



Preschool Teachers' Emotional Acting and School-Based Interactions

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Abstract

How preschool teachers manage and express their feelings across school-based interactions (e.g., teacher-child, teacher-family, and teacher-colleague) has implications for their professional success and the developmental and academic outcomes of their relational counterparts. This study explores how preschool teachers make sense of their emotional labor, or *the deliberate expression or suppression of emotions to achieve organizational goals*, in the context of three professional interactions. Qualitative findings show preschool teachers' decisions to engage in particular types of emotional acting are both informed by and a facilitator of the strength and intimacy of their relationships. Implications for research, practice and policy are reviewed.

Keywords Preschool teachers · Emotional labor · Emotional acting · Teacher emotion · School-based interactions · Teacher relationships

Due to the highly interpersonal nature of their work, preschool teachers experience a wide range of emotions in their jobs (Davis & Dunn, 2018; Fu et al., 2010; Seaman & Giles, 2021). Exchanges with children, colleagues, administrators, and children's families all raise a variety of emotions (Humphries et al., 2018; Sanders-Smith et al., 2020). How preschool teachers manage and express their feelings during these exchanges can have implications for their professional success, and children's development (Jennings et al., 2017; Seaman & Giles, 2021).

Preschool teachers' direct interactions with young children (ages 3–5) critically contribute to their developmental and academic outcomes (Hamre et al., 2014; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Specifically, teacher-child interactions are influenced by the social and emotional dynamics experienced in the classroom (Coplan et al., 2011). Because teachers' responses to children are shaped by their own social and emotional functioning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), teachers' abilities to regulate their emotions effectively

serve as a key contributor to positive classroom interactions (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Teachers' emotional regulation during adult-facing interactions is also a crucial aspect of supporting children's development, as positive classroom interactions are shaped by teachers' collaboration with colleagues and families.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented changes to teaching and learning (Hamilton et al., 2020) that heightened students' wellness needs (Zhou, 2020) and educators' own stress and fears (Brown et al., 2020). A study of early childhood educators in New York City during the early months of the pandemic noted 91% of educators were emotionally affected by the pandemic and 38% reported being impacted "a lot" or "extremely" (Tarrant & Nagasawa, 2020). These stressors on early childhood educators can have implications for their capacity to build emotionally sensitive and cognitively stimulating relationships (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

At all times, but especially in an ongoing pandemic, navigating the emotional complexities of their job is a challenge (Lambert et al., 2018) for which teachers receive little preparation or training (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). ECE

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professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators (e.g., NAEYC) suggest that managing and regulating emotional expressions is a key competency of professional practice. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2019) notes that reflective practitioners “have strategies to manage the physical, emotional, and mental stress inherent in their profession in order to be healthy and to engage effectively and empathetically with children and families” (p. 25). Emotional labor, or *the deliberate expression or suppression of emotions to achieve organizational goals* (Grandey et al., 2013), is one way teachers navigate the emotional demands of their work.

Research indicates that teachers’ emotional management is a function of how teachers understand the emotional expectations of their work (Brown, Vesely, Mahatmya, & Visconti, 2017), how they conceptualize their teacher identities (Brown, Horner, Kerr & Scanlon, 2014) and how they understand the emotional displays in the professional setting (Stark & Bettini, 2021). Previous studies on emotional labor have not examined how *preschool* teachers make sense of these emotional expectations *within the context of specific professional relationships*: teacher-child, teacher-family and teacher-colleague.

The Role of Emotion in Preschool Teachers’ School-Based Interactions

Given the emotional complexities of teaching (Lambert et al., 2018; Davis & Dunn, 2018), regulating the wide range of emotions experienced at work is a key professional competency, and necessary for promotion of optimal school-based interactions. In the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (2011), several of the principles and ideals directly relate to this competency, such as Principle-1.2 “We shall care for and educate children in positive emotional and social environments” (p. 3) and Ideal-1.5 “To create and maintain safe and healthy settings that foster children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development” (p. 2). Robust literature demonstrates the importance of teacher-child interactions for children’s development (Hamre et al., 2014; Downer et al., 2012), with attention paid to fostering emotionally secure pedagogical relationships (Garner et al., 2013).

