

A Case Study of Five Chinese Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions  
and Reactions to Children's Displays of Emotions in the Classroom

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### **Abstract**

Teaching children higher level emotions (e.g., empathy, gratitude, love) has been present in the curriculum of kindergartens in China for a long time. Conversely, little attention has been paid to teaching children lower level emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger). This study examined five kindergarten teachers' perceptions and reactions toward young children's expressions of lower level emotions in a way to explore kindergarten teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions. It was revealed that the participating teachers (1) have limited knowledge or misperceptions of young children's lower level emotions; (2) pay little attention to children's expressions of lower level emotions; (3) tend to respond to children's displays of emotions in three patterns which are ignore, disapprove, and/or support; and (4) tend to ignore/disapprove children's displays of "unreasonable" negative emotions. The results of this study could be helpful for the development of intervention programs and in-service training to help kindergarten teachers better meet children's emotional learning needs.

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## Introduction

Emotion competence is increasingly recognized as one of the most significant areas of early learning and development (Goodman, Josh, Nasim, & Tyler, 2015). A considerable amount of research indicates that children who have effective emotional skills are believed to yield better results in academic learning and social relation with others than children with poor emotional skills (e.g., Denham, et al., 2003; Goodman, 2015; Hyson, 2004; Sharp, 2001). However, for young children aged three to six, they are just beginning to learn how emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, anger) work. Their abilities to interpret others' emotional states, or to understand, express, and regulate their own emotions are not as high as adults.

Despite the critical influence that parents make on children's emotional development (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Saarni, 1999), as significant adults in children's lives, teachers are also believed to play a pivotal role in the emotional development of children. A range of research conducted in the early childhood educational field suggests that a child's emotional development can be affected by his or her experiences with teachers, both in the classroom and within the whole school environment (e.g., Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012).

In China, this is particularly true in recent years because of the increase in the number of young children enrolled in kindergarten and the long hours children spend in them. Kindertartens in China have seen a long history of teaching children emotions, but what is noteworthy is that the emotional teaching they emphasize in curriculum is surrounding a higher level emotions (e.g., empathy, gratitude, love), rather than the basic, or lower level emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, anger). Furthermore, findings also indicate that academic training is more important in kindergarten's curriculum (Ning, 2015); lack of attention to the lower level emotions has characterized many classrooms; conversations about feelings are rare in early childhood programs (Ju, 2014).

Preschool education has been deemed a critical period for children's emotional development (Vasta, Miller, & Ellis, 2004). Children's expressions of lower level emotions need to be valued by kindergarten teachers. The aim of this research is to ascertain teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions through studying their perceptions and reactions toward young children's displays of lower level emotions in a classroom context.

Understanding teachers' points of views and practices are critical steps that can lead to the development of intervention programs and in-service training to help teachers better meet children's emotional learning needs. Through training and awareness of specific beliefs, teachers would be more informed about what to focus on as they attempt to support the emotional development of young children.



### **Literature Review**

My goal is to examine Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions. Before reaching that goal, a description, summary and evaluation of the works in relation to this area of study will be presented in this part. The literature review of this study is organized into four sections. The first section mainly elaborates on some theories relevant to lower level emotions and the emotions which have been taught in kindergartens in China. The second section describes theories of emotion socialization as well as kindergarten teachers' role in it to affect children's emotional development. The third section reports some research results of kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's lower level emotions. The final section extends to discuss the strong links between the teacher-child relationship and the outcomes of children's emotional development.

#### **Young Children's Emotions**

##### **What are emotions?**

Even though there are many concepts about emotions, not all theorists agree on how to classify emotions or what the basic emotions actually are. One of the best known psychologists Paul Eckman (1999) identified six basic emotions that he suggested were universally experienced in all human cultures. The emotions he identified were happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, surprise, and anger. Later on, other emotions, pride, shame, embarrassment, and excitement were also included in his list of basic emotions.

Some researchers have suggested that emotions exist in something of a hierarchy. Primary emotions such as love, joy, surprise, anger, and sadness can then be further broken down into secondary emotions (Plutchik, 1980). For example, secondary emotions such as affection and longing are from the primary emotion, love. According to Plutchik (1980), secondary emotions can be broken down still further

into tertiary emotions. For example, tertiary emotions such as liking, caring, compassion, and tenderness come from the secondary emotion, affection.

Researchers in China have also explained their understanding of emotions. According to professor and psychologist, Wang (2003), emotions are interpreted in a different way from what was suggested by Eckman and Plutchik. He considered that emotions should be classified into two types, which are “情绪(*qing xu*)” and “情感(*qing gan*).” *Qing xu* is viewed from a biological perspective that emerges at the beginning of one's life. For instance, infants possess the ability to smile and cry. This type of emotion has strong associations with one's biological needs, such as food, water, warmth, and sleep. On the other hand, *qing gan* emerges later after one begins his/her social interaction with others. It is feelings obtained through pursuit of knowledge, arts, interpersonal communication, and through other social needs. Love, respect to others, and empathy are examples of *qing gan*.

To apply these categories to early childhood education, *Qing xu* and *qing gan* are also used in the study of children's emotions. As described in teaching materials for teacher training program, children's emotions, *qing xu* (lower level emotions) show an impulsive, changeable, and exposed nature (*qing xu*, n.d.). Children tend to have weak control of their own emotions. Their behaviors are affected easily by their emotions. Furthermore, their emotions are unstable, and rather than hiding their emotions, children tend to express their emotions without reservation.

*Qing gan* refers to higher level emotions which can be further broken down into moral sense, intellectual sense, and aesthetic sense. Their differences are shown below (see Table 1) (*Qing gan*, n.d.).

Table 1.

*Explanation of moral sense, intellectual sense, and aesthetic sense.*

Emotions ( <i>qing gan</i> )	Definitions	Examples
Moral sense	Emotions triggered by evaluating people's intention, behavior, and ideas based on social norms.	The feelings you have when you see a stranger helping a homeless man.
Intellectual sense	Emotions triggered in the process of learning.	Curiosity, learning motivation etc.
Aesthetic sense	Emotions triggered in the process of evaluating nature, society, and their connection with arts based on one's own aesthetic standard.	The feelings you have when you are in nature enjoying a beautiful view.

### **Emotions taught in kindergarten in China.**

The higher level emotions, *qing gan* have been emphasized in children's emotion education for a long time. According to the Educational and Developmental Guidelines for Children Aged Three to Six (the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012), childhood serves as a critical period for young children to learn *qing gan*. Lacking life experiences and knowledge, young children are more likely to be immersed in and influenced by emotion education. In reality, a considerable number of events are held in kindergartens to foster children's *qing gan*. Love, empathy, gratitude, curiosity, moral sense, and other emotions are taught in a flexible and constant way. For example, kindergarten holds theme activities (e.g., activities for Mother's Day, Teacher's Day, National Tree Day, and National Day) to cultivate children's love for their school, communities, teachers, families, and country (*Qing gan* education, n.d.); Kindergarten teachers provide children opportunities to

understand and experience their own feelings through music and painting in arts classes (Yuan, 2009), picture books (Wang, 2018), story-telling (Zhang, 2019), and role-playing in pretend play (Xue & Xiao, 2011) are used to teach children perspective-taking ability and empathy as well as how to relate to others' feelings.

However, less emphasis is put on the teaching of the lower level emotions, *qing xu*. *Qing xu* might not be a disturbing problem for adults, but the same cannot be said for young children aged three to six. Even though communication with others (e.g., parents, teachers, peers) gradually extends their evaluation of and awareness of their own feelings and of emotion-evoking events (Saarni, 2000), they are just beginning to learn how emotions work, so even the lower level emotions, *qing xu* (or basic emotions) might disturb them (Dewar, 2018). Thus, an emphasis on the higher level emotions, *qing gan* is not enough. Children should be provided with opportunities to learn and practice the lower level emotions, *qing xu*.

An increasing number of studies have investigated children's emotional readiness in preschool and its interrelationship with adjustment (e.g., Miller, et al., 2006) and social development (e.g., Denham, et al., 2003), and its role as a predictor of behavior in the later school years (e.g., Fine, et al., 2001). In China, there is also a growing recognition of the importance of young children's emotional experience during preschool years. Educational and Developmental Guidelines for Children Aged Three to Six emphasizes the importance to nurture an emotionally stable and happy child. Some suggestions are put forward in the guidelines for kindergarten teachers to use in class (see Table 2).

Table 2.

*Suggestions for nurturing an emotionally stable and happy child:*

Topics	Details
1. Teachers need to create a warm and carefree environment where children can feel secure:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Maintain positive emotions, influencing children with positive and happy feelings;</li> <li>b. Do not yell at or hit children if they misbehave. Calm yourself down.</li> </ul>
2. Teachers need to coach children to express and regulate their emotions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Express your own emotions properly, in a way to model emotions in front of your students. (e.g., no acting while in anger);</li> <li>b. Talk about things evoking emotions (e.g., happiness, anger). Encourage your students to share emotions with others.</li> <li>c. Do not suppress their expression of emotions. Coach them when needed. (e.g., If a child is having a tantrum, do not suppress his/her negative emotions, but calm him/her down, then talk about his/her behaviors.)</li> <li>d. Coach children to cope with their negative emotions once you find out that they dwell on uncomfortable emotions.</li> </ul>

This guideline, focusing on five different themes (e.g., health (both physical and mental), language skills, social development, science, and arts) of children's development, only provides some suggestions to teachers in terms of teaching young children emotional skills and emotion management. It does not come down to teaching techniques and methods teachers can actually use to enhance children's emotional skills.

Research (e.g., Pirskanen, et al., 2019) conducted to investigate children's emotions in educational settings showed that some teachers, most notably in Australia, Finland, and Spain, reported putting a lot of effort into teaching children to identify, express, and manage emotions. They had a multitude of techniques for

enhancing children's emotional skills and several teachers reported that they had participated in training on the theme. The same research said that in China, enhancing children's emotional skills was talked about in only one interview. However, the Chinese teachers stressed the changeable and uncontrollable nature of children's emotions. Research conducted in China also indicated that academic training was given precedence in kindergarten curriculum (Ning, 2015), and participating teachers tended to ignore children's expressions of emotions in early childhood programs (Ju, 2014).

### **Emotion Socialization**

Even if Chinese teachers are less likely to put conscious efforts in teaching children emotional skills with a multitude of techniques, they directly or indirectly influence children's emotional development because children's emotional well-being may be influenced by the socialization that children have with teachers in a school context.

#### **What is emotion socialization?**

Although the term "socialization of emotion" first appeared in 1928 in the psychological literature (Jastrow, 1928), the systematic study of emotion socialization, and of children's emotional development is a relatively recent occurrence. Beginning from the 1990s, ideas about emotion socialization were receiving more and more attention in the field of education.

