Chapter 23

EMOTION SOCIALIZATION PRACTICES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

Because emotional skills learned during the first years of life play a key role in children's adjustment and future academic achievement, the socialization of children's emotions has become an important topic in educational science. Children's preschool experience, in particular, has emerged as a major issue, our understanding of which needs to be extended and consolidated, especially with regard to the impact of adults. While studies have shown that parental socialization practices are related to the development of children's emotional competence (Denham, 2006; Eisenberg, 1998), few studies have examined the role played by early childhood educators (ECEs), even though most children under the age of six attend daycare (70% in Quebec, Canada). To improve our understanding of ECEs' practices related to children's emotion socialization, we interviewed 107 ECEs in Quebec, using the *Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale - Caregiver Version*. Our results revealed that the ECEs valued positive reactions to the expression of children's negative emotions, in particular, reactions that focus on problem solving. Some individual characteristics (work experience; educational background; perceived stress, job satisfaction and interpersonal reactivity) also appeared to be associated with the nature of the ECEs' reactions to the expression of negative emotions.

Keywords: socio-emotional development; daycare settings; early childhood educator, preschool children.

1. INTRODUCTION: EMOTION SOCIALIZATION

It is now widely recognized that children's and youths' adjustment and academic achievement do not only involve their cognitive abilities and skills but that socio-emotional competence also plays a determining role. Even if as early as the 19th century Darwin considered the adaptive role of emotions and their effect on mental processes and behavior (Darwin, 1872/1998), it was not until the 1990s that emotions are no longer considered as disruptive elements. The work of Salovey and Meyer (1990) on emotional intelligence, and thereafter studies of Goleman (1995), constitute a turning point for the field. Emotions are then considered as feeling states that conveys information (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004), and are associated with critical skills for individuals' functioning (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Cherkasskiy, 2011). Recent studies have shown that emotions play a significant role in children's social and school adjustment and thus impact their academic achievement and, ultimately, their future. More specifically, youths' ability to express, understand and regulate their emotions has an impact on their academic and social skills (Denham & Burton, 2003; Herndon, Bailey, Shewark, Denham, & Bassett, 2013; Izard, 2002; Saarni, 1999). With regard to social adjustment, for example, Rose-Krasnor and Denham (2009) associate children's effectiveness in social interaction with different socio-cognitive and socio-emotional skills, in particular, the ability to resolve interpersonal conflict, the ability to self-regulate behaviors and emotions, prosocial behaviors and social conscience.

These results have led researchers to focus specifically on the socialization of emotion, a process through which children learn to recognize, assimilate and master various skills related to the expression, understanding and regulation of emotions through the exchanges they engage in with the various people in their lives (Coutu, Bouchard, Emard, & Cantin, 2012; Grusec & Hastings, 2007). From this perspective, the skills acquired during the preschool period appear to be crucial (Maccoby, 2007). Several authors have pointed to socio-emotional and behavioral deficits among children who are starting school (Janus & Offord, 2000, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), and stress the importance of better training early childhood educators (ECEs), given that the great majority of children (70% in Quebec) currently attend daycare outside the family before entering the school system. It is thus important to better understand the role played by ECEs in the socialization of emotion and to document their educational practices (Ahn, 2005; Ashiabi, 2000) since, to date, most studies have focused on the role of parents.

Few studies have investigated the educational practices of ECEs related to the socialization of emotion or the way ECEs perceive their role with regard to the socialization of emotion, despite the fact that they engage in educational activities that influence the socio-emotional development of the children in their care (Papadopoulou et al., 2014). In Quebec, this mission of ECEs is, moreover, clearly set out in *Quebec's educational program for childcare services* published in 2007 by the ministry of the family and seniors. While some authors maintain that the mechanisms of socialization identified among parents can also apply to ECEs (Eisenberg, 1998), other dimensions come into play for ECEs because of the group context that their work involves (Hyson, 2004). There is thus a need for research that specifically targets this population

2. THE STUDY

2.1. Objectives
The present study therefore aimed to better determine the role played by ECEs with regard to children's emotion socialization. More specifically, it set out to:

1. Assess ECEs' emotion socialization practices, including their reactions to negative emotions expressed by the children in their care;
2. Determine which individual characteristics influence ECEs' emotion socialization practices (work experience; marital status; educational background; levels of perceived stress, job satisfaction and interpersonal reactivity).

2.2. Participants
Our study population was comprised of 107 ECEs, whose average age was 37.2, working in childcare centers in two regions of Quebec. Table 1 below presents the characteristics of our study population.

Table 1. Description of the Sample (N = 107).