Beyond teacher-child interactions, partnerships between preschool teachers and families are crucial for the success of preschool children. Effective partnerships between teachers and families foster young children’s development in multiple domains, including literacy skills (Durand, 2011), cognitive and language development (Fantuzzo et al., 2004), academic achievement (Ogg et al., 2021), and behavior and socio-emotional development (Ogg et al., 2021).

Preschool teachers’ daily interactions with colleagues, including other teachers and administrators, also have implications for children’s outcomes (Van Garderen et al., 2012). Strong colleague-to-colleague relationships support increases in student learning (Ronfeldt et al., 2015) through fluid communication and shared instructional planning (Sileo, 2011), and improved social and emotional competences for teachers and students (Jennings et al., 2017).

Developing strong partnerships with children, families, and colleagues involves an emotionally complex process, and can trigger both positive and negative emotions in teachers (Chen & Wang, 2011; Seaman & Giles, 2021). Understanding connections between teachers’ emotions and their interactions with young children, families, and colleagues may help in the process of building true authentic school-based partnerships (Rouse & O’Brien, 2017). However, much of the research on teachers’ emotional labor focuses only on teachers’ interactions with students. We therefore address a gap in the literature by examining teachers’ emotional labor across multiple types of school-based interactions, including adult-facing interactions with families and colleagues.

The Nature of Preschool Teachers’ Emotional Labor

As teachers struggle to navigate the emotional demands of their job (Lambert et al., 2018), researchers have used the framework of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) to understand how the deliberate suppression or expression of emotion to achieve organizational goals (Grandey et al., 2013) informs daily teaching practice. Research shows that teachers’ engagement in emotional labor is linked to positive (e.g., job satisfaction) and negative (e.g., burnout) professional outcomes (Fu, 2015; Wang et al., 2019). To understand teachers’ emotional labor, researchers examine teachers’ *emotional acting strategies* and the *display rules* of their organizations.

Emotional Acting Strategies

Emotional acting refers to the different ways in which teachers might externally express the emotions they experience internally at work. Emotional acting includes teachers’ decisions to naturally emote (i.e., feel and express genuine emotions; Diefendorff et al., 2005), surface act (i.e., conceal emotions felt inside and display alternative feeling; Hochschild, 1983), or deep act (i.e., modify felt emotion to align with emotional display expectations; Hochschild, 1983). For example, imagine that a teacher is interacting with a child who is regularly disruptive during morning meetings

by knocking toys over while the teacher and other children are taking turns speaking. Frustration is the *natural emotion* the teacher experiences internally. If enacting natural emotions, the teacher may choose to display this emotion externally by yelling or snapping at the child in a harsh tone. On the other hand, if the teacher believes that natural emotional expression might not meet the child's needs, the teacher may choose to conceal the feelings of frustration by responding with a neutral face and tone to the child, even though she really still feels frustrated internally. This suppression of an emotion is an example of *surface acting*. Alternatively, the teacher may engage in a third form of emotional labor: *deep acting*. To *deep act*, the teacher would reappraise the emotional stimulus (the child's behavior) and experience a different emotion from frustration, internally. Although her initial emotion was frustration, she may then remember learning from the child's mother that his grandmother, who lives with the family, was admitted to the hospital recently. Upon remembering this context, the teacher may feel her internal frustration being suddenly replaced by empathy and concern for the student, and in response, she handles the students' behavior with a neutral face and tone.

Although teacher-child interactions captured in the above scenarios frequently occur in early childhood classrooms, few studies have documented the emotional acting of *preschool* teachers within the context of such interactions. In a survey of 198 Canadian child care providers, Lee and Brotheridge (2011) uncovered how educators performed emotional labor throughout their daily routines with both children and parents; experienced providers surface acted more frequently whereas inexperienced providers deep acted. In a survey of 1,264 early childhood Chinese educators, Zhang et al. (2020) found that experienced teachers engaged in surface acting more frequently than inexperienced teachers, but that deep acting was more common overall. They also found that preschool teachers engaged in emotional acting for a variety of purposes, including entertaining their students, disguising negative feelings, and creating boundaries between their professional and personal emotional identities (Zhang et al., 2020).

