

USING BOOK READINGS TO TALK ABOUT EMOTIONS IN THE HEAD START CLASSROOM:  
BUILDING EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **USING BOOK READINGS TO TALK ABOUT EMOTIONS IN THE HEAD START CLASSROOM: BUILDING EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

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Emotional competence skills are important for children's academic and social success. Throughout the preschool year, children experience great changes in their emotional competence skills, making it an ideal time to consider how adults support children's development of emotional competence. Because children who are living in poverty are at-risk for not developing important emotional competence skills, it is of particular interest then to explore how adults, such as Head Start teachers, who work with children living in poverty, support children's emotional competence. This study explores how Head Start teachers talk about emotions during whole-class book readings, a common preschool classroom activity, and how the amount of emotional content in text influences teachers' talk about emotions during book readings. Findings from this study showed that Head Start teachers are not talking much about emotions during book readings, and that when teachers are reading books rich in emotion content, they talk more about emotions. This study also found that teachers' scores on the emotional domain of the CLASS are not predicted by their use of emotion talk during whole-class book readings or their choice of text for book readings.

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## **Using Book Readings to Talk about Emotions in the Head Start Classroom: Building Emotional Competence**

In order to successfully participate in a classroom setting and take advantage of learning opportunities, a child must develop skills related to emotional competence (Denham, 2006). According to Denham et al. (2003), emotional competence includes skills related to emotion knowledge, expressions of and responses to emotions, and the regulation of emotions. Therefore, skills related to emotional competence encompass a child's ability to name his emotions, express and manage his emotions appropriately, and properly respond to others' emotions. These emotional competence skills play an important role in providing children with a foundation for academic (Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2001) and social success (Denham et al., 2003).

Book reading is one common classroom context in which teachers have the opportunity to support children to develop emotional competence. In early childhood classrooms, the most commonly read book is a narrative (Pentimonti, Zucker, & Justice, 2011), which typically provides a set of characters, often with emotions, and a problem to solve, a context that can elicit discussions of emotions and how to respond to the emotions of others. Unfortunately, little research has been done to evaluate how teachers are using everyday classroom activities, such as whole-class book readings, to support children's emotional skills. Therefore, the present study will examine whether preschool teachers are reading books that provide a platform for discussing emotions and emotional skills with children, as well as whether preschool teachers are talking about emotions during book readings.

## **Importance of Emotional Competence**

When a child begins preschool, emotional competence plays an important role in helping a child adjust to this new formal school setting (Denham, 2006). Preschool children utilize their emotional competence skills everyday as they face new experiences, as they interact with their peers and teachers, and as they encounter new social and academic challenges. Not only does emotional competence aid preschool children in navigating social and emotional experiences in the classroom (Denham, 2006), it also helps prepare children to be successful academically (Rhoades et al., 2011) and socially (Denham et al., 2003) in the future.

Emotional competence skills in preschool are linked to children's present and future academic skills. Preschool students' emotion regulation skills are strong predictors of early math and literacy skills, as well as children's productivity levels in the classroom (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2006). In a study of low-income children, Rhoades et al. (2011) found that preschool emotion knowledge was a significant predictor of children's academic performance in kindergarten. In addition, higher teacher reports of kindergarten children's emotion regulation and attention skills positively predicted children's academic success a year later in the first grade (Trentacosta & Izard, 2007).

Not only is emotional competence important for children's academic success, research has indicated that skills related to children's emotional competence impact their social relationships and social skills (Denham et al., 2003). In a longitudinal study investigating preschool children's emotion expressiveness, emotion knowledge, and emotion regulation, Denham et al. (2003) found that children's emotional competence impacted their social competence at ages 3 and 4 and on into kindergarten. Young



children's emotion regulation skills are also related to positive student-teacher relationships and teachers' reports of fewer behavior problems (Graziano et al., 2006). This may be because a child's struggle with emotion regulation may lead to teachers directing their energy to managing and monitoring the child's behavior, preventing them from using their energy to build a positive relationship with the child. Clearly, both teachers and children benefit from building children's positive emotional competence skills.

A child's emotional competence also lays the groundwork for a child's social and emotional adjustment later in life (Hessler & Katz, 2010). Youth who are better at regulating their emotions are less likely to act out of anger and in an aggressive manner, and are more likely to possess the ability to appropriately express their emotions later in their lives (Buckner, Mezzacapa, & Beardslee, 2003). Beyond childhood, emotional competence skills are linked to less delinquent behavior (Hessler & Katz, 2010; Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004), more positive relationships (Schute et al., 2001), and better academic performance (Petrides et al., 2004). Considering the immediate and long-lasting effects of emotional competence, it is important to prioritize and support children's development of emotional competence.

### **Poverty and Emotional Competence**

Preschool children who grow up in poverty are exposed to stressors that put them at an increased risk for not developing critical emotional competence skills (Shaffer, Suveg, Thomassin, & Bradbury, 2012). Specifically, living in poverty impacts the ways in which emotions are modeled and explained for children at home. For example, when having a conversation about school with their parents, children from low-SES households heard fewer emotion words (e.g., "I felt sad yesterday when you didn't clean up your room." "Are

you frustrated that you can't play with your trucks right now?") from their parents than their more affluent peers (Flannagan & Perese, 1998). Additionally, during a picture book reading task, mothers with lower income levels talked less frequently about negative and positive emotions than mothers with higher income levels (Garrett-Peters, Mills-Koonce, Adkins, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008).

Not only is living in poverty related to children hearing fewer emotion words (Flannagan & Perese, 1998; Garret-Peters et al., 2008), living in poverty is also associated with experiencing more negative socialization parenting practices (Conger et al., 1992). Conger et al. (1992) found that parents from communities in poverty were more likely to use parenting strategies characterized as harsh, such as coerciveness, hostility, and inconsistency, than parents from more affluent communities. Both African American and Caucasian mothers living in poverty report feeling high levels of stress and low levels of support (Middlemiss, 2003), which has been argued to impact their parenting practices (McLoyd, 1990). Additionally, a parent's ability to manage stress at home is related to a preschooler's emotion regulation skills; the more stress a parent reported, the more likely a teacher was to rate the child's emotion regulation skills as poor (Mathis & Bierman, 2015). Clearly, children's home experiences affect their skills related to emotion competence.

These early emotional socialization experiences at home, combined with exposure to harsh parenting practices, may put children from communities of poverty, such as those attending Head Start, at a disadvantage for developing the appropriate emotion response and regulation skills that are needed for the preschool classroom. This is evidenced by teachers' reports that children growing up in poverty appear to have more difficulty

adjusting to the kindergarten classroom and have more emotional, behavioral, and social adjustment problems than children who are not from communities of poverty (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Therefore, it is important to examine ways in which Head Start teachers promote emotional competence in the classroom.

### **Preschool and Emotional Competence Development**

Children who are on a trajectory to meet the emotional demands of a formal school setting must know how to appropriately identify and control their emotions, as well as respond to others' emotions (Denham, 2006). During the preschool period, children experience considerable growth in skills related to emotional competence (McCabe & Altamura, 2011). As their vocabulary grows and their cognitive skills increase, their ability to name emotions also increases (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, & Cohen, 2009). By the end of age four, children display a greater ability to name their emotions than they did at the age of three (Cole et al., 2009). A child's increased ability to name emotions helps children transition better to school and the classroom, form more positive relationships with their teachers (Shields et al., 2001), and extend empathy to others (Miller et al., 2006). An increase in the ability to name emotions means that children are able to better communicate feelings to adults and peers, as well as recognize others' feelings.

In addition to a growth in perspective taking and an ability to name emotions, children's emotion regulation strategies also increase during preschool (Sala, Pons, & Molina, 2014). Sala et al. (2014) compared the emotion regulation strategies and emotion comprehension skills of three- and four--year-olds with those of five- and six-year-olds. They found that five -and six-year-old children utilized a greater range of emotion regulation strategies than the three- and four-year-old cohort. In addition, this same study

found that children in the five- and six-year-old cohort were more likely to use cognitive reappraisal, an advanced and effective emotion regulation skill that involves a child altering his or her way of thinking about an emotion stimulus in order to coordinate an appropriate response (Jacobs & Gross, 2014), than the younger cohort. Here it becomes evident that not only are children's emotion regulation strategies developing during preschool, but children's ability to use more advanced emotion regulation skills is also present at this time.

Advances in emotional competence permit children to better navigate new social and emotional experiences that make up the preschool classroom. Cole et al. (2009) found that preschool children who named and generated more strategies for coping with sadness persisted through a frustrating task longer than children who named and generated fewer coping strategies. Preschool children's ability to cope with the emotion of sadness may translate to their perseverance through frustration related to learning new information during preschool, as well as the frustration encountered when navigating new experiences in the classroom.

