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Teachers’ perspectives on the consequences of managing classroom climate.

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Abstract

**Background:** Well-managed, emotionally positive preschool classrooms promote academic and social success (Mashburn et al., 2008). Therefore, learning standards and practitioner guidelines emphasize the maintenance of a positive, well-managed classroom climate (Schonert-Richle et al., 2016). **Objective:** The present study qualitatively explores how this emphasis on classroom climate shapes teachers’ perceptions of their own and children’s emotions in the classroom. Three themes emerged around creating a positive, well-managed classroom climate. Specifically, that teachers tended to perceive their own and their students’ emotions as hindrances. Also, that teachers desired additional training to prepare themselves to create and maintain a positive, well-managed classroom climate. **Methods:** Participants were 31 lead preschool teachers working at 10 private and publicly funded preschool centers in the Mid-Atlantic region.  **Results:** Three major themes emerged from the coded focus group transcripts. First, teachers viewed children’s emotions as requiring management and detracting from class climate*.* Second, teachers viewed their own emotions as prominent determinants of classroom climate. Third, teachers wanted more support in creating and maintaining positive, classroom climates*.* **Conclusions:** The data described here suggest that the early-childhood education field must better support teachers with clear guidance about managing classroom climate *and* their own emotional well-being.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Preschool, Teachers, Qualitative Research, Social and Emotional Competence, Social Emotional Learning

Teachers’ perspectives on the consequences of managing classroom climate

Teachers are important to children’s social-emotional development (e.g., Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2002), particularly in early childhood when children experience rapid changes in emotional competence (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999; Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004). One frequently cited way teachers assist in children’s emotion development is by establishing and maintaining caring and supportive relationships in safe, positive, and emotionally warm classrooms (e.g., Mashburn et al., 2008; Zins, & Elias, 2007). Well-managed, emotionally positive classrooms are the optimal climates that promote children’s academic and social success (e.g., Zins, & Elias, 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008). However, the creation and maintenance of such climates are not easy, and do not occur without sacrifices.

Teachers are tasked with fostering and maintaining positive classroom climates while also meeting the health, safety, academic, and social-emotional needs of their students. This task can be especially challenging given the likelihood that teachers will face classroom situations that provoke negative emotions. In a moment of frustration, disappointment, or anger, a teacher must properly express and inhibit these emotions if they are to create a comfortable climate for children (Hargreaves, 2000). For example, when a child sneezes all over his hands and then runs to his teacher for a hug. The teacher may need to suppress her disgust and frustration at his germ-covered hands while admonishing him for not following the hand-washing rules – all in a manner that does not detract from their positive relationship.

In this study, we aim to elucidate the possible costs of teachers’ efforts to sustain a positive classroom climate. We do this not with the intention of arguing against the importance of such beneficial atmospheres for learning, but rather, with the goal of drawing attention to the acute emotional labor early childhood educators engage in on a regular basis. We see this investigation as further contributing to the literature on the importance of attending to teacher well-being and mental health. Although these topics are becoming more prominent (e.g., Katz, Greenberg, Jennings, & Klein, 2016; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011), additional research and interventions are needed to benefit teachers and their students.

**Classroom Climate as a Foundation to Social-Emotional Teaching**

Positive, well-managed classroom climates are marked by (1) supportive teachers who are sensitive to academic and emotional needs, (2) the expression of positive affect (e.g., singing, dancing, smiles, and excitement) by children and teachers alike, (3) and caring teacher-child relationships (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta, 2005). The classroom is positive, caring, safe, respectful, and conducive to learning. Teachers can cultivate this environment in a multitude of ways, such as upholding rules for appropriate behavior, nurturing caring relationships with all students, and facilitating positive peer interactions (Furlong et al., 2003). In comparison, negative climates tend to be less engaging, less emotionally supportive, less sensitive, more chaotic (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), and have more instances of student misbehavior (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2005; Werthamer-Larsson, Kellam, & Wheeler, 1991).