Educators' decisions to use one of these emotional acting strategies are shaped by their understanding of emotional display rules (EDRs): the organizational expectations for display of emotions on the job (Diefendorff et al., 2005). From the example above—*imagine that a teacher is interacting with a child who is regularly disruptive during morning meetings by knocking toys over while the teacher and other children are taking turns speaking*—the teacher's emotional display to use a calm and warm tone of voice when speaking with the child or calling the child's family home—would inform how to emotional act within this school-based interaction. Zhang and colleagues (2020)

found that among Chinese preschool teachers, *keep smiling* was an important display rule for teachers. This mirrors findings of another study that indicated *maintaining positive emotions* and *hiding negative emotions* were represented in teacher displays (Stark & Bettini, 2021).

Because schools rarely communicate EDRs to teachers explicitly, teachers' perceptions of their EDRs are dependent on their own identities and perceptions of their organizations' culture (Stark & Bettini, 2021). Current research speaks to teachers' struggles to obtain knowledge of emotional display rules (Brown, Vesely, Mahatmya, & Visconti, 2017) and the resulting complexity of managing and enacting professionally-appropriate emotions on the job (Brown, Horner, Kerr, & Scanlon, 2014). To our knowledge, previous studies have not yet examined how teachers make sense of these emotional expectations, and use various display strategies, *within the context of specific types of relationships*. We, therefore explore how teachers' make sense of their emotional labor across multiple relationships (i.e., with children, families, colleagues) in the ECE context. Our analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do preschool teachers describe the emotional dimensions of their work?
2. How do preschool teachers emotionally act within their different school-based relationships, and what distinct purposes does this emotionally acting serve within each?

Method

We collected data for this study as part of a larger mixed methods study focused on preschool teachers' ($n=123$) emotional labor and well-being. We examine data from qualitative, in-depth interviews from a nested sub-sample of the preschool teachers ($n=27$).

Participants and Sites

The 27 participants were all teachers working in six publicly-funded preschool programs in a metropolitan area of the eastern United States (16 teachers worked in programs funded in part by local and state governments through public pre-K programming; 11 were teachers in Head Start; see Table 1). These programs predominantly served children from historically disinvested communities and many of the children's families were facing economic hardships at the time of the study. Our sample included similar numbers of lead ($n=15$) and assistant teachers ($n=12$). As shown in Table 2, on average, teachers had 14 years of experience and earned approximately \$30,000 per year; about one-third

Table 1 Descriptive information about six programs

Site	Number of Participants (n=)	Predominant Funding Source	Age of Children Served (in years)	Community-based OR School-based Program	Single or Multi-site Program	Enrollment of Mixed income OR Low-income Children
1	2	Head Start	3–5	Community	Multi-site	Low-income
2	2	Universal Pre-K (state)	3–5	Community	Single site	Mixed income
3	1	Head Start	3–5	School	Multi-site	Low-income
4	8	Head Start	3–5	Community	Single site	Low-income
5	7	City	4–5	Community	Multi-site	Low-income
6	7	Universal Pre-K (state)	3–5	Community	Multi-site	Mixed income

of participants had at least a four-year degree. Most participants were in their late 40 s.

Data Collection

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited participants from publicly-funded preschool programs. We purposively sampled (Patton, 1990) teachers with varied experience, education, and role (i.e., lead or assistant teacher) in the programs. The first three authors of this paper attended teachers' professional development workshops to discuss the study and recruit participants. We made clear that participation was voluntary. In total, 123 teachers signed informed consent forms to complete the survey, and 27 of these teachers consented to participate in an in-depth interview as well. These 27 teachers are the focus

Table 2 Demographic Information for 27 Teachers

	Total teachers (N=27)	Lead Teachers (n=15)	Assistant Teachers (n=12)
Age			
Mean age (in years)	49.29	48.92	49.66
Education			
High school	3	1	2
2-year college	8	4	4
4-year college	9	4	5
Master's degree	6	6	0
Mean Income			
Annual Household	\$30,297	\$35,929	\$24,666
	\$43,303	\$46,622	\$39,984
Race/Ethnicity			
African American	13	8	5
White	7	5	2
Latino/a	6	1	5
Asian/ Pacific Islander	1	1	0
Years of Experience	14.66	14.56	14.79

