
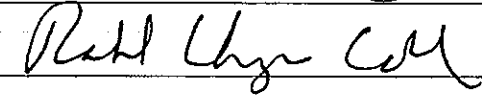
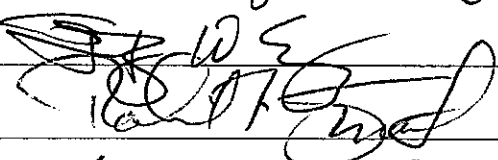
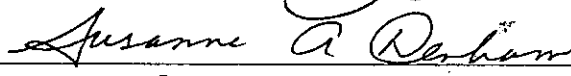
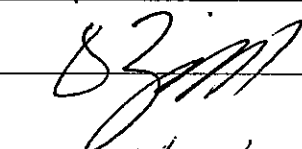
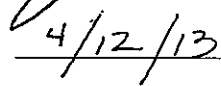


EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DIRECTORS' IMPACT ON SOCIAL-  
EMOTIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING

by

Katherine M. Zinsser  
A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Psychology

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Artium Baccalaureatus  
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Spring Semester 2013  
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## **Abstract**

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DIRECTORS' IMPACT ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING**

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George Mason University, 2013

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Early childhood education (ECE) centers are more than a series of contiguous classrooms. They are vibrant social communities where child and adult emotions are ever-present and integral to learning. Although much research has focused on classroom quality and teacher-child interactions that support children's social-emotional development, researchers have paid less attention to the center-level environmental factors that influence classroom climate. Like all organizations, the climate of each ECE center is, in part, set by the leadership style and skills of the top administrator: the center director. Yet, little research has been conducted to assess the influences of a director on the emotional climate of ECE programs.

In this study, we take a first step towards defining the impact of ECE program directors on the emotional climates of their centers. A model of positive early emotional leadership is defined that outlines how leadership behaviors and decisions influence



teachers' emotional experiences at work and the extent to which those feelings affect teachers' classroom practices, especially pertaining to social emotional teaching and learning. The model describes the three key components of the socialization of center emotional climate: modeling attending to emotions, emotionally sensitive reacting and responding, and emotionally sensitive teacher development. These components are further explored through detailed multi-method descriptions of two exemplar ECE centers. Finally, a case is made for the development of an assessment tool focused on the emotional climate of ECE programs.

## **Introduction**

Much of the research into early childhood social-emotional learning has focused on the details of curriculum being presented to children: developing self-control, emotional awareness, social skills, and basic problem solving skills; skills that are all critical to successful social experiences in early childhood and beyond (e.g. Denham, Brown, & Domitrovich, 2010). Additionally, some research has examined what characteristics make a classroom effective at improving these skills in young children (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008), yet little of this research has delved as far as to consider which organizational factors enhance the teaching quality of social-emotional skills. In particular, one understudied aspect of early childhood education (ECE) is the emotional climate of the whole center, as set by the program director, and its impact on social-emotional teaching and learning.

Although there have been calls for research to identify what effective leadership practices look like in the ECE field (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004), the research remains focused on the more tangible aspects of program administration, including compliance with health, safety, legislative, and contractual requirements; coordinating family and social services; and financial management (e.g. Osgood & Stone, 2002). Surprisingly little is known about teachers' feelings about working in ECE, how those feelings result in teacher frustration, burnout, and turnover, and to what degree those

feelings translate into lower quality SET in the classroom. To respond to Muijs' call, preliminary work must be undertaken to identify key concepts related to workplace climate, teacher emotional well-being, and children's SEL. In the present study we aim to understand the role that program directors play in formulating the emotional climate of their ECE center; what impact leadership behaviors and decisions have on teachers' emotional experiences at work; and the extent to which those feelings influence teachers' classroom practices, especially pertaining to social-emotional teaching and learning.

### **The Nature of ECE Centers**

ECE centers are more than a series of contiguous classrooms, operating independently with no effect on each other. Instead, classrooms in centers resemble ecological models of human relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children attending ECE programs are influenced not just by the most proximal contexts (i.e., an individual classroom, teachers, and peer group) but are additionally influenced, albeit indirectly, by the larger and more distal features of the ECE environment including structural (teacher-child ratios) and interpersonal features (teacher job satisfaction). Just as children come to school each day with their own emotions, experiences, and backgrounds, teachers also come into classrooms with a host of experiences, beliefs, and values and they too experience a wide range of emotions in the classroom. Together, children and teachers create the emotional climate of their classroom, and each classroom differs in its support of effective emotional interactions. For example, classrooms marred by high levels of teacher stress and/or a large number of children displaying challenging behaviors may be less supportive of positive SEL. Yet, even in small centers, these

classrooms do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a larger organization that has a unique emotional climate, related to, but distinct from the climate of the individual classroom. In the following section we will review the impact of classroom emotional climates on children and teachers, and then connections to the larger center climate and the role of the director will be introduced.

### **Social-Emotional Teaching and Learning in ECE**

**Social-emotional learning.** Social-emotional learning (SEL) describes the process by which children acquire social-emotional skills including recognizing their own and others' emotions, managing their emotions, showing social awareness and empathy, forming and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). Children with greater levels of SEL have more success making friends, are more positive about school and have stronger grades and achievement later in elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). The SEL strides made during early childhood set children up for greater success in the realms of social and cognitive development, pre-academic achievement, school readiness and adjustment (Denham et al., 2010). Children develop these social and emotional skills primarily through social interactions. Of all of their social partners, the emotional socialization practices of children's parents have received the most attention from researchers, but with many children spending large amounts of time in preschool settings, the influences of ECE employees on children's SEL is attracting greater attention (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012).

**Social-emotional teaching.** Social-emotional Teaching (SET) describes the process through which teachers enhance children's SEL. SET includes the combined effect of a teacher's emotion socialization practices (modeling, teaching and contingent reacting; (Denham, 1998; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998), use of SEL curriculum (such as Preschool PATHS; (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007), and maintenance of a positive emotionally supportive classroom climate on children's SEL development. Additionally a teacher's ability to engage in each of these SET behaviors is theoretically dependent, in part, on her own emotional competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) .

***Emotion socialization in the classroom.*** Recent and ongoing research is supported previously theoretical connections between teachers' socialization behaviors and children SEL (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012; Ersay, 2007). Teachers' displays of positive and negative emotions are models for children of how to express and regulate emotions across a variety of social contexts (Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Ahn, 2005a, 2005b). Furthermore, teachers' SET also teaches children the labels, precedents, and consequences of emotions through discussion about emotions as well as coaching children through emotional situations (Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2007). Finally, the way teachers react to children's (and others') emotional displays is associated with children's social and emotional outcomes (Denham, et al., 2007). Supportive, warm and accepting responses to children's negative emotions (e.g., sadness and anger) help children develop better regulated responses to emotions themselves. Conversely, punitive

or dismissive reactions by caregivers are associated with negative outcomes for children (Eisenberg et al., 1998).

***Classroom emotional climate.*** The emotional climate of a classroom describes the valence of the shared emotions among teachers and children. Positive classroom emotional climates are marked by warmth and respect; teachers and students express positivity, display verbal and physical affection, and are interested in spending time together on shared activities (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). In such classrooms students feel comfortable asking for help and teachers know their students well enough to anticipate problems and provide individualized support. Conversely, in less-positive classrooms, teachers and students may display more negative affect, there may be power struggles with teachers relying on raised voices and/or threats to establish control of students, and students may display interpersonal aggression directed at peers or at the teacher (Pianta et al., 2008)

Ratings of classroom environments have yielded notable associations with children's social outcomes (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Pianta et al., 2008). Higher ratings of teacher emotional support are associated with greater student social competence (Mashburn et al., 2008) and fewer problem behaviors (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). Furthermore, children's experience of positive preschool classroom emotional climates has been linked to their later social competence (Howes, 2000).

It is also important to note that classroom emotional climate is not just teacher dependent. Children's social and emotional competencies, to some extent the degree to

which they have absorbed SEL teachings, can additionally impact the classroom emotional climate. Children who successfully express a preponderance of positive emotions can be very inviting to social partners (Garner, 2010), and higher concentrations of such peers can provide more opportunities to practice social skills and contribute to an overall positive emotional climate in a classroom. Conversely, children's challenging behavior can detract from teachers' cognitive and emotional resources, making it challenging to be emotionally positive in their interactions with students, and testing their own emotional competence. Students' challenging behavior is a significant contributor to teacher stress and burnout (Hastings & Bham, 2003), indicators of negative classroom emotional climate.

**Teacher emotional experiences at work.** Some teachers respond to challenging interactions with students in more emotionally effective ways than others. For example, teachers may regulate their own frustration with a child's behavior and instead choose to validate their expression and help them problem solve saying 'I see that you're upset because you can't play in the block area right now, is there somewhere else you would like to play?' In such ways, how teachers deal with their own feelings in the classroom contributes to their provision of high quality SET.

Teachers' negative feelings (e.g. frustration, anger, annoyance, sadness) are particularly related to their SET through their reactions to emotions (socialization). Teachers who experience intense negative emotions at work were more likely to react punitively to children's expression of emotions (Ersay, 2007). Similarly, teachers who were less attentive to their own emotions were more likely to minimize children's

emotions (Ersay, 2007). For example, a teacher may pass by a crying child saying “you’re alright” without overtly attempting to comfort or support him. The implicit message being that the teacher feels that the child’s emotions are not important. Teachers who experience depressive symptoms may be more likely to engage in harsh interactions with their students (Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell, & Breckler, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2004).

Teachers’ expressions of negative emotions can, in part, be the outcome of high levels of workplace stress. Individuals experiencing high degrees of stress are more likely to express frequent negative emotions (e.g., anger, depression and sadness) (Feldman et al., 1999). These expressions in the classroom serve as models for children and such modeling has been linked to lower levels of emotion regulation and increased aggressive behaviors in children (Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002).

Teachers’ emotions at work are also related to their classroom management styles. Teachers who perceive themselves as more effective use more cooperative approaches to managing conflict (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006) and engage in more nurturing caregiving practices (NICHD, 2005). Finally, teachers who are more satisfied with their work and working conditions are more highly committed to the organization and the profession of ECE in general (Jorde-Bloom, 1988; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988). Therefore, one determinant of teachers’ emotions in the classroom and thereby SET and SEL, is the workplace factors such as the emotional climate of their ECE center.



**Burnout, Turnover, and Center Emotional Climate.**

When teachers struggle with their own emotions at work, not only does it impact the quality of their interactions with students (and subsequently, their SET), but it can often escalate, resulting in fatigue, burnout, and eventually turnover. High turnover in ECE staff can be debilitating to centers and can negatively impact the children under their care (Bloom & Sheerer, 1992). In some cases, ECE programs experience turnover rates of nearly 40% among lead teachers and over 50% of assistant teachers in a single year (Helburn, 1995). The National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook, Howes, Phillips, & Pemberton, 1989) found that up to 45% of ECE staff reported that they were likely to leave their jobs within the next year. In addition to the time demand and resources consumed recruiting, training, and integrating a new employee, turnover has been also been associated with lower classroom structural quality (Philips, 1987) and can disrupt the formation of attachment-like relationships between children and caregivers (Kontos & Feine, 1987) – both of which have negative impacts on the SEL of children.

The causes of ECE teacher turnover have been widely reported. Many studies focus on low salaries, poor benefits, and the meager status associated with the line of work (e.g. Granger & Marx, 1990). More relevant to the present discussion, a handful of studies have acknowledged the role that teachers' workplace emotions play in their degree of satisfaction and commitment. An unsupportive organizational climate in ECE centers, including working conditions, job demands, contentious relations with co-workers, and lack of feedback and support from the director, has been shown to impact staff morale, stress, and burnout, ultimately resulting in more negative emotional experiences and higher teacher turnover (Stremmel, 1991). More recently, Reffett (2009)

investigated the individual and organizational factors that contribute to teachers' experiences of stress. Findings indicated that individual factors such as education level and tenure at Head Start are not significantly related to strain, but aspects of the work environment, (e.g., job demands, work load, and unclear expectations) significantly contributed to teachers' experience of strain (Reffett, 2009). Given the associations between stress and emotions (Feldman et al., 1999), management of teachers' workplace experiences will be an important factor influencing their engagement in high quality SET.

Despite the attention drawn to the organizational climate consequences, research into the management of climate in ECE is still limited, save for the work of Bloom and her development of assessment tools for ECE organizational climate and work attitudes (Bloom, 2010). Through such tools, Bloom is aiding administrators in identifying climatic issues, hoping to help them increase retention and improve care quality through awareness of workplace environments and job satisfaction. Although seminal and highly important to the improvement of ECE programs, this approach still does not incorporate the role of emotions in early childhood education.

Emotions are ubiquitous in ECE programs and should not be overlooked, especially given the current drive to improve program quality and effectiveness, including children's social and emotional readiness for school (Snow, 2006). Greater attention is being paid to the adoption and implementation of SEL programming; making studies that improve our understanding of contextual factors that may influence such outcomes are particularly timely. We believe that, specifically, the *emotional climate* of

ECE programs and its impact on staff, and students, must be further explored and understood to improve not only child SEL, but also teacher well-being and retention.

### **Focusing on Head Start Emotional Climates**

Although private ECE programs will be discussed to a degree, the present paper will more directly speak towards the emotional climate of Head Start programs. This focus is intentional for two reasons. Firstly, a nationally administered funding stream holds all Head Start centers, regardless of location and size, to certain performance standards. This consistency means that many directors face similar challenges and have access to similar resources. Secondly, and more importantly with regards to SEL, children living in poverty and inequity are known to already be behind their more advantaged peers as early as kindergarten (Campbell & Stauffenberg, 2008; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Living in stressful conditions, such as poverty, has consequences for the development of both cognition and behavior (Blair, 2002).

Head Start students are more likely to be at-risk for social-emotional deficits; they score lower on measures of emotion knowledge, inhibitory control, compliance, and social information processing; and display more angry/aggressive behavior than their more economically advantaged counterparts (Denham, Bassett, Thayer, et al., 2012). When they arrive at kindergarten, their teachers consider them less socially competent and adjusted in the classroom in terms of learning behaviors and attitudes. This trend places an even greater expectation on Head Start teachers to overcome the SEL deficit in their students, yet working with at-risk families may place Head Start teachers under

greater degrees of stress than ECE employees in private programs (Glisson et al., 2008). In combination, these circumstances could additionally impact Head Start teachers' own emotions in the classroom and their effective engagement in high quality SET, making research on the emotional climate of their centers particularly crucial.