Preschool also marks a time when children are practicing skills related to taking the perspective of others (Ogelman, Secer, & Onder, 2013), providing the opportunity for children to understand others' emotions in order to appropriately react and respond to them. Ogelman et al. (2013) studied how 124 5 and 6 year-olds scored on the Perspective-Taking Test that measures children's cognitive, emotional, and perceptual perspective-taking abilities as it relates to their level of self-perception. In this particular study, it was found that children with higher levels of self-perception also scored higher on the perspective-taking tasks. This study not only illustrates how self-perception and

perspective-taking skills are related, but it also shows that young children are capable of taking others' perspectives, a skill necessary for responding appropriately to others' actions and emotions. Children in preschool also show an increase in their curiosity about others' emotions (Abe & Izard, 1999). Clearly, children encounter many developmental changes in emotional competence skills across the preschool years.

### **Emotional Competence and Interventions**

Children certainly experience growth and change in their emotional competence skills throughout the preschool year. However, it is important to note that children experience this growth at varying rates. In addition, children enter preschool with varying levels of emotional competence skills. The varying levels and growth of children's emotional competence skills during preschool suggest that preschool may be an ideal time to intervene to support children's development of emotional competence.

Multiple preschool curricula exist to support children in their social and emotional skill development and are currently being used by Head Start teachers (Quesenberry, Hemmeter, & Ostrosky, 2011). For example, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), a curriculum designed to promote children's social-emotional skills, has been shown to improve children's emotion knowledge skills (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). Domitrovich et al. (2007) used a randomized control trial to compare children's social emotional skills of those who had been exposed to weekly lessons from PATHS curriculum to those who were in classrooms that did not use the PATHS curriculum. Children from classrooms utilizing PATHS had greater emotion knowledge and social competence than children from classrooms that did not use the PATHS curriculum. In a randomized control trial evaluating the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management

and Child Social Emotion curriculum, a curriculum with lesson objectives and teacher training that support decreasing children's conduct problems and increasing children's social skills and emotional competence, Webster-Stratton, Reid, and Stoolmiller (2008) found that in classrooms implementing the curriculum, children could name more positive feelings, as well as generate more strategies for dealing with emotions than children in classrooms that did not implement the curriculum. In addition to experiencing changes in children's emotional competence skills, classrooms implementing the curriculum were rated as having a more positive classroom environment than classrooms that did not implement the intervention. Not only can curricula intervene and benefit individual children's emotional competence, curricula can also change the entire emotional classroom environment and climate.

Prevention programs aimed at aiding children in developing emotional and social competencies have also been effective at increasing Head Start children's emotion knowledge, emotion regulation, and emotion expression (Izard et al., 2008). Based on the notion that children are capable of learning and practicing emotional competence, interventions and curricula typically target children's emotion regulation and emotion knowledge, as well as additional skills such as how to resolve conflicts (Izard et al., 2008).

One specific prevention program, emotion-based prevention (EBP), has successfully increased Head Start children's emotional competence (Izard et al., 2008). Through RCT studies, Izard and colleagues have found that inner-city Head Start children participating in EBP have higher emotion knowledge and emotion regulation than children without this curriculum and for children participating in another emotion focused curriculum I Can Problem Solve (Izard et al., 2008). EBP involves a teacher giving a lesson about a specific

emotion, helping children identify the emotion, providing opportunities for the children to share their personal experiences with the emotion, and then conducting a book reading in which children are encouraged to identify the emotion discussed in the lesson (Izard et al., 2008). Teachers also provide coaching in the targeted emotion, by facilitating a discussion that includes how to recognize and cope with the specific emotion, in addition to providing information about how to respond to others who are experiencing the emotion.

EBP increases children's emotion knowledge, and thus, it was posited that the program helps decrease children's maladaptive behaviors and increase appropriate responses to emotions because emotion knowledge requires children to label emotions, think about the emotions, and then choose a response (Izard et al., 2008). With increased emotion knowledge gained through EBP, children's awareness of emotions and regulation of emotions improved. Therefore, findings from this study support the hypothesis that as children's emotion knowledge increases, their ability to regulate emotions also improves.

EPB provides preschool children with lots of opportunities to learn about, discuss, and reflect on emotions in relation to their own experiences (Izard et al., 2008). Even more so, EPB involves a book reading component and discussions of emotions to promote the development of emotion knowledge, emotion awareness, and emotion regulation strategies. Most importantly though, this prevention program shows that increasing children's emotional competence at the preschool level is feasible and can have significant effects on children's abilities to develop and choose healthy emotion coping skills.

### **Challenges to Implementing Socioemotional Curricula**

Head Start seeks to prepare children who are living in poverty for kindergarten (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). In order to prepare children for

kindergarten success, part of the nation-wide program involves ensuring that children leave the program with social-emotional skills related to appropriately expressing, identifying, and controlling their emotions. In fact, the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework lists social-emotional development as one of the ten domains for promoting positive and adequate growth for Head Start children (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Head Start teachers recognize their role in helping children develop social-emotional skills (Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014). Many Head Start programs implement a curriculum or have a structured plan to address the social-emotional development of children (Quesenberry et al., 2011). Such curriculum or programs can aid teachers in teaching important skills related to emotional competence, as well as help hold teachers accountable to teaching children about emotions. In fact, when Head Start teachers implement social emotional programs for kids, they are more likely to monitor children's social emotional development throughout the school year and are more likely to report that they incorporate social emotional learning opportunities into daily classroom activities (Quesenberry et al., 2011).

While some curricula and programs used in Head Start centers have shown to improve children's social-emotional skills (Bierman et al., 2008; Quesenberry et al., 2011), not every center is mandated to utilize these curricula. For example, in a randomized control trial evaluating the Head Start REDI Program (Research-Based, Developmentally-Informed), a program providing teachers with research-based intervention strategies aimed at improving literacy and social-emotional skills, children who had received the intervention program made significant gains in emotional understanding (Bierman et al.,



2008). However, children without these programs performed more poorly on emotional skills. Further, issues of implementation fidelity may reduce child outcomes (Lieber et al., 2009).

Previous work has noted that teachers struggled to implement socioemotional curricula with fidelity reporting difficulty in building social-emotional climate and adapting for cultural variations in social relations (Thomas & Ostrosky, 2011). Further, a study looking at the implementation of PATHs in six urban elementary schools found that teachers whose children benefited most from the curriculum often perceived their administrators as supportive and also implemented the curriculum with quality (Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). This suggests that implementation of such curricula, even if beneficial to children, requires teacher buy-in and administrator support, two components that cannot be guaranteed when a teacher is trained in and implements a social-emotional curriculum. Given the difficulties and concerns associated with even well-developed and research-based social-emotional curricula, Head Start may not be helping all children develop their greatest level of emotional competence. Therefore, it may be beneficial to consider specific teaching strategies, or alternative methods, of developing children's emotional competence in order to ensure that all Head Start children attain their greatest level of emotional competence.

Head Start teachers are not only encouraged to foster the social and emotional development of children through the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), but they also report that social-emotional learning is important for their students (Zinsser et al., 2014). Despite Head Start teachers' beliefs about the importance of social-emotional learning and reports of

incorporating social and emotional learning opportunities into the classroom (Zinnser et al., 2014), little research has been done to understand how teachers' everyday practices and activities, apart from the use of formal curriculums and programs, can be used to support the development of Head Start children's emotional competence. Such work may identify that while teachers struggle to implement socioemotional curriculum, they may be using other practices to promote children's emotional competence. Therefore, examining how everyday classroom activities are being used to develop children's emotional competence is warranted.

### **Adults' Language and Children's Emotional Competence**

Research has suggested that the ways in which adults socialize emotions for children impacts children's emotional competence (Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997). Research on parents' talk with their young children indicates that what parents talk about (Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002), how much they talk about something (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006), and whether the talk relates to the child's life or the adult's life (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006) has implications for children's development of certain skills and knowledge related to emotional competence. While there has been research linking teachers' talk to children's language and literacy outcomes (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Gerde & Powell, 2009), little research has examined how teachers' emotion talk may influence children's emotional competence. Even more, research has yet to examine whether teachers are even talking with children about emotions (Ahn, 2005b). Therefore, exploring research related to how parents' language influences children's understanding of emotions and their development of certain skills

related to emotional competence will provide insight into the important role adults' language plays in children's lives.

The words parents use when talking with children affect children's development of certain skills, such as theory of mind, or the ability to understand that others have their own unique thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002), a required precursor to empathy. Ruffman et al. (2002) studied how parents' mental state talk, or talk about desires, emotions, and thoughts, impacts children's development of theory of mind. Their study found that parents who used more mental state talk when describing pictures to their children, directly and significantly impacted their children's theory-of-mind understanding (Ruffman et al., 2002).

The ways parents discuss emotions with children also matters. Garner, Jones, Gaddy, and Rennie (1997) coded low-income mothers' use of statements of empathy, explanations for the causes and consequences of emotions, and emotion words during a wordless picture book reading task. Preschool children whose mothers' used more empathy-related statements and talked more about causes and consequences of emotions exhibited a better understanding of emotional situations. The same study also found a positive correlation between children's use of emotion words and mothers' empathy-related statements, suggesting the possibility that when an adult talks more about emotions, children are akin to do the same.

Denham, Zoller, and Couchoud (1994) identified that the ways in which adults discuss and respond to their emotions and the emotions of their children promotes children's understanding of emotions. Specifically, mothers who explain their emotions and the causes of their emotions have children who are more likely to do the same.

