**A Preschool Teacher’s Perception of Teacher’s Roles in Children’s Emotion Regulation Development**

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**Abstract.** This case study was to investigated in what ways early childhood teachers address children’s emotion regulation development, and to explore the aspects of teacher-student relationship that can influence children’ emotion regulation development. The data sources included participant observations, interview and documents. This study revealed that preschool teachers can influence children’s emotion regulation in various ways, such as modeling, direct intervene, discussions of emotion, and general warm and caring interactions. However, more efforts are required to increase parents’ and educators’ the awareness of teachers’ important roles in facilitating children’s emotion regulation.

**Introduction**

In the last decades, the topic of emotion regulation has increasingly gained substantial attention from researchers in psychology. Emotion regulation together with emotion awareness, emotion understanding, emotion expression and empathy are regarded as the core aspects of emotion competence, which is the ability of an individual to function adaptively in many contexts [1]. According to Eisenberg and Spinrad emotion regulation can be seen as a process involving initiation, avoidance, inhibition, maintenance or change of internal emotional states, physiological and attention processes, motivational states and behavioral concomitant of emotion [2]. Emotion regulation generally involves individuals changing their emotion state in physiology, experience and expressed action, through some strategies and mechanism [3].

Researchers argued that emotion regulation has great impact on children’s characteristics, socialization, school performance and emotional problems [4, 5]. It has been found that children and adolescents with better emotion regulation strategies show higher social competence, have a higher peer status, better relationship quality and engage in prosocial behavior at a higher level than peers with lower skills in regulating their emotions [6].

Although emotional regulation develops throughout the life span, the early years are particularly noteworthy for substantial gains in emotion regulation. During the early childhood, children gradually acquire different strategies of emotion regulation [7]. It is suggested that an essential component of children’s successful development is learning how to regulate emotional responses and related behaviors in socially appropriate and adaptive ways [8]. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the developmental pathways of children’s emotion regulation.

Researchers have found that specific parenting practices and characteristics are related to children’s emotion regulation. Meanwhile, emotion regulation is affected by the emotional climate of the family, as reflected in the quality of the attachment relationship, styles of parenting, family expressiveness and the emotional quality of the marital relationship [8, 9, 10, 11]. As emotions are recognized as both products and processes of social relationships [3], investigating the influence of parents on children’s emotion regulation development only addressed one part of the impacts of children’s social relationships. In early childhood, teacher-child relationships have also been shown to have great influences on children’s development [12, 13]. Research indicates that positive teacher-child relationships can facilitate children’s development. For example, Hughes, Cavell and
Jackson found that positive teacher-student relationships were important for children with unsupportive parent histories as they serve as a buffering role [14].

Although parents and teachers are considered as important socializers of emotion, providing children experience that promote or deter the development of emotion regulation, not much studies have been conducted to explore early childhood teachers’ roles in influencing young children’s emotion regulation [15].

The purpose of this study was to identify the ways in which early childhood teachers can impact preschooler’s emotion regulation development. The central question was what role do early childhood teachers play in the process of preschoolers’ emotion regulation development?

The following were the specific questions:
1. In what ways do early childhood teachers address children’s emotion regulation development?
2. What aspects of teacher-student relationship can influence children’s emotion regulation development?

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a single instrumental case study, which can be considered as a base for further study. In this study, the particular pre-kindergarten teacher, the specific preschool, the current semester and the class in a specific grade could be approached as bounded system. It was conducted to understand the issue of a pre-kindergarten teacher’s perceptions, teaching practices and behaviors related to children’s emotion regulation development.

Setting and Participant

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to identify and select an individual who have some experience of teaching preschoolers and can provide the opportunity to track a number of issues relative to the phenomenon under the study from a number of different perspectives and levels of concern. Purposeful sampling is the overarching form used in all qualitative research as opposed to random sampling, and the ideal form used in quantitative research [16]. I took the form of convenience sampling to get into contact with a preschool principal, who was willing to set an appointment for me with a preschool teacher in her school.