of the analyses highlighted in the current paper. In addition to opt-in interest, the sample size for this analysis was also determined by reaching saturation, or no longer hearing new theoretical or conceptual information (Daly, 2007). All participants completed a demographic survey capturing information on ages taught, years of experience, gender, race, and ethnicity. Each participant was assigned a unique researcher identification (ID) number to ensure confidentiality.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted by one of four interviewers (i.e., two study authors and two graduate researchers). According to participant preference, 25 of the interviews were conducted in English, and two were conducted in Spanish. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. They ranged in length from 45 to 90 min, and were conducted during the teacher workday. The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of interview questions focused on: teachers' perceptions about their emotional labor (e.g., *Could you describe a teacher-child AND a teacher-family interaction in which you believe you may have used emotional labor?*), interactions with children and families (e.g., *Tell me about a recent interaction with a child in which you feel you were successful; How do you feel when you work with parents and families?*) and daily routines. During the daily routine component of the interview, we collected information regarding relationships with other teachers and administrators as well as how participants felt about those interactions.

Data Management and Analyses

Interviews were transcribed in English, and each transcript was reviewed for accuracy before it was uploaded to Dedoose for data analysis. We analyzed interview data in three-waves: open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005). In each wave, we considered theories that emerged from interview data and existing literature (LaRossa, 2005) through the use of sensitizing concepts as initial codes (Van den Hoonaard, 1997). During open coding we used a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to build our codebook. Starting with our initial codes, we read blocks of texts and began to assign codes using these existing codes

as well as creating new emic-informed codes reflective of participants' specific experiences. As we read each new block, we compared it with the previous block to determine if a new code ought to be created or if the text aligned with a previously created code. The first three authors worked together through this initial open coding process across three transcripts until we reached agreement regarding each code's meaning. We then open coded the remaining transcripts using the codebook we developed, and continued to discuss our coding to ensure reliability in this process. This was particularly important as we deciphered and delineated experiences of emotional acting (e.g., natural emotions versus deep acting). We met to discuss any disagreements with the existing codes.

Following open coding all 27 interview transcripts, we began axial coding. In axial coding, we identified the most salient codes and groups of codes related to our area of inquiry (Glesne, 2016). The categories that emerged included emotional labor codes (i.e., deep acting, emotional display rules, natural emotions, and surface acting), daily routine, and family engagement codes. We then examined each of these larger categories across all of the participants to understand the dynamics within and across participants' experiences related to emotional labor and interactions with children and families. Finally, we engaged in selective coding, which involved connecting the categories to tell the story of how preschool teachers understand emotional labor and what it looks like in daily interactions with children and families.

Data Quality

To establish trustworthiness, we used strategies common to qualitative research (Guba, 1981). As we conducted interviews and analyzed the data, we debriefed with professional peers to think more deeply about growing insights of the interview data (Guba, 1981). This peer examination helped widen our perspectives on teachers' emotional labor, daily routines, and work with families and children. Peer examination presented an opportunity to practice reflexivity (Guba, 1981), which was an important step in minimizing bias (Glesne, 2016). Our research team was diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, first language, and classroom teaching experience. This diversity was especially important throughout data collection and analyses as we practiced reflexivity by critically and continuously examining our assumptions through dialogue with one another. In addition, the in-depth interview data collected afforded thick, rich descriptions contributing to the transferability of the findings (Guba, 1981). We developed and presented descriptions of our participants to provide context for understanding the findings (Glesne, 2016; Guba, 1981) as they may apply to similar contexts.

Findings

We found that preschool teachers were deeply aware of the emotional practice of their work, despite their lack of familiarity with the concept of emotional acting. Participants described a variety of distinct ways in which they acted and displayed emotions, in relation to their interactions with students, families, and colleagues. Our findings demonstrate that the intimacy or strength of the relationships informed how these teachers emotionally acted and suggests that each form of emotional acting serves a unique purpose within the context of specific relationships with students, families, and colleagues.

Natural Emotions: "It's Hard for Me Just to Fake How I Feel"

Across interactions with students, families, and colleagues, the extent to which participants felt comfortable displaying natural emotions varied based on their level of intimacy with the other person. Abelina, who had three years of teaching experience, described using natural emotions when students felt very comfortable with her: "[They're] too attached to me and would know if I wasn't showing the truth...so I make them feel really comfortable, and then that way they are okay with my feelings." Claudia, who had 10 years of teaching experience, noted that she expressed emotions differently around children than parents, explaining, "I'm more natural with the children. They know me better." As Gail, who had over 30 years of experience explained, the trusting relationships she built with students sometimes made it challenging to *not* to show her "true feelings":

I think the faking part is difficult because... I like to show my true feelings in the moment...It's hard for me just to fake how I feel.

