Beliefs About Emotions Among Early Childhood Teachers in Hong Kong

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The pattern of emotion-related beliefs among teachers in the early childhood setting was assessed in a sample of 222 in-service teachers in Hong Kong using the translated version of the questionnaire "Caregivers' Beliefs About Feelings", developed by Hyson and Lee (1996). Results indicated that, among the six areas of emotion-related beliefs tapped in the questionnaire, statements relating to the belief area on "bonds" were most likely to be endorsed, followed by those in the belief area on "modeling". The likelihood of endorsing emotion-related beliefs related to "expressiveness", "display/control", and "talk/label" were at similar levels, much lower than the level endorsed for statements relating to "bonds" and "modeling". Statements that belong to the area of "protect" were endorsed the least. Further research topics in the area of emotion-related beliefs for teachers and implications for such beliefs on educational practice are discussed.

Key words: beliefs; emotions; early childhood teachers

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Recent developmental research has outlined the importance of basic feelings and how they become connected with other aspects of children's development (e.g., Denham, 1998; Sroufe, 1996). Goleman (1995), in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, calls for a "schooling of emotions" that focuses on enhancing one's emotional skills such as identifying, expressing, and managing emotions, controlling impulses, and understanding others' perspectives. If young children are helped to develop skills in handling their own emotions, this will strengthen their sense of self and their relationships with other people, and consequently their overall development (Sylwester, 1995; Thompson, 1994).

Adults play a key role in enhancing children's emotional development. Children learn about the nature and expression of emotions from their daily interaction with people. Adults act as mirrors and assist children in regulating their own emotions. Adults' emotional expressions communicate important information to children about themselves, the world, and the meaning of emotional expressions and experience (Bowlby, 1969, 1980). Dunsmore and Halberstadt (1997) theorize that adults' beliefs about emotions help determine the meaning that their emotional expressions convey to the children. Hence, adults' emotional expressions have impact on children's development of schemas about emotional experience and expression.

Teachers, being one of the key adult groups in the out-of-home environment, influence children's ability to understand and express emotions. The importance of teacher's role in enhancing children's socio-emotional skills that are required for healthy development is further stressed by the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, Payton, et al., 2000). At school, teachers manage and guide children's emotions through relieving distress and modeling positive emotional expression (Thompson, 1994). Teachers' reactions to the emotional displays of children in their classrooms can affect how children cope with their emotions in the future (Denham & Burton, 1996). Whether feelings are discussed openly in the classroom or not also give important explicit and implicit messages about the world of emotions. The guidelines from the National Association for

Early Young Children (NAEYC) for developmentally appropriate practice stress the importance of warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions between children and their teachers (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The distinct role of preschool teachers in children's socialization of emotion is further highlighted by Denham (2001) who maintains that preschool teachers provide important regulatory function for emotional competence that is vital to school adjustment. Positive teacher-child relationship is also linked to other aspects of later development, including children's relationship with peers (e.g., Elicker & Fortner-Wood, 1995; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997), and later school competence (Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997). As beliefs influence the ways teachers interact with children and the classroom practice (Hyson & Molinaro, 2001; Kowalski, Pretti-Frontczak, & Johnson, 2001), examining teachers' beliefs is important. Unlike studies done in investigating teachers' beliefs relating to academic domains, the research on teachers' beliefs about children's socio-emotional development is relatively limited. As there is a growing emphasis on the socio-emotional aspect of development in education as a whole (e.g., Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Payton, et al., 2000), teachers' beliefs and practices regarding emotional development deserves more attention.

Teachers' Beliefs About Children's Emotional Development

A review from the relevant literature suggested that teachers hold varying points of view regarding different areas in relation to emotion-related beliefs. The perspective from the maturation theory such as Gesell & Ilg (1943) emphasized that young children are not mature enough for various experiences and hence they have to be protected from strong emotions. Teachers influenced by psychodynamic theorists like Freud (1964) tend to support the belief that adults should openly express positive as well as negative feelings and that children should be encouraged to "let their feelings out" to allow catharsis or draining off of aggressive impulse. Those who favour the emotion regulation viewpoints (e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992)

believe that children should control their emotions. Teachers influenced by attachment theorists (see Ainsworth, Belhar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) have a strong belief in affectionate bonds between adults and children. Teachers may also vary in the endorsement of the beliefs about whether children should learn "display rules" for emotions (as emphasized by Gordon, 1989) and the beliefs in adults' emotion modeling and scaffolding on children's emotion-related behaviour (e.g., Saarni, 1985).