This study was conducted at a Christian preschool, located in the center part of a mid-sized city in California. According to the school website, the school is aimed to nurturing the whole child through academic, social, and spiritual training to prepare each child for their school experience. The school provides full-time and part-time programs for children ages 6 weeks to pre-kindergarten. There are one infant class, two toddler classes, two 3-year-old classes and two pre-kindergarten classes in the school. Each class contains a maximum of 18 kinds with two teachers. Some of the children attend the school five days a week and others only attend the school for half days or several days a week.

One pre-kindergarten teacher participated in this study. The teacher was conveniently selected with the permission of the school principal. The teacher was a 26-year-old female, with an associate degree. She has been teaching in this school for six years, and has been teaching pre-kindergarten classes for four years. In her current class, there are nine boys and seven girls in total. Whenever there are more than 12 kinds attending the school, the teacher is accompanied by another teacher as an assistant.

Data Collection Protocols and Procedures

Data were collected through participant observations, interview and documents gathering. I first conducted an observation at a time during teacher-led activity in the morning for one hour, using an opened observation protocol to write down any events happened related to children’s emotion regulation. Two days after that I conducted a semi-structure interview with the teacher, while the kids were taking a nap. The interview protocol was given to the teacher before the interview, to get
the teacher to be familiar with the questions. During the process of interview, the teacher was
distracted several times, and she responded with short sentences. Therefore, I added some follow up
questions to get the teacher to elaborate into more details about the issues. The whole interview was
audiotaped. After the interview, I transcribed it verbatim, and also took reflective analytic notes.

Based on the interview and existing literature, I created an incidence count observation protocol.
I used the incidence count observation protocol together with the opened observation protocol to
conduct two more continuous observations for an hour at a time during free play and snack hour in
the afternoon. During all observations, I took up a position in an unobtrusive part of the classroom,
and took notes on verbal and non-verbal interactions and the instructional context quietly. These
field notes included observations of classroom activities as well as my reflective notes on the
observations. Examples of details I captured included the teacher’s verbal and nonverbal
communications, including words, behaviors, gestures, and facial expressions used in instructions
and in response to students’ emotions; the topics and durations of subject matter being taught; the
types of materials presented in class; the degree of freedom granted to the students to express their
ideas and feelings; the students’ verbal and nonverbal responses to instructional materials and to the
teacher in general; and the contexts before and after the activity being observed.

After the first observation, I asked the teacher to give me the documents relevant to her teaching
practices. Several documents were provided by the teacher in person after the interview, including
class schedule, teaching objectives, sample of student record, sample of teacher’s record form,
beginning of the year parent questionnaire, parent-student handbook. These documents were
compared with observations and interview on an ongoing basis in my reflective analytical notes.

Data Analysis Approach and Procedures

The unit of analysis in this case study is a single case. I used a holistic analysis of the entire case.
The point is to create a detailed description of the case [16]. Data analysis occurred simultaneously
as the data were collected. I used transcribed interview as my major source of data. First, I read and
re-read the transcribed interview until I identified a unit of data. As I read the transcribed interview,
I wrote emerging insights, feelings, tentative concepts, and questions in the margins. Then, I
manually coded the data, looking for patterns, issues, and themes emerging from the collected data.
After that, I carefully checked and revisited the interpretation by comparing it with both the field
notes from the observations and the collected documents. Lastly, I investigated the entire body of
analysis in order to refine and confirm or refute my preliminary analyses and generated four final
themes.

Findings

The preschool teacher provides a wealth of information. Five themes derived as a synthesis of the
rich textual material found in the data sources.

Teacher’s Perception of Children’s Emotion Regulation

The teacher had a basic understanding of the concept of emotion regulation. However, she mixed
the concept of emotion regulation with the concept of emotion awareness, expression and
understanding. When asked about her understanding of emotion regulation, she responded that:

The students’ ability to be able to soothe themselves, identify how they are feeling and be able to
verbalize it. If they can’t do those, that’s all a lot of aggression comes out of it. And are they
sympathetic towards others? That sort of thing… or they just you know kids are still in their own,
they are self-involved… don’t know that is not just about them, but people around them also.

Meanwhile, the teacher does perceive emotion regulation as an important part of children’s
development. When asked about her view on the importance of emotion regulation, she said that
“Absolutely, because everything is affected by emotion. If they are having a good day, they can
carry on or if they are not able to regulate could ruining their day. A lot of it is coping.” In addition,
the teacher has a good understanding of the process of children’s emotion regulation development.
She notices the differences in emotion regulation among children and the changes in the children over the school year.