The tenor of the climate children learn and develop in has routinely shown to impact their academic and social success. For instance, the relative positivity and negativity of a child’s preschool classroom is associated with academic achievement (Zins, & Elias, 2007), social competence (Howes, 2000) and behavior problems (Mashburn et al., 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 2003), all in the expected directions. Furthermore, the relative consistency of classroom positivity is important. Children in consistently positive preschool classroom climates showed greater gains in both academic and social skills over the course of the school year than children in less consistent (but still on average positive) classrooms (Curby, Brock, & Hamre, 2013). Although teachers’ instructional practices play an important role in establishing the routine and tenor of a classroom, the climate of the classroom is also influenced by teachers’ and students’ intra- and inter-personal characteristics (e.g., children’s heritable characteristics (Houts, Caspi, Pianta, Arseneault, & Moffitt, 2010) and teacher gender and previous experiences (Yoon, Sulkowski, & Bauman, 2016)) as well as by factors outside of the classroom (e.g., school climate (Zinsser & Curby, 2014) and management practices (Zinsser, Christensen, & Torres, 2016).

The research supporting the benefits of positive, well-managed classroom climates have driven stakeholders and policy makers to include relevant statements in state-level standards for teacher licensure and practice. In a scan of the standards of practice across 50 states, Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, and Hymel (2016) found that standards regarding the management of positive learning climates are heavily emphasized. Similarly, childhood education practitioner guidelines from organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Head Start, as well as the classroom observation measures used to evaluate teachers and programs (e.g., the Classroom Assessment Scoring System; Pianta et al., 2008; Hestenes et al., 2015) explicitly emphasize and appraise the extent to which classrooms have “warm, sensitive, and … safe and secure climates built by positive relationships” (NAEYC, 2009). Finally, across assessments of preschool program quality (Hestenes et al., 2015), classroom climate has received consistent praise and emphasis for its benefits to young children. Indeed, teachers are receiving similar messages through professional development training and adopted curricula by their respective schools that aim to promote the positive behaviors, which mark such classroom climates (e.g., Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2014).

From all angles, teachers are receiving the message that the maintenance of a positive well-managed classroom climate is highly valued and most beneficial for their students. What is less well understood is how the barrage of messages about the importance of maintaining classroom positivity impacts teachers’ own feelings in the classroom and their perceptions of children’s emotions and behaviors, especially if their practices are ineffective. Without hearing directly from the teachers, we do not know how teachers are assimilating the various messages they receive about the importance of maintaining a well-managed classroom climate with their perception of their social-emotional teaching efficacy and their own emotional experiences in the classroom.

**Teachers’ Contributions to Classroom Climate**

Two key contributions to teachers’ understanding and beliefs about the messages they receive on positive classroom climates are likely their own emotional experiences in the classroom and their sense of self-efficacy in supporting children’s social-emotional development. Teachers’ social-emotional competence is integral to the successful management of the classroom and high quality social-emotional teaching (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). There is a critical gap in the field currently, where we fail to understand how teachers view not only their students’ emotions, but also their own within the context of the classroom. The classroom climate is dependent, in part, on a teachers’ perceptions of whether and which emotions are beneficial to learning. In a review of the literature, Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight (2009) reported that teachers desire to minimize their negative emotions, seeing them as disruptive to the class, and to instead focus on positive emotions. These results suggest that teachers’ view emotions as a teaching tool to maintain a harmonious classroom (Sutton et al., 2009). Therefore, expressing negative emotions threatens their idea of professional competency. In comparison, positive emotions are seen as a hallmark of a successful educator and therefore teachers are more likely to make concerted efforts to express positive emotions (Sutton et al., 2009).

However, in some studies, there is a small group of teachers that perceived their emotions as a teaching opportunity, for example, pointing out why a student’s behavior made them sad (Sutton et al., 2009; Sutton, 2004; *Reference withheld,* 2014). The literature largely points to these latter teachers as being emotionally competent in the classroom. Teachers who are socially and emotionally competent are aware of the impact their emotions and behavior have and strive to build caring relationships within their classroom. In addition, such teachers may be more in control of their emotions and behaviors during times of stress. These teachers potentially manage their physiological arousal in healthy ways that do not detract from their relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and helps them to view their work positively (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004). In contrast, for teachers who are less socially and emotionally competent, arousing classroom experiences can impact their teaching quality. To understand how teachers’ beliefs about emotions are impacted by their pursuit of the ideal classroom climate, we must acknowledge teachers’ classroom perceptions.