### **The Present Study**

Using an exploratory approach, we aim to identify the role that leadership in ECE plays in formulating and maintaining a center's emotional climate. Furthermore, we aim to understand the ways that emotional climate influences staff, children, and families affiliated with the center. In-depth qualitative interviews with experts in the field of early childhood education informed the creation of a model describing the role of center leadership in fostering the emotional climate of preschool programs. Following the description of the model, we will evaluate the model by studying two exemplar cases.

## **Study One: Defining the Positive Early Emotional Leadership Model**

### **Methods**

Key stakeholders (N=8) in the field of ECE were recruited and interviewed to inform the model of positive early emotional leadership. These interviews were conducted either over the phone (5) or in-person (3) and each lasted approximately one hour. In-person interviews were conducted in the participant's office. Efforts were made to reduce interruptions and maintain privacy so that participants felt comfortable speaking candidly. All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. The first author, conducted all of these interviews. Interviews followed a semi-structured format with follow-up questions and probes varying based on interviewee experiences and area of expertise. Topics discussed included stakeholders' background and experiences in ECE leadership positions, their understanding of the responsibilities of ECE directors and the qualities of successful directors, the role that emotions play in management of ECE programs, components of ECE center climate, how directors contribute to/detract from a center's positive climate, and training opportunities related to emotional climate development, leadership, and program management.

### **Participants**

Following is a short description of each stakeholder who was interviewed for this project. In order to maintain anonymity, some personal characteristics have been changed

or omitted, including the stakeholders' names. Participants included individuals who are either currently serving as program directors, have leadership experience in the field of ECE, conduct evaluations of or provide professional development to ECE leaders, or otherwise inform ECE management practices.

Ms. Miller is a mid-level administrator at the Office of Head Start currently serving in the Quality Assurance Division. She has previously worked for Head Start in several capacities, including as a Program Specialist where she conducted ongoing program monitoring and collaborated with technical assistance providers to maintain high quality services at Head Starts and Early Head Starts in her region.

Dr. Allen is a senior executive at a large, private childcare chain. She has over 40 years of experience in the field of ECE including single and multi-site program management, curriculum and program development, and planning and administering trainings for teachers and managers.

Dr. Mitchell is a senior executive at a large management consulting firm contracted to conduct Head Start monitoring. She has extensive program management experience, previously serving as the director of a large, urban school district, chairing a state Head Start Association, and working as a content expert for a regional Training and Technical Assistance center focused on administration, management, and fiscal issues.

Ms. Campbell is an infant and toddler specialist and author of a series of resources for teachers, administrators, and family services professionals. Her work focuses on shaping classroom practices to positively impact teachers and children and she has extensive experience training Head Start staff.

Ms. Evans is a senior advisor on early childhood at an international non-profit child welfare organization. She has extensive ECE management experience both at the small scale - cultivating a regional Early Head Start program from the ground up - and directing large scale monitoring operations from a position at the Office of Head Start.

Mr. Walker is the former superintendent of ECE for a large, urban school district where he oversaw hundreds of teachers and administrators both within public school facilities and in stand-alone programs. Previously he worked as a Head Start program specialist and spent nearly 20 years working in 0-6 classrooms. He currently works as a consultant on projects pertaining to kindergarten readiness and Head Start evaluation research.

Ms. Daniels is the director of large, urban Head Start program administered by a larger urban district Board of Education. After working in private ECE programs, Ms. Daniels held a variety of positions in Head Start including Educational, Mental Health, and Disabilities Coordinator positions. She now oversees eight centers serving ages 0-6 years old.

Ms. Gupta has experience at all levels of the Head Start system, including as a classroom teacher, educational coordinator, center director, and more recently as a training and technical assistance provider. She has organized individualized training for ECE management staff and coordinated program staff training retreats focusing on the improvement of program quality through administration practices.

### **Analysis Plan**

Audio files from each interview were transcribed verbatim by the first author and a research assistant. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by the first author and were then uploaded into NVivo qualitative coding software (QSR International, 2012). In developing the conceptual model of early emotion leadership, we used an iterative inductive content analysis approach, meaning that categories, themes, and codes were derived directly from the data being analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This technique is particularly useful in areas where little research has been conducted. However, as Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) underscore, this process is more reflexive than objective – data were visited and revisited repeatedly and as insights and patterns emerged, previously reviewed transcripts were re-evaluated with this new understanding. All the while, we continued to explore the relevant literature for key concepts identified by other researchers in the fields of management, leadership, workplace climate, SEL, and ECE. Themes identified from the transcripts were explored in the literature and concepts prevalent in the literature were sought out in the transcripts. The resultant model (Figure 1) reflects the blending of these qualitative investigations and the relevant empirical literature.

### **Results**

#### **Confirming that Center directors are Early Emotional Leaders**

Based on previous research, we anticipated there to be a connection between leadership practices and the climate of ECE programs (Bloom, 2010); however, given that this study is one of the first qualitative forays in this direction, it was important to first confirm that there was a consensus from the stakeholders that center directors are

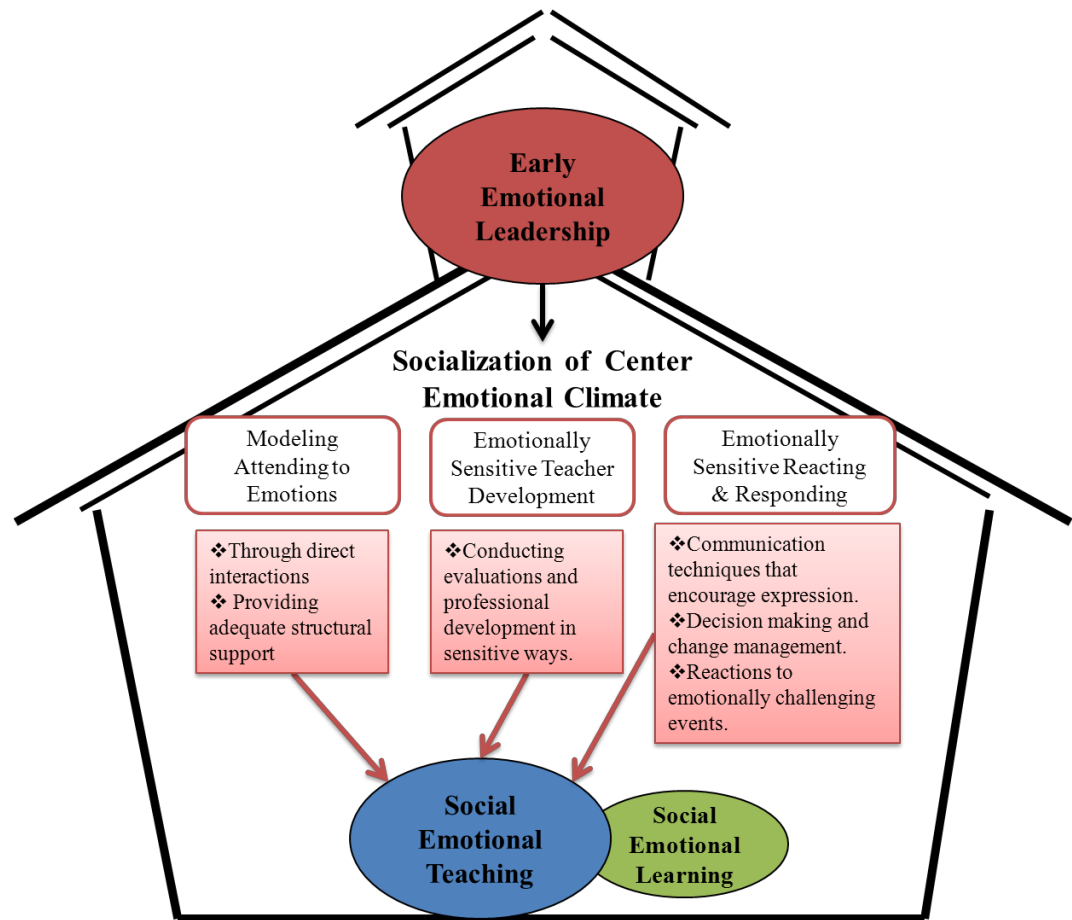


emotional leaders in ECE and that their actions are in some way connected to SET and SEL.

Such connections were emphatically supported by our key stakeholders, who emphasized the “family-like” amount of time directors and teachers spend together: “We want this a good place to be because we spend 8, 10, 12 hours at a time in those places with people who you spend more time with sometimes than your own family members. So of course anything that we can do overtly to show that we’re genuinely concerned about improving that, I think it should be successful,” noted Ms. Daniels, A good center leader, notes Dr. Mitchell, is one who can “relate to people in a positive way and learn how they relate to other people, learn their strengths, learn some of the challenges that they’re faced with and try to work with them on those kinds of issues.”

Despite this confirmation of the importance of setting an emotional climate for the center, many directors indicated a lack of knowledge of how, exactly, the provide such support: “There is a consistent feeling that when we look at schools and look at centers, that high quality is really dependent on leadership,” noted Mr. Walker. “How on a day-to-day basis do we encourage people and support people to be their best? And how do you create an environment where they can do their best?” Ms. Campbell also acknowledged this quandary: “We could fill up your office with books about children’s emotional development and what they need, but ...*what do the adults need?*” (emphasis added). The stakeholders were in agreement that work investigating these connections was overdue, saying that with this line of inquiry we were “absolutely onto something that’s very crucial...you know we talk about those triangles we try to create with parents

and child and you as a support and I think there's also a triangle between a leader, a teacher, and a child" (Mr. Walker). Another reiterated this saying, "It's an unsolved problem, industry wide. I'm kind of hoping you come up with some ideas" (Dr. Allen). With our underlying hypothesis confirmed, we proceeded to explore the role of leadership in creating positive early emotional climates.



**Figure 1: Positive Early Emotional Leadership Model**

## **Modeling Attending to Emotions**

Modeling describes the means by which socializers implicitly teach children about which emotions are deemed acceptable and how they should be expressed and regulated via their own emotional expressiveness (Valiente et al., 2004). In parenting literature, modeling tends to focus on overt displays of emotions as a way of socializing children's understanding of emotions. Conversely, parents who do not express their emotions overtly provide scant opportunities for children to learn about emotions, and their children consequently develop lower levels of emotion knowledge (Garner et al., 1994).

In our exploration of emotional climate socialization, there was some corresponding discussion by stakeholders of modeling through overt expression of emotions by center directors; for example, by laughing and sharing enjoyment with staff and families in the center or by displaying signs of frustration or disappointment. Such displays send a signal to staff, students, and parents that such feelings are acceptable in the center, either positive or negative. However, a greater degree of discussion by our stakeholders focused on the ways that directors model, not just the emotions themselves, but the importance or value of emotions in general. Directors modeled the value they placed on emotions through the attentions they paid to emotions in their centers. This modeling took place either through emotionally focused interactions and/or the structural support for emotions.

**Attending to Emotions through Interactions.** One of the most fundamental ways that ECE directors can influence the staff and students in their buildings is through

direct interactions. The quantity and quality of interactions that directors have with those in their centers is to some degree modeling for the teachers in the center what the director feels is important and worth her time. Two factors in particular can send clear messages to the staff and students: being a visible and present director, and looking for opportunities to catch teachers “doing good.”

***Being visible.*** First and foremost, in order to model the importance of paying attention to emotions, a director must be visible. She must be engaged in day-to-day interactions with all members of the ECE program. As one of our stakeholders asserted:

A good director is visible....they walk into a center, they know the staff – not necessarily everyone, but to a great extent. ... They greet them, they know who they are and they actually know a lot of the kids. For me, going out and monitoring ...I know if that’s what that director does [regularly] because when they walk into a classroom not only do they greet the staff, but they know the children by name. When kids run up to them, they know them. They’re glad to see them, they’re familiar. (Ms. Miller)

She went on to connect a director’s visibility to the teachers’ perceptions of her valuing them and their work with the children: “I think it’s part of demonstrating that you’re paying attention; you’re not just the person who shows up when there’s a problem, but you’re invested in the day-to-day and knowing what’s going on across your program” (Ms. Miller). Ms. Miller described directors who are visible, engaged, and invested, not just in classroom practices and child outcomes, but in the people themselves. They care about their employees and that care translates into positive workplace relationships. The

director is not perceived as merely the regulator/police officer, but rather as an active, present, and positive part of the classroom community.

A similar sentiment was echoed by the key stakeholder from the private childcare industry. She indicated that visibility was a heavily emphasized component of their management training and that directors should strive to maximize the time they spend out of their offices and enjoying the children and teachers in their centers:

It's very important that the director know when her parents are walking in the door and that [she] be physically present, at the front of the building, greeting parents in a very purposeful way. Now, the parents don't see this as purposeful, they just feel this friendliness. But the other thing is, the teachers in the building need to feel it too. They need to see the director walking through her building and noticing and admiring the things that are going on in the classroom. [When] Directors do that, the feeling in the building is right there. You can feel this sense of positivity, collegiality, "oh look at what I'm doing" and I think that parents really pick up on that too. (Dr. Allen)

These two stakeholders emphasized the connection between directors modeling attentiveness to emotions and the connections to center EC. It should be noted that many of the "being visible" comments from the stakeholders echo the use of the term "managing by walking around" as coined by the management consultants Peters and Waterman (2004). When directors are visible and engaged in interpersonal interactions with the members of the program, there is a positive impact on climate.

***Positive reinforcement.*** Stemming from the need for directors to be visible and emotionally present in their centers, directors can also model for staff what they value by emphasizing and praising certain practices and behaviors. Positive reinforcement communicates to staff that positive feelings are acceptable if not expected in the center. Dr. Allen emphasized the importance of not only being visible in the center, but being vocal and praising teachers throughout the day:

I really do advocate very strongly for informally walking around your building, just observing and admiring, making small corrections as you're walking around. Just being visible and noticing things...they need to see the director walking through her building and noticing and admiring the things that are going on in the classroom...maybe poking her head in saying, that's really impressive what you're doing. (Dr. Allen)

Such small gestures go a long way in instilling positive feelings in the work place. As Mr. Walker summarized, leaders who utilize such praise "create an atmosphere where people feel valued for who they are as human beings but also for the work that they do."

