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How urban early childhood educators used positive guidance principles and improved teacher-child relationships: a social-emotional learning intervention study

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-four early childhood educators in an urban city in the United States completed a social-emotional learning course as part of an intervention to explore how teachers learn to value and practice positive guidance principles. Affection between 124 teacher-child dyads was tracked weekly to measure change in teacher-child relationships. Phenomenological collaborative inquiry and inferential statistics were used. Findings: (1) positive relational principles (e.g. validate feelings; provide choices; demonstrate love, and others) succeeded in redirecting child behaviour, solving inter-personal conflicts and improving teacher-child relationships, (2) the extent to which teachers *valued* and became *proficient* using 8 principles significantly increased (avg. ES = .35), (3) teacher-child affection significantly increased by the end of the course (ES = .91–2.18). Providing competency-based coursework in social-emotional learning with ample opportunities for educators to practice positive guidance approaches can improve the extent to which loving relationships are experienced. Recommendations for practice, policy and research are shared.

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Emotions; relationships; early childhood; urban; guidance principles; social-emotional

Introduction

Early childhood educators play a significant role in supporting young children's prosocial competence development (Ferreira et al., 2016; Humphries, Strickland, & Keenan, 2014) by using responsive methods based on positive guidance strategies, affectionate interactions and close relationships (Kersey & Masterson, 2013). Close teacher–child relationships are characterized, in turn, by loving and open communication associated with children's prosocial competence development (Howes, 2000; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Roorda, Verschueren, Vancraeyveldt, Van Craeyevelt, & Colpin, 2014; Spivak & Howes, 2011).

Socially-emotionally competent educators develop supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, design lessons that build on student strengths and abilities, establish and implement behavioural guidelines to promote intrinsic motivation, coach students through conflict situations, encourage cooperation, and act as a role model for respectful and appropriate communication and prosocial behaviour (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As early childhood educators develop social and emotional competence, they increasingly help young children understand and regulate emotions and develop socialization skills by modeling appropriate responses to emotion, teaching children about emotions and by promoting positive emotion (Hyson, 2002; Perry & Ball, 2008).

Most early childhood educators are aware of the importance of teaching skills of socialization and emotional competence to children (Poulou, 2005). Teachers are also aware of the importance of

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paying attention to children's emotional well-being in the classroom (Zembylas, 2007). However, it was observed in Ahn and Stifter (2006)'s study that child care teachers taught children about constructive ways of expressing negative emotions relatively infrequently and responded to children's negative emotional expressions differently based on the children's gender. Ahn and Stifter suggest that social-emotional practices of early childhood educators may need attention and they may benefit from receiving training programmes that focus on facilitating social-emotional competencies.

It is the teachers' own emotional competence that forms the basis of their attitudes toward children and influences their abilities to create safe learning environments (Harvey, Bimler, Evans, Kirkland, & Pechtel, 2012). Due to the crucial role that early childhood educators play in children's emotional learning and well-being, researchers such as Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggest ways to improve teachers' emotional abilities through mindfulness, stress reduction, reflective supervision, and new teaching strategies stating that such training can help children maximize their own emotional competence.

Existing research in the United States suggests that teachers, whether pre-service or in-service, have not had enough training in managing and displaying their own feelings or promoting children's emotional competence (Garner, 2010; Marlow & Inman, 2002; Meyer, 2009). Furthermore, regardless of experience, few early childhood educators have had the opportunity to take a course dedicated to social-emotional learning (SEL) or experience advanced SEL coaching and training (Haslip & Gullo, 2017).

Preschool teachers who have taken coursework specific to child development and early childhood education (ECE) engage in more positive responses to children's negative emotions and challenging socialization behaviours compared to preschool teachers who have not taken similar coursework (Lang, Mouzourou, Jeon, Buettner, & Hur, 2017;2016). Lang et al. (2017) conclude that educating early childhood teachers in the theory and practice of SEL also leads to improved positive guidance of children's negative behaviours. However, few peer-reviewed studies investigate child or teacher outcomes following SEL interventions designed for preschool or early childhood educators.