Participants described ways in which they used natural emotional displays in service of students' development. Abelina displayed her natural emotions to build relationships, because seeing her emotions helped students feel comfortable around her. She explained, "I make them feel really comfortable, then once they, well, we, feel that way, they are okay to go with each other." Other participants noted that they displayed natural emotions in order to serve as role models for displaying and regulating feelings. Although being in the position of role model left some teachers feeling vulnerable, they noted that their relationships with and commitment to the children in their care made this vulnerability possible, and worthwhile. As Gail shared, it is important for students to know how their teacher feels:

If I'm coming in and I don't feel good for that day, or I have a headache or something.... [If] I generally don't

feel good, I tell children. I don't—I just can't come in and just fake out. I say, 'Today I have a headache, I'm not feeling too good today, so I might not say that much.'

Teachers' levels of trust and comfort in adult-facing relationships also informed whether or not participants expressed their natural emotions during interactions. Aliyah, who had 30 years of teaching experience, explained how her relationships with parents informed her emotional interactions with them:

I don't really act with my parents...what they see is what they get. I get to know my parents. I know their reactions and how to deal with them. And how to talk with them, because you cannot talk with every parent the same way.

Bennett, who had 16 years of teaching experience, also noted ways her trust and relationships with families informed the extent to which she demonstrated her natural emotions to them:

Some families, you know, you have to be very careful because of the fine line...I've noticed for the past two years that I have been very open with and very natural with things that I need to say and get across. ... you do have those parents that you have to walk on eggshells because you don't know how they're going to respond.

Preschool teachers also described that the strength of relationships with colleagues informed their emotional labor during collegial interactions. Bennett explained she could display her natural emotions around many colleagues but not all of them, because "some colleagues, you just—you don't really know how to take them. So, you just keep that level of respect. And then you have some colleagues who [you] trust and [you] know they have your back, no matter what." Teachers noted that similar work ethics and values informed their display of natural emotions with colleagues. Abony spoke of feeling "bullied" and "in competition" with a colleague and although she expressed her natural emotions once, she "was not comfortable with her [colleague]" and masked emotions going forward. Thus, the strength of the relationship played a role in participants display of natural emotions, across all three types of school-based interactions.

Surface Acting: "I Have to Smile and Say, 'Come on Let's Go Play!'"

Several participants described using surface acting as a tool to protect themselves and others from the negative emotions they naturally experienced. Participants recognized that showing a negative emotion could be harmful to their relationship with a child, family, or colleague. Rather than compromise a relationship, they used surface acting to display a positive emotion during a challenging interaction.

Surface acting was most useful when relationships with students, families, and colleagues were unknown or new, when teachers felt "watched," or when they were caught off guard by others' actions and knew their natural emotions would not be professional. For example, several participants indicated that they utilized surface acting when they did not fully understand the root of a behavior. Gail shared an experience in which she chose to surface act "because I don't know if it's the child's fault or not...So, [I decided to] just not show my true feelings at that moment."

Participants noted that suppressing negative emotions and displaying alternative emotions had implications for children's development. They used surface acting when they felt that displaying negative emotions did not serve their relationships. Aliyah explained, "Always I hide my feelings. If I am sad, I cannot work with the kids. I have to smile and say, 'Come on let's go play!'...we cannot show our feelings to them because...is not good for them." Sofia, who had seven years of experience, shared that she sometimes hid her true emotions because her students might internalize those emotions: "Usually I don't try to show... if I'm mad with my coworker or somebody...in front of... the kids...cause I know the way I feel I'm going to transmit it to them..."

Participants also described how they used surface acting to protect relationships with families. For instance, Zainab, who had 10 years of teaching experience, described surface acting during a conversation with a parent:

She did not understand what I'm saying or...I felt... insulted a little bit because all the time she was either correcting my words...I did not feel comfortable talking to her...I have to sit down with this parent face to face and share the problems in the school...the conference turned...ugly....so I'm always just stay nice to her [even though] I felt really angry first of all and disrespect[ed].

Zainab, like other participants, intentionally chose to surface act so as not to jeopardize the relationship. Surface acting enabled Zainab to ensure that the family's voice was heard; she explained, "I don't want to hurt parents' feelings...I

don't shut down the parent right away... I don't want the parent to hate me."