Ms. Daniels echoed his sentiment, saying, "I give a lot of positive feedback to everyone, to managers, to line-staff...I try to do this so everyone understands that I appreciate them." In describing a recent change that she imposed on the program's assessment tools used by the Family Services workers, Ms. Daniels explained how she made sure to recognize her staff for their work on a challenging transition. She:

I congratulated them on their work and I told them how much I appreciated them because it was a deadline date and they were so

surprised...I think they're always thinking the hammer is going to fall....They were always yelled at so I'm trying to turn that around so folks will know that we're all going to grow....I'm going to give a pat on the back.....And I hope that these kinds of things help them, just even momentarily, take that deep breath and say, 'we're appreciated. It's hard work but now I can't wait to come back refreshed and do the job.' (Ms. Daniels)

Knowing that she had raised the expectations and pressure on her staff, Ms. Daniels simultaneously demonstrated to her staff that she cares about them and that she has high standards for their performance.

The concept of positive reinforcement aligns well with the definition of transformational leadership (Eagly, 2007) which includes exhibiting optimism, attending to individuals' needs, and clearly communicating the value and importance of an organization's mission. Conversely, directors who do not engaged in positive reinforcement could be described as using translational leadership techniques such as only attending to mistakes and failures to meet standards or waiting until problems become severe before intervening (Eagly, 2007). Directors who are engaging in positive reinforcing interactions with staff are engaging in transformational leadership.

Through investing their time in interactions with members of the ECE program, directors are signaling to their staff what they value. When those interactions are intentionally emotional in nature, smiling at staff and families in the center, positively

reinforcing staff efforts, and generally adding to the warm supportive atmosphere, directors are promoting a positive emotional climate in their centers through modeling.

**Structurally modeling attention to emotions.** In addition to drawing attention to emotions through direct interactions with their staff, directors can also impact the emotional climate by emphasizing the importance of emotions through the structural supports they put into place for SEL and SET. With constrained budgets it may be easy to push emotions to the back burner, but as Dr. Mitchell described, withholding such structural supports can result in both behavior problems in the classrooms and negative feelings among the staff: “I see a lot more teachers nowadays getting very frustrated because they don’t have the skills, tools, or resources to help support kids’ social-emotional development in the classroom” (Dr. Mitchell).

Ms. Evans emphasized that directors cannot expect their staff to perform at their best when they are inadequately supported. When serving as a director, she “really wanted them to like the work and have every single tool they needed to do it. So if a teacher needed staff development, I wanted to have a substitute in that room so that could happen. If a home visitor needed to be able to have a really good mileage reimbursement to be able to do that then I wanted that to happen. So I wanted the staff to have what they needed. And I want them to have fun on the job and with their colleagues” (Ms. Evans). In particular, the stakeholders identified five key ways that directors can model their attention to teachers’ emotions through structural support by: fighting for resources, providing specific support for SEL and SET, setting procedures for the management of challenging behavior, and by creating formal opportunities to recognize and acknowledge



staff achievements. Each of these actions sends the message to teachers that emotions are valued in the ECE center.

***Fighting for resources.*** In order to adequately attend to the needs of a center, directors are constantly seeking out additional resources, and their success in procuring those resources can have meaningful impacts on the emotional climate of a center. Having access to adequate resources, such as the fiscal support to fund an additional assistant teacher or behavioral specialist can increase the opportunities for one-on-one interactions between children and adults. Similarly, having sufficient materials for an activity can reduce staff stress and frustration indirectly and generally enhance SET through sensitive attention to children's needs. This battle for resources is especially hard fought in soft-funded programs such as Head Start. Mr. Walker refers in particular to on Head Start center that was able to create a "nature explore" classroom through a partnership with the National Arbor Society. He described how this program had been beneficial on many fronts, noting that after a year and a half, "things like behavior problems, they just disappeared....the ability to move and be involved and engaged – that some of these issues that occur when you try to get kids to sit still inside have just disappeared. That's made [the teachers'] jobs easier.... So now because of [the director's] leadership they're having a great time." Furthermore, this program had similar impact on parent engagement, as parents became involved in the nature classroom's activities. Said Mr. Walker, the involvement of the parents created "a sense that we can do something that's important...to help the center...and these are our poorest neediest families. And there the idea that we've created a resource for them and both [directors] are very trusted

by communities and families and so that works for the teachers – the modeling of that is phenomenal.” By pursuing a new funding stream and implementing a unique opportunity, this director was able to engage students, families, and teachers and impact every aspect of the center from behavior management to center-parent relationships.

Many of our interviewees talked about the importance obtaining adequate resources for their centers and additionally making sure that their employees knew how hard they were working to get them what they need. “You fight for money you fight for budgets you fight for higher salaries. You fight – you’ve got their backs and I’ve had staff say that to me. Thank you. Because they know that I’m fighting for them with the people above me,” said Ms. Evans. When teachers know that their administrator is advocating for them and trying to make their work-life quality better, they are experiencing the benefits of a positive emotional climate.

***Structural supports for SEL and SET.*** Whether a center is implementing a SEL curriculum such as Second Step or AI’s Pals, or teachers have received specialized training in behavior management techniques, the investments that directors choose to make in their center’s SEL and SET send signals to their staff and students about the ways that emotions are to be handled in the center. If, for example, a director is deficit-focused and conflates behavior management and SEL, believing that her center addresses the SEL needs of children solely through behavioral intervention, this may send the message to staff and students that emotions are something to be managed, not experienced. This approach is in line with the dismissive and suppressive attitudes towards emotions seen in some parent socialization literature (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven,

1997). When children receive such messages from their parents, they tend to suppress their emotional display while still remaining emotionally aroused (Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001). Conversely, a director who implements a universal SEL curriculum, or otherwise encourages teachers to incorporate SEL components into their lesson plans is sending the signal that emotions are valued and providing teachers with an outlet through which to influence emotional and behavioral displays in their classrooms. Having such a toolkit can ameliorate teachers' experiences of frustration and inefficacy surrounding children's challenging behaviors.

***Procedures for managing problem behaviors.*** Problem behaviors have been well documented as a challenge for individuals working with young children (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), and directors' responses to such behaviors can have significant impacts on the front-line staff in their centers as well as the students. One prominent approach to such behaviors that was frequently discussed by our stakeholders was the practice of teachers calling to the front office to have a misbehaving child physically removed from their classroom. In discussing such a situation, Dr. Mitchell remarked on the ways teachers may feel after following a protocol to have a child removed from their classroom:

I think you feel frustrated in the sense that you can't help the child. I think it's almost like an integrity issues [*sic*] because you're supposed to be the teacher, you're supposed to be able to do it all....if you were to fail with one kid, it's like 'my credibility has gone down the tube, I couldn't' help this child.' It becomes frustrating, they don't feel supported, the morale

goes down, and they're not giving enough to the other kids in the classroom so the other kids are suffering.

Policies and procedures surrounding the handling of challenging behavior do not only impact the individual child but the teacher as well, and directors who recognize the ramifications of such policies can act to ameliorate to the benefit of the center climate.

By contrast, some centers allocate their resources to support an additional staff person who is specifically trained to handle challenging behaviors. Generally referred to as Mental Health Consultants, but also known as play therapists or SEL specialists, such staff can simultaneously lessen the emotional burden on the teacher by stepping in to work individually with a child, and eliminate the guilt associated with “failing” - because rather than punishing the child, the teacher is in essence referring a child for additional services; they are helping the child. Several stakeholders pointed towards such specialists as invaluable resources for ECE programs, improving not just individual child behavior, but also teachers' feelings of support and competence.

[We need a] mental health consultant, or play groups on a regular basis to help kids socialize and understand their feelings and how to control them. Once a month isn't going to cut it and teachers who aren't emotionally—their well-being isn't being nurtured—are not going to be able to do the same for the kids in the classroom ... I was very fortunate because I was within a program that had good resources. So I was able to do twice a week play groups, I was able to have mental health consultants in every single one of my buildings, every single day. (Dr. Mitchell)

Another stakeholder expanded on the role of the specialist, saying that she made room in her budget to have that individual available for her staff as well:

The person we have here meets with the home visitors as a group every month and there would be a topic, they would talk about how they're dealing with it, etc. and if that person is also available to meet with the director, it's a wonderful resource to have to be able to focus on the emotional needs. I mean we have money in budgets to focus on the emotional needs of the parents of the children and we have staff development money. Nobody says in Early Head Start and Head Start that you can't use it for the emotional stability of the teachers... And it wasn't that expensive. I mean you're talking maybe 4-6 hours a month, but it makes a big difference. And then someone who is in trouble who is having a hard time can say, 'Can I have an hour of her time?' and it's all confidential of course. (Ms. Evans)

This particular stakeholder's approach to supporting her staff's emotions is in line with her own beliefs about emotions. She said in reference to emotions, "I think they happen, but I think you have to have someone to go to. You have to have a way to make sure [emotions] get directed in the positive way and not the negative way. And I can't say honestly that that's always happened but that certainly is the goal. Not to act out of anger" (Ms. Evans).

***Formalized recognition & acknowledgement.*** Mr. Walker described how particularly emotionally attentive directors are "always on the lookout for opportunities

for their centers,” including being visited by influential policy makers. One director in his district routinely invited people to tour their centers, saying “we’re doing important work and we need to share it with the community.” However, for these directors, the visits are as much about paying attention to the emotions of the staff as they are to show off their center. Adds Mr. Walker, “we feel like we’re special and feel like someone is coming to visit us every day, not to catch us, but to pat us on the back. And that staff got it, it felt good when people like what you’re doing and see the value of it...[staff] feel the importance of their work and they feel like they’re valued.”

In many cases, providing recognition and acknowledgement to staff does not necessitate large, sweeping gestures. Simple displays of empathy and appreciation through standard practices may be sufficient. As Ms. Campbell relayed, staff meeting practices provide opportunities for directors to model that they are attentive to the needs and emotions of their staff.

We were working at a Head Start with the ...director and the meetings that she would set up, adults were sitting on child chairs, all crunched into a little room. She never thought about a snack...if you’re talking about people emotionally feeding kids, and people aren’t even getting a piece of fruit at a meeting or a cookie or something, there’s some big issues there with feeding and nurturing. (Ms. Campbell)

At the end of a long work day, teachers are tired, and as Ms. Campbell iterated, this one director’s inattention to the emotions of her staff left them feeling additionally drained. She went on to describe how, with some coaching, the director altered her approach to

staff meetings, held them in a more comfortable space and asked the kitchen staff to prepare a fruit salad. When the teachers arrived for the next meeting she reported that there was an audible “sigh of disbelief.”

### **Emotionally Sensitive Reacting & Responding**

In the parent socialization model (Gottman et al., 1997), contingent reacting refers to socializers’ behaviors that either encourage or discourage the expression of emotions. With children, encouragement can include accepting and acknowledging how a child feels and possibly providing comfort to an upset child. Conversely, parents can discourage expression by reacting in a dismissive or punitive way. Children who experience such reactions may suppress their expression of emotion, but remain physiologically aroused, and they do not learn how to rectify the situation (Fabes et al., 2001). In our model of the socialization of a center’s EC, the ways directors respond or preemptively anticipate emotions in their centers seem to have implications for the emotional experiences of their staff and students. Three themes in particular emerged from the interviews that we categorized as emotionally sensitive reacting and responding: the ways that directors encourage expression through communication techniques, the ways that directors anticipate the emotional ramifications of management decisions, and the ways that directors react to emotionally challenging situations.

**Communication techniques that encourage expression.** Many of our stakeholders underscored the importance of making sure that staff felt that their concerns were being heard and acknowledged. Approaches to encouraging expression by staff and families ranged from the use of formal comment boxes to less formal open door policies,

but all allowed staff to communicate with directors directly, and not just about weighty issues. In fact, sometimes it was the routine “quality of life” issues that teachers needed to be encouraged to express the most. Ms. Gupta described some comments she received in the comment box outside her office while serving as a Head Start director: “The bathroom is not cleaned right or this parent always picks up late and nothing happens...the snow isn’t removed as well on this side of the building and so the kids can’t go there.” She went on to say that these “small annoyances...are the worst ones because they fester. The big ones you already know about! It’s the small ones you don’t know about and that aggravate people.” She was very willing to address such small concerns whenever possible because she knew that by doing so, she was making sure her staff felt heard and cared for, feelings that would only benefit their students: “All right! I’ll [fix] that, but it’s nice to know that the teachers are concerned about that and if you can and if it is in the budget you [fix] that. If it’s small and you can do what people want, why not? If they’re happy, their kids are happy.” In this succinct statement, Ms. Gupta is reiterating our conceptual model, connecting a director’s responsive actions, the emotional climate of the whole center, an individual’s emotions, and children’s emotional experiences in the classroom.

Other stakeholders talked about the importance of directors appearing approachable so that employees felt encouraged to go and talk to them. Dr. Allen noted that “you have to have an open door and be physically present in your building enough so that people won’t feel like you’re closing yourself off from them. That’s the mistake some directors make. They’re very good financial/administrative people, but they lose



connections with the people around them.” When directors appear closed off, either physically or metaphorically, they promote a climate of isolationism, and are less in-tune with the needs of their staff and families.

The image of the unnecessarily closed door emerged in several interviews as a strong indicator of negative climate. In describing a visit to one center in his district, Mr. Walker said, “The first thing [I noticed] when we walked into the office...the director’s door was shut. You rarely see that at other centers...only if there was something confidential, but [here] the door was shut and this director, this guy, I think this was a very clear [indicator] of this situation.” The “situation” he went on to describe was a center that was underperforming on several licensure and quality standards and where the director “saw himself as more of a police person, and not as a comrade on the job with the staff.”

Just as a parent’s comforting response to a child’s distress socializes them to express their feelings, directors who either formally or informally institute open lines of communication are encouraging staff to share how they’re doing, what they need, and what is causing unnecessary distress or frustration, can provide staff with a positive outlet for their feelings and possibly reduce the negative impact on the classroom climates.

**Emotionally sensitive decision making and change management.** There is a large body of literature on change management in traditional business contexts highlighting the importance of smoothing out the challenges of transitioning from a current practice or state to a future or desired state (Phillips, 1983). The goal of change management is to implement new, beneficial practices while minimizing the impact of

the change on workers and avoiding distractions. Although directors are not frequently completely overhauling their center practices, some of their decisions can result in significant changes to teachers' day-to-day experiences in the center, ultimately impacting the teachers' feelings of stress and their classroom practices. In particular, the interviewees pointed towards short- and long-term staffing decisions, such as hiring and firing decision, as potentially disruptive and distracting.