One such teacher intervention study was conducted by Poulou (2017) who investigated preschool teachers' perceptions of their emotional intelligence (EI) and SEL skills to explain teacher–student relationships in preschool classrooms in central Greece (preschool includes ages 5–6). The study suggested that teachers' perceptions of personal skills, such as EI, and professional skills, such as SEL comfort and commitment, are important predictors of the quality of teacher–student relationships. It was evident that enhancing teachers' social and emotional skills would promote positive teacher–student relationships and prevent relational conflict in preschool classrooms. Poulou (2017) suggests improving teacher training programmes by helping teachers to develop competencies and skills that help teacher-student relationships.

In a study by Morris, Millenky, Raver, and Jones (2013), teachers in fifty-one preschools in the United States received modified training in the Incredible Years curriculum (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001). The intervention improved the number of minutes teachers devoted to instruction following improved behaviour management skills while reducing children's conflictual interactions and improving teacher ability to provide a positive emotional climate. As the study by Morris et al. (2013) implies, when teachers are not able to manage children's negative behaviours in the classroom, instructional time is greatly reduced (Arnold et al., 1999) because children who have not developed prosocial competence are more likely to disrupt teachers' instruction (Arnold, McWilliams, & Arnold, 1998). Moreover, young children with social-emotional and behavioural issues may form unhealthy relationships, drop-out of school, form anti-social behaviours, and experience academic failure (Conroy & Brown, 2004). To avoid these outcomes, teachers (and parents) need to provide emotional support to children, but this is not always the case.

When teachers become mentally and emotionally exhausted by children who have not developed emotional competence, they may imprudently and punitively react. Adults reacting to children's aggressive behaviour with aggressive responses causes children to respond with heightened aggressive behaviour and the cycle of negative behaviour continues because social-emotional

competencies of adults and children are mutually interactive and reinforcing (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995; Osher et al., 2007; Patterson, 1982).

Social and emotional skills are crucial for school life such as effective teaching, learning, relationships, and academic performance (Brackett & Katulak, 2006). Children's engagement in classroom activities and academic tasks is higher in classrooms that guide positive relationship development and appropriately manage behavioural problems (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Furthermore, children's positive emotions are related to work effort and persistence in completing school-related tasks (Lazarus, 1991). These studies suggest negative behavioural and academic consequences for children who have not developed social-emotional skills. Since the development of children's social-emotional competence is correlated with their teachers' social-emotional competence, a study that focuses on early childhood educators' social-emotional competence development by providing positive guidance principles as tools would contribute to the literature. Furthermore, to our knowledge, there has not been a study examining how the use of guidance principles in the context of a SEL course may alter in-service preschool teacher perceptions of their teacher-child relationships over time.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to learn with early childhood educators about improving relationships with children in the context of practicing positive guidance principles taught during a 12-week social-emotional learning and child guidance course. Positive guidance principles provide teachers with tools to be more emotionally sensitive, nurturing and caring (Kersey & Masterson, 2013; Masterson, 2008). Practicing these guidance principles is a practical skill that applies to educators of all experiential levels. We wanted to observe how and why teachers use guidance principles, and the results of their use in multiple classroom situations. We wondered if teachers would *value* and be more *proficient* in using guidance principles by the end of the course and the extent to which teacher-child relationships might become more emotionally supportive and affectionate.