Additionally, children who have parents who guide them through emotions exhibit more emotion knowledge (Denham et al., 1997). Further, preschoolers who have parents who were considered emotion coaches, that is, parents who help children name, understand, and work through their emotions, were also better equipped to navigate peer relationships at age 8, suggesting the lasting significance that early emotion socialization has for children (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996).

Parents' mental state talk (e.g. "I want a different toy" or "I feel sad today") does affect children's use of mental state talk and their performance on an emotion task that measures children's ability to consider how a person may feel given a specific situation (Taumpeopeau & Ruffman, 2006). In fact, the more children heard mental state talk, the more likely they were to use mental state talk and the better they performed on this emotion task. Ruffman et al. (2002) found that children's understanding of theory of mind depended most on the amount of mental state talk parents used with their children. While this study looked at infant and mother pairs across time, it reveals that the type and amount of adults' language about mental states and emotions affects children's future talk about mental states, as well as children's ability to understand that others are capable of having distinct thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and responses independent of the child's own expectations and experiences.

Taumpeopeau and Ruffman (2006) also found that the amount of parental mental state talk impacts children's performance on an emotion task. In addition, the longitudinal study looked at how adults' mental state talk changes across time and found that parents are more apt to reference mental states in relation to the child when the child is very young. As the child gets older, mothers talk more about their own personal experiences, as

well as the experiences of others, suggesting that parents scaffold the use of mental state talk by first relating mental states to the child and then expanding mental state talk to others. It is important to note that mothers' use of talk about their child's desires was significantly correlated with the child's future use of mental state talk and the child's performance on emotion tasks that require them to determine the emotion a person may feel in a certain situation and use body language to read how a person feels. Mothers' talk related to her own desires did not correlate with children's mental state talk and performance on the emotion tasks as much, suggesting that child-referenced comments about mental states are useful for children's development of mental state talk and emotion understanding.

Allowing children insight into what an adult is thinking may be useful for children (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006). When adults share their thoughts with children, it may provide children with insight that helps them understand that others have their own beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, opening up the opportunity for children to begin to understand that others may experience the world differently than they do. When adults let children into their own thinking and experiences, it may also scaffold the process of understanding others' experiences and emotions. However, it is important to recognize that at first, it may be important for the child to make connections to the self before being able to understand the experiences of others (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006). Therefore, this finding may be useful for teachers working with children in the classroom; perhaps it is beneficial to first make references to the child when talking about emotions in order to scaffold and build children's understanding of others' experiences and emotions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that what adults say (Taumoepoeau & Ruffman, 2006), as well as the amount they talk about emotions (Ruffman et al., 2002), impacts children's development of knowledge and performance on tasks related to emotional competence. While this research studies parents' and their infants' and toddlers' mental state talk across time, these findings confirm that adults' talk impacts children's emotional outcomes.

While research supports that parents' talk is connected to children's emotional knowledge and understanding, little is known about how teachers' use of mental state talk impacts children (Ziv, Smadia, & Aram, 2014; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser., 2012). Even more concerning, little work has been done to determine whether emotions are being talked about in the classroom setting (Ahn, 2005a). Despite a call for more research exploring how early childhood educators act as emotion socializers (Denham et al., 2012), there remains little research about how teachers talk about emotions with children, as well the effects this talk may have on children's emotional competence.

### **Teachers' Emotion Socialization Practices**

Although numerous learning contexts exist in preschool classrooms, book reading is a daily and common activity in preschool classrooms (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Further, research supports that teachers' facilitation of whole-class book readings can impact children's development (Hindman, Wasik, & Erhart, 2012). Therefore, book reading is an important classroom context to investigate. While there has been research linking teachers' book reading practices to children's vocabulary and literacy skills (Gerde & Powell, 2009; Hindman et al., 2012; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001), how Head Start teachers use book readings, a common preschool classroom activity, to talk about emotions and support

children's emotional competence remains under researched. However, book reading certainly has the potential to offer opportunities to discuss emotions of characters and how these emotions relate to events of the story (Ahn, 2005b; Sullivan & Strang, 2002; Doyle & Bramwell, 2006), particularly narrative books, the most commonly read genre in preschool classrooms (Pentimonti et al., 2011).

It is known that Head Start teachers who believe in the importance of social-emotional learning and have classrooms with emotionally supportive environments report incorporating social-emotional learning activities into their daily classroom routines and experiences than teachers who do not believe social-emotional learning is as important (Zinsser et al., 2014). Therefore, investigating whether and how teachers are utilizing book reading, an everyday classroom activity, to incorporate social-emotional learning opportunities for children is important.

**Book selection.** It has been suggested that books can provide teachers with an opportunity to teach children about emotions (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). In addition, Stadler and McEvoy (2003) demonstrated that the content of books that parents read to their children influences the things they talk about with their children during the book readings, such as the pre-reading skills they focus on while reading. However, more research needs to be done to explore how different texts influence whether teachers discuss emotions with children during book readings.

According to Ahn (2005b), good books for talking about emotions with young children include a narrative with a storyline where a character encounters a problem and solves it; this provides an opportunity to discuss emotions surrounding how and why the character approaches the problem and solution in the manner that he or she does.

Pentimonti et al. (2011) found that most preschool teachers choose narrative books for their classroom book readings. In their study, 13 preschool teachers logged the books they chose to read aloud to their classes for 30 weeks, books were coded as either narrative, informational, mixed (a book that includes factually accurate information woven into a narrative), and other text, such as menus, instructions, autobiographies, and biographies. After coding the books the teachers chose to read to their classes, Of the 258 books teachers reported choosing to read, a little over 85% of the books were narratives. Because narratives provide opportunity for discussing emotions, book selection for whole-class book readings has the potential to influence the discussion of emotions in the preschool classroom.

A lack of emotion talk during book reading could be a result of the content of the books that adults are choosing to read to children. Teachers' talk during a picture book reading may be influenced by the content of the story (Ziv, Smadja, & Aram, 2015). Ziv et al. (2014) found that when a book was rich in false-belief content, parents and teachers talked more with children about false-belief concepts. Considering this research, one may hypothesize that if teachers choose books that are rich in emotion, their use of emotion language will increase as they use the emotional content of the book to spur discussion about emotions with children. Because adults do not normally talk about emotions unless prompted (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000), it may be useful for teachers to use books rich in emotion text as script for facilitating conversations about emotions with children.

**Narratives and emotions.** Narrative picture books often have a character that is encountering some sort of struggle or conflict (Torr & Clugston, 1999). Given the conflict



and growth present in narratives, narratives provide an opportunity for adults to expand on characters' experiences, and more specifically, the emotions the character encounters. It may be that narratives or books that are rich in emotions provide adults with more opportunities to discuss emotions, and therefore, it would seem that teachers who use books that are rich in emotion words will talk more about emotions because they can elaborate on the characters' emotions, make connections to emotional experiences, or ask questions about the emotions present in the book. The question therefore arises about whether teachers are choosing narratives that are rich in emotion text for their class book readings.

**Book reading and emotion talk.** Despite the existence of books that teachers can use to discuss emotions (Sullivan & Strang, 2002), in one study observing teachers' strategies for socializing emotions, only a third of the teachers actually employed book reading as a means of talking about emotions with children (Ahn, 2005b). This was even after the researchers requested teachers use a specific book that would lend itself to conversation about emotions. Perhaps the teachers in this particular study were not regularly using book readings in their classrooms, or they may hold the belief that books are not the most productive avenue for building children's emotion competence skills. This lack of understanding points to the need for more research to understand how teachers use everyday book readings beyond the scope of developing children's language and literacy skills to develop children's emotional competence skills.

While teachers' talk about emotions has not been heavily explored, more recent research has focused on teachers' mental-state talk during book readings. When comparing preschool teachers' language and mothers' language during book readings, Ziv and

colleagues (2014) found that teachers incorporated more mental-state vocabulary into their book readings than mothers did. Further, teachers talked more than mothers about the causes of mental states, as well as others' perspectives. Therefore, teachers were using language to engage children in thinking about different mental states during book readings (Ziv et al., 2014). More specifically, teachers talked about emotions with children during book readings more than mothers did. However, it is important to note that teachers rarely talked about emotions. Nevertheless, Ziv et al. (2014)'s research suggests that teachers in Israel are engaging children in emotion talk during book readings, but more studies are needed to explore whether early childhood teachers in the U.S. are talking about emotions during book readings. It is also important to note that Ziv et al. (2014)'s research focused on mental-state talk and how mothers and teachers differed in addressing different aspects of mental-state such as point of view, mental causality, and false belief. Therefore, future work should be broader in scope, exploring the ways in which teachers specifically engage children in thinking and talking about emotions. Due to the generally low emotional competence of many children in Head Start, and the critical need for developing these skills prior to kindergarten (Rhoades et al., 2001; Denham et al., 2003), there is a need to know if Head Start teachers are using book readings to talk about emotions.