"Emotion socialization" conveys the essential idea that children learn to understand, express, and self-regulate emotions in social contexts. It refers to the direct and indirect ways that adults promote children's capacities to experience emotions, identify, and understand the contexts of emotions in themselves and in others, and efficiently manage their emotions (Friedlmeier, Corapci, & Cole, 2011; Hastings & De, 2008).

**Process of emotion socialization.**

There are many ways that an adult may influence children's emotional development. Kitzmann and Howard (2011) summarized that in the psychological literature, these have been conceptualized into four key processes: (1) immediate response to a child's emotions; (2) modeling of emotions-relevant behaviors; (3) discussion with the child about emotions; and (4) the indirect effect of adult's "meta-emotion philosophy" or beliefs and feelings about emotions. Some of these processes show adults' deliberate attempts to influence children's emotional development, but many processes could be considered unconscious because adults teach children about emotions naturally in daily interaction, without special focus on how to affect their emotional development. The following part will continue to explain these four processes.

The first process of emotional socialization occurs when adults respond to children's expression of emotions. Generally, there are two types of response: non-supportive and supportive. To be more specific, John Gottman and his colleagues (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996) have identified three common patterns of non-supportive type of response: (1) some adults dismiss children's emotions. Children's feelings are silly and unimportant for them; (2) some adults disapprove children's emotions. They notice children's feelings but consider them as offensive; (3) some adults acknowledge and accept children's emotions but make no efforts to help them cope with the emotions. By contrast, adults who give supportive responses to children's emotions are those who not only accept and acknowledge children's emotions, but also help children come up with strategies for coping with the emotions. They take time to see things from children's perspective and make them feel understood and respected. They talk with children about emotions and help them put their own feelings into words (Dewar, 2018).

The second process of emotion socialization occurs in the process of modelling.

Adults' expression of emotions, reactions to their own and others' emotions, and ways of coping with emotions serve as important models for children to imitate when they are dealing with their own emotions. Although little research on this topic is conducted in the context of early childhood educations, research said that parents' reactions to young children's emotions and their direct instruction about emotions are important socialization tools that support the development of children's emotions (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010).

The third process of emotion socialization occurs through adults' discussions with children about emotions. This process shows conscious attempts by adults to teach children emotional knowledge. For example, teachers conduct discussion with children to help them label and understand the causes of emotions (Sun, Lv, & Liu, 2018); teachers talk to the children about their own feelings and model what they do when they have different feelings; teachers actively teach children how to recognize emotions in themselves and others; and teachers comment on or ask questions about how children are feeling (McLaughlin, Aspden, & Clarke, 2017).

The fourth process occurs through adults' "meta-emotion philosophy." Literally, "meta-emotions" refers to emotions about emotions. When we evoke a certain emotion, we also deal with subsequent emotions regarding how we experienced the primary emotion (Jager & Bartsch, 2006). For example, anxiety (the subsequent emotion) may follow anger (the primary emotion). According to Gottman and his colleagues (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996), "meta-emotion philosophy" refers to the idea that adults (parents) have an organized set of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about their own and their children's emotions (e.g., parents' beliefs about acceptable way to express or cope with their own or their children's emotions). For example, adults who are open to the emotions of themselves and their children are likely to convey this openness through supportive reactions toward children's emotion and vice versa, they view children's negative emotions as harmful. Adults' "meta-emotion



philosophy” may help or hamper the emotional development of the children. Studies (e.g., Yeh, Cheng, & Yang, 2005) suggested that there is a relation between adults’ “meta-emotion philosophy” and children’s depression, as well as children’s coping skills.

### **Importance of teacher’s role in emotion socialization.**

In China, the enrolment rate for kindergartners aged three to six has grown rapidly during recent years and was 86% in 2017, compared to 50% in 2009 (UNESCO, 2019), which indicates that a considerable number of children spend their daytime in kindergarten with their teachers and classmates rather than at home with their parents or relatives. The growing influence that teachers and classmates have on children cannot be denied or dismissed.

The teacher, defined as the person whom a child will face and who will influence them in their life the most after their relatives/parents (Pianta, 1999), is believed to play a critical role in affecting young children’s emotional development during preschool years (Denham & Burton, 2003). Their awareness of children’s emotional expression and selection of activities to meet children’s emotional needs play an important role to enhance children’s emotional development (Zhang & Qian, 2011).

The impact that teachers have on children’s emotional development is obvious. There is an association between teachers’ response to children’s emotions (especially negative emotions) and the social-emotional development of children. For instance, according to researcher Dan Fei and her colleagues (Dan, Liang, & Xue, 2014), children show better capability to manage and express their own emotions when their expressions of negative emotions receive supportive responses from the teachers. On the contrary, when teachers ignore or suppress children’s emotions through threats (or punishment), children are likely to misinterpret their own negative emotions, and their learning of coping skills might be hindered as well.

### **Teachers' Beliefs about Children's Emotions**

In the previous section on emotion socialization, it has been discussed that adults (teachers) socialize children's emotional development in a direct or indirect way. Actually, one point that needs to be emphasized is that how they do emotion socialization is closely connected with their beliefs about children's emotions.

Beliefs involve intentions and perspectives for displaying or not displaying certain behaviors. Teachers' beliefs represent their general knowledge and feelings of objects, people, and events that affect their general planning, interactive thoughts, and decisions in classroom (Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

It is essential to know teachers' beliefs in the classroom concerning emotions, as researchers have found that teachers present their beliefs in their classroom by "teaching what they are" and "what they believe" (Howard, 2006; Irvine, 2003; Tatum, 1997). To situate this research's results in the area of teaching children emotional skills, teachers' beliefs about children's emotions decide what kind of rules and parameters they select when dealing with children's emotional expression in a school setting, or how to facilitate opportunities and activities to meet children's emotional needs.

Teachers hold different beliefs and perceptions about children's emotions. For example, according to a study conducted by researchers in China, Sun Lu and her colleagues (Sun, Lv, & Liu, 2018), teachers tend to have different beliefs with regard to children's expression of negative emotions: (1) some teachers consider negative emotions (especially intense emotions) as offensive and annoying; (2) some teachers view expression of negative emotions with gender or age differences (e.g., little boys or kindergartners of greater age should be better at regulating their negative emotions.); (3) while in some teachers' opinions, expression of negative emotions gives children opportunities to cope with emotions, which is beneficial to their mental

health as well as emotion management. Furthermore, this research also examines teachers' beliefs about the attribution of children's negative emotions, which indicates that four teachers (out of ten teachers) attribute children's negative expression of emotions to family dynamics (or parenting); six teachers attribute these emotions to the nature of three-to-six-year-old children who are still learning how emotions work on themselves.

### **Teacher-child Relationship and Emotional Development**

The relationship between children and adults is a significant phenomenon which directly or indirectly reveals social, emotional, and academic results in early childhood (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Morris, et al., 2013; Pianta, 1998). The quality of the relationship children form with their teachers within preschool years is associated with the social, emotional, and behavioral compatibility of children at school (e.g., Driscoll, et al., 2011).

When teachers establish responsive and supportive relationships with children, they create an environment that brings children together and engenders, for each child in the group, feelings of attachment, security, and trust. This environment of relationships provides the platform for positive development of children's emotions, or further, creates the opportunities for emotional teaching through which teachers help children to extend their ideas and practices of emotions.

While positive teacher-child relationships play a pivotal role in supporting children's emotional development, negative teacher-child relationships (characterized by conflict and weaker attachment) hamper the emotional development of the children. For example, a teacher-child relationship full of conflict may give rise to anxiety and fear in the child about going to school. The child will as a result be unlikely to seek the help of their teacher when emotional problems arise (Howes & Ritchie, 2002).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions addressed in this paper are:

1. What are kindergarten teachers' understandings about children's emotions?
2. How do kindergarten teachers respond to children's displays of emotions?

Why have these questions been brought up for this research and what is their relationship with the literature review?

As the literature review indicates, kindergartens in China have seen a long history of teaching children higher level emotions. Conversely, little is known about the situation of teaching children lower level emotions. This study examined kindergarten teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions in a way to explore the current situation in Chinese kindergartens. It is considered that teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions are critical points to examine, not only because they have potential to bring positive benefits to children's emotional development, but also because they influence children the most in a school setting. Teachers' beliefs tend to affect the way they socialize children's emotional development. My interest and focus are to study their beliefs by examining children's ways of expressing their emotions in the classroom context as perceived and responded to by teachers, so naturally these two research questions were brought up for this study.

## **Methodology**

Often researchers talk about the quantitative and qualitative methods of doing research. However, Yin (2018), suggests that case study is also a methodology that may be different from other qualitative research because of its focus on cases.

### **Exploratory Case Study**

According to Yin (1994), there are many research strategies such as experiment, survey, archival analysis, and case study. Each strategy can be used for all three purposes – exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory, but when to use each strategy depends on three conditions: (1) the type of research questions posed; (2) the extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioral events; (3) and the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events.

Taking the above-mentioned three conditions into consideration, exploratory case study was selected to be the research strategy of this study. Reasons were as following: (1) the research questions of this study mainly focus on “what” and “how” which are appropriate for exploratory purpose; (2) early childhood programs are still being conducted right now. Thus, kindergartens and kindergarten teachers are accessible for this study; (3) and this study is examining contemporary events.

### **Sampling**

Kindergarten teachers are the key participants needed for this study. Five teachers who worked in the same kindergarten were chosen as the informants of this study. This part will explain what kind of sampling methods were used to choose the kindergarten and participating teachers.

#### **Kindergarten.**

Sky Kindergarten (Sky Kindergarten is not the real name of the kindergarten where the fieldwork was conducted.) was chosen to be the sample of this research due

to convenience sampling. It is most accessible to this author, and it could provide useful information for this study.

### **Participating teachers.**

Sky Kindergarten was staffed with 18 teachers (nine head teachers and nine co-teachers). Two teachers (one head teacher and one co-teacher) were in charge of one class. Head teachers had more power in class decision-making and took more responsibilities than co-teachers did. They were likely to exert bigger influence on the children. Thus, informants of this study were selected from those nine head teachers.

All the head teachers in Sky Kindergarten were differing in educational backgrounds, teaching experience, qualification, and other aspects. Purposive sampling was conducted according to five aspects (e.g., school; educational level; certificate of Early Childhood Education (ECE); working years; and the grade they teach) (see Appendix B). After a thorough examination of all the information, five head teachers were chosen to be the samples of this study. Their profiles are shown in the following table (see Table 3).

Table 3.

*Participating Teachers' Profile*

Name	Age	School	Educational level	Certificate of ECE	Working years	Grade
Ms. Zhang	44	Normal school	Secondary Vocational School	Yes	23 years	Grade 3
Ms. Huang	25	Tourism school	Secondary Vocational School	No	2 years	Grade 1
Ms. Yu	34	Normal school	Three-year college	Yes	12 years	Grade 1
Ms. Peng	38	Normal school	Three-year college	Yes	15 years	Grade 2
Ms. Tu	41	Normal school	Three-year college	Yes	10 years	Grade 2

*Note:* Teachers' names here are not their real names.