Theoretical perspectives

The current study is grounded in three theoretical perspectives (Figure 1). (1) Kersey and Masterson (2013)'s positive guidance principles for responsive teaching, (2) The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, and (3) Knowles (1984)'s adult learning theory. Responsive early childhood educators promote children's social-emotional competence, self-regulation, and academic success through positive guidance, loving and caring teacher-child interactions,

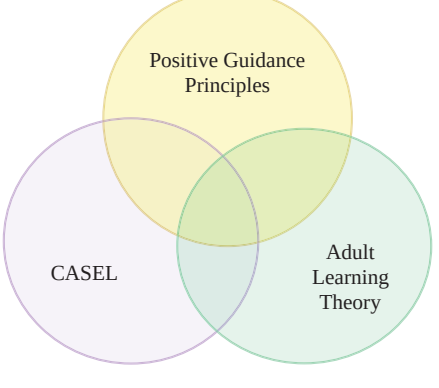


Figure 1. Theoretical perspectives of the current study.

and respectful teacher-child relationships (Kersey & Masterson, 2013). Five skill areas make up the core SEL competencies: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making (CASEL). Knowles's adult learning theory includes four principles: (1) adults are interested in subjects that are deeply related to their professional and personal lives, (2) adults' learn by solving problems that they encounter in their everyday lives, (3) adults learn through experiences, and (4) adults reflect and evaluate their own teaching and learning.

Figure 1 describes the perspectives used to inform the intervention described in this study. *The 101 Principles for Positive Guidance with Young Children: Creating Responsive Teachers* (Kersey & Masterson, 2013) served as a primary text for the SEL course. This text was chosen because it organizes and clearly presents numerous teaching strategies that combine to create a system of positive guidance in the classroom. The strategies are presented in a workbook format designed for teacher training and can be aligned with the CASEL core competencies. In the sections that follow, we further describe how the programme and pedagogy emerged from these theoretical perspectives.

Program implemented

A 12-week course entitled *Social and Emotional Learning and Child Guidance* was taught by an assistant professor of early childhood education at a local middle school. The class met weekly for two hours on Wednesday evenings from January to March, 2017. This course was originally designed and taught by Katherine Kersey at Old Dominion University (Kersey & Masterson, 2013). It was then re-designed and taught by the first author as an undergraduate course for the University of Oklahoma (OU) where it received very high student reviews among pre-service teachers. An existing SEL course taught by the instructor was significantly redesigned for the local population following a local needs assessment.

The needs assessment included visiting a local child care centre considered to be of good quality to observe and speak with staff and children and a presentation summarizing likely content was delivered to a local group of 10 centre directors. Participants completed a survey to provide feedback to the instructor about the content. Content included conceptual and practical knowledge in social, emotional and moral/character development, while involving educators in practicing many SEL-related competencies.

Eighteen positive relational principles based on a wider list of 101 (Kersey & Masterson, 2013) were selected and used in the intervention. Given the limited in-class time available, we determined that 18 principles could be taught during the 12-week course. Masterson (2008) previously found that ten of these principles correlated positively with teacher interaction quality as measured by the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS). This is further described in the measures section. Participants practiced using these principles and completed related reflection sheets. Starting in week 3, teachers also began scoring the closeness and warmth of their relationships with children using a weekly chart.

Participants earned 20 professional development (PD) hours for completing the course and received a certificate of completion from the state ECE registry system. The course was held in a large urban city in the northeastern United States. Participants were recruited through flyer distribution and by directly contacting a network of about 20 ECE centre directors. Criteria for participation included working with children ages 0–8. This study was approved by a university institutional review board. Funding was provided by a local university for course materials.

Design & pedagogy

Phenomenological collaborative inquiry (PCI) was used to learn with 24 preschool teachers about providing young children with increased emotional support and more loving relationships. The four stages of collaborative inquiry (Heron, 1996) were embedded into the pedagogical design of the social-emotional course that participants were taking for a 12-week period. Participants were

involved in an iterative process with the instructor/researcher regarding reflection, action, awareness and insight generation, and further inquiry, through action planning and extension of learning into new scenarios. Various instructional aids facilitated these stages of co-investigation, such as class discussion, journaling, completing reflective templates about strategies being used by teachers in their own classrooms, and writing action plans to extend learning into new directions, such as planning to transfer learning through parent workshops. This pedagogical approach to teaching and professional development shares many similarities with collaborative inquiry learning (Bell, Urhahne, Schanze, & Ploetzner, 2010) and aligns with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984). Despite this collaborative approach, an appropriate degree of guided instruction was provided (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006).