*Short-term staffing decisions.* In combination, the long hours of operation for most ECE programs, plus the mandated teacher-child ratios within classrooms, place directors and staff in a constant juggling game as they try to maintain a continuity of care. This topic emerged frequently in the interviews with key stakeholders as both a challenge for directors and as a means through which directors can make or break their center's positive climate. As one stakeholder put it:

One of the hardest jobs for a director is scheduling. The fact that we have long hours, some of our centers are open thirteen hours a day. The most [teachers] can work is an eight hour day so how do make sure that you're adequately covered? We have the teacher-child ratio. How do you cover the entire day, all day every day? Some of the strategies that directors use are less than ideal and that will get in the way of what the teacher can be effectively doing in the classroom with the children. (Dr. Allen)

Another wondered, "so how do you create a situation where....there's a process for children, where they feel like 'this is a family...people know who I am, and teachers know who I am, and they know each other and I feel like it's a safe place for me.'" Dr.

Allen went on to give an example of how a director's management of staffing changes can negatively impact all involved:

We had a child who really has had a series of very unfortunate circumstances that's going to end up with him having to stay with Grandma soon because Mom's going to Afghanistan. They just got divorced and just moved three times and here's this child acting out in the classroom with his lead teachers trying her best to create some consistency, and what do we do? We pull out her assistant to do the bus run every day, three times a day..... It's a different person who substitutes for her every day. [The teacher is] struggling to create consistency—we need to get this bus run done and [the assistant teacher is] the only person who knows how to drive the bus at the moment because the other person is on maternity leave. An awkward set of circumstances and that directors' inability to solve that more productively is adding to the problem..... A director who can't juggle all three balls effectively—it's like dominoes, they will start falling down and then the teacher gets frustrated, she quits, and then you have another change. (Dr. Allen)

Short-term changes in classroom personnel can disrupt classroom climate, teacher emotions, and child comfort. Too frequent or too abrupt shifts in staff can be jarring for children and can be detrimental to their sense of emotional security in the classroom and a teacher's ability to engage in high quality SET.

*Decisions regarding teacher pairings.* Another longer-term form of staffing decision that can prove challenging for directors is the pairing of teachers. Some interviewees referred to this as “matchmaking,” implying that forming lead-assistant teaching partners is almost like arranging a marriage; they spoke of pairing not just on personalities and friendliness, but also on skill sets. Dr. Mitchell described what she looked for in pairs: “obviously that they’re going to work well together because they like one another; that’s the basic foundation, but also complimentary skills. A teacher may have one skill set; another assistant teacher may have a different skill set so they can complement one another.”

Continuing with the marriage metaphor, directors need to anticipate that changes to teachers’ work relationships can be unsettling and distracting both for teachers and children. But, sometimes change is necessary. Says Dr. Mitchell, “We try very hard not to change our teaching teams too often because [the teachers] build a good working relationship with one another. We also were cautious on the other end that they didn’t build such a relationship that they became stagnant. It’s a fine line.” When the pairing together of two teachers is not harmonious, Dr. Mitchell went on to describe how it can impact their emotions and the quality of their work, noting that “one person may be picking up more of the workload than another. Record keeping, the quality of the work, activities in the classroom, different things like that. Little things.”

Teachers working in pairs form tight relationships that, when paired well, can result in a warmer, more collaborative classroom environment, that can

benefit both teachers and children alike. However, when pairings are contentious, this can negatively impact the emotional climate of the classroom and the quality of classroom practices.

***Decisions to hire and fire staff.*** Several stakeholders emphasized that one of the most important ways a director can impact the climate of her center is by “knowing how to hire” (Ms. Evans). As Ms. Evans underscored, emotionally sensitive hiring is “so important because once you’ve got them, you have them for a long time.” Directors need to hire staff who not only have “knowledge and skills” but are also “flexible,” “able to set boundaries,” and are “lifelong learners” (Ms. Evans). Successful hiring decisions are made with a center’s emotional climate in mind. Directors seek out individuals who are not only warm and nurturing, but who will operate harmoniously with other staff and promote the goals of the center.

Similarly, just as hiring decisions are made with emotions in mind, so are decisions to terminate employees. From the reports of the participants in this investigation, deciding to dismiss an employee can have an immediate influence on center emotional climate. Yet, “a leader also cannot let bad things go on too long because it sours everybody else” (Ms. Evans). The decision to fire an employee is time-sensitive and must be made quickly when the climate of the center is at stake. Notes Ms. Evans, “if you’ve got someone who’s not doing the job, I’d probably act faster than not” She went on to describe the recent dismissal of a staff member at one of her home visiting programs who had been impacting the emotions and behaviors of her co-worker. “I just had to do it,” Ms. Evans said. “I counseled someone out and forced her into resigning

because she was just so terrible and because the human resources department was going too slowly in my estimation.” After counseling out the underperforming staff member, Ms. Evans said that the shift in the emotional climate was even greater than anticipated. The remaining staff expressed their gratitude for the personnel change and appeared much more comfortable at work, indicating to her that “the situation is even worse than” she had supposed and she admitted that they had “thought it was pretty bad.” Finally, Ms. Evans stressed how important it is for directors to be willing to make hard personnel decisions saying, “You’ve got to feel confident. You can’t be afraid as a leader.”

The phrase “counsel somebody out” was reiterated across several interviews and refers to a director guiding an employee to decide to resign, rather than waiting to be fired officially. This process appears to be emotionally beneficial for all parties involved – it saves face for the departing employee, prevents the director from looking like a bully, and avoids a drawn out, formal termination process which can be negative and bitter and further detract from the positive climate of the center. As Ms. Gupta added, the process of firing someone associated with a program like Head Start is additionally challenging due to several factors, including a director’s own inexperience with human resources and management, the weak economic position of many rural and poorer areas (where Head Starts are often prevalent), and the political ramifications:

You have long-time leadership there that has never had management training and these are in small, rural areas and communities where jobs are hard to come by. So you are damaging people’s livelihoods, people’s families...so I think it’s a very complex management [issue], more so than

if you were managing Google or IBM, because at IBM everyone is a professional coming in. There are very clear expectations and there are no local politics involved in it, community politics. Head Start is a community-based program and there are a lot of politics involved and you have to understand that. And you cannot be insensitive to those issues.

(Ms. Gupta)

Based on the contributions of the stakeholders described above, it is evident that a director's management of change, especially change in staff, is a significant way by which she can socialize the emotional climate of her center. When emotions are taken into account during the decision process to enact change, such as thinking about the effect of short-term staffing changes on teacher and child emotions, or being aware of the emotional impact of a single under-performing or distracting employee, directors can guide their centers towards experiencing positive climate both within individual classrooms and across the program as a whole.

**Reactions to emotionally challenging events.** The final component of emotional reacting and responding prevalent in these interviews was the ways that directors react to emotionally challenging events at their centers or in their communities. As part of the semi-structured interviews, stakeholders were asked to discuss competencies of some particularly successful directors that they knew. Many participants approached this prompt by then contrasting successful directors with those they saw as struggling to maintain a positive emotional climate in their centers, and a common theme emerged

with regards to the ways these two groups of directors handled challenging events in their centers.

In such an instance, one stakeholder described the contrasting ways that two directors she had known had responded to separate incidences where a staff member had faced assault charges:

Same beginning but two very different endings...The director at one of those centers pulled her parents and her teachers together, did not lose a single child... [The director was] actually very forthcoming and very honest with what happened, how it happened and took personal responsibility, took quick and efficient action... rallied the staff around... they were going to move on from this, they were going to do the right thing and yes it was unfortunate, this was a very bad guy I take responsibility for hiring, but we know we're good and we're going to move forward from this. And the parents rallied around her and that attitude and it worked

Conversely, she described that the other director as having:

lost the trust of the parents in the school, [they] began to pull out of the school, lost the trust of teachers who began to leave and go elsewhere... This other director took no responsibility, said "it's not my fault, I'm going to get in trouble, I don't want to lose my job, they're picking on me for this happening and it's not my fault" so with that sort of



attitude she lost the respect of everyone around and eventually was railroaded out of the position.

This stakeholder, (whose name has been purposefully withheld to further protect those involved) went on to reiterate that the ways that directors respond to emotionally challenging situations can reveal a great deal about how they want teachers, children and families to feel in their centers. She went on to say, “I think that’s the epitome of leadership, to say, ‘hey listen, the buck stops here, I’m in charge, this happened but we’re going to move on from here and follow me.’ Versus, ‘I got [*sic*] to protect myself.’”

In another example, a stakeholder described two directors in her district and their opposing reactions to the recent shootings at Sandy Hook elementary school (in December, 2012). Many teachers and school staff across the country felt understandably unsafe following the shootings, and the two directors she described approached the management of those feelings very differently. At one center:

The center director met with her staff to talk about what security issues we have in place, how they were feeling about the center, what could be asked in terms of our needs, reviewed what they might have to do if it’s an emergency, were just sensitive to the topics...let’s get everyone together and let’s just review how do we feel, what do we do here to keep safe. More consensus, more working together as the team and just hearing. Just bouncing [ideas around], making sure that they feel heard...that worked.  
(Ms. Daniels)

Ms. Daniels described the other director saying: “she’s more of a bully. She’s pretty hardcore,” and went on to explain that in contrast to the previous approach, this director had an emergency drill on the first day back after the shooting, telling the teachers

“we’re having a drill today ... we don’t want to make it a surprise because that would not be nice but you’re having a drill today, either you’re ready for it or not, we’re doing it. And the guard’s up front and that’s it.” There wasn’t an opportunity for anyone’s voices to be heard about how they individually felt or how they could support each other.... you close your individual doors and you were told, ‘I’m having a drill today.’

This director’s approach was in essence preemptively shutting down communication between staff and administration, dismissing their emotions. Her response was one of action without any sensitivity to the emotional needs of her staff. As Ms. Daniels further detailed, the director’s reaction in this latter example displays how some of the leadership technique can overlap with several of the emotional climate socialization techniques already described:

She’s much more interested in that rigid, putting everybody in their places. There’s not a lot of touchy-feely stuff, she’s just like....these are the rules and this is the way it goes. I know that center—the staff don’t say much and maybe they don’t say much because they’ve learned that that’s probably not the place to say it ...but I’ve probably had more complaints

from parents at that center who feel detached and some of them want to feel more like it's a friendlier environment. (Ms. Daniels)

This director's reaction to the emotionally challenging event was in line with her overall management of the center's emotional climate. By creating an emotionally dismissive environment, staff and parents did not feel safe or welcome in their center. Perceptions of safety at the center level, especially teachers' perceptions, undoubtedly impact the emotional climate within their individual classrooms.

### **Emotionally Sensitive Teacher Development**

When referenced in the parent socialization literature, *teaching* refers to adults' use of deliberate instruction to help children gain greater competencies expressing, identifying, and regulating emotions (Saarni, 1999). Such teaching can include labeling emotions, discussions about emotions, and emotion coaching (e.g., a parent helping children resolve an altercation over a desired toy). Based on the socialization literature, it may have been expected that the teaching component for this model would involve professional development (PD) training and evaluation specifically focused on the use of emotions in the classroom and the improvement of student SEL. However, rather than focusing on content, stakeholders emphasized the importance of the directors approach to PD, not the content, as impacting the emotional climate of a center.

**Emotionally sensitive evaluations.** Results of these interviews point to the directors' approach to evaluation as particularly meaningful when it comes to impacting teachers feelings at work. Specifically, stakeholders identified three approaches to teacher

evaluations that had emotional ramifications: disengaged, authoritarian, and collaborative.

***Disengaged oversight.*** In her work as a program evaluator, Ms. Miller described how directors' abilities to adequately monitor and self-evaluate their programs was a critical determinant of program quality, and that often programs that did not fare well through external evaluations procedures had directors who had implemented, "monitoring systems [but were] not using them... or doing them but doing nothing with the information." Such disengaged oversight sends a message to the staff that the director does not care enough about teacher's work to follow up and evaluate it. Ms. Miller suggested that teachers who are not being evaluated by their directors may think, "they never visit us, they don't really care what we're doing here, so if we bend a little rule, we skip a little practice, whose going to know? Who's going to care?" Disengaged monitoring of teacher quality not only leads to poorer quality programming, but it also sends a negative message to teachers, socializing them to understand that their feelings about being evaluated do not matter.

***Authoritarian vs. collaborative evaluations.*** Even among directors who were actively engaged in the evaluation of their teaching staff, two distinct approaches dominated the interviews. Several of the interviewees conjured the image of a more authoritarian approach to conducting evaluations: a director standing in the back of the classroom, holding a clipboard, and looking somewhat disapproving. This style of evaluation was generally seen as promoting discordant feelings between supervisors and staff – that the teachers felt as though the directors focused on their deficits rather than

trying to help them improve. When Ms. Daniels first came into her new position as a Head Start director, she noted that her staff seemed fearful and apprehensive when interacting with her. She explained that previously they were, “always thinking the hammer is going to fall....They were always yelled at” (Ms. Daniels). As Mr. Walker was previously quoted, in a top-down, deficit-focused or authoritarian approach to evaluating teacher performance, a director may seem him- or herself “as more of a police person, and not as a comrade on the job with the staff.”

One stakeholder explained the unfriendly evaluation visits as the “boss is only coming in to check on me,” indicating that some directors may seem uncaring. Similarly, directors may sometimes narrowly focus their evaluations of teacher performance as to depend on simple yes/no checklists, in which case feedback to teachers is limited to acknowledging compliance or chastising for insufficiencies. Such evaluation practices place teachers on edge, undermining their feelings of efficacy and professionalism, and result in a negative emotional climate at the center.

Conversely, several stakeholders emphasized the benefits of collaborative evaluation practices, built on the foundation of respectful and caring relationships between staff and administrators. In her leadership training classes, Dr. Allen encourages directors to “make sure that you’re really respecting the teachers in your building as their supervisor...[not] talking down to them, but that you really include them in the process of running the school.” Mr. Walker described how as a young teacher, he benefitted from a collaborative approach to evaluation:

So the mentor, my director, came and spent a lot of time with me, and not in a way that was judging me but really was saying “this is a big step for you, and I have some time and we’ll do this together.” It wasn’t at all that she was sitting back in the corner watching me. We really did it together. And I’ve always valued that. And not in terms of evaluations but kind of being in there and doing it together and talking about the work and kind of being able to reflect, to have that mutual reflection. (Mr. Walker)

Mr. Walker’s experience of collaborative and supportive mentoring not only taught him about being a better teacher early in his career, but it also taught him about emotionally sensitive evaluating. His director demonstrated her care for him and his well-being by investing one-on-one time in him. Furthermore, her approach was positive and supportive rather than deficit focused and critical.