**Collecting Data**

As case studies focus more on concrete details, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews which can provide more details to answer the research questions were considered suitable for this study (Yin, 2018).

Classroom observations provided some data about teachers' beliefs from a researcher's perspective, while interview questions were designed to examine teachers' understanding of children's emotions from a teacher's self-narrated perspective. This section will explain how the data of this research was collected by classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

**Classroom observations.**

Classroom observations began on May 9, 2019 and were completed on May 30, 2019. Since teachers' perceptions and responses toward children's emotions were the

focus of this observation, classroom atmosphere, children's expression of emotions as well as verbal and physical interactions between teachers and children were observed in an unmanipulated classroom context. Individual teachers were observed continuously for 120 to 180 minutes at a time from 9:00 A.M to 12:00 A.M., during which free play, teacher-led activities, lunch hours were observed and recorded. Interactions during transition times, clean-up times, and break times were also observed.

### **Semi-structured interviews.**

After classroom observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded by tape recorder on June 4 and June 5, 2019. The five teachers who were observed in classroom context were interviewed. To achieve optimum use of interview time, each of the respondents was asked to answer about 10 preset open-ended questions for 20-30 minutes (see Appendix A). Questions raised from classroom observations were also asked in this semi-structured interview. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed, and all the interviews which were conducted in Chinese were translated into English by this author.

### **Privacy.**

All the five participating teachers signed consent forms which indicate that they understand the purpose of this study and are taking part voluntarily. Consent forms also made it clear that the identity of participants (including their real names) will remain confidential and classroom observations/interviews will be anonymized and pseudonymized in the study.

### **Analyzing Data**

For the classroom observations, observation notes were mainly used to examine research question one: how do kindergarten teachers react to children's displays of



emotions? This thesis summarized different patterns of reactions by the teachers, and it also went further to analyze teachers' ideas about their reactions by means of examining their interview answers.

For the interviews, words or interview answers from the teachers were mainly used to examine research question two: what are teachers' understandings about children's emotions? Individual cases were made for each teacher, but the cases were analyzed for key ideas. In other words, the teachers were analyzed under categories which were created based on all the words from them. Observation notes were also used to analyze/validate teachers' answers to some interview questions.

Furthermore, classroom observations and interviews provided numerous useful data for the purpose of this research. The main issue is how to present the data in a clear and effective way. According to Yin (1994), case study evidence (data) does not need to be presented in a traditional narrative form. A question-and-answer form is also an alternative way to present the evidence. For this thesis, question-and-answer format serves as a more effective way to present the evidence for clarity, thus, most data gathered in the fieldwork was analyzed under key ideas and was presented in question-and-answer format.

### **Contextual Information**

#### **Sky Kindergarten**

Sky Kindergarten is a non-profit private whole-care kindergarten located in a lively street where lots of residential buildings have been constructed. Most of the children studying in this kindergarten are living in this neighborhood. With 280 kindergartners enrolled, it is staffed with one principal, 18 teachers, two kitchen chefs, one cleaner, and one security guard. Only two teachers are responsible for one class. No caregiver is present (caregivers are normally required by the Educational Department of People's Republic of China). The tuition fee for each semester is only Chinese Yuan 3,400 yuan/child (about 55,000 Japanese Yen/child) which is only half or one third of the cost to enter the for-profit kindergartens in the same city. The lunch and snack fees are Chinese Yuan 10 yuan/day/child (about 150 Japanese Yen/day/child).

Children spend almost the whole day in Sky Kindergarten (from 8:30 AM to 17:00 PM). School rules require them to eat breakfast and lunch in school and after a small nap in the afternoon, parents pick them up after classroom activities finish at 16:00 PM. The following one-day schedule of a grade-three class shows the routine of a typical day at Sky Kindergarten (see Table 4.).

Table 4.

*One-day schedule of a grade-three class.*

Time	Activities
7:00-8:30	arrival, free play
8:30-9:00	breakfast
9:00-9:40	singing practice
9:40-10:00	break time
10:00-10:30	free play
10:30-11:00	dance/ morning exercise
11:00-11:30	recitation
11:30-12:00	lunch
12:00-12:30	entertainment (watch cartoon)
12:30-14:30	nap
14:30-15:00	transition time for class
15:00-15:30	snack
15:30-16:00	arts
15:30-16:00	singing practice
16:00-17:00	free play, departure

In Sky Kindergarten, the enrollment ages of all the kindergartners are from three to six. They are organized into two grade-one classes, three grade-two classes and four grade-three classes based on their ages (see Table 5). Similar to other kindergartners in China, children in Sky Kindergarten will spend three years in kindergarten before the start of formal education in primary school.

Table 5.

*School System of Sky Kindergarten.*

Grade	Age Group	Class number	Class size
Grade 1	3-4 years old	2	About 30 students
Grade 2	4-5 years old	3	
Grade 3	5-6 years old	4	

**The Five Participating Teachers**

Talking about the teachers in Sky Kindergarten, a proud smile appears on Principal Yan's face. Obviously, she is satisfied with their work. Even though the Educational Department of People's Republic of China stresses the need in its official documents issued in 2013 to have at least two teachers plus one caregiver for any full-day kindergarten class (The Central People's Government of People's Republic of China, 2013), Sky Kindergarten, without caregivers, is obviously under-staffed with only two teachers for each class with around 30 children. However, in the mind of Principal Yan, caregivers are not needed because without caregivers, teachers in her kindergarten can still do a good job. She compliments the teachers in her kindergarten by saying that they have a great deal of teaching experience and competence. They are diligent, efficient, and responsible to the children. Under the teaching and guidance of these teachers, children from Sky Kindergarten are cultivated with better manners/behaviors, better academic skills and they are likely to be more academically successful than the children from other kindergartens.

Ms. Zhang is the oldest and the most experienced teacher among the participants. She is in charge of a class of grade three. Before working for six years at Sky Kindergarten, she had worked for eighteen years in other kindergartens after graduating from a normal school. Co-operating with her co-teacher, Ms. Hu, she

arranges the classroom decorations and teaches the children everything required in the curriculum. Students in her class are good at academic knowledge, singing, and drawing. Partly because of her personal character, Ms. Zhang seldom smiles in front of her students. She more often displays her stern face rather than showing caring emotions as well as love to her class. Ms. Zhang sets limits and controls children's behavior very much and the overall mood in her class is too controlled.

Ms. Huang is the youngest teacher among the participants. She is in charge of a class of grade one. Unlike other teachers who were educated in normal school, Ms. Huang graduated from a vocational school of tourism several years ago. After working in a non-educational area, she changed the direction of her career path to become a teacher of Sky Kindergarten in 2016. Now she is making efforts to obtain a certificate of ECE while teaching in this kindergarten. Ms. Huang's bad temper is fully known by all the teachers in Sky Kindergarten. She is easily annoyed or made angry by misbehaving or disobedient children. According to her interview responses, a little girl refuses to attend school because she is fearful of her.

Ms. Tu is responsible for a class of grade two. She has been teaching in kindergarten for twelve years after graduating from a normal school with a degree of three-year college education. Unlike Ms. Zhang and Ms. Huang, oftentimes Ms. Tu talks with her students with a smiling face and in a soft tone. When asked about what the important things are for a child in preschool years, Ms. Tu places great value on academic learning and play. She wants to create a classroom where children could enjoy play and study. One thing she also mentions is that as a teacher, being strict and harsh is sometimes needed to correct the shortcomings of her students.

Ms. Peng is responsible for a class of grade two. As an early childhood educator, she has fifteen years of teaching experience. Always speaking in a soft and warm tone, Ms. Peng is patient and friendly to her young students. She sets less limits on children's behavior and the overall mood in her classroom is comparatively happy and

light, but it does not mean that Ms. Peng is always nice and friendly. Sometimes she is strict to mischievous children, and in her opinion, being strict to her students will not affect the teacher-child relationship in a negative way if the children also feel loved by her.

Ms. Yu is in charge of a class of grade one. She has ten years of teaching experience. Though not always speaking to the children in a soft and warm tone, Ms. Yu has a close relationship with her students. She would share jokes with them or tease them in a playful way during break time. Ms. Yu doesn't want to be too harsh or strict because it will ruin her close relationship with the students. However, she has to be harsh sometimes as she needs them to stop misbehaving, and she believes that being severe is an effective tool to urge her students to learn academic knowledge.

### **Half-day at Sky Kindergarten**

During this observational case study, all the teachers and children in Sky Kindergarten were undergoing a busy preparation for the two upcoming big events, which are the kindergarten assessment held by the municipal Educational Department on May 27 and the singing performance for the International Children's Day (June 1). Both of these two events brought extra workload and pressure on these teachers. It was a race against time. Teachers had to finish classroom decoration in a limited amount of time before May 27. Meanwhile, their three-to-six-year-old students also needed a considerable amount of their attention in daily classes, as well for the singing performance.

Despite the fact that teachers were overwhelmed with pressure and overwork, most of the children were cheerful and delightful all the same. Since half of this semester had gone by, they seemed to have gotten used to school life. Their laughter and voices of recitation and of singing could be heard from time to time on every school day.

The following timetable shows a half-day schedule of a grade-three class (see Table 6) on May 9, 2019. As the classroom observation was conducted in the morning from when the class began at 9:00 AM to the lunch time at noon, the following part will give a description of a typical half-day at Sky Kindergarten.

Table 6.

*Half-day schedule of a grade-three class.*

Time	Activities
7:00-8:30	arrival, free play
8:30-9:00	breakfast
9:00-9:40	singing practice
9:40-10:00	break time
10:00-10:30	free play
10:30-11:00	dance/ morning exercise
11:00-11:30	recitation
11:30-12:00	lunch

Summer in Guangdong Province is humid and hot. At 8:00 on a sunny Thursday morning in May, some parents/grandparents have arrived at Sky Kindergarten's front gate on electric bikes, each carrying a child riding on the back. After parking their electric bikes, they take their child/grandchild by the hand and lead them up a corridor to the classroom. Many children cheerfully walk up the steps to join their friends in the classroom. Only a few children show unwillingness to attend school.

Children who arrive at school earlier could play different educational games in the classroom until breakfast begins at 8:30. During this free-play time, Teacher Ms. Zhang is already in the classroom with the children. She watches the children play or joins them to have a little talk from time to time.

By 8:30, after the children gradually arrive at the classroom, the teacher stops

free-play time. She has them sit by their table and begins to distribute buns to them. There are seven tables in the classroom. Each of the table is sat with five children. They study, play, and eat breakfast/lunch on these tables. Being well-trained on manners, these five-to-six-year-old boys and girls draw their chairs back to the table every time when they leave their seat. After lining up to get the bun from the teacher, each of them moves back to their seat to eat their bun. Most of them seem to have a hearty appetite for the bun.