The Caregivers' Beliefs about Feelings (CBAF), a questionnaire developed by Hyson (1994), is used to assess early childhood educators' beliefs about emotions. Hyson and Lee (1996) revised the CBAF and regrouped the 23 items under six areas: (1) emotional bonds between teachers and children are beneficial (Bonds), (2) teachers should express emotions openly (Expressiveness), (3) teachers should model and directly instruct children in expressing emotions appropriately (Instruction/Modelling), (4) teachers should talk about and label children's emotions (Talk/Label), (5) teachers should protect children from negative emotions (Protect), and (6) children are able to control their emotional expression (Display/Control). One common theme collected from an American sample and a Korean sample in that study was the endorsement of the importance of emotional closeness (physical affection) between children and teachers. There are, however, interesting patterns shown in comparing these two cultural groups.

Cultural Difference in Emotion-related Beliefs Among Teachers

A teacher's emotion-related beliefs can be shaped in many ways. One key area is the cultural environment whereby one has been brought up. As noted by Hyson and Lee's (1996) study which compared emotion-related beliefs of American and those of Korean teachers, some interesting pattern came up. American teachers highly endorsed items stating that children learn about emotions from seeing how adults behave, and it is especially important to teach children socially acceptable ways of expressing feelings. Recent literature in the Western world (e.g., Denham, 1998; Saarni, Mumme, &

Campos, 1998) stresses the importance of emotion learning in helping children understand and regulate their emotions. Children should be taught the vocabulary on emotions and the appropriate ways of expressing their emotions. In contrast, Korean teachers were much more likely to believe that teachers should avoid being emotionally demonstrative. Control rather than the expression of emotions is emphasized. There was a higher chance that they endorse statements indicating that children need protection from emotionally upsetting events (such as a pet dying or a scary story). Such results on teachers' beliefs about emotions may further suggest that there could be different cultural specific expectations of American and of Korean teachers about young children's emotional vulnerability.

The Hong Kong Situation

The existing curricula in Hong Kong, from preschool to upper secondary, have been knowledge-based. Strong emphasis is put on enhancing students' intellectual learning and on developing their academic abilities. In the recent reform proposals for the education system — Learning for Life, Learning through Life (Education Commission, 2000), the aims of education focus on all-round development of students, including their emotional and social skills development. Teachers are expected to help children bring about their holistic development, that is, to understand their own emotions and develop their full potentials. If emotional literacy has to be incorporated into the standard curriculum, teachers' role as well as their beliefs in emotions would be important as they create the affective climate in which emotions are discussed and expressed. A search from the relevant literature suggested that the majority of local studies in the preschool setting were related to academic learning while studies relating to preschoolers' socio-emotional development seemed to be extremely limited. In the recently published special issue on "Hong Kong" in the Early Child Development and Care (2003, volume 173, no. 1), very few articles were on the socio-emotional domain in young children. With the growing interest in the study of children's

emotional and social behaviour in relation to their adaptive performance (Tam, 2003), the immediate emotional environment in our local preschool settings, which could have impact on preschoolers' socio-emotional development, is worth studying. The primary purpose of the present study was to explore the pattern of local preschool teachers' emotion-related beliefs and what these beliefs mean for early childhood practitioners. As emotional openness has not been a desirable characteristic in the traditional Chinese culture, it follows that Chinese teachers in Hong Kong could be less likely to endorse children's open expression of feelings and that they would protect children from experiencing strong negative emotions.

Method

Participants

A total of 222 early childhood practitioners participated in the study. All of them were female and were recruited from the two in-service early childhood education programs at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. These teachers held a variety of professional roles in the field, including principals, head teachers, classroom teachers, and assistant teachers.

Measure

The emotion-related beliefs of these preschool teachers were assessed using the revised version of "Caregivers' Beliefs About Feelings" (CBAF; Hyson & Lee, 1996), which taps practitioners' beliefs in 6 scales with three to six items in each scale. These subscales are: bonds, expressiveness, modeling, talk/label, protect, and display/control. The items were translated into Chinese. This translated version was piloted with an independent group of teachers before its use in this study. Reliability of the original scale showed alphas ranging from 0.41 to 0.62, with an average alpha of 0.51. Intercorrelations among subscale scores for the 6 belief areas were generally low (the mean r was 0.18), indicating that the areas formed somewhat independent clusters of beliefs (Hyson & Lee, 1996). The total score for

each area is obtained by averaging the item responses in each belief area. Higher scores reflect more likelihood of endorsing the statements in certain belief areas.

Procedure

Preschool teachers were asked to participate in a study of early childhood teachers' ideas about children's feelings. They were instructed to complete the CBAF by reading each statement and checking the level of their agreement, using a 6-point Likert type scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6). The introduction to the instrument, similar to Hyson and Lee's (1996) study, emphasized that "people who work with young children have many different ideas about children's emotional development, and about how teachers can best help children deal with emotional issues". Participants were also asked to "answer all items even if you are unsure of your feelings". All participants were assured that the data would be kept confidential and would be used for research purposes only.