Socio-demographic characteristics			Eff.	%	$\bar{M}$	σ
Gender	Male		3	2.8	-	-
	Female		104	97.2	-	-
Family status	Married / In a couple relationship (no child)		14	13.1	-	-
	Single (no child)		8	7.5	-	-
	Married / In couple (with children)		72	67.3	-	-
	Single (with child)		12	11.2	-	-
Family income ($CDN)		Less than $45 000	35	32.71	-	-
		$45 000 to $84 000	38	35.51	-	-
		More than $85 000	28	26.17	-	-
Academic background	Number of years at school		-	-	15.67	2.78
	Early childhood education training		100	93.5	-	-
	Last diploma	Certificat (1 year post-sec)	4	3.7	-	-
		DEC (3 years post-sec)	78	72.9	-	-
		University (30 cr. – 1 year)	21	19.6	-	-
		Other	3	2.8	-	-
Work	Experience as an ECE (years)		-	-	12.62	7.25
	Experience in the actual child care center (years)		-	-	8.86	6.38
	Number of children in the group		-	-	8.95	2.14

2.3. Measures

To investigate the ECEs' perceptions of their educational practices related to emotion socialization, we used *The Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale - Caregiver Version.* Adapted from Fabes and colleagues' questionnaire (1990), the CCNES - Caregiver Version consisted of 12 hypothetical situations in which preschool children are likely to experience distress or negative affect (e.g. being teased by peers, being nervous about embarrassing him/herself in public). For each situation, the ECEs were asked to indicate how likely (on a seven-point scale from very unlikely to very likely) they would be to react in each of five alternative ways. The five types of responses included the following: minimizing responses, punitive responses, expressive encouragement, emotion-focused reactions and problem-focused reactions (the "distress reaction" scale was not included for psychometric and theoretical reasons). Situations that are specific to the family context were replaced by emotional situations typical of daycare settings (see document).

Other measures were used to assess the ECEs' level of job satisfaction, perceived stress and capacity for empathy, based on the three following questionnaires: *The Special Educator Job Questionnaire* adapted from Abelson (1986) (30 items in 6 Job Satisfaction subscales: Team-work, Authority, Positive Feelings, Management Skills, Working Conditions and Leadership Opportunities – the latter of which was not used in our study for psychometric reasons); *The Perceived Stress Scale* (PSS-14) developed by Cohen and Williamson (1988) (14 items in 2 subscales: Perceived Vulnerability and Perceived Control); and *the Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI) developed by Davis (1980) and adapted by Gillet and colleagues (2013) (28 items in 4 subscales: Perspective Taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concern and Personal Distress). The goal was to examine the influence of these variables on the ECEs' emotion socialization practices.

3. FIRST RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 below presents the descriptive results obtained from the ECE's.

Table 2. General Results.

		$\overline{M}$	σ
CCNES (7-point scale)	Emotion-focused reactions	5.43	0.80
	Problem-focused reactions	5.55	0.67
	Expressive encouragement reactions	5.35	0.94
	Minimization reactions	1.74	0.52
	Punitive reactions	1.74	0.48
Special Educator Job Questionnaire (10-point scale)	Collegiality	7.42	1.39
	Authority and control	7.71	1.52
	Positive feelings	7.80	1.21
	Behavior management skills	6.95	1.22
	Working conditions	5.26	1.52
PSS-14 (5-point scale)	Vulnerability	2.57	0.54
	Perceived lack of control	1.89	0.41
IRI (7-point scale)	Perspective taking	5.15	0.81
	Fantasy	4.54	1.07
	Empathic concern	5.82	0.73
	Personal distress	3.26	0.98

Because our data were ordinal, in order to identify the ECEs' emotion socialization practices and examine which individual characteristics might influence them, we conducted non-parametric statistical tests such as the Friedman test and the Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon tests. We also used the Pearson correlation coefficient as a measure of association.

3.1. Self-reported reactions of ECEs to the children's negative emotions

The results of the CCNES – Caregiver version revealed that, when the ECEs were confronted with children who were expressing negative emotions or distress, they tended to favour certain types of reactions over others ($Q = 323.44$; p = 0,00). More specifically, a comparison of the ECEs' scores for the five categories of possible reactions on the CCNES (Wilcoxon test) revealed that they favoured problem-focused reactions, expressive encouragement and emotion-focused reactions, as clearly seen in Figure 1 below. On the contrary, the ECEs rarely reported using punitive or minimization reactions.
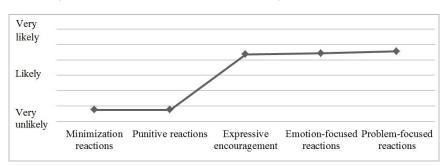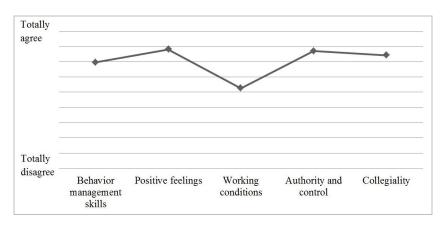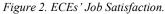
Figure 1. ECEs' Reactions to the Children's Negative Emotions/Distress.
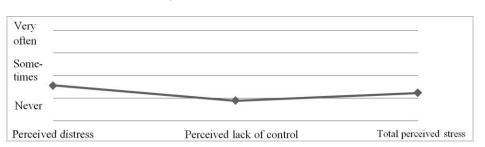
3.2. Job satisfaction of ECEs