**The Present Study**

The present qualitative study was an exploratory examination of how teachers’ focus on the classroom climate shaped their perception of their own and children’s emotions in the classroom. More specifically, that to create a positive well-managed climate in their classrooms, teachers may tend to perceive emotions, both their own and those of their children, as hindrances. The authors inductively identified a consistent set of themes emerging across transcripts pertaining to the creation of classroom climates (a topic not directly probed in focus group questions). To the best of our knowledge, no prior papers have qualitatively studied teachers’ understanding of how classroom climates are established and processes for achieving their climate goals. The present paper seeks to understand how the messages about the importance of maintaining classroom positivity are interpreted by teachers in their classroom practices, and where they perceive additional support as being necessary.

**Method**

**Participants**

Data were from a larger study examining teachers’ emotion socialization behaviors and social-emotional learning (SEL) in preschool classrooms serving children ages three to four. This work was supported by grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Science. The sample included 31 teachers working at 10 private and public preschool centers in the Mid-Atlantic region during the 2011-2012 school year. These centers were recruited based on prior research involvement and diversity of student populations. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The participating teachers were primarily young, Caucasian, moderately well educated, experienced, and 80% earned less than $40,000 per year. This study was approved by the George Mason University Institutional Review Board.

**Procedures**

**Teacher Focus Groups.** The first two authors moderated 10 semi-structured teacher focus groups to investigate teachers’ roles in children’s emotion socialization. Focus groups were conducted on a center-by-center basis, ranging from 2 – 8 participants per focus group. Focus groups were carried out independently from all other aspects of the larger study. The lead moderator asked 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. All focus groups were video recorded and teachers’ comments were attributed to their unique identification number printed on a table tent facing the camera. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts used in these analyses include the lead teacher from each participating classroom.

Focus group questions with possible probes were first developed based on literature about parent and teacher emotion socialization practices (*Reference withheld*, 2012). The script and procedures were piloted with two groups of preschool teachers in a school not included in the project. Modifications were made to decrease leading probes and to increase clarity. The final script consisted of eight questions about emotions in the classroom, children’s and teachers’ emotional competence, teachers’ roles in emotion development, and teachers’ SEL training. Following each focus group, the moderators debriefed to capture initial impressions and salient themes, which is considered good practice when examining focus group data (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998). The field and debriefing notes were the basis of the first draft of analysis codes, which was later linked to their survey and observational data in the larger study. All references to individual names were redacted to maintain anonymity.

**Coding Procedures & Reliability.** The coders developed a coding scheme based on "families" of codes. This approach is a common way of balancing the need for detail to capture the nuance of teachers' perceptions while reducing the number of codes to achieve satisfactory reliability (Campbell et al, 2013). Our code families included 16 primary Level-1 codes (e.g., Emotions in the Classroom) and 55 Level-2 codes (e.g., Positive vs. Negative Emotions). By organizing codes hierarchically, we achieved a satisfactory level of reliability (wherein equally capable coders assign the same code for the same unit of text while working in isolation).

The researchers who conducted the focus groups coded the transcripts using Ethnograph qualitative data analysis software (Qualis Researcher, 2009). Coders used the two pilot focus group transcripts to define the codebook. All disagreements in codes were discussed with the third (senior) author until consensus was reached. To assess intercoder reliability, two of the 10 analysis transcripts were randomly selected and coded independently. Reliability was assessed on the Level-1 codes. Kappa at Level-1 was calculated to be 0.59, a moderate and acceptable level of reliability (Sim & Wright, 2005). 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. Following the close coding of these data, the researchers undertook an intensive analysis of the codes’ meaning and frequency.