Equipment in the classroom is simple but shows teachers' attentiveness to teaching as well as to their students (see Figure 1). In front of the room are a television, a blackboard, an electric piano, and some shelves for children to put their school bags and water bottles. The walls and ceilings are originally white which seem to be too dull for a young children's classroom, so teachers have decorated the whole walls with colorful papers as well as the children's paintings. Along the classroom walls, Ms. Zhang also set up five playing fields as free-play corners for the children to play during unstructured activity. These playing fields have different themes which focus on cultivating children's math skills, reading ability, creativity, arts, and hands-on experience. The temperature, inside as out, is above 30 degree Celsius.





*Figure 1.* The classroom decoration of a grade-three class

The first lesson begins at 9:00 and lasts for 20 to 30 minutes during which Ms. Zhang arranges the children in a big semi-circle for singing. The song kids sing is a song celebrating soldiers' bravery and defiance to enemies in war. Lyrics are written on a white board. Some Chinese characters are very difficult for a six-year-old child, but these children can recognize most of the characters and they sing together. In order to have them sing well, Ms. Zhang turns into a strict teacher in this class. She leads the children to sing for two times, then has them sing several times. However, not all the children could focus on the song. Some do not want to sing. Some whisper with their classmates beside them. One little boy is asked to sit alone in the middle of the circle because he refuses to sing with the whole class. This little boy seems bored and still does not show any interest in the song, but because he does not make any noise, Ms. Zhang does not pay any attention to him. She focuses on leading the whole group to sing better.

The next class (from 10:00 to 10:30) is free play time. Children are told to sit down at their tables. Once they are seated, Ms. Zhang tells them to discuss and decide the game by themselves. Teammates in the same team must play the same game. After

several minutes of discussion, each team finally reaches an agreement. They get their toys or blocks on the table. They tease and talk to their peers throughout the game. At the same time, Ms. Zhang is not involved in playing with any of the teams. She is in front of the classroom drawing something for the classroom decoration. One little girl is not satisfied with her teammate (one little boy) because he grabbed her favorite block. She is sitting there without doing anything but shows an unhappy face. Ms. Zhang does not notice anything.

Kids are not allowed to speak in a large voice during free play. When noises become bigger and bigger, Ms. Zhang stops her work and says to the children, "Which team is making the biggest noise? OK, this team makes the biggest noise. This team will be the first one to finish their game. The noisiest team is not allowed to play their game." Her words seem to be effective. Children begin to play with much smaller voices. After walking up and down the aisles checking each team, Ms. Zhang returns to her own seat in front of the room to continue her work.

By 10:30, children are told to collect and put their toys back to the shelves as later they are going to do morning exercise in an empty area outside of the classroom. The empty area is only big enough for a maximum of four classes of children. Ms. Zhang arranges her students in five lines. Some children grow a bit restive, pushing and talking with their peers in a playful way. Ms. Zhang stops in front of them and says, "Keep still!" She walks up and down the aisles trying to make them stand in a straight line and keep enough space for morning exercise. When the music begins, Ms. Zhang goes back to the front, leads the children in morning exercise. Most of them participate with enthusiasm, while one little boy is unwilling to join in. He remains still, silent with a bored face. Ms. Zhang spots him, goes toward him and tells him to stand in front of his classmates to lead the morning exercise.

At 10:50, children move back to their classroom. Ms. Zhang tells them to drink some water and go to the bathroom which is a small room connected with the

classroom. Seventeen girls leave their seat for the bathroom. The remaining boys stay in their seat drinking water from the bottles they bring to school. Inside the bathroom there is a long ditch running along the wall. Under Ms. Zhang's direction, all the girls pull down their pants and squat over the ditch, then before leaving the bathroom, they wash and wipe their hands with the small towels hanging on the wall. After the girls return to the classroom and take their seats, boys take turns to do the same thing as the girls did. Children love break time. They laugh and talk with peers while drinking water. Ms. Zhang sits in front of the room watching the children. She talks with the co-teacher Ms. Hu and from time to time, some boys will come to Ms. Zhang for a small talk. She makes jokes with the boys, asks them questions about their holiday and things happening in their family. The whole classroom is filled with a light and happy atmosphere.

Ten minutes later (at 11:00), children are told to put their bottles back on the shelves because soon they will continue to have the last lesson in the morning. Ms. Zhang tells them to take their chairs out from the table to the empty area of the classroom and to sit in a semi-circle. With a book held in Ms. Zhang's hands, she asks the children to recite three small stories as well as the math tables they have learned. Most of them are confident with their ability to recite. They participate with enthusiasm. Ms. Zhang's eyes keep moving from the book to the children to check their performance. Several children either do not have any sound coming out from their mouths because they have forgotten the story, or else they squirm in their chairs and talk to their friends nearby. Ms. Zhang asks them to come to the front. One after another, they are told to recite by turn. Only those who are able to recite with a clear and confident voice could return to their seat, otherwise, they have to stay at the front.

At 11:30, as the recitation check draws to an end, lunch is delivered from the central kitchen and brought into the classroom in stainless steel buckets. The children march to the bathroom and wash their hands. After coming back to the classroom,

they are told to line up to get their bowl of food. Ms. Zhang reminds the children to eat in silence and not waste any food while she distributes the food. If they chat with their desk mates in a large voice, she says in a strong tone, "You are so noisy. There is no need to talk while you are eating." Ms. Zhang walks around their tables checking on their progress after distributing the lunch. She stands beside the table of a particularly slow eater, and says with a stern face, "You are so slow. Look at how much food you have in your bowl. Are you still talking?" This little girl, without reply, continues to eat her food.

### **Daily schedule in other classrooms.**

The above-described half-day schedule is a good representation of how all the classes/activities are undergoing in all the classrooms of Sky Kindergarten. What is important to mention here is that (1) art (drawing & singing), math, language skills (reciting & reading) and morning exercise occupy the main part of the daily schedule; (2) free play is on the schedule, but is not arranged on a daily basis. Furthermore, as in other classrooms, free play is present not for educational purposes mainly, but for transitional purpose between activities. For instance, children are asked to play before breakfast begins, or they play while waiting for their parents to pick them up at the end of the school day; (3) most of the classes are teacher-directed and are held in group form where children have to obey some rules (e.g., no talking, be attentive, no squirming).

It seems that the principal and the teachers in Sky Kindergarten are focusing on the academic training and behaviors/manners of the children, which shows much similarity with what was described in the famous book, *Preschool in Three Cultures* written by Tobin, Davidson, and Wu in 1989. The education of children's lower level emotions is not present on the schedule; neither is it in daily school life.

## **Findings and Discussions**

For my research, I discuss Findings and Discussions together, as this seems a more effective way to present the data for clarity. Findings are organized into four sections. The first section reports incidents of six kinds of emotions that were displayed by children in a classroom setting. These incidents help to understand the context of emotions in the classroom. The second section examines teachers' perceptions about children's emotions that happened in a classroom context. In the third section, teachers' reactions toward children's displays of emotions are examined. Finally, in the fourth section, some efforts are made to discuss the distance that the five participating teachers want to keep in their teacher-child relationship.

### **Emotions Captured in Classrooms**

As the observations started in May when half of the semester had gone by, most children had already gotten accustomed to their school life as well as their friends, teachers, and environment in Sky Kindergarten. Participating teachers said that the children showed much more stability in emotions than they did at the beginning of the semester. However, "much more stability in emotion" does not mean that these children hardly display any negative emotions, or they could nicely handle their emotions. They have emotions all the same and the emotions come in different kinds.

This study only examines six different varieties of lower level emotions displayed by children in a classroom context. These emotions are sadness, excitement, anger, fear, frustration, and embarrassment. This section will report one to two vignettes related to each of the six emotions before we get to the next section where teacher's perceptions of young children's emotions will be discussed.

#### **Sadness.**

1. May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in a singing class taught by Ms. Zhang

As the singing contest which is going to be held for International Children's Day is getting closer, Ms. Zhang gathers her students to practice at least two times each school day. Most students' interest in the practice only lasts the first 15 minutes. From then on, several students begin to lose their patience and start teasing or whispering to peers standing nearby. They try to find something interesting to do rather than engage in the practice. One of the boys, Mingyang, is noticed by Ms. Zhang. He is told to stand in front of his classmates to sing the song alone. Though unwilling at first, Mingyang finally leaves the group to stand before his peers at the repeated request of Ms. Zhang. He sings in a small and hesitant voice which doesn't satisfy Ms. Zhang at all. Ms. Zhang turns her face from him to the class and says, "Do you want Mingyang to leave our class?" All the children are amused by this question. They answer with "yes." Ms. Zhang turns to Mingyang again and says, "See? Nobody wants to have a classmate like you." Mingyang's face takes on an unhappy expression.

## 2. May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019, free play, Ms. Yu

After a forty-minute singing practice, Ms. Yu asks her students to play outdoor on the plastic slide outside the classroom as a small reward for their good performance in the singing practice. All the children are excited to go outside. They line up and follow the co-teacher Ms. Chen's instructions to leave the classroom. Ms. Yu stays in the classroom to help two remaining boys with their drawings. A few minutes later, a little girl Meixi walks back into the classroom crying. She wants to play the "little train game" rather than slide. Sitting with the boys at a table on one side of the classroom, Ms. Yu talks to Meixi who stands several meters away, still crying. "It's OK if you don't want to play on the slide. I'm a little bit tired. I can't play "little train" with you today. Let's play it next time after the morning exercise." Ms. Yu is obviously tired. She does not say anything more even though Meixi is still wiping her tears in silence. About one minute later, Meixi stops crying. Ms. Yu advises her again to play on the slide outside. Meixi walks out the classroom to join

her peers.

### **Excitement.**

1. May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, story time, Ms. Tu

Ms. Tu tells her students a story which is designed to teach children knowledge of feet and toes. All the students sit in a semi-circle, showing great interest in the story. Without holding a book or chalk, Ms. Tu just sits on a small chair in front of them, telling the story with interesting and expressive words. She keeps asking some questions in an effort to keep them engaged in the story. "How many Xiaojiaoya (toes) do we have?" "What are they?" Children are all in high spirits to give Ms. Tu their answers "five!!" "Some are long!" "Some are short!" "Some are fat and some are slim!" Ms. Tu repeats their answers and shows her approval smile to them. Then she continues with the question, "What are our Xiaojiaoya used for?" After thinking for a second, some boys raise their hands and say, "They can run!" "They can walk!" and "They can ride a bike!" Ms. Tu repeats their answers and then she adds one answer that thrills all the children "and they can also race with a big wolf!" Meanwhile she stretches her arms and makes a big sound of "wooooo" trying to scare her students by pretending to be a big wolf. Children all scream with excitement. Their eyes are bright with happiness.