Beyond the teacher-child and teacher-family interaction, participants described ways in which surface acting supported their relationships with colleagues such that they could better communicate important information, remain present in emotional exchanges, and promote job security especially when natural emotions could have impeded those exchanges. For example, Rebecca, who had 13 years of teaching experience, masked feelings of frustration and sadness around her colleagues' lack of enthusiasm for the work:

...I tried to approach [one of my former colleagues] in a [respectful] way. You know, not...pointing my finger at her and saying, '...you're changed'...She didn't want to do anything extra. And wasn't really motivated to be creative...I pretended like I didn't notice it... I respectfully say, 'You know, I notice that you seem like you don't want to be here. Is everything okay?'

By surface acting and suppressing her own emotions, Rebecca was able to connect with her colleague in such a way that made their relationship more workable. Others shared that the use of surface acting with colleagues aligned with the importance of job security. With 15 years of teaching experience, Soniya explained that surface acting enabled her to interact with her administrator: "...when we are in front of the director, and she is asking questions like, 'Okay. Does anybody have any problems?'...I am feel[ing]...I am the only one who steps up...and then I am like the bad person...So, sometimes I just stood back..." In the following exchange, Maria echoed Soniya's description of feeling the need to stand back and smile as if all is fine.

When you are sad inside what, what do you have to show outside? What is it that you show to your colleagues, or the kids on the outside? Well, here, nothing...just is like, smile, say everything is fine.

Deep Acting: 'It Gives You a Different Perspective'

Just like natural expression and surface acting, teachers' experiences of *deep acting* were shaped by the authenticity of their relationships with children, families, and colleagues. Participants explained that the more they knew children's and families' backgrounds, the more likely they were to deep act. Teachers described how employing multiple strategies to understand what might be happening for the child during their interactions promoted deep acting—some teachers were able to deep act in the moment whereas

for others it emerged over time. In order to deep act, teachers intentionally reflected on their emotions, child development, and individual children's experiences. Participants who described being able to deep act tended to be more experienced teachers with practice in leaving stress or negative emotion outside the classroom. As Aliyah described,

But it took a while...It took years of practice. When I walk in here, whatever I am feeling, I leave it. Because I see all of these little faces coming towards me...I forget whatever is bothering me because I have all of their smiles, I have all their needs, I have all of their concerns, and truthfully it goes all out the door.

With experience, participants learned to leave stressors outside of the classroom to emotionally focus on their students, and to regularly take perspective of children's behaviors. However, even those teachers with less experience described specific strategies such as getting rest, praying, listening to music, engaging in positive self-talk, drinking coffee or tea, and visualizing the day as supportive of their ability to deep act. Randee explained that in order to deep act, she has trained herself to actively pause during interactions and ask herself, "How do I want to respond to this situation?"

Teachers described ways their professional knowledge of child development informed their deep acting. Bennett explained that she could engage in deep acting, "because I know they don't, they don't know any better." To deep act, teachers took the child's perspective. Teachers also described drawing on others' professional knowledge to support their emotional labor. For example, Norah described seeking support when deep acting,

What I do is I step outside of myself and I call someone. 'This is what's going on, I just needed you to talk to me and let me, you know, tell you what's happening. And what do you think?' so it's not that the person is right because they don't know the whole story, but it gives you a different perspective. So, I regroup and I'm able to speak to my child on a different level.

Some participants noted how their ability to understand their students' emotions emerged over time as they gathered additional information. Abelina recalled having a student who she initially felt was not listening to her, explaining, "I would call her and tell her to stop and it seemed like she was ignoring me." Through deep acting, to get beyond the initial surface feelings of frustration, Abelina checked in with the school nurse about the child's hearing and learned that the child had a history of hearing issues. Randee also determined the need for more information about a child and

reached out to the mother. Jesinia, who had four years of experience, noted that spending time with the mother and child helped her develop a greater perspective on the child's behaviors. This moved her into a space of deep acting, and greater connection with the mother:

First it was easy to kind of blame him for all of his aggression, but as we found out more about his family context...we started feeling more sympathy for him. My interactions with his mom and seeing also that she was frustrated and also didn't know how to deal with this behavior made me more sympathetic towards the family situation and him.