**Results**

In our qualitative analysis of teacher focus groups, three main findings emerged related to classroom climate, especially with regards to teachers’ perceptions of the contributions of children’s emotions, their own emotions, and desire for additional training. Each of these themes will be described in detail below with illustrative quotations from focus groups. Findings presented highlight the themes that were most consistently supported across all focus groups. Quotes were selected that succinctly represented a theme across speakers.

**Children’s Emotions Require Management and Detract from Class Climate.**

In response to our explicit interview questions pertaining to the types of emotions teachers observed and experience in their classrooms, teachers frequently discussed the importance of expressing and understanding both positive and negative emotions. References to children’s emotions were consistent across transcripts with 100% of focus groups including discussions of both children’s positive and negative emotions. By examining portions of the transcripts coded as referencing Level 1 and Level 2 codes pertaining to emotions in the classroom and teachers’ perceptions of children’s emotional competence, we identified two salient themes. Notably, in all but one focus group (90%), the discussion focused almost exclusively on children’s negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, and frustration). Teachers had to be prompted by the moderator to reflect on positive emotions. Overall, negative emotion references were coded more than twice as often as positive emotions and when positive emotions were referenced, teachers often focused on problematic positive feelings (e.g., situations where children were overly positive to the point of excessive excitement and not being able to calm down). In this way, participants saw positivity as having negative consequences and being disruptive. As one teacher put, it is “good to have positive energy, but sometimes that can get the kids to being a little crazy and then you have to calm them down.” Across all focus groups, teachers’ indicated that they mostly viewed emotions as requiring their attention to manage and disruptive to the classroom climate.

The focus on emotions as being disruptive was echoed in teachers’ beliefs about children’s emotional skills and abilities. Another prevalent theme across transcripts was the relatively narrow definition of emotional competence. One question posed to the focus groups was for teachers to describe what they believe emotional competence looked like in preschool aged children. In response to this and relevant follow up questions, 80 % of focus groups discussed aspects of children’s emotional competence including emotion expression, knowledge, and regulation. Notably, 70% of focus groups also discussed aspects of social competence, but that is outside the realm of this analysis. Within these descriptions of competence, children’s emotion regulation was disproportionately referenced by teachers. When asked to describe an emotionally competent preschooler, many participants discussed how a number of their children have trouble regulating their emotions and how much of a “struggle” it is for them to communicate what they are feeling appropriately. Teachers’ reported that children, who lack emotion regulation skills, resorted to hitting, throwing, or lying on the ground: “[they] don’t know how to get their emotions out correctly. So they’re frustrated. They’ll just smack their head instead of saying ‘I’m frustrated’.” Another teacher reiterated this point, saying, “[the children] cry or they’ll hit if they’re struggling with their emotions instead of using their words. And they get more upset a lot easier than the other children that can use their words.” Across all of the focus groups, discussions of children’s emotions emphasized the importance of children regulating and communicating their needs and feelings. Well-regulated and communicative children were seen as not detracting from a positive and manageable classroom climate. The teachers perceived negative and disruptive emotions as most salient in their classroom and emphasized the importance of children’s emotion regulation skills. It is possible the teachers are focused wholly on the maintenance of a calm and productive classroom climate and view negative emotions as interfering with their teaching and children’s learning.

**Teachers’ View Their Own Emotions as Prominent Determinants of Classroom Climate.**

To more directly assess teachers’ perceptions of their roles in classroom climate development, we examined the portions of transcripts which were coded using teacher emotional competence and social-emotional learning in the classroom (including coded references of the positive classroom environment, direct instruction about SEL, and various teaching practices (i.e., modeling)). These level-1 codes were applied across 90% of focus group transcripts. On average each focus group referenced aspects of teachers’ emotional competence 20 times (range= 9-32) and SEL in the classroom 44 times (range = 21 to 74). Upon analyzing the coded text, a consistently emerging theme was the perception held by teachers that one of the most important emotional skills they could have was the ability to regulate, often suppress, their own emotions. They described this skill as key to being considered emotionally competent and to affect social-emotional instruction.