### **Classroom Climate and Teachers' Emotion Talk**

Research supports the notion that emotionally supportive classroom environments have academic (Rudasill, Gallagher, & White, 2010) and social benefits for children (Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008). Further, emotionally supportive classroom environments provide notable benefits for students who are considered at-risk (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Teachers are responsible for creating classroom environments

that support the emotional development of children (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Teachers can create such positive classroom environments by cultivating supportive and meaningful relationships with children (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). Teachers also foster emotionally supportive classrooms when they take time to get to know their students and understand their unique and individual needs, as well as when they take time to teach children social-emotional skills, such as labeling emotions (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). Classrooms structured with smooth transitions and clear expectations also contribute to developing children's emotional skills.

Because Zinnser et al. (2014) found that teachers with highly supportive classroom environments were more likely to incorporate social emotional learning opportunities into their daily activities, it might be that teachers who choose to use books rich in emotion text also foster emotionally supportive classroom environments, as well as talk more about emotions with children during book readings. Perhaps preschool teachers who provide children with more emotional support throughout daily activities are apt to use emotion-rich text, as well as discuss emotions with children during book readings. Therefore, research to better understand whether teachers' use of emotion-rich texts during book readings and use of emotion talk are linked to the emotional support that they provide for students throughout the school day is needed.

### **The Present Study**

Given the significant role adults' language plays in helping children develop skills related to emotional competence, it is important to understand how teachers are talking about emotions with children. Because book reading is a common activity in preschool classrooms (Pentimonti et al., 2011), exploring how Head Start teachers are using book

readings in their classroom and whether they are using book reading as a platform for teaching and discussing emotions with children is needed. Therefore, this study sets out to answer three questions:

- 1) Are Head Start teachers using book readings to discuss emotions with children?
- 2) Do Head Start teachers choose to use emotion-rich text during book readings?
- 3) How are teachers' use of emotion talk during book reading and choice of books rich in emotion text related to the emotional support they provide children throughout daily classroom interactions?

Based on the previous work on teachers' use of book reading as an opportunity to discuss emotions, it was expected that teachers would vary widely in their use of emotion talk during book reading. It was hypothesized that the teachers who were using text rich in emotions were also talking more about emotions, suggesting that emotion-rich text can be used to generate more teacher talk about emotions. However, it is plausible that teachers were not choosing emotion-rich texts for their shared book reading sessions, which may be a factor related to their use of emotion talk during book reading. Finally, teachers who use book reading as an opportunity to talk about emotions with children would have more emotionally supportive classroom environments in general.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

All teachers participating in this study were also a part of a larger study evaluating the effects of teacher participation in a science intervention. However, data used for this study was all pre-test data, prior to any intervention work thus, reflecting business as usual teaching practices. Further, the intervention study was focused on science, not literacy or social-emotional development, so there was no specific emphasis on book reading or teachers' emotion talk in any part of the intervention work.

Only teachers who conducted whole-class book readings during videotaping were used in this study. After reviewing the recordings, 34 teachers were included in the study because they conducted whole-class book readings. 39 teachers were not included because they did not perform a whole-class book reading, or because their book readings were not recorded during classroom observations.

The sample used in this study included 34 teachers (1 male). 8.8% of teachers were African American, 85.3% were White/Caucasian, and 5.9% identified as other. Teachers reported having between 0 and 27 years of experience teaching Head Start, with an average of 8.71 years experience teaching Head Start. Levels of education varied with 1 teacher having a high school diploma or GED, 9 with associates degrees, 20 with bachelor's degrees, and 4 with master's degrees.

### **Procedures**

Lead teachers and their classrooms were video recorded during one typical school day (i.e., no field trips or special guests). The observers/videographers were trained to reliability in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (*CLASS*, La Paro, Pianta, &

Stuhlman, 2004). Per the procedures of the *CLASS*, each teacher was video recorded for 4 20-minute segments during the day. This included a large group session, which included a book reading for 34 teachers. Teachers were aware of the video recording and were wearing a microphone to enhance sound quality of the recording.

A team of research assistants was trained by the lead author to transcribe the videos of teachers' book readings. Transcripts were created in an EXCEL document and captured both teacher and child utterances during book readings. For the purpose of this study, teachers' utterances are defined as speech divided by "pausing and phrase-final intonation" (Dickinson, Hofer, Barnes, & Grifenhagen, 2014, p. 235). A book reading began when the teacher introduced the book and concluded before the teacher introduced transitioning to a new activity.

### **Coding**

When transcribing videos, researcher assistants were trained by the lead author on how to divide teacher and child utterances. After being trained, the lead author supervised the research assistants while they transcribed their first video in order to ensure reliability in transcribing. After the lead author approved all the undergraduate researchers' first transcripts, they transcribed the remaining videos that the lead author assigned them. While transcribing, researchers would watch the entire book reading, and then would view small segments of the video to accurately capture teacher and child utterances. If researchers were unclear, they could re-watch the segment of the video; if it was impossible to understand the utterances, researchers would mark an xxx to indicate there was talking, but that the talking was inaudible. However, this rarely happened with teacher utterances, as teachers wore a microphone during recording. Throughout the process of

transcription, the lead author had the undergraduate researchers documented any questions or concerns they had about the videos or transcripts, and the lead author answered and addressed all questions in order to ensure reliability.

Once all eligible book readings were transcribed, the lead author trained a research assistant to code the teachers' utterances using a coding system developed by the lead author. Every teacher utterance appearing in a transcript was coded using the coding system below; children's utterances were not coded.

The coding system developed by the lead author consisted of two streams. The first stream addressed the focus of teachers' utterances during book readings. Table 1 (see Appendix A) highlights the codes of the focus stream, giving a definition and example of each of the codes. When coding for focus, utterances were either coded as emotion-focused, academic-focused, behavior-focused, or N/A for utterances that were unrelated to any of the other focus categories (i.e. "Okay" used as a transition from thoughts). An emotion-focused utterance is an utterance that defines, addresses, recognizes, explains and names words related to emotion, asks questions about emotions, gives examples of emotions, makes comments about emotions, and responds to and expands on comments about emotions (adapted from Gerde, & Powell, 2009). If a teacher's utterance was related to anything pertaining to the book (i.e. a character, the problem in the book, or a word in the book), or any other academic or learning content (i.e. pointing out a letter), it was coded as academic. When an utterance was related to managing or changing a child's behavior, or giving expectations about a child's or the class's behavior, the utterance was coded as having a behavior focus. It is important to note that in all instances, emotion-focus took

precedence, meaning if an utterance contained an emotion word but was also related to the book being read, the utterance was coded as having an emotion-focus.

In order to better understand how teachers are engaging children in talking about emotions, a second stream in the coding system was developed for determining the purpose of the utterance. Studying the purpose of an emotion utterance is important because past work by Taumoepeau and Ruffman (2006) has suggested that whether an adult is relating emotion talk to a child's or adult's life influences children's early emotional competence skills. Therefore, teachers' emotion utterances focusing on asking the child about his or her experience (eliciting) or giving information about emotions (providing) was coded. If a teacher's emotion utterance inquired about children's knowledge of emotions or actively engaged them in thinking about or reflecting on emotions and emotional experiences, the purpose of the utterance was considered eliciting. When an utterance was providing, explaining, labeling or giving information, it was coded as having a purpose of producing. When an utterance was not directed at the class or unrecognizable, it was coded as N/A. Table 2 (see Appendix A) defines and gives examples related to utterances coded for purpose.

Using the aforementioned coding system, a research assistant was trained to reliability on the coding system. The lead author and undergraduate research assistant coded the same transcript; for the focus stream, 92.77% inter-rater agreement was reached, and a 97.59% inter-rater agreement was reached for the purpose stream. The research assistant coded the remaining transcripts, and the lead author double coded 20% of the transcripts ( $n = 8$ ) to verify reliability was maintained; for the focus stream,



reliability was maintained at 95.6% and for the direction stream (only emotion utterances), reliability was maintained at 100%.

## **Measures**

**Emotional quality of the classroom.** The *CLASS* (La Paro et al., 2004) is a commonly used measurement in Head Start classrooms to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions. The *CLASS* is based on theoretical support and has been found to be relatively consistent across validation studies, as well as suggested for future use for guiding teacher and classroom practices (Sandilos, DiPerna, & The Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2014). While the assessment contains three domains (emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support), this study used data from the Emotional Support domain only (La Paro et al., 2004). Teachers who score high in Emotional Support use everyday activities to promote children's emotional development. The *CLASS* Emotional Support domain scores classrooms on how teachers are acknowledging and responding to children's emotional experiences, as well as how teachers address behavior in the classroom to promote a positive and respectful classroom environment (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008).

The *CLASS* is made up of three domains and a total of ten dimensions, and each dimension is rated using a seven-point scale. For the purpose of this study, the scores in the domain of emotional support was used. The emotional support domain is made up of four dimensions: positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives. Using the seven-point scale, four twenty minute segments of videos of a teacher's classroom are rated on each of the dimensions. A score of 1-2 indicates a low-range score in which classrooms are demonstrating a low-level of the dimension. A score of

3-5 is a mid-range score that shows that the components related to a dimension are somewhat present. Finally, a score of 6-7 indicates that the desired behaviors of a dimension were most likely the general experience of all children in the classroom.