2. May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Free play time, Ms. Peng

Officers from the Municipal Educational Department come to evaluate today. In order to pass this school evaluation, principal Yan changed today's schedule to meet its standard, which is to have children play most of the time in school. Children obviously love play. The whole Sky Kindergarten is filled with happiness and noise as rules of no big noise during play is loosened up today. All the classes enjoy themselves in different games. In Ms. Peng's class, she has all her students get their own jumping ropes and wait outside the classroom. After reminding the children to be

careful during play, she stands near the classroom doorway watching them playing. When some girls have difficulties adjusting the length of their ropes, Ms. Peng comes to help them out. A smile appears on her face as she sees some boys jumping rope in an awkward way. She makes fun of them a little bit then teaches them how to jump better. Those who are good at rope jumping not only jump alone, but also invite their peers to jump together. Talking, laughing, and sweating, the whole class seems to enjoy this moment a lot.

### **Anger.**

#### 1. May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, lunch time, Ms. Peng

A little boy, Jianjian finishes his lunch earlier than the others. Without anything interesting to do, he sneaks to the free-play corners wanting to get some toys to play with. Playing with toys at lunch time is against the rules and all the children know this clearly. Jianjian doesn't have the courage to break the rule. He only enjoys the toys by touching them and re-situating some of the items. Soon this misbehavior is spotted by his classmate - Junhao. Junhao reminds him of the rule first, but without effect, then he hits Jianjian on the hand. Jianjian becomes angry. He runs to tattle to Ms. Peng who is by now sweeping the floor in the classroom. Ms. Peng stops her work, asks both of them to stand together for detailed information. She doesn't criticize them, but asks Junhao in a warm tone, "Why did you hit Jianjian?" Junhao reports that "He played with the toys." Ms. Peng looks at Jianjian "Why did you play with the toys?" Jianjian doesn't reply. Ms. Peng continues to talk to Junhao with a soft tone, "Remember, it's not good to hit other people. Even though Jianjian did the wrong thing, you shouldn't hit him." She has them say sorry and shake hands with each other. Anger seems to disappear in a short time. The two boys smile with each other and are friends again.

#### 2. May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Recitation class. Ms. Tu



School evaluation is only eleven days away, but there are still a lot of decorations that need to be done in Ms. Peng's classroom. Ms. Peng wants to have more free time for decorations, so she asks Ms. Tu for a favor. Now at this moment we see Ms. Tu leading two classes of students to recite short stories in one classroom and Ms. Peng is busy with decorations in her classroom. A sudden combination of two classes excites some of the boys. They become curious about some of the strange faces. Whispering and laughing, their attention is distracted away from the recitation to these little new strangers in the same room. One of the little boys, Kangkang who is talking aloud is seen by Ms. Tu. She calls out his name, asks him to stand up and recite again in a strict tone. Kangkang immediately cries, but he still manages to recite at the same time. Standing several meters away from Kangkang, Ms. Tu responds to his crying with an explanation, "I told you to sit quietly, sit quietly, didn't I? Was I mistaken about you? Who should feel wronged?" Kangkang is still wiping his tears. Showing a bit of rebellious spirit and anger, he answers without any hesitation, "I should feel wronged." Ms. Tu replies, "Do you really think you are right? Please spend more time considering about it. If all I did is wrong, didn't you do anything wrong?" She continues to talk to the whole class, "If I don't speak in a strict tone, nobody would listen to me."

**Fear.**

1. May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019, singing practice taught by Ms. Tu

Ms. Tu is worried about the singing performance. She would like her class to practice every day expecting that her students would do a good job in the performance. However, these four-year-old young children cannot understand her intention. Their interest and patience to practice hardly lasts for ten minutes. After ten minutes, the song becomes dull to them. They either forget to do some of the gestures to the song or forget their position in line or get distracted by other things around or squirm in line. Ms. Tu makes several attempts to correct them, but all are proven

ineffective. Eventually a strong feeling of annoyance comes to her. She speaks to her students in a severe tone and loud voice, "How come you all are being so shiftless in this practice!?" "I don't think we need the costumes (that are already bought) for this performance anymore! I will return them!" All the students are extremely upset by Ms. Tu's reaction. They stand still, without making any sound at all. Ms. Tu continues to say, "I don't allow you to do this on the stage! With such poor performance, how could you go on the stage?! You don't feel ashamed? I do!" The whole classroom is very quiet. Some children feel too scared to look at Ms. Tu.

## 2. May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, morning exercise led by Ms. Huang

Children in Ms. Huang's class are only age three to four. Most of them stand well in four lines for morning exercise: no talking and no squirming. Ms. Huang stands in front and faces her students while leading the exercise. She pays attention to those children who do not move or who are doing something else instead of the exercise. Some children quite enjoy the dancing and moving but some don't even move or look at Ms. Huang. Ms. Huang would occasionally remind them to stay focused. However, one little girl Yanyan who does not concentrate on the exercise does something that irritates Ms. Huang. She stops leading the exercise, goes to Yanyan and asks her to leave this classroom. Yanyan expresses her unwillingness to leave. She does not say anything but only stays there with a frown face, which intensifies Ms. Huang's anger. Without any more words, she grabs Yanyan by her right hand and right leg, carrying her in a forcible way to a grade one classroom nearby. Yanyan cries and struggles so hard during this process. She keeps shouting, "I don't want to go there (to the other class)!!" Ms. Huang remains firm on her decision. After putting Yanyan into the other classroom, she comes back to move Yanyan's school bag and water bottle to the classroom where Yanyan is now.

**Frustration.**1. May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019, free play led by Ms. Zhang

During free play time, children are told to sit down at their tables. Once they are seated, Ms. Zhang tells them to discuss and decide the game by themselves.

Teammates in the same team must play the same game. After several minutes of discussion, each team finally reaches an agreement. After getting their toys or blocks on the table, they joyfully play and talk with each other through the game. However, not all the children are satisfied with the team decision. One little girl, Mengfei comes to Ms. Zhang to ask for help because her team has some disagreement in playing the same game. Ms. Zhang responds in a strong tone, "I told each team to decide its game by discussion. Why didn't your team reach an agreement after discussion? What does it mean to discuss? Didn't you and your teammates discuss?" Mengfei is a little bit disappointed and frustrated with Ms. Zhang's response. She does not say anything but moves back to her seat.

2. May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Free play led by Ms. Huang

In Ms. Huang's classroom, she also set up five playing fields as free-play corners for the children to play during unstructured activity. These playing fields have different themes emphasizing children's math skills, reading ability, creativity, arts, and hands-on experience. After repeating some rules children need to obey while playing in the corners, Ms. Huang arranges her class into five groups and has them go into the five corners to play for about twenty minutes. A little girl, Fangfang doesn't have any interest in reading books; instead she wants to play with a big doll in the other corner called "Baby's House." Without asking Ms. Huang, Fangfang moves to the "Baby's House" and takes off her shoes, wanting to join her classmates inside. Obviously, this is against the rules. Ms. Huang stops her immediately after seeing her taking off shoes at the corner's doorway. Showing a frowned expression, Fangfang looks at Ms. Huang, and still insists on going in. However, Ms. Huang remains firm

on her decision. She looks Fangfang in the eye, strengthens her tone and repeats, "NO." Without further explanation and talking, Fangfang moves back to the reading corner with a frustrated look.

### **Embarrassment.**

1. May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019, drawing class taught by Ms. Zhang

In drawing class, Ms. Zhang is teaching the children to draw a colorful fish. At first, she leads them to draw the fish with simple basic shapes such as triangles and circles on the blackboard, then asks them to fill their fish with any patterns and colors they like. After that, Ms. Zhang is walking around to see their progress of drawing. Those who are less able to copy the fish on the blackboard are corrected: A girl whose fish is drawn too small on a white paper is told to draw bigger. A boy Junsheng makes a terrible mess to his fish even though he has been asked to make it better several times. This time, Ms. Zhang stops in front of his table. Showing dissatisfaction at his drawing, she asks, "Can you draw slowly? What are you drawing right now? A total mess." While commenting on Junsheng's fish, Ms. Zhang holds up his drawing and one that is nicely done by a girl nearby to show other students the big difference. Being amused by Junsheng's drawing, the whole class laughs out loud. Junsheng seems to be embarrassed by their laughter. He doesn't say anything. Ms. Zhang continues to say, "Don't laugh at Junsheng. Actually, his fish is big enough, but the problem is that he didn't pay attention to drawing the patterns of this fish. Let's see what he can do to make it better." Ms. Zhang gives the drawing back to Junsheng and begins to check other students.

### **Noteworthy points in the vignettes.**

The vignettes mentioned above are certainly just a small fraction of the emotion-evoking vignettes that happen every day in the classrooms. They provide a glimpse of the participating teachers' ways in their responses to children's displays of emotions

in terms of what the conversations are about and how the teachers behave in the vignettes.

If the focal point of teachers' responses is moved a little forward to the beginning of each emotion-evoking vignette, it is found that most of the emotions (positive or negative) are evoked by the participating teachers rather than the children themselves or by their peers. To be more specific, only the first vignette of anger reports the uncomfortable feelings evoked between Jianjian and his classmates, Junhao. Other vignettes all report the emotions caused between the teachers and the children. For instance, Mingyang becomes upset because Ms. Zhang says to him, "See? Nobody wants to have a classmate like you." or Fangfang becomes frustrated because Ms. Huang strengthens her tone and repeats, "NO." to stop her playing in the "Baby's House."

This leads this author to think about the reasons why this happens. Most classes are led by the teachers in a group form, which limits the opportunities for children to interact with each other. Thus, given little chance to interact, the children in class are less likely to experience different emotions which are easier to be evoked in social interactions. On the other hand, the participating teachers often interact with the children. Their interactions with the students are usually as groups, rather than as individuals. The frequency of individual interactions between the teacher and the individual student tend to increase only when an individual student has poor academic performance (e.g., poor drawing) or misbehaves (e.g., absent-mindedness) in class, which is why many uncomfortable feelings that happen between the teachers and individual student were captured in the classroom observations.

Apparently, this is not a good way for the children to experience and learn different emotions in a classroom context. Firstly, the participating teachers restricted children's free social interactions with their peers, which decreases children's emotional experiences and emotion sharing with peers. With limited experiences, it

might place them at a disadvantage to improve their emotional understanding as well as to learn emotion coping skills in school. Secondly, the teachers seem to focus more on academic performance and classroom rules, which sometimes makes the children suffer emotionally. Such experiences with the teachers might be negative to children's emotional development in terms of emotion socialization.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Emotions**

As the intention of the semi-structured interview is to understand teachers' thinking in regard to young children's emotions, the participating teachers could talk about everything they knew about young children's lower level emotions. After an analysis of their interview answers, several findings are coming out.