Responses from the participants were analyzed in two stages. First, the internal consistency of items within each belief area was analyzed to determine the validity of the translated version of the scale, followed by a series of ANOVAs to identify the level of endorsement for statements in various emotion-related belief areas.

Results

The responses of the 222 preschool teachers were scored by summing the relevant items in each scale according to the scoring procedures in the measure. Table 1 shows the corresponding coefficient alpha. Reliability analysis of the measure showed alphas ranging from 0.38 to 0.70, with average alpha of 0.54. The alphas were comparable to those in the original version. Inter-correlations among the subscale scores for the 6 areas were generally low (with mean r = 0.17), indicating that the areas reflected rather

independent clusters of beliefs (see Table 2). The strongest correlation was between Talk/Label and Modeling (r = 0.46).

Table 1 Emotion-related Beliefs in the Six Subscales of the CBAF — Chinese Version (N = 222)

Subscale	Alpha	Alpha (Original version)	
Bonds (4 items) e.g., "Children need to feel emotionally close to their teachers."	0.70	(0.62)	
Expressiveness (4 items) e.g., "It's good for a teacher to let children know when she is feeling angry."	0.44	(0.46)	
Modelling (3 items) e.g., "When a child is angry because, I often tell the child exactly what words she could use to express her feelings."	0.62	(0.43)	
Talk/Label (6 items) e.g., "I often label children's feelings for them, such as 'You seem worried about our trip'."	0.40	(0.53)	
Protect (3 items) e.g., "If a class pet died, I would not tell the children because they might feel too upset."	0.66	(0.41)	
Display/Control (3 items) e.g., " As a teacher, it is important for me to teach children socially acceptable ways of expressing their feelings."	0.37	(0.59)	

Table 2 Inter-correlations of Emotion-related Belief Areas Among Preschool Teachers (N = 222)

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Emotion-related belief areas							
Bonds	Bonds	Expressive	Modelling	Talk	Protect		
Expressive	0.17**						
Modelling	0.25**	0.15*					
Talk	0.30**	0.29**	0.46**				
Protect	-0.04	0.03	0.21**	-0.03			
Display/Control	0.03	0.08	0.20*	0.21**	0.04		

Note: * p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01.

Investigation of the emotion-related belief pattern of the participants was done through a series of statistical analyses. To identify the endorsement level of the items in various areas, the average scores in the six subscales were compared. Results from Table 3 indicated that the highly endorsed area is "bonds" (M = 4.38; SD = 0.62), followed by "modeling" (M = 3.93; SD = 0.54), "expressiveness" (M = 3.76; SD = 0.41), "display/control" (M = 3.76; SD = 0.41), "talk/label" (M = 3.75; SD = 0.30), and "protect" (M = 3.41; SD = 0.54). In a follow-up analysis, a within-subject ANOVA was conducted using the six emotion-related belief areas as repeated measures. The results indicated significant differences among the six areas (F(5, 1325) = 91.72, p < 0.001). Subsequent post-hoc comparisons indicated that "Bonds" differed significantly when compared to the other five constructs. "Modeling" was identified as the second highest, with significant difference at p < 0.05 when compared to the other five constructs. The differences among "expressiveness", "display/control" and "talk/label" were non-significant, indicating that all items in these three areas were endorsed at a similar level. The emotion-related belief pattern on "protect" was endorsed the least, i.e., statements that belong to the area on "protect" were

Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Multiple Comparisons of the Differences Between Means in the Six Emotion-related Belief Areas (N = 222)

Bonds	Mean	SD	Mean difference with		
	4.38	0.62	Modelling	0.45*	
			Expressiveness	0.62*	
			Display/Control	0.62*	
			Talk/Label	0.63*	
			Protect	0.97*	
Modeling	3.93	0.54	Expressiveness	0.17*	
			Display/Control	0.17*	
			Talk/Label	0.18*	
			Protect	0.52*	
Expressiveness	3.76	0.41	Display/Control	0.00	
			Talk/Label	0.01	
			Protect	0.35*	
Display/Control	3.76	0.51	Talk/Label	0.01	
			Protect	0.35*	
Talk/Label	3.75	0.30	Protect	0.34*	
Protect	3.41	0.54			

Note: * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

scored at a significantly lower level when compared to the other five constructs.

To sum up, teachers' underlying emotion-related beliefs, as identified by participants in this study, indicated the following pattern. Items relating to the emotion-related belief area on "bond" are highly endorsed, followed by the belief relating to direct adult instruction in the appropriate expression of emotions ("Modelling). Beliefs relating to talking/discussing about causes of emotions and developmental readiness to control emotion displays are seen as a group and are endorsed at a lesser degree. The least endorsed area in emotion-related belief is relating to the protection of children from having strong emotions.

