.

Among these MS teachers, there appeared to be a high degree of empathy for the parents of their students. The teachers in the group acknowledged that the children "spend quite a deal of time [with teachers] because the parent has a very long workday" (MS4). As one admitted, it is "frustrating" for teachers but they "get it. [Parents are] at work all day long, so they're stressed and tired, then the drive home – the traffic. By the

time you get home, it's almost... 6:30pm and the kids have to eat and bathe and then be in bed...so [the parents] don't really even have much time [with their kids]" (MS3). This lack of time with parents seems to have elevated the role of teachers in some classrooms. Several of the MS teachers indicated that they had the advantage over parents with regard to teaching children emotional competencies and therefore had a responsibility to engage in more of it.

MS1: We're the authorities...they listen to us better for the most part in general than they do their parents. So I think that they're willing to listen to us and understand what we're saying and kind of implement the things that we're teaching them, rather than their parents just always barking at them about something.

This role confusion even manifested itself in how MS teachers referred to themselves, three MS teachers using phrases such as being "another set of parents" (MS4) or that, in the eyes of the children, their roles are "pretty much the same" (MS5) as parents because teachers and parents are both "trying to guide them and show them love and care" (MS5).

### **Discussion**

In this study, we utilized a unique component mixed-methods design, integrating classroom observation ratings of emotional supportiveness with qualitative focus group data on teachers' beliefs about emotions in preschool classrooms. The findings of this study revealed that teachers' beliefs about emotions were related to their social-emotional teaching practices. Specifically, highly supportive teachers differed from their moderately supportive peers with regard to their: (a) beliefs about emotions and the value of SEL; (b) discussion of socialization practices and SEL strategies; and (c) perceptions of their roles as emotion socializers. Our

findings point to differences in teachers' underlying beliefs about emotions in preschool classrooms that are associated with the quality of their interactions with students. Understanding such differences can facilitate the development of intervention programs and in-service training to help teachers better meet students' SEL needs.

HS teachers see SEL as highly valuable and integral to their daily activities and interactions with students. Conversely, MS teachers tend to focus on specific skills when discussing emotions in their classrooms (e.g. being able to handle their emotions). Across both groups, emotions are highly valued, but for differing reasons. Among the MS teachers, emotional skills are valued for their association with concurrent classroom behavior and later social benefits (e.g. playing successfully with peers). When compared to HS teachers' emphatic discussion of careful and consistent incorporation of SEL in classroom activities and routines, these findings seem to point to underlying differences in these teachers' emotion meta-theory, similar to those seen in the parenting literature (e.g. Gottman et al., 1996).

Although it is apparent that many of these teachers acknowledge the importance of preparing children emotionally (as well as academically) for kindergarten and beyond, HS teachers were attentive to the extent to which SEL was incorporated into their daily activities and interactions with students. Conversely, MS teachers' comments resembled a check-list or lesson plan of skills that children needed to attain by the end of the year. Although research indicates that these skills are beneficial, this approach to SEL resembled the traditional compartmentalized teaching of academic subjects like math and reading, and may be indicative of a less sophisticated pedagogy. These findings are further supported by the following results of examinations of teachers' SEL strategies in the classroom and perceptions of socialization processes.

The second major finding of this investigation was of the different approaches to SEL in the two groups of classrooms. HS teachers discussed purposefully incorporating SEL into their daily interactions with students through modeling, coaching and scaffolding children's emotional experiences, knowledge acquisition, and regulation. MS teachers relied heavily on specific SEL curricula during prescribed times of day. Although different, these two SEL strategies appear to be along the same continuum. The MS teachers viewed these pre-packaged lesson plans and activities as their primary SEL approach. The HS teachers could be viewed as more confident in their SEL strategies. Many of the HS teachers still utilized a curriculum, but viewed it as secondary to their interactions with children in promoting social-emotional competencies.

Finally, in this study we found that across both groups teachers believed that parents *should* be the ones primarily responsible for children's emotional development; however, there was an overarching acknowledgement that teachers also play an important role. This finding is reflective of the recent changes in children's preschool experiences, with more and more children spending substantial portions of their days in non-familial care arrangements. Differences emerged in the way the two groups balanced their involvement with that of parents. HS teachers emphasized collaboration with parents whereas MS teachers seemed to make excuses for parents and accept their role as the primary socializers for all children in their classes. Our findings indicate that feeling responsible for children's emotion socialization does not necessarily translate into HS interactions with students. Instead, teachers who deliberately partnered with parents and communicated about emotional goals and expectations for children displayed more emotionally supportive teaching behaviors.

The findings of this study are particularly important because these two groups of teachers are relatively representative of the average teachers in U.S. preschools. Across the whole sample,

these teachers' CLASS scores are very similar to the national average. Even though the comparison groups were created relative to this sample, not using the cut points of quality as defined by Pianta and colleagues (2008), the group means fall within the boundaries of the upper two categories of quality.