**Professional development.** The importance of supervisory relationships built on trust and respect also came through in discussions of professional development. Stakeholders identified several emotionally sensitive approaches to PD as sending messages to ECE staff about the value of emotions in their centers.

As a sign of respect for the professionalism of ECE teachers, several stakeholders emphasized the importance of having professional development plans for each staff member at the center. Furthermore, Ms. Gupta underscored the importance of that PD plan being individualized to the needs of the teacher:

To me the training should be “ok you’re a new teacher and I have observed you and what I think you need to learn more about is how to do

the block play” and I should be able to provide you with support for block play and send you training on that – training materials, videos, send you to a group training, whatever. And I have a teacher with 10 years of experience. This teacher does not need block play training. This teacher needs more skills in how to mentor other teachers. And that individualization of professional development is the way to do it. (Ms. Gupta)

By individualizing the training, directors display their respect for the different needs and skills of each teacher. Such a director is constantly, but gently, pushing them forward to improve their practice. Ms. Gupta further indicated that blanket, one-size-fits-all approaches to PD deteriorate teacher engagement and can undermine the positive climate in a center:

If you look at the work of the American Society for Training and Development – the whole thing is about individualization! You start them where they are and you take them to the next step. Giving the same thing over and over again is boring as hell. People don’t learn and then they think “oh, development? I don’t want to sit through that” (Ms. Gupta)

Ms. Gupta further connected PD to teachers’ classroom practices saying, “You expect the teachers to do [individualized instruction] with the children. This [PD] is not that far apart.” Directors’ approaches to PD are teaching teachers how to scaffold children’s learning in the classroom. If directors respect the time and skills of their teachers, they

craft PD programs that maximize both teachers' growth as educators and demonstrate to teachers that they're valued and appreciated at the center.

In addition to crafting individualized PD plans, many stakeholders discussed the impact of one-on-one coaching and more reflective approaches to teacher PD. Dr. Allen described the emotional effects of experiencing this approach when she had staff at a training role play using a collaborative approach to teacher development:

In the training I had today I was working with supervisors, future managers on how to build teacher skills using collaboration rather than direct instruction... One of the things they worked on today was meeting with a teacher who's having trouble with a student with a behavior problem, which is very common, and instead of telling that teacher what to do, doing more of a brainstorming activity with them. For some of the supervisors it was a brand new experience, it was like "wow that was really nice, being the teacher listening to this supervisor brainstorming with me, instead of talking down to me." They have this really very positive experience.

The emotional climate fostered by collaborative approaches to PD was further detailed by Mr. Walker, who said that as a director he thinks:

It's important to create an atmosphere where there's camaraderie, and active coaching, modeling, and doesn't get into that kind of "the boss is only coming in to check on me." I think that building relationships and trust then allows for those kinds of conversations to go on...So then when



they come in, there's a respect for me and there's a safety to know that the things that they're challenging themselves with that they want to move ahead in, that they're able to talk about that with me.

### **Conclusions Drawn from Study One**

Through examination of key stakeholders' comments, we identified that directors do in fact play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining positive emotional climates in ECE centers. Furthermore, the means through which directors have such influence resemble the socialization processes identified previously in parenting and teaching literatures. Based on the analysis of interviews conducted with our key stakeholders, it became clear that ECE directors socialize the emotional climate of their centers through modeling, reacting and teaching. Specifically, directors model attending to emotions through their interactions with teachers and staff at their centers and creating structural supports for emotions. Directors also socialize emotional climate through the ways they react to emotional situations including their encouragement of expression, decision making, and response to adverse events. Finally directors socialize the emotional climate of their centers through their teaching of teachers in evaluation and professional development activities.

Although these socialization processes do resemble those previously observed in parent-child interactions (e.g., Saarni, 1993), a meaningful distinction did arise. Rather than socializing teacher practices directly, directors are socializing a more global emotional climate – instilling an institutional awareness of, sensitivity to, and valuing of

emotions that in turn enables teachers to remain more positive and feel more emotionally supported in their SET practices.

It is important to note that the three components identified by our stakeholders are all process-based mechanisms and in no way resemble the traditional measures of director qualification or management proficiency. Rather than simply evaluating directors on their education level, compliance with health and safety regulations, or maintenance of balanced financial records, this model emphasizes the importance of looking deeper and taking into account what message a director imparts to her teachers through her modeling of, reacting to, and teaching about emotions.

Interestingly, this shift from easily quantifiable structural variables to more process-focused, or interaction-based, determinants of leadership merit mirror the recent changes in classroom quality assessment. Rather than focusing on static variables such as teacher-child ratios and the number of books available in a classroom, researchers and practitioners now focus on the quality of the interactions between teachers and students (Pianta et al., 2008). Based on these findings, we believe that a similar shift is necessary in the evaluation of ECE directors. Rather than simply focusing on structural indicators of management quality (e.g. Talan & Bloom, 2004), it is important to additionally consider the interactional quality of leadership practices and its impact on teachers and students. We believe that this is especially significant when examining directors' impact on children's SEL, for which there is little to no research.

The practices of positive early emotional leadership identified by key stakeholders in the preceding section are meaningful in their own right, and represent, to the best of

our knowledge, the first such investigation of leadership's impact on emotional climate in ECE programs. Moving forward, the next logical step in the transition from a conceptual model to viable measurable constructs is to examine how all of these components play out in real-world ECE settings. Therefore, in the next section, we will present two in depth case study examples relating the components of the positive early emotional leadership model to the experiences and perceptions of teachers and administrators.

## **Study Two: Testing the Model in Two ECE Programs**

Two Head Start centers were recruited from an ongoing study of social-emotional learning in preschool settings. These centers and their respective directors are not associated with any of the key stakeholders previously interviewed in the model development phase. Center directors were recruited first, and then with their consent, assistant directors and teachers were invited to participate. From each of the two centers, the following were performed: a) director interview; b) assistant director interview; c) teacher focus group; d) director survey; and e) teacher survey. Interviews and focus groups at each center were scheduled to all take place on a single day with interviews in the mornings and focus groups during teachers' afternoon break during children's nap time.

### **Methods**

**Interviews.** Director interviews were conducted following the same protocol as with key stakeholders. Each lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in the participant's office. Efforts were made to reduce interruptions and maintain privacy. All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. As above, the first author was the primary interviewer; however, for the interviews of the director and assistant director at the first center, an industrial-organizational psychologist, was also in attendance. Interview questions focused on leaders' perceptions of the connections

between teacher's feelings and children's SEL, and on the role of program leaders in the establishment and maintenance of positive center emotional climates.

**Focus groups.** At each of the two centers, a focus group was conducted with teachers (N=6/center). These semi-structured focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes each and were moderated by the first author. All participants were female. The industrial-organizational psychologist also assisted with the focus group at the first center described below. Focus groups were conducted behind closed doors and along with standard confidentiality practices, participants were reassured as to the privacy of their comments given the possibly sensitive nature of discussions. The proceedings were videotaped for transcription. Focus group questions centered on teachers' emotional experiences at work and perceptions of workplace climate, their experiences of support from program leaders, and their expectations for support.

**Teacher Survey.** The same teachers who participated in the focus groups also completed a short survey about their experiences working in early childhood education centers. The survey included four Likert-style subscales and several free response questions. Three subscales assessed aspects of The Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey and The Childhood Work Environment Survey (Bloom, 2010, p. 20) using 5-point anchors ranging from 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly Agree): *Supervisor Relations* (9 items, such as "My supervisor asks my opinion",  $\alpha=.90$ ); *Pay and Promotion Opportunities* (10 items, such as "I'm being paid less than I deserve",  $\alpha=.78$ ); and *Commitment* (11 items, such as "I put a lot of extra effort into my work",  $\alpha=.89$ ). This last scale was adapted from Bloom's original (2010) yes/no style questions. .

Additionally the teacher survey included a 19-item depression inventory (*The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale* (CES-D) which asked participants to indicate the frequency with which they had experienced certain feelings over the past week. For example “My sleep was restless” or “I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.” Across non-clinical samples this measure has been found to have high levels of internal consistency ranging from 0.8 to 0.9, (Radloff, 1977).

*Emotional Climate Free Response Questions.* Teachers were additionally asked to respond to several free response questions on the survey: “What three words describe the emotional climate of this center as a place to work?”; “Have you ever felt supported by your supervisor(s)? If yes, please briefly describe the scenario” and “Have you ever felt inadequately supported by your supervisor(s)? If yes, please briefly describe the scenario.”

**Director Survey.** Approximately four weeks after their initial interviews, directors were asked to complete short surveys. In addition to demographic, education, and employment history questions, the director survey included four sub-scales: 1) *The Work Itself* (Bloom, 2010) captures directors’ sense of satisfaction with their work, consisting of 10 Likert-style items (e.g., “My work gives me a sense of accomplishment” and “there is too little time to do all there is to do”). In Bloom’s original work this scale had adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .76$ ). 2) *Commitment* (this is the same as the scale completed by teachers, see description above). 3) *SEL Beliefs* (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012) captures directors’ beliefs about the value of SEL and their capacity to impact such learning in their centers (17 Likert-style items including “Taking

care of the social and emotional needs of the students at my center comes naturally to me”). This scale had marginal reliability in this sample ( $\alpha=0.66$ ). 4) *Staff Management Skills* (North Carolina Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development, 2009) captures directors’ sensitive management of staff (e.g. “Each staff member has a professional development plan” and “I reward strong performers and terminate poor performers”) and management of the workplace environment (e.g., “I am able to create a sense of community between children, families, and staff.”). Across all 8 items, this scale showed high internal consistency in this sample ( $\alpha=0.89$ ).

The *Director Responsibilities* scale is an original item that forces respondents to rank 10 common ECE director responsibilities by importance. The responsibilities included items such as: “monitoring compliance with regional codes and licensure requirements”; “implementing innovative and research-based curriculum”; “providing a positive social-emotional environment for students”; and “providing a positive work environment for staff.” Finally, directors were asked to answer two *Emotional Climate Free Response Questions* that paralleled those asked in the Teacher Survey: “What three words describe the emotional climate of this center as a place to work?” and “What are three things you do to promote a positive work environment?”

## **Results**

In the following sections, the two example centers will be described using the constructs identified in the model. Interview and focus group transcripts were coded for Modeling Attention to Emotions, Emotionally Sensitive Reacting & Responding, and Emotionally Sensitive Teacher Development, and general themes as well as areas of

convergence and divergence between participants will be presented herein. Following the qualitative presentations, results from the survey data of both centers will be compared and findings will be related back to the qualitative data as well as the overall leadership model.

### **Hope Junction Community Head Start Qualitative Themes**

Hope Junction is located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan center on the East Coast. The center is housed in two buildings, one serving approximately 150 Head Start students in nine classrooms, and the other serving approximately 35 Early Head Start children in center-based care. The center employs 25 full-time teachers, five part-time teachers, and 30 non-teaching staff including family services workers and three mental health/social-emotional consultants. The center is funded through a grant to the County Office of Families and Children. The director, Ms. Beth, is in her late 40s and has worked as an ECE director for more than 20 years. She has completed extensive undergraduate coursework in early childhood (six courses) and child development (six courses) and has completed a graduate degree in special education. Prior to working as a Head Start director, she worked for the county public school system coordinating care for children with emotional disabilities, and later she worked with Head Start as an inclusion specialist and rose to the position of Head Start Director in 2005.

The qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group from Hope Junction revealed that the constructs described by the model resonate with both teachers and administrators; both groups support the connection between leadership actions and the emotional climate experienced at the center by staff and students. However, further



analysis revealed an underlying disconnect between the emotional climate that the teachers experience and the intentions and perceptions of the administration. In the following we will examine the convergence and divergence between teachers and administrators for each component of the model.

**Modeling of attention to emotions.** With regards to the modeling of attention to emotions through interactions, both directors and teachers agreed on the importance of directors being visible for the maintenance of a positive climate. An important finding not explicitly reflected in our model was that although Ms. Beth's presence was important to teachers, a greater degree of modeling through attention fell to her assistant director, Ms. Carroll. Ms. Carroll reported that she checks in "with the teachers every day. All the time, I'm in and out of the classrooms every day." She additionally implied that it was because she was visible and present regularly that she was able to provide the additional support that her teachers needed throughout the day, be it an additional set of hands in the room or sitting one-on-one with a child in her office so that teachers can have a few minutes' respite or maintain proper ratios.

Even though Ms. Carroll is interacting more directly with the teachers daily, her ability to be visible and available is contingent on Ms. Beth's leadership. Ms. Carroll explained that her availability and visibility in the center had recently increased when they were able to make budgetary changes to hire a second assistant manager to oversee the Early Head Start program separately. Previously, she had felt that she "wasn't doing a good job [supporting] the teachers" because she was splitting her time between the two buildings. This director made a decision to reallocate financial and personnel resources,

and this has resulted in increased presence of the assistant director, as she is more able to walk the halls and support teachers.

Although the teachers at Hope Junction agreed that directors' interactions with teachers can significantly impact their feelings at work, they did not feel that the directors were as visible as the administrators had stated. One said, "You don't see them. They'll come into the room and say good morning but then you don't see them in passing." Another teacher confirmed, "They don't spend much time in our classrooms." Teachers also felt that when they did see the administrators it was because there was "something that they need." In line with our model, teachers at Hope Junction felt that because they were not being encouraged and supported informally, they were more likely to feel frustrated and stressed in the classroom. One teacher captured the construct in the model, saying, "we were taught to catch a child doing good. It's not the same for us, it's not the same." Teachers explained that they wished the director and assistant director spent more time in their classrooms enjoying and celebrating what they did with the children, because "you don't get enough of that reinforcement." She continued, saying that she wished a director would acknowledge her hard work by simply saying "I like the way you handled that situation." According to these teachers, such positive comments would go a long way to relieving the frustration and pressure they sometimes experience in the classrooms.