The ECEs reported a good level of overall job satisfaction. They were happy with their duties and responsibilities and felt positive about their work. They appreciated their level of authority and control and the team they worked with. Lastly, they felt competent in their work. However, they were not totally satisfied with their working conditions (salary, fatigue, pressure). Thus, all analyzes conducted with the Wilcoxon test revealed significant differences between the level of satisfaction with working conditions and that measured by the other scales, namely the Behavior Management Skills ($Z = -7.65$; $p = 0.00$), Positive Feelings ($Z = -8.80$; $p = 0.00$), Authority and Control ($Z = -8.34$; $p = 0.00$) and Collegiality ($Z = -7.96$; $p = 0.00$) scales.
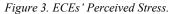
Figure 2. ECEs' Job Satisfaction.

3.3. ECEs' Perceived stress

The results of the PSS-14 revealed that the ECEs reported low levels of stress. Their total raw scores ranged from 16 to 44, and none reached the critical level of 50 defined by Cohen and Williamson (1988). In fact, the ECEs did not perceive themselves as experiencing a high level of distress and felt they were in control of what happened to them most of the time.

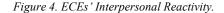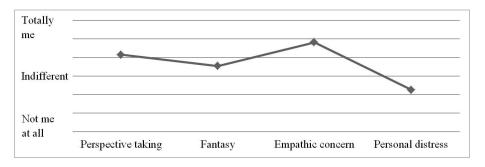*Figure 3. ECEs' Perceived Stress.*

3.4. Educators' Interpersonal reactivity

The results of the IRI indicate that the ECEs saw themselves as empathetic. They reported high levels of empathy, specifically as measured by the Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking subscales, which differed significantly from the two others subscales,

namely, the Fantasy (Z = -4.61; p = 0.00; Z = -7.90; p = 0.00) and Personal Distress (Z = -8,44; p = 0,00; Z = -8,94; p = 0,00) subscales. Notably, their scores for the Personal Distress subscale (which assesses the tendency to experience discomfort in response to others'emotional distress) were relatively low: the difference with all other subscales, including the Fantasy subscale (Z = -7.05; p = 0.00), was significant.

Figure 4. ECEs' Interpersonal Reactivity.

3.5. Individual characteristics that might influence ECEs' emotion socialization practices

Several socio-demographic and individual variables were tested to see whether they were associated with different reactions by the ECEs to the children's negative emotions. These variables were: ECEs' educational background, work experience, family status, age of the children in the group the ECEs were responsible for, and number of children in the group. Table 3 below presents the significant results.

Table 3. Influence of Individual Characteristics on ECEs' Reactions to the Children's Negative Emotions/Distress.

		Minimiz. reactions	Punitive reactions	Expressive encourag.	Emotion-focused reactions	Problem-focused reactions
Work experience	Less than 5 years	-	-	-	13.56*	-
	6 to 10 years					
	11 or more years					
Diploma	Certificate	-	-	-	-	-
	DEC					
	University					
	Other					
Parental status	Child	-	-	-	-1.99*	-
	No child					
Children's age	Under 3	-	-	8.04*	-	-
	3 to 5					
	Multi-age group					
Number of children	Less than 8	-	-	-	-	-
	8 or more					

*   p < 0.05

Based on the results, work experience appears to have had an influence on the tendency to use emotion-focused reactions. More particularly, ECEs with less than 5 years of experience reported more emotion-focused reactions than more experienced ECEs, with 6 to 10 years of experience ($z = -2.40$; $p < 0.05$) or 11 or more years of experience ($z = -3.74$; $p = 0.00$). It also appears that the ECEs who did not have children of their own tended to report more emotion-focused reactions than those who were parents of one or more children ($z = -1.99$; $p < 0.05$). Lastly, the age of children in the group appears to have influenced the type of reactions reported by the ECEs to children who were experiencing distress. Thus, when the ECEs were responsible for young children, they were more likely to use expressive encouragement, compared to those who were caring for older children ($z = -2.42$; $p < 0.05$) or those responsible for a multi-age group ($z = -2.39$; $p < 0.05$).

3.6. Correlations between ECEs' reactions to the children's negative emotions/distress and their level of job satisfaction, perceived stress and interpersonal reactivity

Table 4 below presents some interesting correlations found between the ECEs' reactions to children's negative emotions or distress and the results of the different subscales of the three other questionnaires, namely, *The Special Educator Job Questionnaire*, the PSS-14 and the IRI.