**Focus on suppressing negative emotions.** Mirroring their primary definition of emotionally competent children, these teachers emphasized the importance of regulatory skills for teachers too. As participants described it, many classroom situations require a teacher to down-regulate or suppress their negative emotions. As one teacher explained, “there are times when a child’s behavior, you’re just at your last straw and you really want to scream and holler and stomp your feet, but you can’t do that.” Many teachers described similar experiences of “boiling over” and emphasized being able to recognize and regulate such feelings. Participants underscored a teacher’s ability to regulate their emotions as crucial for working with children. For example, one teacher said, “Children should never change your channels for you… and if they start getting on your nerves or start making you upset, you shouldn’t allow them to do that, sort of be able to walk away from the situations.”

**Regulating classroom climate by managing teacher emotions.** Of particular interest was how teachers in these focus groups described that it was through regulating their own emotions that they can manage the climate of their classrooms. In various ways, teachers emphasized that to prevent classroom chaos, they needed to be a person of such control that they would be unaffected by their emotion. For example, one teacher described an emotionally competent teacher as one, “who can rise above feelings.” Another teacher echoed this belief, stating an important skill for a teacher to have is “compartmentalizing…because that helps the environment.” Another explained this compartmentalization occurs before teachers step into the classroom: “you have to be [emotionally] prepared before you come in, before you walk in the door.” The teachers appeared determined to maintain a positive classroom climate and perceived a direct connection between their emotions and the children’s: “children are happy because you are reinforcing that you are happy too.” One teacher described the hallmark of a classroom with an emotionally competent teacher as having, “…a smooth environment” and points to teachers as being responsible for preventing “an uproar. Kids …screaming and yelling at each other, crying hitting, running around, not wanting to do their work or do art.”

Teachers also described their regulation of emotion as indirectly impacting classroom climate through the modeling of successful strategies. Teachers were very aware of how attentive children were to their behaviors and expression. Teachers explained how they needed to regulate their emotions because, “…how well you regulate your own emotions … reflects onto the children … how they self-regulate their emotions” as well as, “you’ve got to control your actions before you can help control the kids.” In addition, one teacher aptly described a consensus among teachers that they must “…help them control their emotions. We teach them the right way to act or maybe how they should act.” In this way, teachers model how to regulate emotions which supports children’s learning of these skills and contributes to the positive, well-managed climate.

**Regulating emotion expression to build children’s competence.** Where all of the focus groups discussed aspects of emotion regulation, a smaller proportion (60%) also referenced the importance of teachers’ emotional expression skills, although often still in conjunction with regulation. This subset of participants talked about regulating their emotions to purposefully model their emotion expression. One teacher summed this point up well, recommending to, “identify your emotions to the children... so that they can see that you have feelings and emotions just like they do, but that you’re using them appropriately…” Teachers also conveyed the importance of the teacher acknowledging feeling a particular emotion so children can realize they have correctly identified it: “They call things just like they see it. And that’s what we want. We want that identification and the thought process…” In this way, teacher emotion expression was a way to teach children how to properly express their emotions and maintain harmony in the classroom. Another teacher connected these themes saying “…it’s important for us to label our own emotions and/or to keep your calm so that they mimic that and learn by example.” This idea of leading by example was echoed by another teacher: “if you constantly yell, they’re going to yell. But if you show love and respect and how you follow rules, then they’re going to do the same thing.” In other words, teachers’ proper emotion expression and regulation together supported children’s SEL and maintain a positive, well-managed classroom climate.

**The strain of emotion regulation.** Through our analysis of teachers’ discussion of their emotion regulation and the influence they have on classroom climate, it became evident this is an area of stress for teachers. The code for teacher stress was consistently applied in 80% of transcripts and often coincided with discussions of emotion regulation. The awareness of their position as emotion role models, constantly being observed by children (and at time supervisors), appeared to contribute to teachers’ feelings of strain in the classroom. This was especially true when teachers were experiencing negative emotions at work. One described the importance of masking those feelings saying that since the children are watching, “you just have to go in with a smile on your face.” The labor associated with over regulating their feelings could be draining on the teachers. Another teacher described this saying “…leave your emotions at the door, but sometimes you just can’t. And so I think that’s a lot, you know, and I think anybody who’s in a teaching field is stressed…in order to make sure that the children in your care thrive…” As we previously saw in teachers’ descriptions of what emotion competence means for them, there is an emphasis on rising above your feelings. These teachers who perceive emotions as inconvenient or problematic, especially with regards to the maintenance of classroom climate, are exhaustively regulating their own feelings, possibly to the detriment of their own emotional well-being.