Per CLASS procedures, data collectors captured four twenty-minute segments of teacher practice to assess the classroom environment using CLASS. Because one of these segments was the teacher book reading (coded for teacher language), the CLASS scores used in this study include the scores from the remaining 3 twenty-minute segments. The two researchers were trained to reliability on the CLASS through Teachstone. Coders met with two supervisors to code 2 videos together; the group then split to code 2 videos separately and then discussed each video to ensure reliability. The two coders then coded the remaining videos. Meetings were held about every two weeks with a supervisor to maintain reliability, and both coders maintained their CLASS certificates throughout the process of assessing the videos.

**Emotion-rich text.** In order to code books as emotion-rich, the lead author examined all book text that teachers read aloud. Recall that Denham et al. (2003) states that emotional competence includes a child's ability to name emotions, respond to emotions, and regulate emotions. Therefore, book text was coded based on how many times the book explicitly mentioned or named emotions (i.e. included emotion words such as sad, happy, or grumpy), how many times a character experienced an emotion or emotional state (i.e. crying, laughing, smiling), or how many times a character in a book encountered a challenge in which he or she had to manage emotions in order to overcome. Each occurrence of any one of these three requirements was recorded for each book; the total number of occurrences was summed to give the book its emotion-richness score.

Books can receive a score ranging from 0 to 5. A score of 5 indicates that there were 5 or more incidents of emotion words, emotion states, or challenges a character encountered in which she had to manage emotions; for this study, a book with a code of 5 is considered an emotion-rich text. If a book does not meet any of the criteria for emotion-rich text, it was coded with a score of 0. This coding scale is used to indicate how much the book lends itself to opening up a conversation about emotions and emotion regulation skills.. The lead author coded the books participating teachers used in their large group book readings. Because all teachers read the entire book that they selected, all text of all teacher-selected books was coded.

## Results

### Emotion Talk During Book Reading

To answer research question one, *are Head Start teachers talking about emotions during book readings*, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the central tendencies of teachers' total utterances during book readings and teachers' emotion utterances.

Recognizing that data were skewed, histograms were created to present data. Figures 1 through 5 display histograms that show the distribution of the data for variables emotion utterances, emotion eliciting utterances, and emotion producing utterances, as well as behavior utterances and academic utterances.

On average, teachers produced 69.82 utterances during book reading, and of the 34 teachers in this study, 41.18% used emotion talk. The range of participants' use of emotion utterances during book reading was 0 to 22 utterances and the median was 0. Teachers averaged 2.44 emotion utterances throughout the book-reading event (see Figure 1 in Appendix B). The average number of eliciting emotion utterances was 1.24, the median was 0, and the range was 0 to 13 utterances (see Figure 2 in Appendix B). The average number of producing emotion utterances was 1.21, the median was 0, and the range was 0 to 11 (see Figure 3 in Appendix B).

While the mean of emotion utterances used during book reading was 2.44, teachers on average used 11.74 utterances related to managing or changing children's behavior (see Figure 4 in Appendix B) and 43.68 utterances related to academic content or the book (see Figure 5 in Appendix B).

## **Emotion-Richness of Text**

To answer research question two, *do Head Start teachers choose to use emotion-rich text during book readings*, the number of emotion words, states, or experiences found in the text of each book were identified (see Figure 6 in Appendix B). Books containing five or more incidences of emotion words, states, or experiences were considered emotion-rich; 17.65% of teachers read books that met this criteria. It is important to note that the number of books following standard narrative structure, or books that contained a storyline with a beginning, middle, and end and consisted of a character encountering a problem was also calculated; 55.88% of teachers chose books that followed standard narrative structure. The remaining teachers read books that were classified as other, such as counting books, rhyming books, or alphabet books.

A Pearson Correlation identified that the amount of emotional content in a text was significantly correlated with teachers' emotion talk ( $r = .56, p = .001$ ).

Teachers using books coded as 5+ for emotion-richness on average used 11.20 emotion utterances (range 3 to 22). Of these utterances, 6.20 were eliciting emotion utterances and 5.00 were producing emotion utterances.

## **Emotion Text and Emotional Support**

To answer research question 3, *are teachers' use of emotion talk and emotion-rich text predictors of teachers' emotional support domain scores on the CLASS*, a regression analysis was conducted using total emotion talk and the richness of emotion text as independent variables and the average scores of the emotional support domain of the CLASS as the dependent variable. Results indicated neither emotion talk nor emotion text were predictors of teachers' emotion support scores on the CLASS ( $F = .057, p = .945$ ).

## **Discussion**

The current study contributes to the research literature in two important ways. First, findings indicate that Head Start teachers rarely discuss emotions during shared book reading sessions. Second, although it was uncommon for teachers to read books identified as rich in emotion text, when teachers did, they were more likely to talk about emotions with children. These findings and their implications for research and practice are discussed here.

### **Teachers Do Not Use Group Book Reading to Discuss Emotions**

The current study shows that very few of Head Start teachers' extra-textual utterances during book readings are related to emotions, suggesting that book reading is not being used as a means of talking about emotions with children. This is unfortunate, as talking about emotions with children is needed in order to help them build the emotional competence skills related to identifying emotions, responding to emotions, and regulating emotions (Denham et al., 2003). Considering the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework, children attending the program are expected to learn to label, express, respond to, and regulate emotions (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Recall that children who are living in poverty, such as those attending Head Start, are at an increased risk for not developing critical emotional competence skills (Shaffer et al., 2012). Therefore, additional support and teaching of emotional competence skills could have a significant impact on children's development of these skills, setting them up for present and future academic (Rhoades et al., 2011) and social success (Denham et al., 2003).

## **Why No Emotion Talk During Book Reading**

Despite earlier research identifying preschool teachers' beliefs about their important role in helping children develop social-emotional skills (Zinsser et al., 2014), Head Start teachers are not using book readings to talk about emotions. However, this does not mean that Head Start teachers are not supporting children's emotional competence. Two alternatives come to mind to explain this finding; it may be that teachers are using other instructional contexts to explore emotions, or it may suggest that teachers may not know how to go about engaging children in conversations about emotions during book readings.

Perhaps teachers are talking about emotions as children experience them in the classrooms, acknowledging and supporting children through their emotional experiences (Ahn, 2005a). Ahn (2005a)'s observations of teachers' emotion socialization practices in the classroom supports this explanation, as the study found that childcare teachers use various strategies across multiple classroom settings and situations to help children name their emotions and understand the cause of their emotions. It may be then that teachers are apt to talk about emotions when the emotions arise in the classroom, such as during free choice time when children encounter a great range of emotions as they make choices, interact with peers, and navigate disappointments and triumphs independently. This may be especially true since adults are not likely to talk about emotions unless they are prompted (Fivush et al., 2000). Therefore, children's emotional struggles throughout the day may act as prompts for teachers' talk about emotions, increasing their likelihood of talking about emotions in those moments over talking about emotions during book readings in the classroom.

Using book readings to talk about emotions gives teachers an opportunity to give children information about emotions, including ways to deal with the emotions they feel, as well as ways to react if another person is expressing an emotion, when children are not in the midst of experiencing the emotion. Children struggle to develop new skills when they are emotionally charged. Therefore, when teachers do not use book readings to talk about emotions with children, they forgo an opportunity to teach children emotional competence skills at a time when a child's emotions are typically not heightened, and thus, more likely to understand and take on this new knowledge.

Another reason teachers may not be talking about emotions during book readings is because they do not know how to do so. The call for a better understanding of how teachers act as emotion socializers for children has been relatively recent (Denham et al., 2012), so one may argue that because there is a lack of research exploring teachers' best practices for helping children develop emotional competence skills, little has also been done to understand how to train and help teachers better address the emotional needs of children by integrating academic activities, such as book reading, and social-emotional learning.

While the research focused on parents' talk about emotions with their children and identifies the impact their talk has on children's emotional competence (Gardner et al., 1997; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006), it is important to recognize that teachers play a different, and unique, role in children's lives, suggesting that they may also play a different role in helping children develop emotional competence skills. Therefore, a lack of understanding teachers' emotion socialization practices may keep teacher-training programs focused primarily on educating teachers about how to support the academic development of children and not children's emotional competence skills. In addition, even



though some preschool teachers use curricula that address children's emotional competence skills (Quesenberry et al., 2011), studies have indicated the difficulty of implementing these with fidelity (Lieber et al., 2009) thus, resulting in few significant outcomes for children. Therefore, teachers may benefit from professional development which supports their learning of strategies for building emotional competence that can be integrated into general classroom activities, like book readings, using available classroom supplies. Giving teachers a set of skills related to supporting children's emotional competence skills could provide teachers an opportunity to integrate these practices into general classroom activities, routines, and materials, in addition to addressing the difficulties many teachers face when implementing curricula in the classroom, such as not having access to curricula material or quality materials (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

Once additional research reveals more about how teachers can support children's emotional competence skills, there may be a better understanding of how teachers should talk about emotions with children, and therefore a push to provide teachers with this information. Despite the limited research regarding teachers' emotion socialization practices, some research has shown that programs aimed at helping parents emotionally support children with behavior problems have been effective in giving adults better emotion coaching strategies (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Kehoe, Efron, & Prior, 2013). This may mean that providing teachers with training on how to use books to support children's emotional development will benefit both teachers and children. However, without the knowledge and skills related to best practices for teachers regarding how and when to talk about emotions with children, one may expect teachers to be less likely to engage in

discussing emotions with children during book readings. Therefore, it will become important to provide effective professional development for teachers about how to do this.