#### **What are children's emotions?**

In a kindergarten with about 280 young children who are still at an early stage of emotional development, it might be easy to imagine a classroom where children display happiness, anger, sadness, and other lower level emotions on a regular basis. Emotions could be positive and negative. If an individual's needs are satisfied by an objective world, he/she would also experience positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, and relief. On the other hand, he/she would experience negative emotions, such as regret, anger and sadness if his/her needs are not satisfied by the objective world (Peng, 2008). In these interviews, the five participating teachers did not define young children's emotions in a clear, thorough, and direct way; instead they used what was normally seen in the classroom to make their definitions.

#### ***Four Emotions “喜怒哀乐(xi nu ai le)”.***

Two of the participating teachers used a Chinese idiomatic expression, *xi nu ai le* which means four emotions, happiness, anger, sadness, and joy, to define young children's emotions. This expression, with both positive and negative emotions included, is a widely known phrase used to describe the various emotions felt by an individual.

*Xi nu ai le*, namely happiness, anger, sadness, and joy, also refers to the lower level emotions. Actually, from what had been seen in the classroom observations, lower level emotions, children's sadness and anger, especially sadness, were the emotions most noticed and dealt with by the teachers.

Ms. Zhang: Young children's emotions are happiness, anger, sadness, and joy (*xi nu ai le*). A sense of shame as well as a sense of pride is also an emotion.

Ms. Peng: It's their happiness, anger, sadness, and joy (*xi nu ai le*).

Particularly, Ms. Zhang was the only teacher who talked about the higher level emotions in the interview. In her opinion, emotions are not confined to lower level emotions, *Xi nu ai le*. The higher level emotions, a sense of shame and a sense of pride, also count as emotions.

***Temporary and forgettable.***

Ms. Tu talks about the characteristics of young children's emotions. In her opinion, negative emotions are not something that will bother young children for a long time. Children are likely to forget their negative emotions which just happened a little while ago if effective methods have been used to help them solve their negative emotions, and unlike adults, she thinks that negative emotions are unlikely to accumulate in children's mind as long as they are untangled by teachers.

Ms. Tu: Young children's emotions are like, a child is happy to get his favorite stuff; he is unhappy because he gets criticized by his teacher. Children cannot hide their emotions. Once they have emotions, they express them immediately on their face. Their emotions come soon, disappear soon, and only last for a short while. Children tend to forget their emotions soon after they express them. For example, a child becomes happy again after being praised by his teacher even though a while ago he was criticized by the teacher for not being attentive in class.

Ms. Peng: Children don't hold grudges. They might be unhappy at the point when you criticize them, but they would become happy and are



willing to play with you again after being praised or rewarded by you.

One point that deserves to be examined is that teachers like Ms. Peng tend to see children's displays of negative emotions (e.g., sadness), "as something to get over, ride out, but look beyond nor dwell on" (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). To be more specific, they tend to view children's negative emotions as something children will recover or pull through by themselves, instead of an opportunity through which children can learn emotions. Actually, children lose the opportunity to develop emotional skills if they are not able to learn from different experiences of emotions. Studies (e.g., Dewar, 2018) suggest that young children who talk about the causes and effects of emotions develop better emotional competence. Evidence-based advice also emphasizes the importance to seize everyday opportunities to talk about feelings and the situations that trigger them.

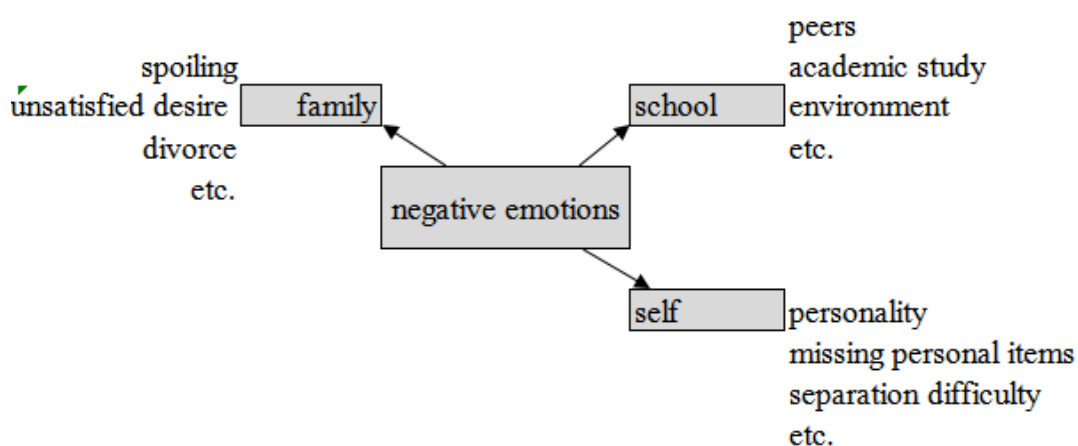
#### **Sources of children's emotions.**

Emotions do not come from nowhere. For three-to-six-year-old young children who are not good at handling emotions both verbally and cognitively, it is hard for them to recognize sources and solve emotions by themselves. During this process, teachers play an important role to do the job for children. In this research, participating teachers did not talk too much about sources of children's positive emotions. Most of their attention was put on the negative ones, therefore, the findings this study gets from the interviews are more about teachers' ideas about young children's negative emotions.

#### ***Three main sources of negative emotions.***

Daily interactions with the children give the participating teachers a lot of experiences dealing with emotionally struggling children. On every school day after incidents of negative emotions happen, they observe or ask parents and children themselves in an attempt to find the sources. Analyzing their interview answers,

participating teachers regard that there are three sources leading to young children's negative emotions in class. They mainly come from (1) family (parents), (2) school (peers, environment, study), and (3) self. Figure 2 below provides detailed information about these three sources.



*Figure 2.* Sources of negative emotions.

According to the participating teachers, some negative emotions are evoked at home. For example, uncomfortable feelings are triggered by unsatisfied desire at home, and these emotions still linger on and dwell on children when they are taking class in school.

Some negative emotions happen in school, for example, negative emotional outbursts that are triggered during interaction with peers and are immediately displayed by children in class; the anxious feelings that grade-one children have about the new school environment at the beginning of each school year.

Some negative emotions come from children themselves. For example, some children are sensitive. They are likely to cry more often than the others; Some children tend to get frustrated by small things: they cry because they cannot put their shoes on, or because they lose a small hair clip on the way to school.

The participating teachers mention the necessity to identify all of these emotions

and to have children talk about the attributions so as to help them get over. However, classroom observations as well as interview answers reveal that (1) the teachers do not always pay attention to children's negative emotions, let alone help them get over their uncomfortable feelings; (2) their responses to children's displays of emotions are associated with their opinions about the sources. For example, the teachers tend to consider emotions evoked by spoiling and unsatisfied desire as offensive. Thus, they are likely to give non-supportive reactions to such displays of emotions.

### *Guan.*

Interestingly, the participating teachers do not mention themselves as one of these sources that might cause young children to struggle with emotions, even though observations reveal many incidents of children's negative emotions that were caused by the participating teachers during academic study and singing practice.

Participating teachers think that they are just doing *Guan* which literally means "to govern" and refers to teachers' control and regimentation of the classroom and children (Tobin, Wu, Davidson, 1989). In their mind, children's displays of negative emotions are likely to happen and oftentimes are unavoidable due to *Guan*, but they are unimportant because of *Guan*. *Guan* can bring the children more benefits (e.g., manners, behaviors) which will contribute to their later academic success in primary school.

*Guan* happens frequently in Sky Kindergarten. When Ms. Zhang tells the children to eat their lunch in silence and finish every bite with a stern face, that is *Guan*. When Ms. Huang grabs Yanyan by her right hand and right leg, carrying her in a forcible way to a grade one classroom nearby, that is *Guan*. When Ms. Tu urges her class to work hard in singing practice by warning them in a severe tone and a loud voice, that, too, is *Guan*. Thus, *Guan* is about carrying out the class so that it goes smoothly without classroom problems.

*Guan* has a very positive connotation in Sky Kindergarten even though negative emotions come with it many times when teachers govern children. Principal Yan believes that some preschoolers are not well behaved because they are not well governed by parents. To deal with misbehaving preschoolers, teachers need to let preschoolers know the existence of someone (teacher) who is much more powerful and is able to govern them. Children mostly experience bad moods every time teachers govern them, but compared with misbehavior, their uncomfortable feelings are dismissed or ignored.

What's more, the participating teachers tend to not see emotional problems as something that will trigger children's behavioral problems. However, research says that in children, emotional problems are usually manifested by behavioral problems (Lawson, 2002). To Principal Yan and the participating teachers, most of their attention is put on behavioral problems when they are dealing with children whom they think as misbehaving. They want to monitor and correct children's behavior. Negative emotions, similar to a "secondary product" coming from a production of a main product (good behavior) are not regarded as being important enough to be taken care of.

### **Reasonable and unreasonable emotions.**

All of the participating teachers mention the necessity of finding out the sources of young children's negative emotions. However, one point deserved to be discussed here is that sources of young children's negative emotions are always judged by the teachers. Specifically, they tend to use "reasonable" and "unreasonable" to categorize negative emotions, which will decide to what extent and by what means the teachers think they need to respond to the children who are having a tough time dealing with their emotions. Ms. Tu's interview answer is a good example to show this.

Ms. Tu: If children have difficulties dealing with their emotions, the

first step is to make a judgement about their emotions, which is to see whether their emotions have reasonable grounds or not. For me, reasonable emotions are like, for example, a child raised by divorced parents are happy most of the school days, but all of a sudden he comes to school one day without any energy or lively spirits, and unusually, he needs my hug during nap time. I consider it as a reasonable emotion that needs my attention, and I would ask his parents for detailed reasons. On the contrary, if a child is known by me for getting his favorite toy every time by screaming and grabbing, I would ignore him because I know this is the trick he is playing.

For young children, their bodies might be small, but the same cannot be said for their emotional reactions. Young children encounter lots of reasons for negativity. No matter how reasonable or unreasonable their behaviors might look to the teachers, children's negative feelings should not be considered in this way because all of the feelings are reasonable as long as they exist, and all the negative feelings matter to children and should be valued and paid attention to by teachers.

John Gottman said that, "It's important to accept all feelings, but not all behaviors" (Goleman, Declaire, & Gottman, 1998). For him, all emotions displayed by children are acceptable, but all behaviors are not. Therefore, it would be wrong to view emotions as reasonable and unreasonable. Teachers should help children cope with their negative feelings, but limits should be set on the behaviors, which means that once children's uncomfortable emotions disappear, teachers should be firm to fix their behavioral problems.

### **Negative emotions.**

The interviews suggest that all of the participating teachers know there are both positive and negative emotions. However, they talk more frequently about negative

emotions than positive ones when asked to define young children's emotions and to provide more examples to further explain their points of view.

Ms. Peng: Normally young children's emotions are like, a child doesn't enjoy group life. He doesn't play with his classmates, doesn't communicate with his teacher. He is unhappy all the time.