With regards to structurally modeling attention to emotions, although the director and assistant director were providing several key forms of support, including the use of an SEL curriculum, and employment of mental health specialists, there were some factors

identified by teachers that their director could improve upon to support both the emotional climate and their SET. The administrators at Hope Junction have taken several steps to structurally model their attention to emotions. First, they have implemented an SEL curriculum called *Conscious Discipline* which addresses not just child emotion regulation and problem solving skills, but also aims to increase teacher emotional competence and empower them to consciously respond to conflict (Loving Guidance, 2012). Although according to our model, this would be considered a structural support for attention to emotions, the curriculum was not mentioned once by the teachers in the focus group, indicating possibly that they do not see it as beneficial or valuable or that it is not being fully implemented.

Another key structural support for emotions at Hope Junction is the retention of three part-time mental health specialists. As Ms. Beth explained, the consultants provide “support for the teachers...helping that child learn how to interact and self-regulate,” ultimately promoting positive classroom environments. Such use of resources shows a high degree of respect for the importance of emotions, rather than viewing challenging behaviors as inconvenient.

This view of emotions was further reflected by Ms. Carroll’s description of how the center has accommodated children’s SEL needs. Speaking of emotions and behavior management she said, “we can’t control the behaviors...we can only do the best that we can do.” She continued, “if teachers have concerns about children...whether it’s social-emotional or development, we sit down, myself and the...family services coordinator, the health coordinator, and the mental health specialists...put some strategies in place.”

Some of those strategies may even include re-arranging classroom furniture to create a “quiet corner in the classroom...geared specifically towards them...their cozy place...to calm themselves down.” This coordinated collaborative effort removes some of the burden of problem solving and investigatory work from the teacher; it is a shared effort to identify the causes of, and strategies for managing, social-emotional and behavioral concerns.

Despite the implementation of these structural supports, the teachers at Hope Junction felt that some aspects of their center were detracting from their ability to emotionally support their students. Several teachers reported feeling overwhelmed and frustrated by the sheer amount of paperwork, assessments, and lesson planning reports they were expected to complete regularly, without being allotted sufficient planning time. Also of concern to teachers was the recent telecommunications change that enabled parents to call directly into their classrooms (rather than going through the main switchboard). They reported that the phone rang frequently throughout the day and disrupted their interactions with children: “the moment you step away...they go haywire and now you’re trying to listen [to the parent] and regulate what’s going on and it’s impossible.”

Together, the teachers reported that such structural frustrations were detracting from their ability to engage with the children, and indicated that without such burdens they would have more time “to do some of the fun stuff” that they really want to do. The pressures they feel now “takes away some of the fun” and “the connections with the children because you’re cutting it off.” When the pressures build up, teachers have to

work at maintaining a positive climate in their classrooms, despite how they themselves may actually feel. One teacher said, “we try very, very hard not to let that have any impact on [the children] at all...they are our top priority no matter what’s going on.”

Another teacher reiterated that given the high-risk nature of their student population, such interruptions may be additionally detrimental, as “these children don’t need a lot of that, because they have a lot of that coming from home. So the last thing they need is to do is to come to school and don’t get to finish out something.”

Finally, there was no mention by Ms. Beth or Ms. Carroll of formal opportunities to recognize the staff for their hard work or achievements. Interestingly, the teachers did make mention of having visitors and foreign dignitaries come to observe their classrooms, much as was described by Mr. Walker previously; however, at Hope Junction, the director did not appear to utilize the visits as a morale boosting opportunity as the others had. Instead, such visits felt uncoordinated and were an additional burden for the teachers.

**Emotionally sensitive reacting & responding.** There was less discussion of the topics falling under our category of emotionally sensitive reacting and responding by the administrators and teachers at Hope Junction. Both Ms. Beth and Ms. Carroll emphasized that they had open-door policies and that teachers felt comfortable coming to them with concerns, either professional or personal. Similarly, the teachers talked about feeling comfortable going to talk with their administrators, but they also implied that such communications often felt futile. As one teacher said about seeking out her director, “When I want to say something to you, you may want to turn away because you don’t

want to hear it,” and another teacher chimed in, “right, because if I don’t hear it, I don’t know [about the problem].”

Another component of communication not explicitly reflected in our model was the degree to which directors adequately communicate about the future or vision of a center. The teachers at Hope Junction expressed frustration because they felt uninformed by their director. As one teacher said:

They’re always in meetings. You look for them and they’re always in meetings...when we come to our big [staff] meetings, what was the outcome? What did you all discuss? How is it going to affect us?...We don’t hear any details about what we can do or what’s going on with us?

Directors may therefore need to consider how a lack of clear communication center operations can result in feelings of anxiety for teachers.

Beyond communication, Hope Junction participants additionally supported the inclusion of emotionally sensitive decision making and change management practices in the model. In particular, the teachers discussed how short-term staffing decisions often resulted in added strain and frustration in the classroom, noting, “substitutes have got to come in with some level of understanding of child development because I can’t teach it to them while I’m working!” Another teacher expressed how when she tried to communicate her frustration regarding replacement teacher inexperience, the director implied that she was ungrateful for the help.

Although Ms. Beth indicated that she personally had not had to fire anyone in several years, she did speak of how when she started as the director, “a lot of the staff

who were here were really not committed to being here, so I came in in 2005 and just started cleaning.” Since her start at Hope Junction, Ms. Beth reported that she has hired “about 50 or 60 staff” and that when interviewing she is “making sure that the person is a nurturer; they can have the best resume, ...but if they’re not warm, nurturing and willing to have fun then how are they going to be able to model that with kids? I look for...behind the scenes, the fuzziness.” Ms. Beth strongly considers the impact of both current and future employees on the emotional climate of her center and making hiring and firing decisions to maintain a positive environment for staff and students. The teachers agreed with the positive relationships among staff saying that the teachers are, “all supportive of each other’s emotions and feelings, so I think that’s a definite plus of being here. I truly enjoy working with my coworkers.” The teachers’ experiences of positive workplace relationships indicates that Ms. Beth’s hiring practices have indeed maintained the emotional climate of the center experienced by staff.

Although not discussed extensively, Ms. Beth did demonstrate her style of response to emotionally challenging events by discussing the way the center handles the reporting of possible neglect and abuse cases to family services. She said:

We’re all about building a trusting relationship with parents. We tell them at the very beginning of the year that if your child comes in with unexplained bruises that we’re mandated reporters and we will call child protective services but we’ll also call you. We’re not investigators but we want to make sure that we’re always preserving that relationship because there is nothing worse than [being at work] and having child protective services walk in. That erodes all the trust that we’re

building with them. We're not investigators but we've done what we've done to make sure your kid is safe.

She continued by speaking about the impact of such actions on the staff, saying that when challenging things happen she wanted to ensure that the staff are “safe, the kids are safe, and that what [the staff are] doing is valued.”

**Emotionally sensitive teacher development.** The final component of our model, emotionally sensitive teacher development, was the least discussed by the teachers and administrators at Hope Junction. The teachers made no mention of oppressive or stress-inducing evaluation practices, save for the pressure exerted on them to complete paperwork in a timely manner. This could either indicate that they were satisfied with the techniques utilized by their director, or that they did not see a connection between evaluation and the emotional climate of their center and classrooms.

Professional development practices were much more thoroughly discussed, yet there again appeared to be some divergence between the teachers' perceptions and the directors' intentions. Ms. Carroll did discuss her approach, saying that she tries to individualize PD to the needs of the teacher:

I do a lot of classroom observations, giving feedback to the teachers...in terms of where they're weak or need a bit more strength...For example, if they need a lot more support in term of math, I would go and look at math activities, even try things they may benefit from...

Ms. Beth reiterated the importance of individual PD tracks, saying that she expects that “all staff identify goals and work towards achieving their professional goals.”



Despite the director's and assistant director's united belief in tailoring PD plans to teachers' needs, the teachers expressed frustration with the seemingly repeated menu of PD programming offered to them. The teachers described the annual late summer training sessions where they're asked to brainstorm new ideas for common classroom problems, and one teacher remarked, "yeah, wasn't that the same thing [as last year]?" She went on to jokingly ask, "just look at last year's list, what did I say then?" So despite best intentions by the administration to individualize PD, the teachers still felt as though they were being treated identically, even year to year.

In summary, the teachers at Hope Junction are relatively positive about their work and seem to generally benefit from a positive emotional climate at the center. Yet, in line with several of the constructs identified in our model, their ability to engage in high quality and emotionally sensitive teaching could be improved with a keener awareness and sensitivity on the part of the director and assistant director. As one teacher concluded, "kids are not going to get the benefit of good teachers if [Ms. Beth] does not start putting that back into [her] teachers." She continued, saying that if teachers are overburdened and stressed, "We're human; we're going to fall apart."

### **South County Public School Head Start Qualitative Themes**

South County serves approximately 350 children in 17 Head Start classrooms and three Early Head Start rooms. The center is housed in a former elementary school building and is administered through the South County Public School system, which serves suburban and rural communities in the Mid-Atlantic region. The center employs

22 full-time teachers and an additional 48 non-teaching staff including family services workers and one full-time mental health consultant.

The director of South County, Ms. June, is in her mid-50s, and has over 20 years of experience in the field of ECE. She holds a graduate degree in educational administration and has completed coursework in child development (3 courses), early childhood (3 courses) and elementary education (6 courses). Prior to becoming a Head Start director she worked as a classroom teacher in Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms and as the Assistant Principal in a South County public elementary school. South County also employs Ms. Anna, who serves as Ms. June's assistant director, although she was originally hired to serve as the instructional and disabilities coordinator for county special education and inclusion services. Her transition to administration has only occurred over the last two years and there appears to be a great deal of confusion about her exact responsibilities besides "helping" Ms. June.

The analysis of interviews and focus group transcripts from South County also underscored the relevance of the constructs identified in the model. Furthermore, although all participants agreed that leadership plays a role in the center's climate, teachers and administrators disagreed somewhat about which leadership actions are most impactful, and there remains a disconnect between the emotional climate that the teachers experience and the intentions and perceptions of the administration.

In comparison to Hope Junction, teachers at South County appeared and vocalized a greater degree of frustration and despondence regarding their working conditions and their own efficacy in the classroom. The classrooms at this center seem both physically

and psychologically isolated, with some teachers feeling “cut off” from their colleagues and others teaching in outbuildings not connected to the main school building.

**Modeling attending to emotions.** When asked about how she, in a management position, impacts the emotional climate of her center, Ms. June replied, “you model it of course,” but then continued to only speak about reprimanding teachers, saying, “you call people down when it’s not appropriate...by a look or a conversation or maybe an improvement plan.” From Ms. June’s perspective, the way you maintain a positive emotional climate is through preventing teachers from acting in certain ways. This echoes the deficit model approach referred to by Mr. Walker previously (pg. 61).

Ms. June later mentioned how she serves as a model for the teachers, saying, “It’s just modeling. Your care and concern for the kids becomes their care and concern for the kids. If you didn’t have that they wouldn’t.” Ms. June perceives there to be a direct path from her behavior the children’s experience, through the teacher, and yet she defines modeling differently from our stakeholders. Whereas our model shows that by attending to the needs and emotions of teachers, directors encourage and enable teachers to do the same for their students, Ms. June focuses her “care and concern” on the children, not on her teachers. She is essentially telling her teachers that only the children’s progress is important, not their own emotions. In terms of modeling, this message seems to have been received by the teachers who generally expressed feeling unsupported, overwhelmed, and frustrated. Interestingly, she also implies that if she did not model the care, her teachers would not display any such concern independently.

In accordance with our model, director visibility at South County seems low, save for when Ms. June and Ms. Anna are conducting evaluations or intervening with a child. Ms. June readily admits that she feels “tied to the office at the computer” and that her “weakest area” is getting “around to everybody every day.” Referring to the administrators, one teacher quipped, “unless we call for help, they don’t come visit us.” Yet, when teachers were asked if they wanted administrators to spend more time in their classrooms, there was a resounding “No.” However, further discussion revealed that the teachers mainly objected to the authoritarian approach to evaluation and would prefer if directors didn’t “come with a clipboard and pen” but instead came “with a book to read” or came “to play in the centers for a while.” The teachers at South County are both commenting on the director’s approach to evaluations (which will be discussed further below), but also indicating their desire for the director to be visible engaged in a variety of activities – not all of which should be evaluative in nature

The lack of visibility and casual interactions in the classrooms lends the teachers to believe that Ms. June has “lost touch” with the realities of the classroom and even possibly developmentally appropriate expectations. For example, in describing a meeting about the pre-literacy progress of her students one month into the school year, one teacher was frustrated when Ms. June seemed surprised that her young three-year-old students did not “know their letters.” She responded, “well this child is barely three years old and they have just come to school for the first time, he hasn’t been exposed to this stuff before.” She then asked of her fellow teachers in the focus group, “why should we be saying that?...She should be telling me that! It’s frustrating.” The teachers perceive

Ms. June as holding a single-minded focus on academic aspects of school readiness, at the expense of SEL gains, and holding unreasonable expectations. One teacher in the focus group pleaded, “We’re talking about getting these kids ready for life and they need to be nurtured, they need the social skills.” She continued saying that the curricular demands, “are not realistic.” The teachers are pressured to meet daily academic curriculum standards that take precedence over spending time engaged in SET. In the focus group, one teacher expressed feeling unsupported in her desire to spend time comforting upset children, implying that instead she was expected to “shove the kid off my lap and go read another book to the class.”

Another teacher related how failing to keep up with the high expectations leads her to feel frustrated and disappointed in herself as an educator. She is driven by a desire to “give the kids everything” and she explained that she views the weekly lessons plans as her director’s statement of “what you need to do” to adequately set her students up for success. She said that if she didn’t managed to get everything done in a week that she is “doing a disservice to the kids” but that by “trying to cram all of it in is doing a disservice as well.”

Ms. June’s interactions with teachers display very few of the characteristics described by the stakeholders as promoting a positive climate. Instead she equates program quality with student achievement and models attention to academic school readiness for her teachers, socializing them to disregard emotional needs in favor of meeting curricular demands.