Research questions

(1) To what extent do early childhood educators *value* and reach *proficiency* using positive guidance principles before and after a 12-week SEL course?
(2) How do early childhood educators describe their experiences using positive guidance principles?
(3) To what extent do early childhood educators report improved relationships with children during a 12-week social-emotional learning course?

Methods

Participants

Participants included 24 early childhood educators from a large urban city in the northeastern United States. Table 1 shows that all educators were actively working with children for at least 10 h per week as lead or assistant teachers, centre directors or family care providers. The majority were at least 40 years old (67%), female (100%), Black or African-American (67%), held a bachelor's or master's degree (54%), worked as a lead or assistant teacher (67%), had more than 10 years of teaching or child care experience (54%), worked full-time teaching children (79%), and taught at least two age groups of children (83%).

We arrived at this participant group following a recruitment process that included personally meeting local early childhood centre directors to discuss their teacher needs regarding SEL training. We emailed flyers about the programme to centre directors with a request that they share the opportunity to attend this free course with their teachers. Incentives to participate included receiving 20 professional development hours, free textbooks, materials and an Amazon gift card for course completion.

Data collection

The data collection instruments, type of data collected, completion methods and collection timeline are reported in Table 2. Data were collected during class sessions.

Measures

Guidance principles survey

Eighteen guidance principles were tested in a pre-post design (Appendix A). Each question had two constructs: the extent to which teachers *valued* the principle, and the extent to which teachers were *proficient* in the principle. This produced an instrument with 36 items. The test format for the 18 valuing items was a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Not important) to 4 (Very important). The

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants ($N = 24$).

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age at time of survey (years)		
25 of younger	4	17
26–32	2	8
33–39	2	8
40–46	6	25
47–53	4	17
54–60	3	13
61–67	3	13
Gender		
Female	24	100
Male	0	0
Race / Ethnicity		
Black or African-American	16	67
White	2	8
Asian or Asian-American	2	8
Hispanic or Latino/a	2	8
Other	2	8
Highest education level completed		
High school diploma / GED	2	8
Some community college	1	4
Completed CDA or other certificate (not 2-yr degree)	3	13
Associates degree	5	21
Bachelor's degree	9	38
Master's degree	4	17
Job title / Type of teacher		
Lead teacher	7	29
Assistant teacher	9	38
Director of early learning centre	4	17
Family care provider (at-home child care)	4	17
Years of teaching or child care experience		
0–5	3	13
6–10	8	33
More than 10	13	54
Hours per week teaching children		
30 or more (full-time)	19	79
10–29 (part-time)	5	21
Age(s) of children you teach[a]		
0–1	11	
1–2	11	
2–3	14	
3–4	18	
4–5	16	
5–6	11	
Other	5	
Number of age groups you teach[b]		
1	4	17
2	6	25
3	2	8
4	3	13
5	2	18
6 (All ages)	7	29

[a]20 teachers taught more than one age group.
[b]An age group is like a grade level (i.e. 3–4 year olds; 5–6 year olds).

Table 2. Data collection instruments, type of data, methods, and timeline.

Source	Data	Method	Collection
Survey	Quantitative	Pre / post	Week 1 & 12
Guidance Principles Templates	Qualitative	Students practiced implementing principles with children and were asked to submit this reflection template weekly.	Weekly
Relationship Tracker	Quantitative	Distributed in Week 3. Scored weekly in class.	Week 12

test format for the 18 proficiency items was a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Beginner) to 4 (Advanced).