One potential reason for teachers’ stress in the classroom stems from the belief expressed by several teachers that working with young children itself is taxing. As one teacher described it, working with children is “a big responsibility. It’s even dangerous.” The danger to which she was referring to encapsulates the responsibilities teachers have towards children’s well-being because, “if something happened to them, it’s on you.” Teachers also discussed the physical dangers that they encounter in the classroom: “I’ve been hit. I’ve been pinched. I’ve been spit on. I’ve been slapped, punched….” Another teacher described her experiences of being over-extended in the classroom, saying that sometimes she “…want[s] to scream because you are going beyond…what you can do to make somebody feel comfortable.” This exasperation was echoed by another teacher who felt it was unrealistic to regulate all of her negative emotions fully, saying “we’re people—sometimes things at home do affect us.” Yet the pressure to present a positive, well-managed classroom climate results in teachers feeling they have no choice but to hyper-regulate their emotions; a feat, which can be very draining. One teacher also described how teaching about SEL is an everyday thing: “Every time a moment arise[s], then we have to be there and try to talk about it, discuss about it, and see how they’re feeling and everything.” However, there were also teachers that believed you learned as you went, “There’s no teaching that. It’s learning as you go and understanding that you have to be the strong one and the one that knows how to control themselves and how to manage themselves, so you can relay that to the kids.”

**Teachers Want More Support in Creating and Maintaining Classroom Climates.**

A final theme emerged around teachers’ perceived needs for additional support. In response to a question about SEL curricula implemented in their programs, over 80% of focus groups referenced their need for more training. Specifically, teachers discussed in order to effectively implement SEL curricula (e.g., Al’s Pals), teachers’ needed training on how to create a classroom climate conducive for teaching such skills. Across a majority of focus groups, teachers expressed a feeling of inadequacy or unpreparedness to meet the classroom climate expectations placed on them. Teachers reiterated they were “only human and we can only do so much” and “it takes a lot of your self-control in order to be able to deal with all sorts of emotions because sometimes those emotions affect you too.” Just as children need instruction to support their SEL, teachers felt they would benefit from specific instruction on how best to create and maintain a positive, well-managed classroom climate *and* manage their own emotional well-being.

When the focus group script prompted teachers to talk about what they wanted or needed to change, many teachers repeated a call for additional training. Specifically, teachers expressed the need for more information on handling emotionally charged situations and the emotional demands of the classroom. One teacher said that, “...it really does make a big difference… people just feel more comfortable when they had the training.” When asked what training they did receive related to children’s emotional development, a majority of focus groups described their current training opportunities as being tied to implementing specific SEL curricula (e.g. Al’s Pals). Teachers sought a better understanding of the causes of children’s disruptive emotional expressions and effective strategies for helping them regulate those feelings, not additional training on curricula. A teacher summed up the benefit of early training on children’s emotions saying, “teachers need the training before just being thrown in there….[without it] teachers get frustrated, [and it] comes back to the kids, and then it goes back to the whole domino effect of emotions and feelings and frustration.” This teacher’s quote summarizes the transactional associations among teacher preparation, training, and their contingent reactions to children’s expressed emotions –which together either build or detract from a classroom climate conducive for learning.

**Discussion**

Through qualitative exploratory analysis of teacher focus groups, we identified three major themes around teachers’ beliefs about and experiences of emotions in preschool classroom. The participating early childhood educators: (1) viewed emotions as largely negative and detracting from a well-managed classroom environment; (2) believed that their emotions primarily drove classroom climate and therefore they exert a great deal of effort suppressing their emotions; and (3) teachers generally feel underprepared for the strain associated with creating and maintaining a positive, well-managed classroom climate and desired further training. Each of these three themes will be discussed in turn and connections will be drawn to relevant lines of research along with the implications for practice and future research.