Discussions of seeking out additional resources for the center emphasized Ms. June's own acquisition of knowledge through attending elementary school principal training sessions and writing grants to support supplemental health care funding. Another resource available at South County that can more directly benefit the center's emotional climate is the on-staff mental health consultant. Although Ms. June did not mention the consultant in her interview, Ms. Anna did provide some details about this form of structural attention to emotions. Whereas Hope Junction, a much smaller center by comparison, employs three such consultants, South County has only one social worker to serve nearly twice as many students. This puts the center at a noticeable disadvantage when it comes to intervening during episodes of challenging behavior. As Ms. Anna described, the teachers follow "the contact procedures if they have a child who's having a meltdown." There are three individuals at the center able to respond to such situations: the social worker, Ms. Anna, and Ms. June, and as Ms. Anna explained, they "go running" at the call. The intention of this system is to support teachers; the administrators want the teachers to know that "somebody will come and help" (Ms. Anna). However with 17 classrooms and over three hundred children, the likelihood of multiple incidents taking place concurrently is very high. In fact, Ms. Anna's interview was interrupted because there were two simultaneous calls from teachers, and Ms. June was unavailable to help. In the focus group, the teachers related that their calls go unanswered frequently: "it happens all the time, you call for help and there's nobody to help you." Left without support, the teachers indicated that they occasionally feel unsafe in their classrooms.

That being said, the transition of Ms. Anna from disabilities coordinator to assistant director has been an allocation of resources that has resulted in an improved attention to emotions at South County. Ms. Anna was repeatedly referred to by the teachers as the “approachable,” “understanding,” and “empathetic” administrator. As she had more recently worked in classrooms than her supervisor, and directly with children displaying disruptive behavior, teachers believed that having Ms. Anna as an assistant director was a crucial structural support for them. Given that she only recently rose to the position, many teachers recalled their experiences working at South County when Ms. June was the only administrator to whom they could turn for assistance. Ms. Anna’s familiarity with disruptive child behavior therefore also makes her a sympathetic ear.

Interestingly, Ms. Anna’s background and training may also be influencing the center’s approach to behavior management, another component of structural attention to emotion modeling discussed by our stakeholders. Ms. Anna oversees the provision of special education services and conducts all of the center’s functional behavior assessments, and coordinates the actions of family services and the mental health consultant for children with developmental, behavioral, and emotional concerns.

Although the center is prepared to support children in need of additional services, there also appears to be a hyper-awareness of problem behaviors more in line with a reactionary or deficit approach to SEL than a universal or preventative tactic. Such perceptions of behavior management were prevalent in the focus group conversations as well. Teachers generally felt unprepared and under supported. When speaking to the severity of the problems they faced, one teacher commented, “Last year was really bad,

someone got hurt in my class every day,” while another said, “I had a kid bite me. And I have one this year that gave my co-teacher a black eye. It happens all the time.”

Another form of structural attention to emotions discussed in the model was the implementation of SEL curriculum. South County has used such a program, called Al’s Pals, (Lynch, Geller, & Schmidt, 2004) for nearly 16 years. Although our model indicates that use of an SEL curriculum to some extent indicates an overarching valuing of emotions by a center and generally supports SET, Al’s Pals was not referred to by either the teachers or the director and was only mentioned in passing by the assistant director. This lack of acknowledgement of the SEL curriculum during discussions of children’s emotions indicates that the benefit of using SEL curriculum for the overall emotional climate of a center may be dependent on how it is perceived by teachers and staff. If Ms. June were as enthusiastic about students’ social-emotional readiness as she is about their academic readiness for kindergarten, there may have been more discussion of Al’s Pals impact on student behavior in the classroom.

**Emotionally sensitive reacting & responding.** Communication at South County appears strained and there is no evident pathway through which teachers can easily convey concerns or needs to the director. Teachers expressed having trouble communicating with Ms. June both about their own needs and emotions as well as their classroom practices. One teacher described it as feeling “on the spot,” like she had to “defend herself” whenever she sought advice or assistance from the director. Although Ms. June referenced the need to “brainstorm” with teachers to solve some problems, she also freely admitted that she “dictates” to teachers and “jumps in” with solutions rather



than allowing teachers to express their concerns or ideas during meetings. There was also some indication that Ms. June may react punitively to teachers' openly communicating about their feelings. Ms. June said about a teacher struggling at work that she "emotionally couldn't handle things and she's not here" anymore. Although it was not clear whether the teacher had been fired, counseled out, or was just on leave, Ms. June's reticence about the topic seems in accordance with a punitive reaction to emotional expression.

In sharp contrast to Ms. June, the teachers felt that Ms. Anna was much more supportive and encouraging of their expression. One teacher said about Ms. Anna, "I know that I can go and speak candidly...and I know that she truly listens and she tries to help me." She continued, "It's validating for us when you feel that your administrator is really hearing you...That's the key, to be heard and respected that what you're saying is valid." Through their interactions with Ms. Anna, teachers feel encouraged to communicate their emotions and that their needs and feelings are valued and respected. Consequently, teachers indicated that they sought out Ms. Anna over Ms. June whenever possible, further reducing Ms. June's presence and visibility in the teachers' day-to-day lives and minimizing her knowledge about the well-being of her teachers and their classroom practices.

**Emotionally sensitive decision making and change management.** Ms. June displayed a high degree of awareness when describing the impact of her recent management of significant changes at South County. She described the reactions of the teachers to recent changes in staff pairings saying, "they were *not* happy about that"

(emphasis added). She even spoke about understanding teachers' reactions, saying that they are "going through the grief process" and that they are "angry because of it and taking it out on me and that's ok." Despite this awareness, she chose not to seek out or consider staff opinions prior to the change because "even if they had input" the director "still makes the decisions."

Ms. June displayed a similar degree of awareness without corresponding sensitivity when managing changes to the assessment tools. Ms. June described how she has made several changes to the assessment procedures at South County with varying degrees of success. When she first started as the director she immediately implemented a new tool and as she described, "they freaked." Upon reflection, she admitted that she didn't "blame them. It was too hard; it was not what they needed." In her second assessment plan, Ms. June had the teachers devise their own assessment tool which she perceived as empowering and uniting her staff because everyone "had their hands in it." Despite seeing a positive reaction to this collaborative approach towards assessment selection, Ms. June has recently selected a new tool, an online lesson planning and assessment system, and did not give the opportunity for teachers to provide input. This transition has again been met with significant push back from teachers. As one teacher remarked, "I had just gotten used to the old assessment and...now I have to relearn everything." The teachers complained that they were not well prepared for using the system, having received only an hour of training, and did not have adequate time to read over the manual as the system was introduced shortly before the start of the school year. When discussing the tool, even Ms. Anna acknowledged that "the whole thing has been a

huge change.” Possibly the most significant impact of the new tool is that teachers are now tied to computer consoles to complete their planning and testing and it is cutting into their flexibility and mobility in the classroom. As one teacher explained, “All I’m doing is taking down data and sitting in front of a computer every spare minute... We’re not teaching.” Another teacher echoed her, saying, “We’re testing on what they don’t know and we’re not teaching them.”

Ms. June is aware that significant changes to assessment tools can be disruptive and unsettling for teachers; she had experienced it in the past, and yet her approach to managing the most recent change appears to have been fairly insensitive. Teachers were not given forewarning about the upcoming switch, they were not eased into the new system, and no additional supports, such as additional planning time, were provided to enable them to easily adopt the system into their daily routines. The resulting frustration on the part of the teachers is impacting their feelings of efficacy in the classroom.

**Emotionally sensitive teacher development.** In contrast to Hope Junction, there was a significant discussion of the teaching component of the model by all participants from South County. There was agreement across reporters as to the prevalence of evaluations at South County. Ms. June emphasized the need for close monitoring, saying, “These teachers need to know you’re checking behind them... If you don’t think I’m going to come around and check, then you don’t think I care.” She continued, “The things I want to see are on a quick check [sheet] that I use when I walk around the classrooms... if it is important... then I put it on here,” referring to an evaluation sheet on the desk. Although she cannot be accused of being disengaged from monitoring her

teachers, there did appear to be a strong sense that Ms. June's approach to evaluations was more authoritarian than collaborative.

Teachers unanimously agreed that Ms. June's approach to evaluations was intimidating and taxing. One teacher commented, "Every time they come in it is 'I'm evaluating you' [mimes holding a clipboard] and it's stressful." Another interesting fallout of the center's transition to online lesson planning is that teachers now are being evaluated electronically. As one teacher pointed out, the director "didn't come into my room but [she's] saying I didn't do these things and that made me feel frustrated." Being judged without context and on their future plans rather than actual classroom practices puts teachers on the defensive. Furthermore, the feedback doled out on the electronic lesson plans was predominantly negative. As one teacher put it, "the feedback is always 'there's something wrong.' You don't get feedback when you're doing the right thing." This again harps back to the deficit focus, as evaluations are presented opportunities to catch teachers underperforming, leaving teachers on edge.

Ms. June spoke most passionately and extensively about her approach to professional development. Over the previous three years she designed a PD approach utilizing professional learning teams to help teachers engage in improving their own classroom practices. She readily and frequently referenced these teams throughout the interview, sometimes bringing them up as seeming non sequiturs, leaving the interviewer with the impression that she was more confident and comfortable speaking about PD than about the emotional climate of her center.

Interestingly, Ms. June did connect the PD teams to climate, saying that the new approach has reduced isolationism: “we’ve gotten so much better with a team feeling...because people share things...for years teachers went and shut their door to their classroom.” Yet, the teachers did not mention the PD team system once in the focus group, and actually implied that they felt more isolated now than previously, saying “we’ve lost our intimacy...we all used to help each other.”

The one mention of training in the focus group revolved around teachers’ perceptions of the trainings as presenting nice ideas but unrealistic given their other constraints and curricular requirements. One teacher said, “I would love to implement them but I don’t have the time...I don’t know when or where or how because I have 1,000 other things to do in that short time.” So rather than empowering teachers, the PD offerings have left teachers feeling more isolated and disappointed in their inability to keep up with current practices in their classrooms.

### **Qualitative Comparisons**

Based on comparisons across the components of the positive early emotional leadership model, the climate at South County is considerably more negative than that at Hope Junction. Although both centers displayed discrepancies between the administrations perceptions and the teachers’ perceptions, the director at South County was less sensitive to the emotional experiences of her staff, instead focusing almost exclusively on the academic achievements of her students. Although such outcomes are important to consider, the neglect of investing effort and resources into the center’s emotional climate has resulted in a staff that is less able to emotionally engage in their

work with students, overburdened with expectations, feeling vulnerable and unsafe in their work environment, and isolated. Furthermore, the conflating of emotions and behaviors as inconveniences that need to be managed have socialized staff to not invest their classroom time in SET, undermining classroom emotional climate, and likely resulting in diminished SEL gains for students.

### **Quantitative Comparisons**

There were no meaningful differences between the two centers on teacher and director survey responses to the forced choice items selected from previous studies of job satisfaction, organizational climate and well-being. However, the differences found in the qualitative case studies above were reiterated in the free response and ranking items created for this study. Hope Junction and South County will be compared across the survey results, starting first with teacher reports and then with the directors' response.

**Teacher workplace experiences.** As Table 1 depicts, the results from the work environment survey items showed little to no difference between Hope Junction and South county teachers with regards to their feelings of commitment, positive supervisory relationships and satisfaction with pay and promotion levels. Independent sample Mann-Whitney U tests showed no difference in the distributions across the two centers for any of the subscales.

Teachers free responses regarding center climate did, however, show some center level differences (Table 2). Responses to the free response question about center emotional climate such as “rewarding”, “secure” and “fun” were categorized as indicators

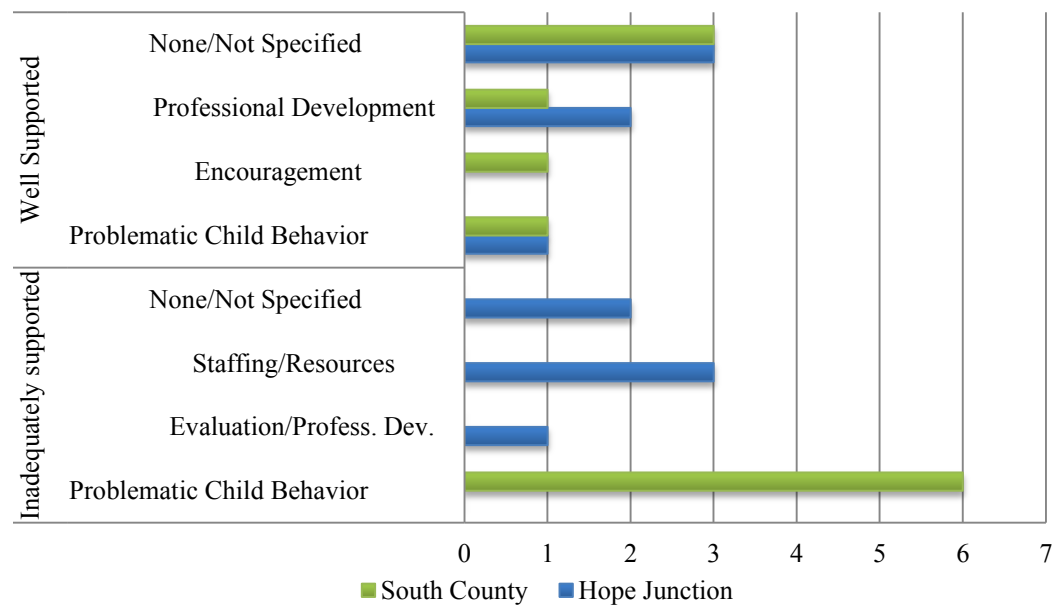
of Positive Climate whereas responses such as “demanding” “stressful” and “overwhelming” were considered indicators of Negative Climate. A third category emerged, which was labeled “Tempo” based on several responses reflecting the fast pace of their work environment. These response included words like “busy” and “fast.” Of the possible 18 descriptive words at each center (each teacher was asked for three words), the teachers at Hope Junction used more than half of their words to describe the positive nature of their workplace. Conversely, South County used two-thirds of their words to describe the negative nature of their center’s emotional climate. Non-parametric tests confirmed supported this observation, indicating that the two centers differed significantly in their reporting of positive climate (Mann-Whitney  $U=2.5$ ,  $p=.017$ , 2-tailed) and negative climate (Mann-Whitney  $U=2.5$ ,  $p=.011$ , 2-tailed).