**Modeling and Direct Intervene Emotion Regulation in the Class**

When discussing the role that early childhood teachers may play in the process of preschoolers’ emotion regulation development, the participant mentioned several times the importance of modeling.

I think a lot of it is they see how you interact. You need to be calm you need to be expressive. What you expect them to, you need to do to them too. So if you want them to stay calm and relaxed, you need to portrait that, you cannot be hectic and then expect them to be calm. How you handle your situation also influence how they are going to handle it too. So, I think it’s a big role. If you get upset, or if you raise your voice, it is gonna change everyone’s environment for that.

I think everything ties into how I carry myself because I am their leader so I need to model so they will follow. You need to lead by example.

This modeling role was observed during the teacher-student interactions. Over the three observations, the teacher was always smiling and talked to children in a clam voice. The children were polite to each other and to the teacher, and at a good mood most of time. When children encountered with difficulties of appropriately manage their actions and emotions, the teacher proactively intervened with them and showed them how to express their emotion.

One boy and two girls were playing together, pretending to be puppies. One girl repeatedly hit another girl on her face using a pillow. She said “stop” several times, but didn’t stop the girl hitting her. Teacher noticed the situation and said to the girl “Have you heard her saying stop many times? What should you do? What do you think she feels? You should say sorry to her”. The girl stopped hitting the other girl, but wasn’t willing to say sorry, stood there silently, and looked down. The teacher took her to the other side of the classroom and asked about the situation. The girl told the teacher “I hit her, because I want her to share toys with me.” Teacher said “You should ask her but not hit her. You get her to be hurt and scared. Do you want to play with the other kids? If you keep doing this, other kids won’t play with you.” The girl agreed with the teacher and went back to say sorry to the other girl.

(Field note: afternoon observation)

The direct intervene was also mentioned by the teacher that “At this age group we are teaching them don’t do this because you are whatever the cause it is. So, they are speaking it out rather than being aggressive.” The teacher also use other ways to intervene with children’s other emotions.

If they are hurt, we try to encourage them not to speak with cry, finish crying and stop, take a breath and tell me what happened, rather them screaming and crying. So I just take a moment, and take a step back. That kind of helps too.

**Specific Teaching Activities Facilitating Children’s Emotion Regulation**

Specific activities were incorporated into teaching to help children develop emotion regulation, including singing songs, storytelling, and drawing diary.

We do a unit on expressing feeling through song and they can have faces in according to the emotion, like sad face, crying face, happy face. And then when we are reading a story, what emotion they are feeling at that time, so they can identify and get it. I am feeling this way, but what’s the word describes it. So, I feel this way, but it means I am scared. That’s sort of thing.

In our language and literacy books, we talk a lot about that also, mostly identifying and figuring out emotional words. Because that is difficult for some kids to say that they are mad rather than being like what does that mean?

The teacher also mentioned that “Drawing is a good way of express emotion. I encourage kids to keep drawing diary. I can see their emotions through their drawing and discuss with them what they were feeling.”
Warm and Caring Interactions with Children

The teacher was quite close to most of the children in the class. She was always friendly, talking in a friendly voice, and really responsive to children’s needs. During the snack time, she had small chats with kids, asking about the plans for weekend and discussing about the coming Christmas show. She also gave kind warm hugs when they needed. All children in the class were in a good mood most of the time, and do not hesitate to ask help from the teacher, when needed. When the teacher came back from a short break, kids run into her and hug her. Although the teacher was not aware of the influence of teacher-student relationship on children’s emotion regulation, she did notice the differences in some children who were not as close to her as others.

Really depends. Some of the students are new to me. It is hard this year, because a lot of students are not here five days a week. It is harder to connect to them. Some of them are only here in the morning, and I don’t have the time to get to know them. For others staying here longer, I have more time. I can go play with them and get to know them better. You can kind of pick up their tendency, and you can see on their face what they are feeling because you know them that well. The ones always here are very huggy, because I am the one they saw more than their mum and dad in a week.

I think it has a little bit for the kids not staying here long. Not so much about express their emotion, but their comfortability. It takes more for the kids to come if they need something. They are more likely the ones not say anything.