Sixteen of the 18 guidance principles were drawn from the text *101 principles for positive guidance with young children: Creating responsive teachers* (Kersey & Masterson, 2013)[1]. Masterson (2008) found that following preschool teacher training in 10 of these principles, teacher interaction quality significantly increased related to 'positive redirection of behaviour,' 'responsive social emotional support,' and 'overall classroom quality' (p. ii). The *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS) dimensions of behaviour management, positive climate, regard for student perspective and teacher sensitivity were all strongly positively correlated with the preschool teacher interaction quality outcomes found following training in the 10 selected guidance principles (Masterson, 2008). By using these strategies, teachers learn how to guide children's social-emotional development and prosocial behaviour (Masterson, 2008) without using negative methods. The heart of the positive guidance philosophy presented by Kersey and Masterson (2013) is to develop and maintain the authentic, loving relationships necessary to guide young children and navigate challenges in emotionally supportive and caring ways. As can be seen by reviewing the full list of principles used for this study (Appendix A), each principle supports this philosophy. Two of the guidance principles (courtesy scripts; build up virtues of character) were created by the first author and included because prior experience suggested their efficacy.

Internal consistency reliability of the *Guidance Principles Survey* was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). Factor analysis revealed that the items were unrelated. The survey was peer-reviewed for clarity and ease of use.

Guidance principles template

To facilitate practice and reflection on the guidance principles being taught, we created a *Guidance Principles Template.* See Appendix C. Participants wrote the date a principle was used, the principle name, the situation that prompted its use, how the principle was implemented and results in action. Teachers were asked to submit one *Guidance Principles Template* each week and to practice at least two principles per week. By analyzing the content written on the templates, we could observe the principles that teachers decided to practice, the different types of scenarios and situations where teachers felt that using a principle was needed, the ways in which the principles were carried out and the results.

Relationship tracker

To encourage early childhood teachers to intentionally provide increased love, care and emotional support to young children, a weekly learning and research activity was created called the *Relationship Tracker* (RT). The RT is an instrument that lists the children being taught by each teacher in chart format and provides columns for each week where teachers enter a score on a continuous scale of 1–10. Scores ranged from 1–3 (Conflict), 4–6 (Polite interactions), 7–8 (Warm friendship), to 9–10 (Very loving and affectionate). See Appendix B. Ample discussion in class about the importance of strengthening teacher-child relationships to support social-emotional learning proceeded the distribution of the RT. The stated goal was to establish a 'very loving and affectionate' relationship with each child.

Procedures

Guidance principles survey procedures

Participants completed a paper version of the survey once during the first class meeting, and again during the final class meeting. To administer the proficiency items on the survey, participants were asked to circle their highest level of expertise with each principle using a scoring sheet which defined four proficiency levels. Participants were asked to read the scoring sheet as they answered each item (Appendix A).

Guidance principles template procedures

To analyze the *Guidance Principles Template,* document analysis was employed, specifically researcher-generated document analysis. Researcher generated documents are documents prepared by the researcher to learn more about a situation, person or event being investigated (Merriam, 1998).

Relationship tracker procedures

Time was provided during each class session starting in Week 3 for teachers to complete one column of data on the *Relationship Tracker* instrument. Teachers reflected on the quality of their interactions with each child over the past week and evaluated their teacher-child relationship using the 1–10 scale as previously described. The prompt provided was, 'score how loving and close your relationship is with each person.'

Analysis

Guidance principles survey analysis

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to test differences from pre-to-post on the *Guidance Principles Survey*. This nonparametric test was appropriate because data were ordinal rather than continuous. The significance level was set at $\alpha < .10$.

Guidance principles template analysis

We analyzed the most frequently used principles by employing holistic-content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). After reading each template several times, we exercised open coding using NVivo software to detect patterns, central foci and themes across multiple instances of the same principle (when multiple templates were submitted representing the same principle being practiced). Thereafter, we compared codes and themes in each narrative pertaining to a guidance principle and analyzed across the various situations. We examined principles from the perspective of levels of interaction (colleague-to-colleague; teacher-to-child; child-to-child) and from other perspectives, such as grouping the various situations when a guidance principle was used and coding how it was implemented, and the corresponding results.