Ms. Yu: Children's emotions are changeable. Different children show different emotions. For me, their emotions could be explained with these cases: a child blubbers (cries noisily and uncontrollably) in school due to separation difficulty; a child does something against your will, like, he rejects eating lunch in school because he doesn't want to be here.

The reasons why participating teachers care more about young children's negative emotions than positive emotions are mainly because in their mind, children's negative emotions would not only influence their study individually but also affect their classmates collectively. Children with positive emotions will not have trouble with that, which is why teachers care less about their positive emotions. They regard children's emotions as a foundation where efficient academic learning as well as good classroom management could happen.

Ms. Yu: Children's negative emotions ought to be paid attention to. If a child is struggling with emotions, the whole day and possibly the whole class would be ruined by him/her. As a teacher, I need to comfort him/her, to make sure that he/she remains happy in school. Only by doing so could the children enjoy every day here, and classes could proceed smoothly.

Ms. Peng: A child's negative emotions might have negative impact on his/her study and other aspects of life in school. I can give you some

examples which happened before. A child was unhappy and because of this, he had no appetite for lunch; he didn't want to engage in study; he was even bothered by unhappiness during nap time. In such cases, teacher ought to help them out.

It seems that teachers' visions of dealing with young children's negative emotions is limited. They think of children's emotional status, especially negative emotions as something they need to help them get over every day so as to achieve a smoothly running class and to promote students' academic learning rather than something that children need to learn to master because it would be beneficial to their well-being in the long term. The importance of children's emotional development is underestimated by the teachers.

#### **Academic learning and emotional learning.**

Interestingly, when the five participating teachers are asked to think about the importance of academic learning and emotional learning, four of them view emotional learning as more important than academic training and one teacher thinks that both of them are important.

The participating teachers might have limited understanding of young children's emotional development, but apparently, compared with academic training, they do attach importance to children's emotional learning in school. The benefits of being an emotionally stable and healthy child are visible to them. Their answers suggest that children with positive and healthy emotions engage more in academic study, have better mental health, and are more willing to follow instructions in class.

Ms. Huang: For preschoolers, emotions are more important.

Academic knowledge comes after. If they are happy and they enjoy their time in school, naturally knowledge would go into their mind.

Positive emotions (happiness) are important for preschoolers.

Ms. Peng: Children who are struggling with uncomfortable emotions are barely able to do anything well. If they are always trapped in negative emotions, they are more likely to struggle with low self-esteem.

However, the observational study indicates that academic learning triggers lots of negative emotions in children which even become worse when the participating teachers try to correct their behaviors in class (*Guan*). What we can see from the emotional incidents captured in class is that a lot of the uncomfortable emotions displayed by children are triggered by teachers because of their reactions to children's absent-mindedness in study, disobedience to instruction, or poor performance in academic training. For instance, Ms. Zhang upsets Mingyang by asking him to leave the class because he is absent-minded in singing practice and he cannot sing nicely when asked to sing again; Ms. Zhang embarrasses Junsheng because his drawing is a total mess. It seems that teachers' focus is still on academic study (sometimes on children's manners and behaviors). Negative emotions triggered by academic study are likely to be ignored or even intensified by the teachers.



### **Teachers' Reactions toward Children's Emotions**

The emotion-evoking incidents shown above provide some ideas about what kind of emotions are happening in the classroom and how teachers respond to children's emotions. Furthermore, as teachers do not pay too much attention to children's positive emotions, this section will focus on the discussion of their reactions to children's negative emotions and there are three patterns. To be more specific, teachers tend to (1) ignore, (2) disapprove, or (3) support children's negative emotions.

As for which pattern the teachers choose to deal with emotionally struggling children, it depends a lot on whether children's negative emotions have reasonable grounds or not. If the emotions have reasonable grounds, the teachers tend to accept them, and they comfort the children with special attention and gentle words, and vice versa, if the emotions have unreasonable grounds, the teachers are likely to ignore or disapprove them.

Ms. Huang: It's common for children to have different kinds of emotions, but as their teachers, we need to find out the sources and help them to solve it. It's pretty important to recognize the sources first because they help us decide what kind of methods we should use to solve children's emotions. For example, if a child doesn't want to attend school because he gets "bullied" by his classmates, I would comfort him and also talk to their parents. But if a child nags her mother for new stuff, like every day and she gets upset because her mother doesn't buy her anything, I would not coax her with special attention. I would criticize her. Such bad behaviors and manners should be monitored and corrected in school.

**Ignore.**

In the interview, some teachers mention a method, a time-out they use to deal with children with emotional problems such as aggression or anger. It is considered to be an effective method to calm down the children and also to modify their behavioral problems. They remove children from an enriched, enjoyable environment and wait for them to calm down. In few cases, the teachers comfort the children after they calm down, but in other cases, the teachers remain silent because in their opinions, to ignore the child might yield a better result.

The emotional incident of fear happened in a morning exercise led by Ms. Huang is a proper example to demonstrate this method. Observations indicate that when children have behavioral problems (e.g., throw a tantrum or are aggressive), communication would be made by teachers first, and the time-out comes after if teachers do not see any change in the children (and to this point, teachers have viewed the children's negative emotions as unreasonable emotions). The time-out space could be the doorway of the classroom, the toilet, or a "naughty chair" set in front of the class, or a different classroom where unfamiliar students and teachers are. In this process, teachers almost stop their conversation with the children and of course, they also ignore the emotional storms going on inside the children.

To move this discussion further, Ms. Zhang talks about a case Principal Yan had with her student, Beibei.

Ms. Zhang: Beibei is a child who gets upset by trivial things. There was a time when she had a tantrum for no reason, like she didn't sleep in nap time, but sat on her bed, knocked the bed to make noise. I tried to talk to her about her behavior, but she just looked at me, without reply. I could do nothing at all to fix her problem, so I left it to Principal Yan. Surprisingly, she only used one day to solve the

problem. This is how she did it: Principal Yan took Beibei to class 2 (other class) and said to her, "From now on, you stay with them in class 2. You are allowed to return to class 1 only when you stop having tantrums." Without any further conversation, Principal Yan left the classroom, so Beibei was left in class 2 the whole school day. She didn't eat lunch, didn't sleep, and she didn't talk to anybody. She remained silent throughout the day. Finally, principal Yan asked her back to class 1 at the end of the school day, and I saw Beibei become a listless girl that was completely different from the girl in the morning. After this small incident, Beibei didn't have the guts to have a tantrum for any reason.

Adults' negative reactions to children's experience of emotions such as distress, fear, anxiety, and sadness generally are believed to be associated with negative socio-emotional outcomes for children (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). On the surface, after the incident, Beibei did not have a tantrum as much as she used to do, but apparently, the reason why she has a tantrum less often is because she is afraid of being sent to class 2 again. For Beibei, this is a process of internalizing her emotions. Because Beibei received negative reactions to her displays of emotions, she gradually learns to hide her emotions, and she might feel anxious when in emotionally evocative situations due to prior associations between punishment and emotional expressivity. Analogously, Tomkins (1962) suggested that children learn to express distress without shame and to respond sympathetically to others if adults (parents) respond openly with sympathy and nurturance to children's feelings of distress.

### **Disapprove.**

Classroom observations also reveal that teachers tend to disapprove of children's expressions of negative emotions. Specifically, they notice children's negative

emotions, but consider them as offensive because teachers view such emotions as “unreasonable” emotions that come along with misbehavior. The emotional incident of anger that happened between Ms. Tu and Kangkang is a proper example to demonstrate this pattern of response: Kangkang was emotionally aroused (crying) after being asked to recite in front of his classmates, and his negative emotions intensified (turns into anger) when Ms. Tu tried to suppress his emotions by saying, “I told you to sit quietly, sit quietly, didn't I? Was I mistaken about you? Who should feel wronged?” About this same pattern of response, Ms. Huang also expresses her opinion.

Ms. Huang: I don't always allow my students to cry. It depends on the attributions of their emotions. For example, if a child did something wrong/bad, but he/she didn't feel sorry. On the contrary, he/she cried for being accused of something. In this case, I don't think the reason why he/she cried is rational for me. I would say to him/her, “You are the one doing the wrong thing. Why do you cry? Don't cry.”

Similar to the pattern of ignoring, if teachers consider children's displays of negative emotions as “unreasonable,” and either ignore or disapprove, they tend to give non-supportive reactions to them. Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy (1996) suggested that children who receive non-supportive reactions (e.g., suppressing, punitive response) to their negative emotions are likely to remain emotionally aroused and become less able to regulate their behavior when they experience negative emotions, which was also validated by Chinese researchers, Sun Lu and her colleagues Lv Guoyao, Liu Xiaohua (2018): In comparison with supportive reactions (e.g., comforting touch, verbal comforting), ignoring and disapproving are less likely to lower children's emotional arousal, instead, they intensify it.

Importantly, the influence of non-supportive reactions is not limited to this alone. Other research reveals that practices (e.g., parental practice) that heighten or extend

children's negative emotional arousal, both in the specific context or in future situations, would be expected to undermine children's learning about emotions and their management during emotional events (Hoffman, 1983). In addition, the quality of reactions to children's negative emotion is possible to affect children's emotional security and feelings about social interactions in general that, in turn, may influence the quality of their emotional responses and behaviors in social encounters.

Apparently, non-supportive reactions to children's displays of negative emotions are not good options for the teachers to make. Efforts should be made to support children's learning about emotions because it is not only beneficial to children in the short term but contributes to their well-being in the long term.

### **Support.**

When teachers view children's expressions of negative emotions as "reasonable," they tend to give supportive reactions to the children in four ways, which are comforting touch, verbal comforting, solution-based comforting, and distraction. For instance, according to the interview answers, (1) when Ms. Tu hugs and pats a child who is raised by a divorced family because this child is unhappy all the day in school, that hug and pat are comforting touch; (2) when Ms. Yu asks a little boy the reason why he is unhappy by saying, "Little handsome, what makes you upset?" or when Ms. Huang comforts a little boy whose toy is grabbed by his classmate by saying, "OK, he has said sorry to you. It's gonna be alright. Don't be upset." that is verbal comforting; (3) when Ms. Peng comforts a little girl who lost her hair clip on the way to school by providing solution, "If you really want to have your hair clip back, maybe you could talk to your Mom. Your Mom might buy you the same new one," that is solution-based comforting. Furthermore, (4) distraction is also used to comfort the children (especially children aged three to four) with separation difficulties. They usually distract children's attention from parents to the interesting items in school (e.g., new toys, cartoons, new friends).

Classroom observations also indicate that the participating teachers tend to meet children's emotional needs with the above-mentioned four ways of comforting, and as a result, the emotional storms that are going on inside the children are likely to be abated by teachers' comfort. However, for children who are trapped in emotionally evocative situations, and for whom it is not easy to get over the emotional storms, teachers tend to ignore these children after several ineffective attempts to comfort them. For example, Wenwen (three-year-old) is distressed from the moment her grandmother leaves the classroom in the morning. Ms. Yu makes several attempts to hug her and encourage her to play with her little friends in the free-play corners, but without any effect. Sitting on her little chair, Wenwen is still wiping her tears, without any sign of getting over her sorrow. In this case, Ms. Yu gradually shifts her attention to other classmates, hoping that Wenwen could calm herself down a little and get better later.