Table 4. Influence of Individual Characteristics on ECEs' Reactions to the Children's Negative Emotions/Distress.

		Minimiz. reactions	Punitive reactions	Expressive encourag.	Emotion-focused reactions	Problem-focused reactions
Special Educator Job Questionnaire	Collegiality	-	-	0.21*	-	-
	Authority and control	-	-0.19*	0.26**	-	-
	Positive feelings	-	-	0.21*	-	-
	Behavior management skills	-	-	0.27*	-	-
	Working conditions	-	-2.26**	-	-	-
PSS-14	Vulnerability	-	-	-0.27**	-	-
	Perceived lack of control	-	-	-	-	-
IRI	Perspective taking	-	-	0.23*	-	-
	Fantasy	-	-	-	-	-
	Empathic concern	-	-0.28**	0.32**	0.25**	-
	Personal distress	-	-	-	-	-

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

Our results suggest that the greater the extent to which the ECEs reported being satisfied with the quality of team-work (i.e. Collegiality), their level of authority and control and their duties and responsibilities (i.e. Positive feelings), perceived themselves as competent (i.e. Behavior management skills) and as being able to easily adopt another person's perspective or point of view and experience feelings of concern or compassion for others (i.e. Perspective taking and Empathic concern), and experienced a low level of stress (i.e. Perceived vulnerability), the more they reported using expressive encouragement with children who were experiencing negative emotions or distress. Similarly, emotion-focused reactions appeared to be linked with empathic concern. On the other hand, the less the ECEs reported being satisfied with their working conditions and their level of authority and control and the less they perceived themselves as being empathetic toward others, the more they reported using punitive reactions.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Given that these results only report ECEs' representations rather than their actual practices, caution must be exercised when interpreting them. Indeed, this self-report information needs to be supported by other more direct measures, to confront the data. That is why we are currently conducting observations and interviews with ECEs in order to enhance our understanding of their practices. Crossing data and sources will be essential to provide a more detailed description of the emotion socialization practices used by ECEs in real-life situations.

5. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Although these results should be interpreted with caution, since they refer to the ECEs' representations rather than their actual practices, they nevertheless reveal a degree of sensitivity on the part of the ECEs, who appeared to favor reactions that supported the children and encouraged them to find solutions to the challenges they encountered. By showing interest in the children's emotions and consideration for what the children were experiencing, the ECEs demonstrated qualities that would make them particularly suitable agents of socialization, as emphasized by Denham (1998). Indeed, the reactions they favoured were those that allow children to identify their emotions, validate what they feel, and help them find ways to deal with their emotions (Pollak & Thoits, 1989). Moreover, this means that they appeared to hold attitudes known to be particularly favorable to cognitive and social development (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004).

Our results also suggest that the working environment is very important and may influence ECEs reactions with children. Thus, it appeared that ECEs are more likely to emphasize the importance for children to express their feelings when the ECEs are in a positive working environment, are happy with their job and are able to understand the children's emotions and experience compassion for them. In contrast, when they are not satisfied with their working conditions and have difficulty feeling compassion, they tend to use more punitive reactions, although this kind of reaction remains minor. Some intrinsic characteristics of ECEs also play an important role, in particular, their empathic skills. Indeed, it appears that the ECEs who are most likely to comfort children and encourage them to express their emotions are those who consider themselves to be particularly able to take into account another person's perspective and perceive themselves to be particularly able to feel compassion for others.

Regarding the children themselves, it was found that while the age of the children in the group played a role, it was not as important as was found to be the case in previous studies, where this variable was shown to have a major effect on ECEs' reactions. For example, Ahn and Stifter (2006) showed that ECEs had different reactions to children's positive and negative emotions based on the children's ages. For instance, while they tended to use physical comforting with toddlers, they used more active emotion socialization strategies with preschool children, involving them to a greater degree in the search for solutions to their negative emotions or distress. They thus supported the children's appropriation of the process of emotion regulation as the children's regulatory abilities developed (Grolnick, Kurowski, McMenamy, Rivkin, & Bridges, 1998). In our study, only the use of expressive encouragement differed according to the age of the children. The ECEs tended to favour this reaction to negative emotions and distress more often with younger children (under 3 years old) than with older children.

Although it would be necessary to examin several other variables in order to better understand the practices used by ECEs, some interesting findings have already emerged from these first analyses. Specifically, the results obtained show that, like parents, the ECEs reported favouring positive reactions to children's negative emotions. If these reactions are backed up by the observational data to be collected in the second part of this study, it will show that, by facilitating the learning of emotion regulation skills and the development of prosocial behaviors among children, ECEs constitute particularly suitable agents of emotion socialization (Denham et al., 2012).

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