Lack of Support from the Parents and the School

The teacher did have some pre-service and on-service training and regularly attend conferences to prepare her for the class. However, she did not receive information in the area of emotion regulation specifically. She mentioned that “I would like to know more about the development stages of children’s emotion regulation, so they can guide my teaching objectives and I can also inform the parents.” In addition, both at the parent and school level more attentions were paid to academic developments, but not to the emotion regulation.

Yes, I would say that for sure, emotion regulation is not the focus here. Other schools are kind of different. In our kind of environment, we are focused more on academic parts, because parents are paying, and parents want them to learn. A lot of parents don’t understand that when they playing and when they are interacting that’s when they learn. They want their kids to learn and do not understand that when they are playing and interacting, that what we need to focus on. We used to have to say that we are learning through play. They need to know how those function together.

This is evident in the documents provided by the teacher that most of the focuses are on the academic development. However, in one document I noticed that emotion development did included as a part of children’s assessment, including “feeling good about self and abilities; enjoy being with other children; able to regulate emotions; resolves conflict with words and indentifies expressions of feelings”.

Discussion

This qualitative single case study explored the pre-kindergarten teacher’s perception of children’s emotion regulation and the ways in which teacher can support children’s emotion regulation development.

The findings from theme one reflected the importance of children’s emotion regulation and the fact that children gradually acquire emotion regulation through their development. These are in line with research findings that emotional regulation develops throughout the life span [7], and it has great impacts on children’s characteristics, socialization, school performance and emotional problems [4,5].

From the second theme of the findings, the teacher emphasized the importance of setting a role model for children to observe and react in similar ways. As mentioned in the article of Morris et al., modeling has long been demonstrated as an important mechanism through which children learn specific behaviors. One mechanism through which families influence emotion regulation is through
children learning about emotions and emotion regulation by observing parents’ emotional displays and interactions. Parents’ own emotional profiles and interactions implicitly teach children which emotions are acceptable and expected in the family environment, and how to manage the experience of those emotions. Children learn that certain situations provoke emotions, and they observe the reactions of others in order to know how they ‘should’ react in similar situations [8]. This same process also occurs between teachers and students in classroom.

From theme three, the teacher underlined the different activities that can be used to facilitate children’s emotion regulation. Ahn also found that teachers’ discussions of emotions help children identify emotion related words, understand the causes of emotion, and deal with their emotions positively. Through emotion talks and book readings, teachers use emotion-related words to help children identify their emotions [17].

The fourth theme of the findings provided more of the particular features of the influence of teacher-student relationship on children’s emotion regulation. From an attachment perspective, as an extension of the parent-child relationship the teacher-child relationship is a reflection of the emotional bond between teacher and child, and these relationships play an important role in shaping a child’s experiences and adjustment in school [18]. Teacher-child closeness may facilitate children’s learning because children feel supported in their efforts to explore, ask questions, and maintain greater involvement in classroom activities. Many researchers suggested that the relationship with teacher may affect children’s emotion regulation [19,20,21,22].

From the fifth theme, the teacher suggested that parents and school should pay more attention to children’s emotion regulation, and required for more resources to support her interactions with children. Ahn also recommended that teacher-training programs focusing on facilitating emotional competence should be developed to provide teachers with method for appropriate emotional socialization [17]. Using modeling, role play, puppet show, and discussion time, teachers can instruct children on how to identify and label emotions and how to appropriately express their feelings.

In sum, with aging, teachers become increasingly important in the process of emotion regulation, through their ability to help children to accurately label, manage, and express the emotions experienced in the classroom. Preschool teachers can influence children’s emotion regulation in various ways. A great deal of children’s understanding of emotion is apparently obtained in the informal curriculum provided by teachers. Teachers can help children to understand the experience and regulation of emotion. Based on the findings of this study, teachers need to recognize the importance of their roles in facilitation of children’s emotion regulation.

This study is only a start point of the research on the role of teacher in children’s emotion regulation. Future studies should be conducted to look into details of each aspects discussed in this study. Teachers in different schools, and teaching different ages should be compared, to discover any similarities and differences in their roles of influencing children’s emotion regulation.

References