At a time when quality thresholds (e.g., Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2008) and quality improvement systems (Yoshikawa et al., 2013) are receiving a great deal of attention, these findings illuminate meaningful differences, not between high and low extreme groups, but among those generally considered adequate. In this study we have shown that even relatively small variations within the realm of moderate emotional support quality can be traced to differences in underlying perceptions of and beliefs about social-emotional learning. This finding is meaningful when combined with research showing that even relatively small differences in classroom quality have meaningful impacts on children's experiences (Mashburn et al., 2008). Teachers' beliefs about emotions and engagement in socialization practices may help to explain differential impacts of classroom quality on problem behaviors found in threshold research (Burchinal et al., 2010, 2009; Torquati et al., 2011).

Finally, this research adds to growing bodies of work emphasizing the importance of integrating SEL curricula beyond single classrooms (Greenberg et al., 2003) and taking into account teachers' own beliefs and experiences when devising and implementing SEL programming (Brackett et al., 2012; Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009) by connecting these beliefs to ratings of the quality of teachers' emotional interactions with students. In this study, the more emotionally supportive teachers who regularly used SEL curricula spoke eloquently of how they integrated lessons into classroom activities and enhanced curriculum-based lessons through socializing interactions. For curricula developers and school

administrators wishing to implement such programming, this study points to the importance of considering teachers' own perceptions, not only of the individual curriculum being considered, but also of the value of SEL in general and their understanding of how SEL can be taught both directly and through high quality emotionally supportive interactions.

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge that there are inherent limitations of this study. First, with qualitative and observational research it is important to be aware of the threat participant reactivity can pose to the validity of results. It is unrealistic to *actually* eliminate our influence on individuals with whom we're interacting and observing (Maxwell, 2005); however, qualitative researchers can strive to understand how our presence may affect the validity of our inferences. In the present study, we addressed this potential validity threat in two ways: first, by conducting pilot focus groups, we were able to test our procedures, paying particular attention to participant discomfort. Pilot participants even completed a short survey about their experience, comfort and interest in the focus group and all indicated that they felt comfortable. Secondly, when moderating the focus groups the researchers made every attempt to avoid using leading questions or giving verbal or non-verbal cues as to their approval or disapproval of various responses. In combination, these procedures appear to have minimized the potential for participant reactivity threatening the validity of our interpretations.

In addition, the use of a semi-structured focus group methodology poses additional 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 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 is especially true for those teachers at the Head Start center. Head Start adopted the CLASS as its key measure of classroom quality with the 2007 Head Start Act and teachers are routinely rated using the measure. 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, yielding more affirmative responses to questions about the valuing of emotions. However, teachers in the private centers in this sample were relatively unfamiliar with the CLASS and yet showed similar responses in the focus groups.

As was discussed above, it is important to consider the possibility of center-level or program-type influences on teachers' focus group responses. Teachers within the same center often use the same curriculum, attend the same professional development, and are supervised by the same administrators. Therefore, it is notable that we did not see more teachers from a single center clustered with the comparison groups. Instead, nine of the ten centers in the full sample were represented in at least one of the comparison groups. However, it is also noteworthy that three Head Start teachers all fell into the HS group, indicating that there are possible center-type differences accounting for some of the patterns in both classroom practices and focus group responses. Further analyses will be necessary to determine how the Head Start program's climate and culture differ from that of the private programs included in this study and how these differences may influence teachers' engagement in social-emotional teaching practices.

As this research was conducted entirely at the teacher level, no child-level data is available for the classrooms in which participants taught. Thus we are unable to address actual outcomes for students or to account for within classroom demographic differences that may have contributed to teaching practices.

### **Implications**

Despite a prominent research focus on the benefits of effective teacher-child emotional interactions for children's social and emotional well-being, there is a lag between the research on effective classroom practices and the pre-service and in-service training programs for teachers. Unlike training teachers in academic instruction techniques, training teachers to be positive emotion socializers and provide supportive learning environments may require more than content knowledge on the part of the teacher. Based on the findings of this study, training programs that aim to increase teachers' emotional support will first need to help teachers acquire positive attitudes towards emotions and a greater understanding of emotions, including their own.

Although the use of evidence-based SEL curricula for classrooms may be a first step toward improving emotional support quality, particularly successful social-emotional teachers will need to go beyond prescribed lesson plans to incorporate SEL throughout their interactions with students. There has been a small amount of research supporting this hypothesis (see Hamre et al., 2012, for an example), but prior to developing such training programs, further research will be needed to understand how teachers' beliefs about emotions and perceptions of emotion socialization are related to higher-quality emotional support behaviors and child outcomes.

In conclusion, with children spending increasing time in preschool settings, it is important to understand how their social-emotional learning is impacted by emotionally supportive classroom environments. The present study begins to bridge a prominent literature on



parent emotion socialization practices with the growing teacher effectiveness and classroom emotional support research by evaluating the relation between teachers' beliefs about emotions and emotion socialization and ratings of their effective emotional interactions with preschool students. Findings show that teachers seen as more and less effective in emotional interactions demonstrate meaningful differences in their beliefs about emotions, socialization strategies, and perceptions of emotion socialization roles.