One more point needs to be examined is that the five participating teachers do not teach children about emotional skills even though they give supportive response to children's displays of negative emotions. Chinese researchers, Sun Lu and her colleagues Lv Guoyao, Liu Xiaohua (2018) studied Chinese kindergarten teachers' reactions to children's displays of negative emotions. Their findings indicated that some participating teachers tend to make use of every emotion-evoking incident to teach children emotional knowledge as well as emotional skills. For example, (1) a participating teacher asked children in distress, "Are you angry? Do you feel upset because Anan is not willing to play with you?" (2) a teacher coached a boy to think about the reason why he got upset and to make him experience what the feeling of upset was like when the boy was getting upset because his football was kicked away by his peers. In Sun Lu, Lv Guoyao, and Liu Xiaohua (2018), the participating teachers revealed their intention to teach the children emotional knowledge by means of giving names to the emotions as well as helping children to find the sources of

emotions. However, in this research, no participating teachers did the same thing to teach children emotional knowledge. Their purpose seems to be wanting children to get over negative emotions only.

**Teacher-child Relationship: Keeping A Distance**

The finding which will be discussed in this part was not expected for this study, and as a matter of fact, it is quite surprising to know that the participating teachers prefer to keep a distance in their relationship with students. It provides another perspective to understand the kind of influence that kindergarten teachers may have on children's emotional development in terms of teacher-child relationships. Therefore, some efforts are made to examine this supplementary finding in this part. In the future, more time and efforts by other researchers are believed to be needed to proceed with the study of this topic.

There are many concepts used to define teacher-child relationships (e.g., closeness, dependency, conflict). Closeness is referred to as one of the most important concepts related to positive teacher-child relationships (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). The closer a child's relationship is with his/her teacher, the more secure the child will feel with that teacher. It contributes to the positive emotional connection between two parties and thus, plays a pivotal role in children's emotional development.

"Closeness" is related to the aspect marked by affection, warmth, and emotional involvement (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). The warm, friendly and open communication established between teacher and child is one of the most important representation of "closeness."

However, this study indicates that classroom activities are not characterized by such warm, friendly, and open communications between the participating teachers and students. Oftentimes, what was seen in classroom observations was (1) an overly controlled classroom atmosphere in which children are not allowed to talk, or not encouraged to communicate with their peers (e.g., children are allowed to talk only when teachers think is OK to talk. Otherwise children are likely to be viewed as



breaking the rules); (2) one-way communications given by the participating teachers to children (e.g., teachers give instructions to children; teachers intensify classroom rules); (3) mild or even harsh criticism that teachers give to children (e.g., When Mingyang is absent-minded in singing practice, Ms. Zhang says to Mingyang, "See? Nobody wants to have a classmate like you."); and (4) excessive structured activities in which children are given little opportunities to communicate with teachers and their classmates. To some extent, the communications between the participating teachers and children are comparatively cold, unfriendly, and even harsh sometimes.

The participating teachers expressed their opinions about this issue. Ms. Zhang said, "It's understandable that some teachers keep a distance in their relationship with the children because it would be really hard to deal with a class of more than 30 students who are not fearful of you."

For some participating teachers, "closeness (intimacy)" would increase the likelihood of children's misbehaving in class. Ms. Yu says, "Children are not fearful of you and they don't expect you to punish them even if they misbehave because in their mind, you are nice to them."

In this regard, intentionally or unintentionally, the participating teachers prefer to create a distance with their students in class so as to maintain a smoothly running class and to foster a class of obedient students who misbehave less and are willing to follow instructions in academic learning.

## **Suggestions and Limitations**

### **Suggestions**

Despite the fact that it may take a long time to change the current situation, the decision makers and the teachers of Sky Kindergarten could take several steps to improve. Here are some suggestions.

#### **School and curriculum.**

(1) Role of directors and administrators: Look closely at what the needs of the teachers are in teaching children emotional skills; Pay attention to what other kindergartens are doing on this topic; Launch and facilitate intervention programs that could help shape the environment/cultures where children can feel safe and free to express their feelings, and where children are given meaningful opportunities to learn emotional skills when they are having different experiences of emotions.

(2) Faculty development: Findings indicate that the participating teachers in Sky Kindergarten have limited knowledge about and tend to underestimate young children's emotional development. Awareness of the importance of children's emotional development should be built into the minds of the teachers (not only the teachers who teach, but all the staff who work in kindergarten), and teaching strategies should be created to support teachers to meet children's emotional needs. As a matter of fact, some kindergartens located in other provinces of China are working on this topic. A close look at their ways of educating teacher (e.g., in-service training) may be helpful for the development of intervention programs in Sky Kindergarten.

(3) Add emotion learning to academic focuses: The findings make it clear that academic training focusing on children's cognitive development is still dominating the curriculum of Sky Kindergarten. More room in the curriculum should be left for the development of children's emotional competence which is marked by three components: children's expression of useful emotions, knowledge of emotions of self

and others, and regulation of children's own and others' emotional expressiveness and experience when necessary (Denham, Zinsler, & Brown, 2010).

A substantial number of studies conducted in the United States/New Zealand indicates that children yield better results on emotional development if teachers teach them emotional skills (mainly on the three components) intentionally and actively in school (e.g., Denham, Bassett & Zinsler, 2012; McLaughlin, Aspden, & Clarke, 2017). The cultures/values of China need to be taken into consideration, as the emotion-centered curriculum created by educators in the United States/New Zealand may not work perfectly in the context of China. It would be good if educators and policy makers in China create a curriculum that is culturally suitable and can facilitate the emotional development of children in China.

### **Teachers.**

(1) Keep learning: Viewed as an adult who will influence children the most after their parents/relatives, the teacher should always be mindful of his/her responsibility of bringing children what is really good for their well-being. In this case, teachers should obtain more knowledge about young children's emotions as well as effective strategies that can be used to meet children's emotional needs in school.

(2) Classroom atmosphere: Classroom atmosphere in Sky Kindergarten is overly controlled by the teachers, which may reduce possible chances for children to communicate with teachers/classmates and to have different experiences of emotions that could be evoked during the interactions. Teachers should create a classroom where more opportunities are given to children to interact/communicate, and where children feel safe and free to express their feelings. In such classroom, children can seek help from the teachers after they experience uncomfortable emotions that are beyond their ability to get over, or they can share with the teachers about something that would make them feel good (positive emotions).

(3) Be responsive to children's emotional needs: The participating teachers may encounter many opportunities to deal with children who struggle with negative emotions. Their feelings cannot be judged as "reasonable" and "unreasonable," and all their emotions need to be treated with patience and wisdom because teachers' beliefs about and their reactions to children's displays of emotions play a critical role in children's emotional development. Manners/behaviors/cognitive development are not the only things that matter for children's well-being; emotional competence also matters. More attentions to children's emotional expressions are needed in the classroom.

### **Limitations**

This study has potential limitations.

(1) There are two categories of kindergarten in China: public and private based on funding sources. This study was conducted only in a non-profit private kindergarten which seeks to provide early childhood services to families for comparatively low tuition. Thus, little is known about public kindergartens and for-profit private kindergartens in this study.

(2) Classroom observations were conducted by one person (the author of this thesis) only. It might be possible that some emotion-evoking incidents that happened in the classroom were missed by the author due to the number of children (about 30 students in one class) and the difficulties of identifying the emotions which were not displayed by the children openly, thus the six types of lower level emotion captured in the classroom could not be said to be the only emotions experienced by the children. Some emotions might have failed to be noticed in this study.

(3) This study was conducted in Guangdong Province of China. The findings of this study could not be applied to all the kindergarten teachers in Guangdong Province nor to the kindergartens throughout China. More research is needed in the future to

examine/compare local differences. Hopefully, the local differences may serve as a mirror from which kindergartens in different places could see the weak points/strong points and learn from each other.

### Conclusion

Kindergartens in China have seen a long history of teaching children higher level emotions. By contrast, little attention has been paid to lower level emotions. For the purpose of narrowing the gap, this study examined kindergarten teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions as a way to explore the current situation in Chinese kindergartens. It was revealed that the participating teachers (1) have limited knowledge or misperceptions of young children's lower level emotions; (2) underestimate the importance of young children's emotional development; (3) pay little attention to children's expressions of lower level emotions; (4) tend to respond to children's displays of emotions in three patterns which are ignore, disapprove, or support; (5) tend to ignore/disapprove of children's displays of "unreasonable" negative emotions.

This study provides a crucial glimpse of teachers' beliefs about young children's lower level emotions. Based on the results of this research, new insights and creative approaches for framing or contextualizing research problems are needed for future study. One suggestion for future research is to examine teacher-child relationship, particularly, teachers' beliefs about keeping a distance in their relationships with the children, as it was found that the participating teachers tend to maintain a distance with the children in class (or even during transition time) so as to achieve a smoothly running class and to reduce the number of misbehaving students. One other suggestion is to examine this topic from children's perspectives, as this study only focused on the kindergarten teachers' perspectives, and little is known about what children think about teachers' responses to their displays of lower level emotions. If children's ideas were also examined, it would help educators make informed decision in intervention programs that are launched to train kindergarten teachers.

Apparently, the education of lower level emotions was dismissed or was not even noticed by the principal and the teachers in Sky Kindergarten, which may also be

present in other similar kindergartens in China.

Preschool years are a critical and irreversible period for children's emotional development. With the increasing number of kindergartners in China, it becomes more imperative than ever that every endeavor should be made to examine this topic. It is hoped that more new knowledge and new courses of action for children's emotional development would come out in future study, and children in China could benefit from them.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Interview questions**

1. What do you think of children's lower level emotions?
2. Do you think that in this kindergarten, children are expressing their lower level emotions freely? Why?
3. What do you think of children's academic training and lower level emotions? Which one is more important?
4. Usually, what is your responses to children who have negative emotions or positive emotions? (some examples)
5. What would you do to deal with children who are not good at handling their own emotions?
6. If a child doesn't want to draw/sing/recite, what will you do? (what if he/she is upset due to your criticism about his/her inattentiveness?)
7. If a child keeps having a tantrum (or being angry, sad, crying), what will you do?
8. Sometimes I saw that some teachers are treating the children in a harsh way. Do you think that it will evoke children's negative emotions? (Do you think that it would influence their relationship with you?)
9. What do you think of your relationship with the kids? Is it intimate?

**Appendix B**  
**Questionnaire**

1. Full name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Single/married: \_\_\_\_\_
4. University/college: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Educational degrees: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Certifications: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Class: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Job title: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Time at current job: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Working experience: \_\_\_\_\_