**Teachers Perceived Emotions as Needing to be Managed**

In response to types of emotions they see in their classrooms, teachers overwhelmingly referenced negative emotions. Nearly all of the focus groups’ discussions failed to mention any positive emotions until moderators prompted them and even those discussions tended to focus on the negative and distracting effects of positive emotions. In discussing emotions, teachers implied that the primary reason they attend to children’s emotions is because they can be detrimental to the classroom climate and inhibit their teaching ability. This view of emotions as disruptive appeared to directly influence teachers’ characterization of emotionally competent children. Teachers stressed that for a child to be emotionally competent they had to regulate these disruptive emotions. In essence, children had to contribute to the maintenance of the positive, well-managed classroom to be viewed as emotionally competent.

Strong emotionality can be a deterrent to learning, such as when a child is so upset they are unable to focus. However, emotions, especially positive ones (e.g., excitement), are integral to learning (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009) and this was not reflected in teachers’ discussions. Teachers’ perception of emotions as intrusive may negatively impact their ability to support children’s emotion development. Indeed, studies of parental emotion socialization showed that when caregivers viewed emotions as dangerous or inconvenient, they tended to utilize socialization practices that discourage negative (Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001) and positive (Yap, Allen, & Ladouceur, 2008) emotion expression. In turn, children learn to express fewer emotions but still remain physiologically aroused in emotional situations (Fabes et al., 2001).

If teachers believe emotions are generally inconvenient and needing to be suppressed to maintain a tenable classroom climate, they may utilize suppressive socialization practices (dismissing or punitive responses) and undermine the goal of supporting children’s emotion development and maintaining a positive, well-managed classroom. Indeed, research has shown when teachers view negative emotions as a threat to their competency as an educator, they view the regulation of negative emotions as an essential tool in the classroom (Sutton et al., 2009). Teacher perceptions of emotions are a crucial target for potential interventions. The limited understanding of the benefits of emotions could be addressed through expanding the training and professional development opportunities for teachers. The more teachers are exposed to information about the importance of emotions (both positive and negative), the more they may be willing to work with children through emotional experiences. Ultimately, such training may enable teachers to disassociate children’s emotions from their disruptive behaviors. Previous endeavors to educate parents on the benefits of emotions, and ways to support emotion expression while still discouraging unwanted behavior, have been successful (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009). Therefore, similar approaches could work with teachers.

**Teachers Perceived their Emotions as Prominent Determinants of Classroom Climate.**

Across the focus groups, teachers reiterated that their emotions set the tone for the classroom and therefore, they carry the burden of classroom climate management through the regulation of their emotions. Having upwards of 18 students plus a host of rotating assistant teachers and paraprofessionals is strenuous for a single teacher, and their feelings of stress and exasperation were evident. This circumstance supports the need for more programs that also focus on teacher stress reduction (e.g., mindfulness interventions). Teacher stress is associated with harsh interactions with students (Reinke, Herman, & Stormont, 2013), poor management of problem behaviors that disrupt the classroom (Grining et al., 2010), and burnout (Roeser et al., 2013). One indication training would be well received comes from Grinning and colleagues (2010), who demonstrated that teachers who are less confident in their ability to manage their classrooms tended to experience more personal and work-related stress. However, these same teachers were most likely to attend workshops on skill improvement compared to their less stressed and/or more effective peers.

Similar discussions of the appropriateness of emotions at work have emerged in other fields. A Harvard Business Review report (2008) emphasized the benefits of bringing your “Whole Self” to work and increasing self-awareness around your emotions and promoting emotional well-being as a way of increasing workplace quality and productivity. One important question that arises from the findings of this study is, *to* *what extent do adult emotions belong in preschool classrooms?* It is evident from the focus groups that many teachers perceive nearly all non-positive emotions as inappropriate for the classroom. However, prior studies have indicated that there are developmentally appropriate ways for teachers to share negative emotions in the presence of children which may actually benefit children’s emotion knowledge (*Reference withheld, 2014*). We are not advocating for teachers to share strong negative emotions with children, but from these results and the work of Brown (2011) and Rosenholtz (1989), it is evident that exhaustive denial of emotions can be detrimental. Teacher turnover from emotional exhaustion would only further compromise efforts to provide consistent and positive classroom climates. In part due to the negative impact of teacher stress and burnout on children, preschool teachers’ emotional well-being is receiving more attention, especially for those working with at-risk children (Whitaker, Becker, Herman, & Gooze, 2013). One possible solution is the adoption of educator mental health interventions, such as mindfulness (Roeser et al., 2013) or stress reduction (Farber, 2000).

