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Preschool Teachers' Emotional Awareness Levels And Their Responses To Children's Negative Emotions

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between preschool teachers' responses to children's negative emotions and their emotional awareness levels. The data was collected from 121 preschool teachers in spring 2013 by the Teachers' Attitudes/Behaviors Questionnaire and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20. Preschool teachers indicated to use mostly problem focus, emotional regulation, label feeling, and behavior focus responses towards children's negative emotions. In addition, low emotional awareness level was negatively correlated with label feeling, emotional regulation, and problem focus responses. Difficulty describing feelings was positively correlated with punishment response. Educational programs teachers graduated from, teachers' ages, and the number of years they worked were not related to the way they respond to children's negative emotions. As a result, teachers' own emotional awareness levels are related to how they respond to children's emotions.

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Keywords: Children, emotion, teachers, emotional awareness

1. Introduction

It is well known that socialization of preschoolers' emotions is related to their school adjustments (Shields, Dicstein, Seifer, Giusti, Magee, & Spritz, 2001) and their social competences (Denham, Blair, DeMulder, Levitas, et al., 2003). Teachers, like parents, have important roles in socializing children's emotions by providing experiences that affect emotional competence of children (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). How early childhood teachers socialize their students' emotions is related to their own emotional competence that influence how they express their own emotions, how they respond to children's emotions, and what they teach about emotions (Morris, Denham,

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Bassett, & Curby, 2013). Ersay (2007) found that preschool teachers' emotional ability is related to their reactions to children's emotions. Teachers with high awareness of their own emotions less often ignored children's emotions and less likely minimized their emotions. In addition, preschool teachers with high awareness of their own emotions accepted and showed respect to their students' negative emotions. More research is needed to explore the factors influencing teachers' responses to children's emotions.

2. Objectives

The aim of this study is to evaluate preschool teachers' responses to children's negative emotions and to investigate the relationship between teachers' responses to children's emotions and their emotional awareness levels.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants were 121 preschool teachers (120 female, 1 male) worked at 53 schools in 6 districts of a big city. The condition to be included in this study was working with 60 months of and older age children.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Demographic information

The demographic information was obtained from the participants according to the following categories: age; gender; completed schooling; time worked in the early childhood education field; ratio of teacher to child in their classrooms.

3.2.2. The Teachers' Attitudes/Behaviors Questionnaire (TBQ)

The Teachers' Attitudes/Behaviors Questionnaire (TBQ) (Ersay, 2007) was developed to estimate preschool teachers' response preferences towards young children's emotions of anger and sadness. This questionnaire has six items in total. Preschoolers' emotional states of sadness and anger are represented in short scenarios. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely". For each scenario, teachers rated the likelihood of responding in each of eight possible ways when exposed to their students' sadness and anger. These eight possible ways to respond children's anger and sadness reflect conceptually two distinct categories: 1-Refer to Emotions and 2-No Refer to Emotions. "Refer to Emotions" category was composed of two subscales: (a) Labeling feelings and (b) Emotional regulation. "Not refer to emotions" category included five subscales: (a) Distraction, (b) Behavior focus (composed of two items), (c) Punishment, (d) Problem focus, and (e) Minimize. The researcher also created each category for sadness and anger emotions. Ersay (2007) found the following internal reliability coefficients for the two main categories: .62 for "Refer to emotions" subscale and .77 for "Not refer to emotions" subscale. For the current study, the internal reliability coefficients for refer to emotions and not refer to emotions categories were .74 and .65, respectively.

3.2.3. Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20)

The TAS-20 is the most widely used self-report measure of alexithymia (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2003), which has been found to have adequate construct, discriminant, and convergent validity, and test-retest reliability (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). The TAS-20 uses five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); five items are negatively keyed. The scale has three factors: difficulty identifying feelings (DIF); difficulty describing feelings (DDF); and externally oriented thinking (EOT). These three factors added together determine the overall level of alexithymia (which represents low emotional awareness). The first factor (DIF) consists of seven items assessing the ability to identify feelings and to distinguish them from the somatic sensations that accompany

emotional arousal (e.g., I have feelings that I can't quite identify). Factor two (DDF) consist of five items assessing the ability to describe feelings to other people (e.g., I am able to describe my feelings easily). Factor three (EOT) consists of eight items assessing externally oriented thinking (e.g., I prefer to analyze problems rather than just describe them). For the current study the Turkish version of the 20-item Toronto alexithymia scale was used (Güleç, Köse, Güleç, Çıtak, Evren, Borckardt, & Sayar, 2009). Güleç and his colleagues found the Cronbach's alpha for the total TAS-20 scale as .78, and for the three subscales (DIF, DDF, EOT); .80, .57, and .63, respectively. For the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total TAS-20 was .69 and .69, .50, and .17 for DIF, DDF, and EOT, respectively. Because externally oriented thinking (EOT) subscale did not achieved solid level of internal consistency, it removed from further analysis for the present study.