**How book readings may support emotional competence.** Book readings may offer a unique opportunity for teachers to talk about emotions with children (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Books with emotion-rich text may give children new vocabulary to describe emotions, as well as new ways to think about responding to and coping with emotions. In addition to merely increasing children's exposure to emotion words, books provide teachers with an opportunity to help children better understand the various sources of emotions, as well as the ways a child can go about healthily coping with these emotions. With the help of an adult, book characters' emotional experiences become a means for teachers to model to children how to think and respond to emotional experiences, and they also give adults a chance to invite children to reflect on their own emotional experiences and how they may be similar or different to the characters' emotional experiences, an important strategy for promoting emotional competence (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006).

What is particularly unique and exciting about teachers using books to talk about emotions is that books allow children to experience emotions indirectly through characters. This may be particularly advantageous because book reading allows children to think about emotions when they themselves are not experiencing the emotions, giving them time to think about and consider how to respond to emotions.

**Specifics of teachers' talk during book reading.** This study found there to be little difference in Head Start teachers' use of eliciting and producing emotion utterances (mean of eliciting emotion utterances = 1.24 and mean of producing emotion utterances = 1.21),

meaning that teachers are giving information about emotions about the same amount that they are asking questions or engaging children in thinking about emotions and emotional experiences. However, because there were so few teacher emotion utterances, it seems that the differences in eliciting and producing emotion utterances is incidental rather than planned by the teachers. Recall that Taumpeopeau and Ruffman (2006) suggest that it may be useful for adults to first talk about children's own emotional experiences before asking them to think about the emotional experiences of others. Considering this, one may expect that teachers would scaffold emotions for children by asking children to consider their own emotions, or simply giving them information about emotions and relating it to children's lives during book readings at the beginning of the year. As the year progressed, they may transition into eliciting information from the children about their own emotions or asking them to consider the emotional experiences of others. Therefore, it may be that if data were collected in the first part of the year, there would be more producing emotion utterances, as teachers explain and give information about emotions, and the second half of the year may bring about more eliciting emotion utterances as teachers have already built children's knowledge of emotions and can now ask higher-level questions about them. However, in this study there are so few emotion utterances, as well as such little difference between the types of emotion utterances, that it seems that talk about emotions is quite incidental and teachers are likely not consciously using book readings as a means of talking about emotions with children.

**How teachers can talk about emotions during book readings.** When teachers talk about emotions in the context of books, they have the opportunity to give information about emotions, naming and defining emotions, as well as giving ways to cope with and

respond to emotions (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). Books also give teachers the chance to ask children to reflect on their own experiences, as well as brainstorm ways to manage emotions, as characters in the books encounter emotional experiences. Further, teachers can use book readings to provide opportunities for children to share their own thoughts and experiences with emotions. Encouraging children to think about and reflect on the emotions in books and about the ways that children connect with characters' emotional experiences mirrors the components of distancing, or a literacy strategy that helps children make meaningful connections with text (Whitehurst et al., 1988), and a strategy that is recommended for teacher use to build children's literacy skills (Dennis & Horn, 2011).

### **Teachers' Talk During Book Reading**

Past research has investigated teachers' extra-textual utterances during book readings as it relates to addressing children's behavior and promoting academic learning. For example, Gianvecchio and French (2002) looked at how teachers' comments during storybook readings address the book or interruptions happening in the classroom. This study found that teachers' utterances that focused on the book or children's own experiences related to the book were better for reengaging children in storybook readings than teachers' utterances that were not related to the book, but are instead focused on interruptions occurring in the classroom.

Teachers' utterances during book reading have also been found to influence children's academics, specifically their vocabulary development, as decontextualized meaning-making utterances, or teachers' talk that asked children to label, make connections, infer, summarize, and predict, or essentially make meaning of the story apart from the information directly provided in the text of the book (Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, &

Morrison, 2008; Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Further, Gerde and Powell (2009) found that Head Start teachers' use of book-focused utterances positively impacted children's vocabulary growth. Consistent with teachers' utterances in these other studies, my study found that teachers' utterances during book readings focused on children's behavior or academic content. However, this study expands beyond that of previous book reading research to investigate teachers' emotion talk. This study captured that teachers were not talking much about emotions, providing an important new contribution to the literature.

Head Start teachers' focus on academic content during book readings is not surprising considering the push in early childhood education to educate teachers to use book readings to develop children's literacy skills. This study's finding that teachers' utterances mostly focused on academic content or the book at hand is actually quite encouraging considering the years of intervention research that has focused on changing teachers' language and talk during book readings to focus more on supporting children's language and literacy skills.

It is important to recognize, however, that this study coded teachers' utterances for the topic of the utterance and not the quality of teachers' utterances, meaning that teachers' utterances in this study were coded as academic because they talked generally about academic content or referenced anything related to content or concepts discussed in the book or classroom. Therefore, this study may show that teachers are talking about academic content often, and while this may be true, the quality of the content of the utterances may actually be quite low. For example, teachers may be asking children to label what they see in the book, whether they liked the book, or asking other close-ended questions, failing to invite children to engage in higher-level cognitive skills such as making

inferences or predications. Yet, it is still encouraging to see such work by Wasik, Bond, and Hindman (2006) that suggests that given teacher training, teachers are able to change their behaviors and practices during book readings. This means that changing teachers' behaviors during book reading is feasible (Wasik et al., 2006), suggesting that future interventions could focus on supporting teachers in increasing their talk about emotions during book readings.

**Promoting literacy when talking about emotions.** Teachers need not sacrifice supporting children's literacy skills while talking about emotions during book readings. When reading books to children, asking comprehension questions about the characters and problems in the books is important for children's literacy development (van Kleeck, Vander Woude, & Hammett, 2006). Teachers can also ask children comprehension questions about the emotions characters from the text may be experiencing (van Kleeck et al., 2006), in addition to asking children to consider times when they themselves have felt similarly, allowing children to make meaningful connections to characters and events in the book (Whitehurst et al., 1988). When preschool teachers read text, they can also ask children to predict how a character may feel in the future, or engage children in a conversation about emotions to promote children's vocabulary development (Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Finally, teachers can encourage the skill of inferring, a recommended book reading practice (van Kleeck et al., 2006), by asking children what a character may be experiencing after a particular struggle in the book. While the present study shows that teachers are not talking much about emotions during book readings, it is important to recognize that book readings provide an ideal context for talking about emotions with children while still upholding its use for building children's literacy skills.

## **Book Text Matters**

The current study revealed that there is a significant difference in teachers' emotion talk when they read books with more versus less emotional content. Recall that the results identified that the amount of emotional content in a text was significantly correlated with teachers' emotion talk, suggesting that when teachers read books rich in emotion text, they talk more about emotions with children. This is consistent with previous research that has shown that the genre and content of a book influences teachers' talk during book readings. For example, Price, Bradley, and Smith (2012) found that teachers' utterances during the reading of information books were more cognitively demanding than teachers' utterances while reading storybooks. Because emotion-rich text is correlated with more teacher talk about emotions, it becomes evident that the emotional content of a book can give teachers an avenue for talking about emotions with children. Book choice then is especially important since it does not appear that teachers naturally talk about emotions during book reading in the absence of emotion text, nor do they appear to intentionally plan for conversations about emotions. The text with emotional content seemed to provide the groundwork for organic conversations about emotions, with little planning on the teachers' part. Therefore, increasing teachers' talk about emotions in classrooms may be possible by merely choosing books richer in emotional content.

Interestingly, findings from this study suggest that Head Start teachers are choosing a variety of text types for whole-class book readings. While narratives have been found to be the most common genre read by preschool teachers (Pentimonti et al., 2011), this study reveals that at least in this sample, teachers are selecting a variety of texts, including nonfiction books, counting and alphabet books, as well as books that are repetitive in

nature or rhyme. Unfortunately, only 6 books were coded as emotion-rich, meaning they contained five or more instances of emotion vocabulary or experiences. This finding is important to take into consideration when thinking about text selection. While teachers who choose more emotion-rich text appear to talk more about emotions during book readings, we do not yet understand why these books were selected. Teachers who did not select emotion-rich texts may not have the resources or books available to them in their classrooms, especially considering that Head Start serves children living in communities of poverty which tend to have preschool classrooms that are more likely to have fewer books and fewer quality books than middle-income preschool classrooms (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Alternatively, teachers may not know what merits emotion-rich text or text that provides opportunities to discuss emotions with children.

Teachers can incorporate talking about emotions with children during book readings, even if the books do not appear to have much emotion content, but it is necessary to more deeply investigate what components of a children's book provide teachers with a platform for talking about emotions, and then train teachers on how to capitalize on these book characteristics in order to engage children in learning about emotions. It is still important to recognize that emotional content in books helps spur teachers' talk about emotions, as suggested by this study. Therefore, future research should consider the books available in Head Start classrooms, and whether these books can provide teachers with an avenue for discussing emotions with children.

