TEACHING TO CARE:
EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT TEACHERS SUPPORT
PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

A considerable amount of research has demonstrated that successful teacher-child interactions in early childhood settings are critical predictors of mental health, social competence, and academic achievement. A few studies have been focused on the processes in which teachers support children’s emotional competence and the influence of their own emotional competence on these processes. This thesis examined a variety of sources of influence for enhancing the capacity to develop emotional competence in preschool children. Its general purpose was on how teachers create classroom atmospheres that promote positive emotional development. Specifically, this research investigated the teachers’ ability to implement strategies to facilitate children’s emotional communications in order to generate synchronous relationships that allow emotional competence through language and other cognitive processes. Emotional interactions, strategies used by teachers for promoting emotional socialization, and emotional atmospheres of Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms are inter-linked, because the general emotional atmosphere allows teachers to be more mindful, less reactive, and more strategic in responding to children’s emotions.

The first phase of the research involved a naturalistic observation study in three culturally diverse preschool settings over a 10-week period. Emotional interaction patterns and strategies that contributed to or obstructed the children’s emotional understanding were identified. The study demonstrated that the observed Early Childhood Education centres which promoted interactions that considered children’s emotions and that used more responsive strategies such as emotion coaching, encouraging of mastery, expressiveness of feelings and emotion talk, showed less frequency of aggressive, unresolved conflict compared with centres that used more reactive
and preventive strategies. The identified positive strategies implemented by teachers inspired the development of an emotion-focused intervention that constituted the second phase of this research.

The second phase consisted of a randomised controlled trial with 30 early childhood education teachers. Half of the participants—the experimental group—were taught strategies to enhance their own and the children’s emotional competence. The participants in the control group were provided standard information regarding children’s development. The training intervention included active strategies involving emotion coaching, emotional schemas, reflective practice, and mindfulness training. Teachers’ outcomes were assessed in situ during a pretend play session with small groups of preschool-aged children. The dependent variables were observed occurrences of different components of emotion competence in teachers. The study showed significant statistical effects across the three different emotional competence skills demonstrated by early childhood teachers during a game situation.

Both studies highlighted the processes through which teachers support emotional competence of young children, and the importance of the role of early childhood teachers on socialisation of children’s emotions. Most importantly, it gave evidence, based on the influence of emotion-focused teacher training, in supporting teachers’ emotional skills so they can optimally meet the emotional needs of children. This research has significant implications for preschoolers’ mental health, educational practice, and policies aiming to protect children from previous or future risk exposure. It also contributed to the integration of psychological and educational research on the role of teachers as agents of the emotion socialization in young children.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA: Analysis of variance
CD: Compact Disc
CHERUBS: Children's Environments: Research Unit for Behavioural Studies
DET: Differential Emotion Theory
ECE: Early Childhood Education
EE: Emotional Expression
EK: Emotional Knowledge
ER: Emotional Regulation
ESQ: Emotional Style Questionnaire
EFT: Emotion Focus Therapy
MEP: Meta-Emotion Philosophy
MESQ: Maternal Emotional Style Questionnaire
NZ: New Zealand
RCT: Randomised Control Trial
TESQ: Teacher Emotional Style Questionnaire
USA: United States of America