Relationship tracker analysis

To test the mean difference between teacher-child relationships in Week 3 and Week 12, as recorded on the *Relationship Tracker*, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted. Data were normally distributed and the homogeneity of variance assumption was not violated.

Results

Research question 1: guidance principles survey

To answer the first research question (to what extent do early childhood educators *value* and reach *proficiency* using positive guidance principles before and after a 12-week SEL course), Wilcoxon signed-rank test results revealed a significant difference in median scores on valuing and proficiency with 9 positive guidance principles ($p < .10$). Early childhood educators *valued* four guidance principles significantly more on the last day of the SEL course than on the first day (avg. ES = .35). They also reported being significantly more *proficient* in using five guidance principles on the last day compared to the first day of the course (avg. ES = .35). Descriptive and inferential statistics are provided in Table 3.

Research question 2: guidance principle templates

To answer research question 2 (how do early childhood educators describe their experiences using positive guidance principles) holistic-content analysis revealed that educators experienced three

Table 3. Wilcoxon signed-rank test results, median change in guidance principle survey scores, standard deviations, significance levels and effect sizes.

		Pre-test		Post-test				
Guidance Principles	Category[b]	Mdn	SD	Mdn	SD	*z*	*p*	*r*[a]
Giving choices to children	Valued	3	.65	4	.47	−1.67	.096	.26
Validating children's feelings	Valued	4	.47	4	.50	−1.73	.083	.28
Extinction (ignore minor misbeh.)	Valued	3	.90	4	.50	−2.68	.007	.43
Hand gestures	Valued	3	.98	3	.70	−2.65	.008	.43
Connect before you correct	Proficient	3	.83	3	.73	−1.81	.070	.29
Change of environment	Proficient	3	.89	4	.82	−1.86	.063	.30
Class meeting	Proficient	2	.73	3	.74	−2.71	.007	.45
Hand gestures	Proficient	2	1.01	3	.92	−2.43	.015	.41
Make a big deal	Proficient	3	.74	3	.51	−1.89	.059	.31

[a]Effect size.
[b]Teachers reported how much they *valued* and were *proficient* in using each principle before and after the 10-week social-emotional learning course.

levels of interaction with relational principles (colleague-to-colleague; teacher-to-child(ren); child-to-child). Analysis of situations revealed a wide diversity of reasons for using guidance principles, such as prompting clean-up behaviours (*make a big deal principle* to praise their efforts), soothing children experiencing separation anxiety (hugs representing the *love principle*), and repairing relationships (*apology principle*), among numerous others. Situations and experiences related to using the guidance principles are presented thematically below.

Among teachers participating in the guidance principles activity ($n = 16$, 67%), teachers completed on average 7 templates, representing 7 weeks of practice. A total of 114 templates were collected representing 47 of the 101 principles distributed for practice.[2] Table 4 shows the most frequently used principles.

By comparing the pre/post survey results (Table 3) with the principle frequencies (Table 4) we see that every principle which was more regularly practiced also had a statistically significant result on the *Guidance Principles Survey*. Results imply a relationship between increased levels of valuing and being proficient using a guidance principle and the learning activity of practicing and reflecting upon that principle using weekly reflection templates. Four frequently used principles were not on the survey, or directly taught during the course, which shows that teachers were reading the course textbook and utilizing additional strategies they found to be helpful.

Guidance principles template findings

Narrative analysis of the nine most frequently used guidance principles throughout the course revealed that participants utilized guidance principles in various situations within classroom, school, and outside of school contexts. Four themes arose concerning the types of situations that teachers felt warranted the use of a guidance principle: (1) Conflict resolution, (2) Clean up and personal hygiene, (3) Redirection of disruptive behaviour, and (4) Transitions.

Table 4. Most frequently used guidance principles.