These connections with families were important to participants' abilities to deep act. As teachers described having relationships with parents they noted that these established relationships provided insight that shaped their abilities to deep act. Veronica shared when a child was kicking and throwing things in the classroom, and after she contacted the mother, with whom she had already established a relationship, she learned that the child's father was recently deported. Veronica described, "We were so frustrated...he was out of control...feelings changed and we had a different way to perceive him." Gail also mentioned after reaching out to the parent who she knew and learned "something happened over the weekend," she could better support the child.

Deep acting was not as represented in colleague-colleague interactions as with teacher-child and teacher-family relationships. Among the few participants who did talk about deep acting when interacting with colleagues, they focused on understanding others' cultural backgrounds and how their relationships with colleagues informed their willingness to reflect and process in order to deep act. Rebecca described how her cultural understanding expanded through her relationship with a colleague,

Like I knew nothing about Muslims. Like I knew I didn't know why they covered...And just talking to her and learning...Before I would have questions, but I wouldn't ask...but I'm asking now. I'm definitely asking. So that's something that I'm not intimidated by anymore.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

In this study, we examined the emotional acting of preschool teachers in the U.S. Previous emotional labor research has focused predominantly on K-12 teacher-student interactions within U.S. and international contexts (Wang et al., 2019)

and preschool teachers' emotional labor in international settings (e.g., in China, Zhang et al., 2020; and in Canada, Lee & Brotheridge, 2011). This study extended research by illustrating how teachers' emotional acting differentially informs their school-based interactions with *young* children, families, and colleagues. This work connects to NAEYC (2019) standards and guidelines regarding the importance of early childhood educators being able to manage their emotions on the job. We found that preschool teachers used emotional acting as an important tool, facilitated by the strength and intimacy of their relationships, to develop and sustain strong relationships within school-based interactions.

Emotional Labor as a Tool for Relationship Building

Because emotional labor studies focus predominantly on single-point interactions between workers and clients (e.g., flight attendants, Hochschild, 1983), research on its effects has largely focused on well-being of the individual who engages in emotional labor (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). For teachers, who see their "clients" on a daily basis, emotional labor occurs within the context of relationships (Kerr & Brown, 2015). Teachers' engagement in emotional labor must be understood not only as a means to meet the service norms of the profession, but as a tool to strengthen these ongoing interactions.

Unlike flight attendants, nurses, or other service providers who engage in emotional labor without previous knowledge of their clients, teachers' emotional acting is informed by their accumulated knowledge of children and families. We found that participants' emotional acting was nuanced and informed by relational intimacy; this was especially true in adult-facing relationships. Our findings show that when teachers engaged in relationship-building with families, they were more likely to be able to deep act, supporting effective collaboration as well as child and family development. In addition, our findings suggest that teachers' use of emotional acting, whether deep acting or surface acting, helps teachers navigate emotionally complex interactions in the moment. This serves to sustain positive relationships with children, families and colleagues despite emotional challenges in the workplace.

Oplatka (2009) noted that because teachers' emotional labor is often seen as a discretionary aspect of their roles, the emotional dimensions of teachers' work are often overlooked in initiatives to advance children's development and achievement. Yet Ostrosky and Jung (n.d.) reinforce the value of considering this work early in life as the teacher-child interaction can serve to inform emotionally secure relationships as adults. Although we did not directly measure child outcomes, we found that preschool teachers conceptualized emotional acting as an important tool for

fulfilling their roles. Teachers shared that masking their feelings, or surface acting, helped them to address interactions professionally, and that deep acting supported collaboration, especially with families. Thus, our findings suggest that emotional acting is a tool teachers can use to support their school-based relationships. These findings extend emotional labor research in teaching showing the impacts of job-related outcomes on the individual teacher and deepen our understanding for how the emotional management of the job informs the teachers' professional relationships.

Two Parts of the EL Toolkit: Surface Acting and Deep Acting

Across these findings, preschool teachers described both surface and deep acting as supportive of their navigation in relationships with children, families, and colleagues and how the depth of relational intimacy within interpersonal relationships informed their emotional acting. These preschool teachers expressed engagement in emotional acting across many domains of their work. Yet, *how* and *when* teachers emote seemed to connect to their depth of knowledge of and in turn, comfort being emotionally vulnerable with particular colleagues, families or children.