**Teachers’ Felt Unprepared to Create and Maintain a Positive Classroom Climate**

Despite the emphasis on the importance of creating a positive classroom climate from funders, accreditors, supervisors, and curriculum developers, teachers in this sample consistently indicated that they felt unprepared to deal with intense emotions in the classroom and realize a well-managed, positive climate goal. When asked about received training for children’s emotion development, teachers primarily described their training to facilitate specific curricula. Teachers generally liked these curricula and thought they were helpful for teaching children specific skills. However, the way teachers described their current approaches to classroom climate management are not sustainable (i.e., suppressing negative emotions), but without clear guidance from supervisors, they have few options. Taken together, the three themes identified here create a persistent negative cycle. Specifically, teachers struggle when they view emotions as hindrances to learning and therefore try to aggressively regulate their own and children’s emotions in the classroom. These repeated instances of ineffective regulation leave teachers feeling less confident which further degrades the classroom climate. It is clear teacher emotion beliefs, and belief in their ability, influence the type of learning climate created (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012; Sutton et al., 2009). Without training and support to address these underlying beliefs and skills, teachers’ will continue to struggle to meet classroom climate expectations.

There are several evidence-based SEL programs that support teachers’ instructional practice and provide management approaches to classroom climates (CASEL, 2013). Training to implement these programs often involves coaching on the fundamental importance of emotions for learning and supporting teachers in managing their own emotions to promote positive, well-managed classroom climates. Yet, teachers participating in this study were not using such programs. Instead, the teachers worked at schools either implementing only child-level SEL curricula (e.g., A’ls Pals), or were using general curricula (e.g., Creative Curriculum).

Another option may be using reflective practices (Laughran, 2002), approaches wherein teachers reflect on their classroom practice, share challenges, and brainstorm potential solutions with supervisors. Reflective supervision is grounded in an understanding that work with young children is emotionally demanding and it is critical to fully support the well-being of caregivers and teachers if they are to engage in high-quality interactions with children. One of the participating centers alluded to informal collective problem solving, but the theme was not prevalent enough to warrant inclusion in the results. Reflective practices may alleviate stress and satisfy professional development needs simultaneously. Future research in this area is essential as we move towards education reform and highlight the importance of classroom SEL. Research into the additive effects of implementing reflective supervision techniques in tandem with evidence-based SEL programing which addresses classroom management strategies would greatly add in our understanding of this issue.

**Future Directions**

Based on empirical research, policy-makers are logically promoting standards of high-quality practice for children’s SEL and classroom climates. Teacher training programs and professional development are likewise attending to these topics. However, the results from this study indicate that emphasis on the importance of climate, absent subsequent guidance on how to achieve these goals without sacrificing ones’ well-being, are doing the education field a disservice. To recruit and retain high-quality teachers, the field must be sensitive to the realities of teaching as highly-stressful and emotionally laborious and provide adequate support to prevent burnout and turnover. To equip programs with such resources, critical gaps in our current research must be filled. To move the field forward, we need to better understand how teachers’ beliefs about emotions influence their emotional teaching practices and test whether changes in the former lead to beneficial changes in the latter. Additionally, we need to continue to develop interventions at the center-level that may influence teachers’ workplace emotional experience, such as teacher educational opportunities, to enhance their understanding of their own or children’s emotions. Furthermore, there is little understanding of the role resources available to teachers play in their ability to create a positive, well-managed classroom climates. Teachers in more disadvantaged schools, may be faced with additional stressors that impact the classroom climate and children’s emotional experiences within them.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

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