### **Emotional Support in Classrooms**

This study found that teachers' selection of emotion-rich text or use of emotion talk during book readings were not predictive of the general emotional support teachers



provide in their classrooms. This finding was not surprising considering so few teachers were using book reading to discuss emotions. In general, teachers' CLASS scores on emotional support were quite high. Thus, we can assume that teachers use other contexts and opportunities outside of book readings to support children's emotional competence skills. Furthermore, it is also important to recognize that the emotional domain of the CLASS provides an overall measure of the emotional climate of the classroom. Inversely, the present study was examining teachers' talk during one specific context. Certainly, teachers can score well on the CLASS without directly talking about emotions with children.

While the CLASS provides a general understanding of how supportive a teacher is to students' emotional needs in terms of classroom climate, regard for student perspective, and teacher sensitivity, it does not specifically hone in on how teachers are teaching children about emotions. This study sought to capture the more nuanced aspects of how teachers support children's emotional competence, and how they do so during a specific and common classroom activity. Past research has suggested that teachers' CLASS scores are predictors of children's future academic and social skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2005), but this finding does not help explain whether teachers are talking about emotions with children and how this influences children's social-emotional development, specifically whether this impacts children's ability to name emotions, regulate emotions, and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Denham et al., 2003).

While we can expect that the CLASS would not capture how teachers' talk about emotions directly, we do need to consider how to capture teachers' emotion talk, as well as the specific strategies teachers employ when building children's emotional competence

throughout the school day. In order to do so, the CLASS, a general and blunt measure, does not appear to be the best tool to evaluate teachers' emotion talk in the classroom. Instead, it may be wise to begin to incorporate measuring and observing specific teacher strategies and skills, including how and when they talk about emotions and the specific interactions they have with children when talking about emotions, in measuring the emotional support they provide children in the classroom. In order to capture teachers' emotion talk and specific strategies employed by teachers to build children's emotional competence then, a different measurement tool is needed.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study contributes to the literature in many ways; however, limitations should be recognized. Although the sample size was small, this work provides the first detailed examination of Head Start teachers' use of emotion talk during large-group book reading sessions providing valuable information to the field. Future work should expand the sample size and perhaps various types of programming (e.g., public school pre-k and private preschools) to understand more about how preschool teachers are talking about emotions during book readings.

Because books provide a meaningful context in which teachers can talk about emotions with children, examining emotion talk during this common preschool classroom activity was important. However, in the future, it is also important to consider how other classroom activities and interactions provide teachers with opportunities to talk about emotions with children, in addition to examining in more detail the complexity and richness of teachers' emotion talk in the classroom. Children experience many emotions with varying magnitudes throughout the school day, so more research is needed to

examine how teachers act and respond to support children's emotional competence throughout the day.

Allowing teachers to choose the text they read to their classes was a strength in this study because it allowed us to examine teachers' choice in book selection. However, this resulted in very little emotion talk, as few teachers selected emotion-rich text. In order to answer questions about how a book's emotional content influences teachers' emotion talk, controlling for the text by providing teachers with emotion-rich text is needed.

Although it was beyond the scope of this study to examine children's emotional skills and outcomes, future studies need to identify how children's emotion competence skills relate to teachers' use of emotion talk during book readings. This work would provide a foundation for identifying effective strategies teachers can use during book readings to help children develop emotion competence skills. Given the unique opportunity book reading provides to integrate literacy and emotional competence education, future research efforts will be beneficial in developing a better understanding of how marrying literacy and social-emotional education can positively impact young children in Head Start classrooms.

## **Conclusions**

Book reading, a common activity in preschool classrooms, possesses the potential to build children's emotional competence skills, however is not used for such purposes. The current study reveals that teachers' text selection plays a role in their discussion of emotions during book reading sessions, and findings point to the need for future research to better understand how teachers' talk about emotions can help children develop emotional competence skills during specific classroom activities, such as book reading.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### TABLES

Table 1:

*Focus Utterance Codes*

Category	Description	Example
Emotion	Speaks about emotion, feeling, emotional state	How do you think he feels?  I bet he is angry.
Behavioral	Expectation or directions about child's/class's behavior	Please sit down.  Move back.
Academic	Related to academic nature of classroom or academic content	Do you see the letter k?
Other	Utterance directed at another adult; utterance cannot be heard; all other utterances	

Table 2:

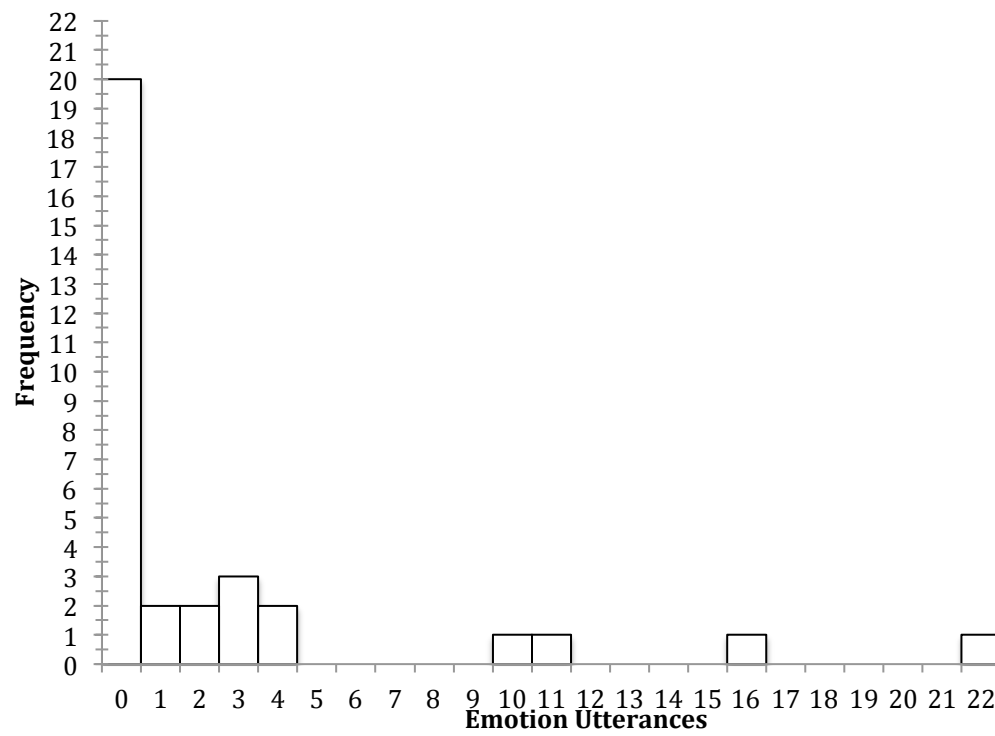
*Purpose Utterance Codes*

Category	Description	Example
Producing	Teacher is providing, explaining, labeling, or giving information	I am mad right now.  The boy looks so sad.
Eliciting	Asking for information/trying to get response from child. Inviting student to consider another viewpoint (wonder statements)	I wonder how it would feel to be little bear.  Can you see how that might make him mad?
N/A	Utterance not directed at child/class; singing	-singing