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Table 1

*Characteristics of Highly and Moderately Supportive Comparison Groups.*

	Highly Supportive (N=6)	Moderately Supportive (N=5)	Total Sample (N=32)
Center Type			
Private	50%	100%	75%
Head Start	50%	0%	25%
Age			
18-24	-	-	12.5
25-34	50%	60%	43.8
35-44	33.3%	20%	28.1
45-54	-	20%	9.4
55-62	16.7%	-	6.3
Female	100%	100%	96.9%
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	66.7%	100%	71.9%
African American	16.7%		18.8%
Asian	-	-	3.1%
Hispanic/Latino*	16.7%	20%	15.6%
Years of Experience in ECE			
Less than 6 years	16.7%	40%	34.4%
7-12 years	16.7%	20%	28.1%
13 or more years	66.6%	40%	37.5%
Highest Degree Earned			
Less than High School	-	-	3.1%
High school/GED	16.7%	-	15.6%
Some College	16.7%	20%	15.6%
Associates	33.3%	20%	15.6%
Bachelor's	33.3%	40%	43.8%
Graduate	-	20%	6.3%
Earnings			
Less than \$10K	-	-	3.2%
\$10K-\$20K	16.7%	20%	25.8%
\$20K-\$30K	33.3%	60%	34.5%
\$30K-\$40K	16.7%	20%	25.8%
More than \$40K	33.3%	-	9.7%
College Level Course Work			
6+ Early Childhood Education Courses	50%	60%	40.6%
6+ Early Elementary Courses	0	20%	23.8%
6+ Child Development Courses	33.3%	20%	34.5%
Use of SEL Curriculum	50%	100%	75%
Global CLASS (SD)	5.24 (.14)	3.83 (.29)	4.57 (.49)
Emotional Support (SD)	6.45 (.11)	4.87 (.31)	5.68 (.53)
Z-score Emotional Support (SD)	+1.46 (.21)	-1.54 (.58)	0.0 (1.0)

Table 2

*Final Primary and Secondary Codes for Teacher Focus Groups*

<b>Level-1 Codes</b>	<b>Level-2 Code Examples</b>
Center/Program	Needed Program Changes, Program Variations, Administration
Child Emotional Competence	Emotion Expression, Knowledge, Regulation, and Problem Solving
Child Social Competence	Prosocial, Antisocial
Emotions in the Classroom	Positive, Negative, Non-emotion words
Experiential Impacts	Age, Day Care Experience, Siblings, Gender, External Emotional Events (e.g. divorce)
SEL in the Classroom	Interactional, Structured, Positive Environment
Stress	Teacher Stress, Child Stress-Pressure, Stress Tools
Teacher Emotional Competence	Emotional Expression, Knowledge, Awareness, Sensitivity, Façade, Practice What You Preach
Parents	Parent-Teacher Collaboration & Relationship, Parent Emotion Socialization Style, Time with Parents, Important Parent Socialization Role
Teacher Role	Socialization Role Differentiation, Idealized Role, Assistant Teacher Role
Training	Innate Skill, Non-Training Skill, Emotional Development Training, SEL Training, Training Wants/Wishes
Value of SEL	Teacher Beliefs of SEL Value, Parent Beliefs of SEL Value, Importance of Child SEL Skills
Respect	Respect for Child Abilities, Respect for Teacher
Coworker Relationships	Collaboration, Conflict

Table 3:

## References Coded and Words per Reference by Comparison Groups

	Moderately Supportive Teachers				Highly Supportive Teachers			
	% Participation	Count of Coded Words	Count of Coded References	Mean (SD) References per Teacher	% Participation	Count of Coded Words	Count of Coded References	Mean (SD) References per Teacher
Value of SEL	0.60	680	8	1.60 (2.07)	0.83	608	11	2.50 (2.16)
Interactional SEL	0.80	2671	20	4.00 (3.39)	0.83	2580	30	5.00 (5.96)
Contingent Reaction	0.20	13	1	0.20 (0.44)	0.00	0	0	0 (0)
Modeling	0.20	288	3	0.60 (1.34)	0.50	762	11	1.83 (2.78)
Teaching	0.20	29	1	0.20 (0.44)	0.33	701	8	1.33 (2.16)
Structural SEL	1.00	1307	15	3.00 (1)	1.00	1078	18	4.00 (2.09)
Direct-Curriculum SEL	1.00	1265	14	2.80 (0.83)	0.33	243	4	0.66 (1.03)
Direct Non-Curriculum SEL	0.20	42	1	0.20 (0.44)	0.33	233	3	0.50 (0.83)
Routines	0.00	0	0	0 (0)	0.16	507	5	0.83 (2.04)
Teacher Role in SEL	0.80	934	9	1.80 (1.3)	0.67	402	8	1.33 (1.36)
Important Parent Role	0.20	305	2	0.40 (0.89)	0.33	250	4	0.66 (1.21)
Parent-Teacher Collaboration	0.40	184	2	0.40 (0.54)	0.50	691	12	2.00 (2.44)
Center	0.40	427	5	1.00 (1.73)	0.50	307	5	0.83 (0.98)
Training	1.00	805	13	2.60 (1.81)	0.67	436	11	1.83 (1.72)