4. Results and discussion

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for teachers' variables

	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	skewness	kurtosis
Age	120	23.0	54.0	37.52	8.20	.04	-.98
Number of years in ECE	113	1.0	34.0	14.52	8.94	.22	-1.18
Child ratio	61	6.0	27.0	18.72	4.99	-.32	-.83

Teachers' ages ranged from 23 to 54 years. In addition, the number of years they worked in ECE is changed from 1 year to 34 years. In addition, the number of children in one class, information from only 61 teachers, ranged from 6 to 27 (see table 1). Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of each subscale of TBQ for sadness and anger. As seen table 2, teachers indicated to use behaviour focus and punishment responses towards children's anger more often than children's sadness.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for subscales of TBQ for sadness and anger

	α		M		SD	
	Sadness	Anger	Sadness	Anger	Sadness	Anger
Label Feelings (LF)	.48	.39	3.41	2.95	.50	.58
Emotional regulation (ER)	.51	.39	3.30	3.12	.49	.60
Refer to Emotions	.59	.55	3.35	3.04	.40	.49
Distraction (DS)	.27	.73	2.56	1.95	.61	.71
Behavior Focus (BF)	.75	.64	2.97	3.40	.60	.41
Punishment (P)	.64	.66	1.42	2.36	.57	.77
Problem focus (PF)	.40	.50	3.34	3.41	.52	.53
Minimize (M)	.44	.33	2.08	2.74	.63	.58
Not Refer to Emotions	.59	.61	2.55	2.88	.30	.28

The Cronbach's alpha scores for minimize subscale of TBQ and externally-oriented thinking subscale of TAS-20 were lower than .50; because of this reason, they were not included in further analysis (see table 3). Preschool teachers indicated to use "refer to emotions" responses more often than "not refer to emotions" responses towards children's negative emotions. When we examine in detail, teachers mostly preferred to use problem focus, emotion regulation, label feelings, and behaviour focus responses towards children's emotions. As seen in table 3, punishment was the lowest preferred response towards children's negative emotions. As seen in table 4, teachers who preferred to use "punishment" response towards children's negative emotions less likely indicated to use "label feelings" and "emotion regulation" responses. As expected, teachers who had difficulty in identifying feelings and low emotional awareness of their own emotions did not prefer to use "label feelings" responses towards children's negative emotions (see table 4). In addition, teachers with low emotional awareness of their own emotions less likely prefer to use "emotional regulation" and "refer to emotions" responses towards children's emotions. Moreover, teachers who had difficulty in describing their own feelings more likely preferred to use "punishment" response towards children's negative emotions. Problem focus response was used less likely by teachers who had difficulties in identifying and describing feelings and had low emotional awareness of their own emotions.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for subscales of TBQ and TAS-20

	α	Min.	Max.	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Label Feelings (LF)	.57	2.00	4.00	3.18	.43	.18	-.17
Emotional regulation (ER)	.56	2.50	4.00	3.21	.43	.26	-.90
Refer to Emotions	.74	2.33	4.00	3.20	.40	.45	-.51
Distraction (DS)	.63	1.00	3.67	2.26	.54	.20	.10
Behavior Focus (BF)	.78	2.08	4.00	3.18	.42	-.10	-.31
Punishment (P)	.64	1.00	3.17	1.90	.53	.10	-.39
Problem focus (PF)	.64	2.00	4.00	3.37	.46	-.24	-.67
Minimize (M)	.39	1.33	4.00	2.41	.45	.58	1.63
Not Refer to Emotions	.65	2.22	3.47	2.72	.23	.43	.41
TAS_DIF	.69	1.00	3.14	1.56	.50	.61	-.49
TAS_DDF	.50	1.00	3.00	1.92	.52	.12	-.62
TAS_EOT	.17	1.38	3.38	2.50	.41	-.14	-.26
Low Emotional Awareness	.69	23.00	55.00	40.40	6.84	-.02	-.24

Note: TAS_DIF, Difficulty Identifying Feelings; TAS_DDF, Difficulty Describing Feelings; TAS_EOT (Externally-Oriented Thinking); Low Emotional Awareness (TAS-20 Total)

Table 4. Bivariate Correlations among subscales of TBQ and TAS-20

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Label Feelings (LF)	-									
2. Emotional regulation (ER)	.665**	-								
3. Refer to Emotions	.913**	.912**	-							
4. Distraction (DS)	-.078	-.161	-.131	-						
5. Behavior Focus (BF)	.348**	.518**	.474**	-.071	-					
6. Punishment (P)	-.208*	-.300**	-.279**	-.032	-.112	-				
7. Problem focus (PF)	.669**	.648**	.722**	-.216*	.445**	-.268**	-			
8. No Refer to Emotions	.319**	.352**	.367**	.293**	.757**	.266**	.421**	-		
9. TAS_DIF	-.197*	-.124	-.176	-.001	-.101	.078	-.322**	-.135	-	
10. TAS_DDF	-.098	-.082	-.098	.012	-.107	.205*	-.262**	-.085	.582**	-
11. Low Emotional Awareness	-.200*	-.205*	-.222*	.134	-.137	.119	-.346**	-.085	.809**	.740**

Note: TAS_DIF, Difficulty Identifying Feelings; TAS_DDF, Difficulty Describing Feelings;

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Teachers' responses to children's negative emotions were not related to their age and the number of years they worked in early childhood education field. Furthermore, preschool teachers' responses to children's emotions did not change according to educational program they completed.

5. Conclusion

According to the results of this study, teachers' ability to process their own emotions and emotional awareness levels are more related to their responses towards children's negative emotions than the number of years they had worked in ECE or the educational program they completed. Teacher educators should reconsider how to improve

educational programs to support teachers' emotional competence.

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