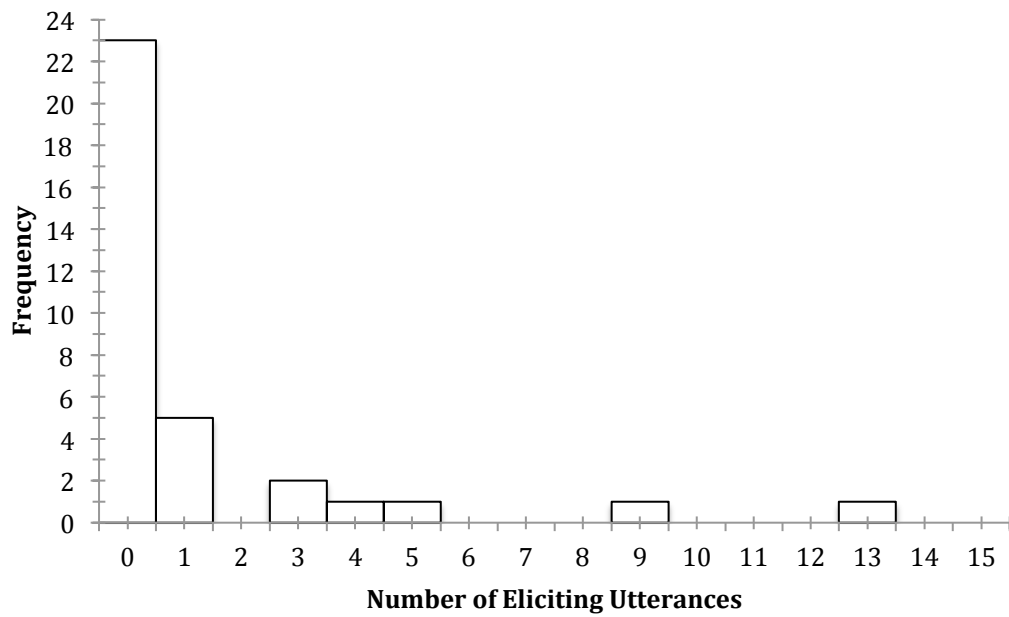
## APPENDIX B

### FIGURES

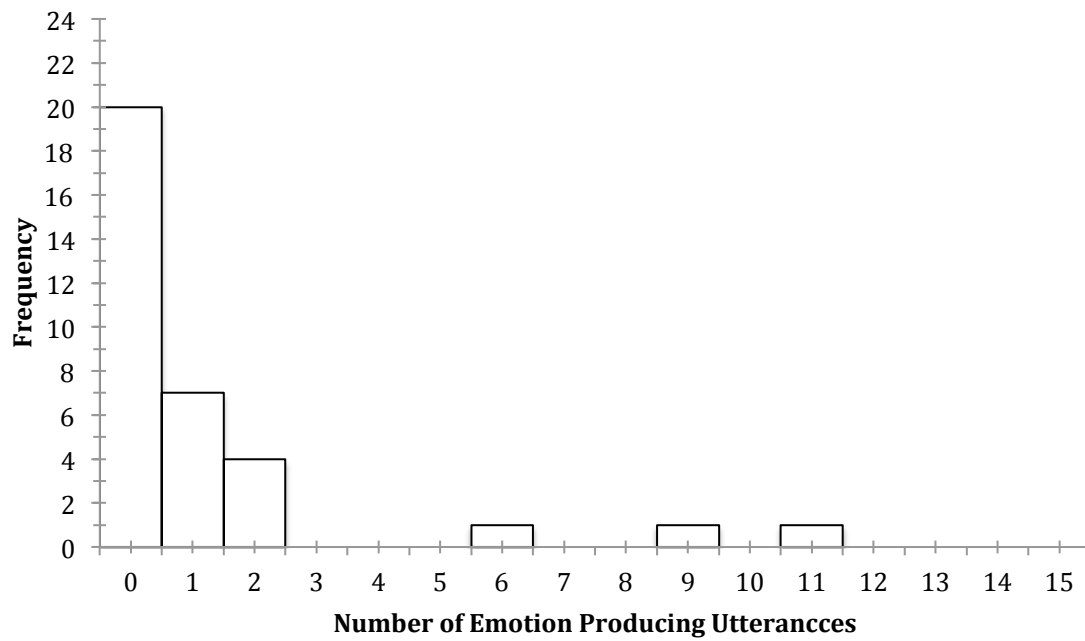




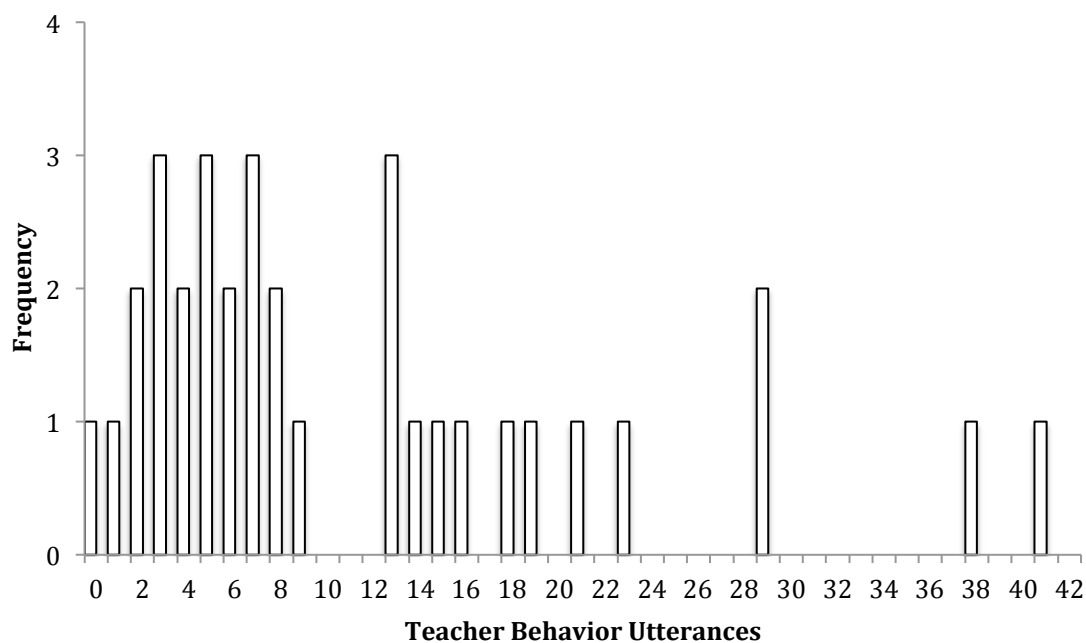
*Figure 1: Teachers' total emotion talk.* This figure illustrates how frequently teachers used emotion utterances during book readings.



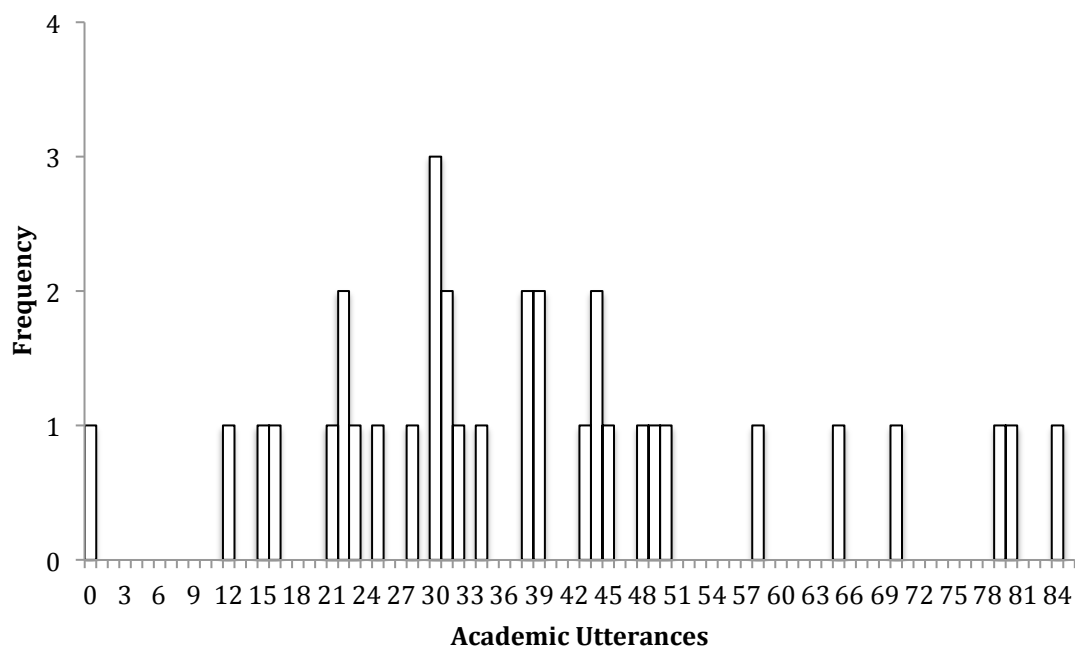
*Figure 2: Teachers' use of eliciting emotion utterances.* This figure shows how frequently teachers used eliciting emotion utterances.



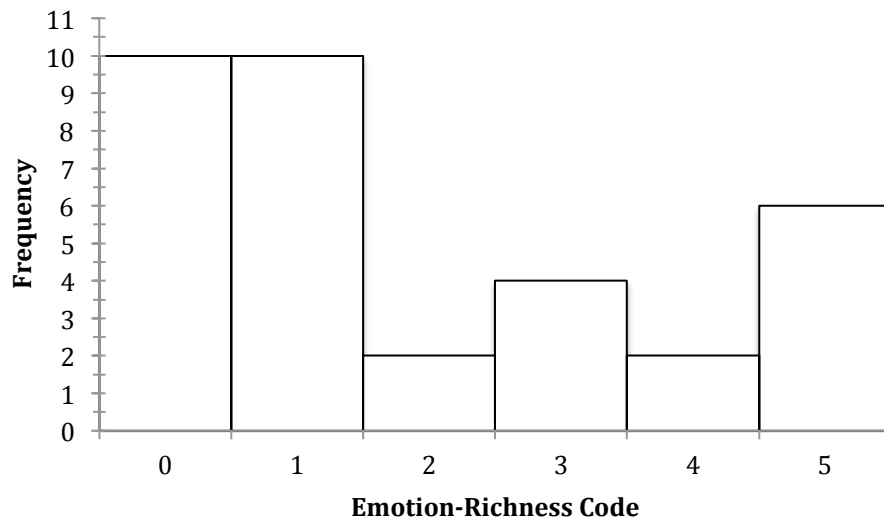
*Figure 3: Teachers' use of producing emotion utterances.* This figure illustrates how frequently teachers used producing emotion utterances during book readings.



*Figure 4: Frequency of teachers' behavior utterances.* This figure illustrates how frequently teachers used behavior utterances during book reading.



*Figure 5: Teachers' academic utterances.* This figure shows how frequently teachers used academic utterances during book reading.



*Figure 6: Emotion-richness of text.* This figure illustrates the number of emotion words, states, or experiences were present in the books teachers' read.

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