Discussion

The present results indicate that local preschool teachers endorsed areas of emotion-related beliefs at various levels. Consistent with the samples from U.S. and Korea in Hyson and Lee's (1996) study, statements relating to developing emotional bond between children and teacher were highly endorsed. This echoes NAEYC's mission and findings from other more recent studies such as Shields and colleagues (2001) that warm, close relationship with early childhood teachers is vital to children's development and their adjustment to school. The present results further confirm that, regardless of the extent emotion is addressed in a culture, belief statements reflecting the importance of teacher-child bond are more likely to be agreed.

Further points from the present findings are noteworthy when compared to the results from Hyson and Lee (1996). Consistent with findings with the U.S. sample, local teachers were also likely to endorse items in their beliefs in teaching (modeling) children skills in handling their emotions. Teachers believe in the importance of instructing appropriate emotional expression on children. However, teachers from this sample would less likely endorse emotion-related beliefs in labeling emotions, openly expressing one's feelings, and developing abilities to display emotions in acceptable ways.

This pattern suggested that preschool teachers believe that they have an important role to teach children to cope with their emotions; however, teachers' endorsement of statements on open expression and labeling of feelings are relatively low. As there is quite a strong correlation between belief in modeling and belief in teachers' talking/labeling of emotions (r = 0.46), further work need to be done to clarify such differences. The low endorsement level on items relating to display and control may suggest that teachers did not believe that children have the ability to display emotions acceptably. Hence, they are more accepting to children's existing way of emotional expression. "Protect" was an area initially expected to be endorsed at a higher level given the results from the Korean sample in Hyson and Lee's (1996) study as well as the general tendency for adults in the Chinese culture to protect children from experiencing negative emotions. The present result of endorsing belief statements relating to "Protect" the least may indicate that local preschool teachers are aware of the state that negative emotions are unavoidable in children's life. These teachers acknowledged the need for children to cope with negative emotions instead of preventing children from experiencing such emotions.

Results from the present study imply that local preschool teachers acknowledge relationship as the most important thing for enhancing emotional development among children and that they are aware of the fact that children should not be protected from experiencing strong negative emotions. However, by looking at the data collected in the emotion-related belief areas on "expressiveness", "talk/label", and "display/control" may further suggest that these teachers are relatively less likely to endorse the idea that children have to be specifically taught the strategies in order to cope with various emotions in the daily encounter.

One major limitation in the present study is the low reliabilities of both the original subscales reported by Hyson and Lee (1996), (with an average alpha of 0.51), as well as the ones in the translated version (with an average alpha of 0.54). This is probably related to the small number of items in the subscales. Further work can be done to revise the CBAF and include more

items to a certain subscale in order to draw a better conclusion to the different level of endorsement of emotion-related beliefs as discussed in the present result. Another limitation of this study is that the data is collected from only one source and it is a self-reported one. Teachers' emotion-related beliefs can be examined more closely through interviews and observations of classroom practices. More qualitative data can be gathered to confirm the information collected in this paper-pencil measure on belief system.

The present result can serve as a pilot study in exploring the emotion-related beliefs among local preschool teachers. To further understand the emotional development among local preschoolers, studies can focus on how teachers' beliefs about emotions are related to children's behaviour at school. Given that teachers' experience in working with children and would influence their emotion beliefs to some extent, further work on investigating how personal factors such as age, life experience could have impact on one's emotion-related beliefs is meaningful.

The results of the present study also have implications for educational practice. As "protect" is the least endorsed emotion-related belief area, it is suggested that local early childhood teachers are aware of the importance of helping children develop skills in coping with their negative emotions instead of protecting them from experiencing such emotions. Furthermore, since "bonding" is highly endorsed as an emotion-related belief, it may imply that teachers are very aware of their roles in enhancing children's emotional development. Given that local teachers endorsed relatively lower on statements relating to skills in labeling, talking and expressing emotions, this may imply that teachers do not believe in preschoolers' abilities to mange their own emotions. As these skills are considered important in enhancing children's emotional development (e.g., Denham, 1998; Saarni, et al., 1998), such attitude may hinder the teacher's role in developing materials for affective learning. Further to this, as there is an increasing interest in enhancing children's socio-emotional competence among school children as suggested by the local government and researchers (e.g., Chan, 2002; Education Commission, 2000; Tung, 2001), it seems that there is a gap

between what teachers want to do and what they can do. Further professional training on managing children's emotions may better equip our local preschool teachers to effectively enhance children's socio-emotional learning.

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