Previous research on surface acting among teachers has focused on the adverse implications on teachers of repeatedly suppressing or withholding emotion (Wang et al., 2019), such as burnout (Akın et al., 2014; Basim et al., 2013). We found that preschool teachers sometimes masked their emotions in order to create space in the moment to sustain and bridge challenging relationships. Teachers noted, at times, that surface acting was a necessary means to facilitate and support their school-based relationships. As such, we caution against the assumption that surface acting is always harmful to teachers, and suggest it may serve as an important tool for relationship building. Surface acting may be beneficial when teachers recognize that they have gaps in their knowledge regarding families, such as when they are entering a new school-based relationship and lack the relational intimacy needed to engage in deep acting. Surface acting may also be used when teachers recognize that their natural emotional displays are problematic for sustaining a relationship, but lack the cognitive and emotional resources required to rapidly deep act in the moment.

Many of the participants noted the need to model appropriate regulation or behaviors as an important element of their job, but their natural emotions may not always align with the type of model they believe is best for students. Teachers may need to draw on surface acting in order to be able to model appropriate emotions for students in the moment. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, surface acting is a tool that early childhood educators can use

to appropriately manage their increased stress and fears (Rodriguez, Rojas, Rabadi-Raol, Souto-Manning, & Brotman, 2021) and to promote positive relational exchanges within their school-based collaborations.

We found that when teachers knew more about the context of their children's, families', and colleagues' lives, they felt more capacity to deep act in the moment during interpersonal exchanges. The relational work done to understand the background information of school-based interactions supported those cognitive shifts indicative of deep acting. This alludes to the value placed in knowing how to broker, build and foster promotive school-based relationships. We often state how teacher-child interactions are central to the longitudinal outcome for children (Hamre et al., 2014) and how co-teaching exchanges impart great value into developmental and academic outcomes (Van Garderen et al., 2012), yet we do little to prepare teachers for these specific exchanges. Ironically, the professional standards, notably Standards 1 and 2, focus on the importance and value of these partnerships (NAEYC, 2019); teachers' use of emotional acting becomes a strategy to address these standards in practice. Understanding how to promote positive school-based relationships may, in turn, engage a child, family, or colleague within that interaction more authentically. For example, does a teacher's own vulnerability impact a family's willingness to be vulnerable offering a shared space for open discourse? Findings here suggest that consideration to the emotive work involved in these school-based relationships may help foster certain tenets of relationship-building qualities and possibly should be built into the formal emotional display rules expected of teachers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study provides preliminary insight into the emotional labor, and specifically emotional acting, of preschool teachers within the U.S. With only a single interview gathered per participant, we were not able to explore ways that teachers' emotional practices change over time, as they become more familiar with their students, families, and their colleagues. Given the finding that the depth of relationship influenced teachers' engagement in various forms of emotional acting, future studies should document how emotional acting and relationship building inform each other at multiple time-points throughout a school year.

The scope of our analysis was limited in that we did not examine participants' cultural and socioeconomic identities, and those of their students, and if those identities shaped their relationships and engagement in emotional labor. Research suggests that teachers' emotional labor is informed by both personal and professional identities (Stark & Bettini, 2021). Future research may explore teacher and

family identity effects on these dynamics. Beyond this, future research may consider the influence of organizational or school contextual elements on teachers' emotional acting as Douglass (2011) found effective partnerships with families centered on "the importance of a relationship-centered organizational system" (p. 1). This would also further Hargreaves (2001) influential emotional labor research on the emotional geographies of teaching.

Our study focused solely on preschool teachers working within publicly funded programs composed of low-income families. This is but one small slice of the early care and education (ECE) system and of educators who work with young children. Given the breadth of the ECE system working with children from birth to age eight, inclusive of both public and private programming, center-based as well as licensed and unlicensed family child care, how these varied settings facilitate relational intimacy among teachers and families, seems important for future research.

Conclusion

Preschool teachers navigate a range of emotions in their jobs (Davis & Dunn, 2018; Seaman & Giles, 2021) given the interpersonal elements of their craft. This study begins to understand the emotional practice of teaching in early childhood education and how that emotional practice could support and inform preschool teachers in managing their emotions especially while fostering key school-based interactions. Findings illustrate that within ECE research, policy, and practice, the field needs to continue to strengthen its understanding, value, and utilization of emotional acting within preschool teachers' daily work.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01326-1>.

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