**Table 1: Comparison of teacher survey responses by center ( $n=12$ )**

	<b>Hope Junction</b> <i>M</i> (SD)	<b>South County</b> <i>M</i> (SD)
<b>Work Environment</b>		
Supervisor Relationship	3.63 (.34)	3.33(.41)
Pay & Promotion	3.10 (.67)	2.73 (.44)
Commitment	3.95 (.39)	4.12 (.54)
Depression	1.65 (.17)	1.68 (.27)
<b>Count of Emotional Climate Terms</b>		
Center Pace	3.00	1.00
Positive Climate	10.00 <sup>a</sup>	5.00 <sup>a</sup>
Negative Climate	5.00 <sup>b</sup>	12.00 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a, b</sup> Significant differences between centers.

Figure 2 shows counts of coded responses to the free response questions about feelings supported or unsupported by administrators. When asked to describe a situation in which they had felt particularly well supported, a majority of teachers in both centers either left the question blank or made general statements such as “I feel like I get good feedback”. Such statements were coded as “None/Not Specified.” Other statements were coded based on the type of situation or problem for which a teacher needed support. For example, one teacher’s statement about getting help from the directors with coaching a brand new assistant teacher in her classroom was coded as “Professional Development.” Across both centers, types of support were relatively distributed with one or two teachers’ comments receiving the same topic code.



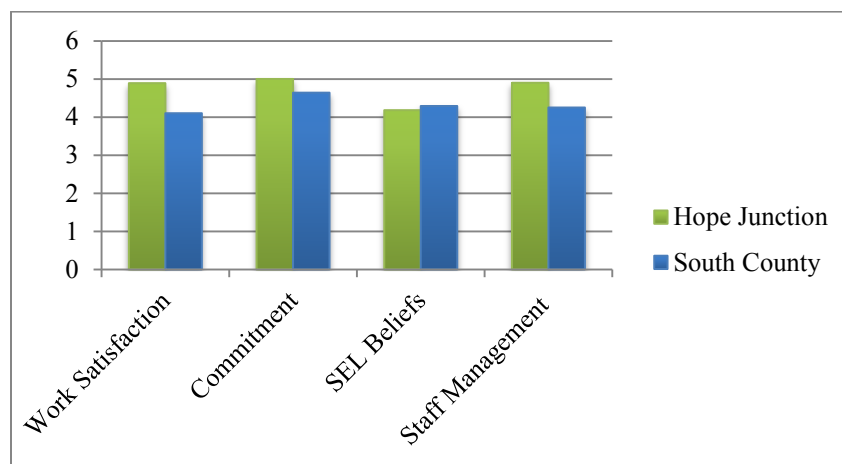
**Figure 2: Counts of coded statements of incidences of teachers feeling well and inadequately supported by administrators.**



Conversely, patterns in responses did emerge from teachers' statements of feeling inadequately supported by their administrators. Most striking was the complete congruence of statements by South County teachers. All six teachers from South County reported feeling inadequately supported by administrators with regards to children's challenging behavior in the classrooms and each teacher provided a unique example. For example, one teacher recounted that recently a crisis situation occurred in her classroom and "there were not any staff members to come help". Another teacher described asking for help with a very violent child in her classroom the preceding year and having her requests go unanswered: "I don't think the director fully understood the extent of the hurtful behavior (physically and emotionally) that was happening daily to the other children and staff (including myself)." This pattern indicates that challenging behavior is a consistent area of frustration for teachers at this center.

Among the Hope Junction teachers, responses were more distributed. The most common responses were "None/Not Specified" and "Staffing/Resources." This latter category describes statements regarding the distribution of resources and manpower. For example, one teacher responded, "There is an hour and a half gap between myself and co-teacher in the morning. I made it known to my supervisor and I am not receiving any support." There was not, however, an overwhelming pattern of complaints as was seen in South County.

**Center directors' experiences and perceptions.** The directors did not differ substantially with regards to their perceptions of job satisfaction, level of commitment, beliefs about SEL and staff management practices reported on the surveys (Figure 3), although Ms. Beth scored slightly higher on feeling satisfied with her work and using sensitive management styles with staff.



**Figure 3:** Comparison of director reported job satisfaction, commitment, SEL beliefs, and staff management practices.

***Promoting a positive climate.*** In response to the free response questions, Ms. Beth at Hope Junction described the emotional climate of her center as “Fun” “Warm,” and “Nurturing” and reported using “Laughter,” “Providing support,” and “Ensuring that teachers have what they need” to promote such a positive climate. Ms. June at South County described the emotional climate of her center using the phrases “Commitment to children and families” “Professional learning community” and “Hard Work.” She

promotes the climate of her center by using “Monthly awards/rewards given by peers”  
 “Professional learning teams” “Staff empowerment.”

***Ranking of responsibilities.*** The directors similarly differed in their priorities as ECE directors (Table 2). The greatest degree of disagreement was evident with regards to the importance of maintaining fiscal records, and, more relevant to the present study, providing a positive work environment for staff. Ms. Beth rated this last item as her 3<sup>rd</sup> highest priority (after providing a positive social-emotional environment for students and implementing research based curriculum) where as Ms. June rated it as her 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest priority (only outranking monitoring compliance and providing PD to staff).

**Table 2: Director ranking of job responsibilities**

<b>ECE Director Responsibilities</b>	<b>Hope Junction</b>	<b>South County</b>
Being available for parents.	5	8
Implementing innovative and research-based curriculum.	10	6
Assessing children’s progress and achievement.	6	5
Evaluating teachers.	3	4
Maintaining accurate and complete financial records for my center.	1	9
Monitoring compliance with regional codes and licensing requirements.	2	2
Promoting academic achievement of students.	7	7
Provide a positive social-emotional environment for students.	9	10
Providing a positive work environment for staff.	8	3
Providing professional development to teachers.	4	1

### **Conclusions Drawn from Study Two**

The components of the positive early emotional leadership model, as defined by our key stakeholders in study one, were identified as ecologically valid across the case studies presented here. Directors' practices related to their modeling of attention to emotions, emotionally sensitive reacting and responding to emotions, and emotionally sensitive teacher development, influenced teachers' perceptions of the emotional climate of their workplace in the expected directions. When directors attended to emotions of their staff through interactions, policies, or resources, such as Ms. Beth's retention of sufficient mental health consultants, teachers were more able to engage in the important SET interactions. Similarly, when directors do not take into account the ramifications of their decisions on staff emotions, such as when Ms. June inexpertly managed the change in assessment tools, teachers are forced to manage their frustration as well as overcome new obstacles, all while struggling to maintain a positive emotional climates in their classrooms.

**Reconciling teacher reports.** In general, results from Bloom's (2010) early childhood job satisfaction and work environment survey subscales did not seem to adequately capture the emotional aspects of teachers' workplace experiences. This was especially true at South County where teachers rated their supervisory relationships are relatively positive while their focus group discussions pointed to greater levels of workplace frustration. This could possibly reflect a conflation of their relationships with the assistant director and the director as the survey prompts did not specify which administrator the questions were referring to. Overall, while the Bloom scales have been

shown to adequately capture organizational climate, they may not be emotionally focused enough to discern how workplace experiences influence SET and SEL.

Going forward, these scales may need to be adapted to better reflect the emotional climate. One possibility will be the expansion of the free response and climate specific questions as there was significant overlap between those answers and focus group responses with South County teachers reporting their perceptions of a less positive center climate and more consistent feelings of inadequate support. At Hope Junction, teachers chose emotional climate descriptors that reflected their more mixed experiences at the center. This was also supported by focus group responses that painted a picture of a center that generally ran smoothly and where, with a few exceptions, most teachers felt relatively supported. They were not overwhelmingly positive, but in contrast to South County, they seemed fairly content at work.

**Reconciling director responses.** In contrast to teachers, the directors' survey responses more closely aligned with the qualitative findings regarding center emotional climate. Ms. Beth reported utilizing slightly more sensitive staff management practices which was reflected in the fact that her teachers generally found her to be supportive. Interestingly, Ms. June and Ms. Beth were nearly even in their ratings of SEL beliefs and yet qualitative reports from Hope Junction found more evidence of structural modeling of attention to emotions than at South County. Social desirability on the part of Ms. June may account for this disparity given that the directors knew the general premises of this study related to improving social and emotional outcomes for children.

The greatest degree of overlap between qualitative and quantitative findings was seen in the free response sections of the survey. Ms. Beth's descriptions of her center's climate point towards a positive environment. Furthermore, the terms she chose were more emotionally focused responses, indicating that Ms. Beth is aware of emotions in her center and sensitive to the needs of her staff. Additionally, Ms. Beth's responses were in line with the survey responses of her teachers, indicating a relatively consistent perception of climate. Ms. June's chose phrases are qualitatively different from those of Ms. Beth's, but are not easily contrasted. Rather than referring to feelings, Ms. June's climate descriptions come across more as mission statements or visions – they are action oriented phrases rather than emotionally focused. Although not clearly negative, these statements are also not unqualifiedly positive. Similarly, her statements of what she does to foster such climates lack some of the softer qualities associated with early childhood practices. Such an approach may also reflect her elementary administration background.

Results from the forced choice ranking of responsibilities section of the survey appear to have strong convergent validity when compared to the qualitative analyses of the centers. Specifically, the degree to which each center aligned with the components of the positive early emotional leadership model was related to their rating of their rating of the importance of 'providing a positive work environment for staff.'

**Re-examining the model based on case studies.** In considering the extent to which the positive early emotional leadership model adequately captures the emotional climate experiences at Hope Junction and South County, two important findings emerged. Firstly, it is clear that not every aspect of the model is equally relevant across

sites. For example, in South County, the director's insensitive approach to teacher evaluation was more detrimental while evaluations were barely discussed at Hope Junction. Similar across both sites however was the greater degree of discussion focused on the modeling of attention to emotions, especially director visibility, which may point towards the necessity to differentially weight components of the model.

A second important consideration to emerge from the examination of case studies is that the model as described does not take into account the differential impact of assistant directors on center emotional climate. Although some of the findings from the qualitative reports indicated that director's actions control, to some extent, the impact of assistant directors, such as when Ms. Carroll's availability was improved because of hiring decisions, for the most part, teachers appeared to view assistant directors separately. Research into assistant directors in ECE is incredibly sparse, but going forward in the investigation of emotional climate, their roles may need to be better defined and accounted for in the model.

As it stands now, the positive early emotional leadership model describes how the actions and behaviors of directors socialize the emotional climate of ECE centers, impacting the staffs' ability to engage in effective SET. Further work will be necessary to empirically link the components of this model to classroom practices and ultimately to child outcomes. However, the present in-depth qualitative exploration represents the first such foray into this field of research and indicates that such associations will likely be found.

## **Implications & Future Directions**

The present study set out to explore the role that ECE center directors play in fostering the emotional climate of their ECE center. Specifically, we defined a conceptual model of the impact that leadership behaviors and decisions have on center teachers' emotional experiences at work and the extent to which those feelings influence teachers' classroom practices, especially pertaining to social-emotional teaching and learning.

Prior to this work, research into leadership practices in ECE have primarily focused on less interpersonal aspects of program administration including fiscal management and compliance with regulations (e.g. Osgood & Stone, 2002). Some work by Bloom has broached the issues of teacher job satisfaction and overall organizational climate (Bloom, 1992, 2010), but more work needs to be done to answers Muijs' call (2004) to identify what effective leadership practices look like in the field of ECE.

The model described herein, the positive early emotional leadership model, provides the first theoretical support for the connection between ECE directors' approaches to leadership and SET in individual classrooms. Certainly additional empirical research will be necessary to further refine and connect the specific components of the model to classroom practices, and subsequently to SEL. However, currently the field lacks a measurement approach that focuses on the emotional climate of ECE centers.



Given the adage, “what gets measured is treasured” we believe that the development of an emotional climate assessment tool could benefit not only the ECE SEL research community, but also the individuals working in ECE centers, as awareness of climatic realities of ECE centers may promote climate improvements. The need for such a tool was echoed by one stakeholder who implied that as the director of a large multi-center Head Start center, she informally already makes judgments about the emotional climate of many of her centers saying that she notices a variety of aspects of the environment asking herself,

Are there places to leave communication? Are there front office staff?

These are things that I think about when I go into centers; I don’t have a check list. Do they at least pick up their heads and say can I help you?

Those things are when you first enter the building, is it clean? Do other staff, as you walk down the hallway, acknowledge that you’re there? [Ms.

Daniels]

She continued, emphasizing how beneficial it would be to be able to capture that information more systematically, “I think that it would be lovely to...measure the emotional climate ... as a whole and then get the feedback.” As Ms. Daniels implies, having a formal assessment tool for ECE emotional climate would mean that center directors could receive standardized feedback about the emotional experiences of their employees. Seeing as assessment and evaluation are at the crux of Head Start program management and decision making (Office of Head Start, 2009), directors’ adoption of an

emotional climate assessment tool would align well with the goal of intentional and continual improvement of program quality.

Going forward we will refine the components of the positive early leadership model into an assessment tool to help directors take the emotional temperature of their centers. Results from such an assessment can inform changes at the administrator level to the benefit of staff and children. Specifically, respondents will be asked about their perception of the centers' emotional climate as well as the director's modeling, reacting, and teaching practices described in the model. The forthcoming Assessment of Positive Early Emotional Leadership (APEEL) will build on the 360° feedback model, one of the best methods to promote increased self-awareness in managers (Hagberg, 1996). Such feedback methods gather information about an individual (typically a supervisor, manager, or executive) from subordinates and supervisors of the individual as well as key stakeholders, including customers (Lepsinger & Lucia, 2009).

The APEEL tool will rely on responses from the director, other administrative staff (assistant directors, specialists, etc.), teachers, non-teaching staff, and parents of children attending the center. By including all members of an ECE community in the assessment directors will be better able to understand the differential experiences of those they serve and employ. In order to successfully unpack the findings of the survey, directors would be paired for a professional coach to guide them through the self-reflection necessary to act on the 360° feedback.

The call for administrators to be aware of the impact of their leadership behaviors and style is new to early childhood, but not in other realms. Such reflection and analysis

has been heavily touted in business. For example, when discussing executive leadership development, Ulrich and Smallwood stated that “senior leaders should be self-aware and self-reflective of how their personal behavior and collective action shape what others do. Leadership hypocrisy exists when the rhetoric of leaders does not match their behavior, and what they do is louder and more visible than what they say.”(Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012, p. 3). What we’re striving for presently is to help pull some of this reflective and intentional leadership practices into ECE centers where they can impact the lives of teachers, children, and families. The development of the APEEL tool will enable such reflection and improvement.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

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