Principle	Frequency
Make a big deal[a]	12
Choice principle[a]	7
Connect before you correct[a]	7
Validation[a]	6
Apology[b]	6
Demonstrating respect[b]	6
Ask the child[b]	5
Love[b]	5
Change of environment[a]	5

[a]Statistically significant change on the guidance principles pre/post survey (See Table 3).
[b]Item not on the pre/post survey.

Conflict resolution. The finding of conflict resolution was pervasive throughout the data and amongst various levels of interaction. In situations when a guidance principle was employed, positive results were yielded to resolve said conflict. For example, Teacher #43 described how she used the Choice Principle (give two appropriate choices as alternatives to an existing behaviour) when a child grabbed a toy truck from another child who was still holding it: *I asked if the child wanted a new truck or to keep playing with the one already in his hand. The child gave the truck back to the child and found a new truck.* In another example of the Choice Principle, Teacher #12 reports: *A child tried to mess up the Legos built by another child who got upset and cried. I gave choices to either rebuild the Legos or play in a different center. The child said 'I'm sorry. I won't do it next time. Can I please play with him?'*

Teacher #41 used the Love Principle in a situation where three students were fighting. *Three of the students were very aggressive towards one another. As two of the children went to place their hands on one another, I went over and asked the children for hugs. They both stopped what they were doing and excitedly gave me hugs. I asked them to help set up an activity for the day. The outcome was that the children stopped what they were doing and were able to have their attention refocused on a positive interaction. They were excited about getting a hug. We are going to continue to reinforce good behaviours with hugs.* In so doing, data revealed that offering positive guidance mitigated classroom conflict, particularly in situations that could have escalated.

Cleaning up and personal hygiene. Cleaning up and personal hygiene were found to be circumstances by which several guidance principles were used. For example, the use of the *Make a Big Deal* principle highlights its use for a child who never wanted to wash his hands as described by Teacher #8: *I went to the sink with the child, washed hands with the child and sang a song. I told the child how proud I was of her. This resulted in the child laughing and giggling. I try to do it every day and am hoping soon I don't have to follow the child to the sink*. Potty training was another situation by which *a guidance principle was used. Teacher #12 stated*: "In time of cleaning up after playing I went over the rules with students. Children behaved responsibly and exhibited positive behaviours. The principle had a positive reflection on my interaction with the students."

Redirection of student behaviour. Another theme centres around the use of guidance principles for situations where teachers needed to redirect disruptive behaviour. In one particular instance the Change of Environment principle was used and resulted in a favourable outcome**:** *The child was not listening to me or the other teacher, banging on the writing center table instead of writing, so we moved him out to play with puzzles. The child was happy when he was taken out of the writing center and learned not to make noise in that center.* The Love Principle was also used to redirect behaviour: *A child was being very disruptive while I was having a conversation with a parent. He was jumping all over the place, knocking down toy bins and banging toys loudly. I took his hand and asked him to stand next to me while continuing to talk. I hugged him and softly patted his chest and rubbed his face. He calmed down because I believe he now felt he wasn't being ignored. After my conversation was over he went back to playing quietly.* In a situation where a child was very talkative, Teacher #37 used the Demonstrate Respect and Make a Big Deal Principles to redirect behaviour: *A girl is very talkative and she kept talking and was in deep conversation with her walking partner when we approached a busy intersection to cross. I became frustrated and worried for her safety. Instead of raising my voice and humiliating her, I gave the entire group a kind, respectful reminder of the outside rules. I was direct and to the point about outdoor safety and crossing the street. I didn't single the child out and gave the group a thumbs-up for following the rules*.

Transitions. The theme of transitions encompassed an array of situations such as during drop off time when several teachers described children's separation anxiety. Teacher # 21 utilized the Love Principle in an interaction with a parent: *While being dropped off in the morning, a young toddler*

was experiencing separation anxiety. The parent was extremely agitated with the child. She yelled at the child to be quiet and snatched off her coat. At this point I decided to step in. I approached the mother and said it looks like you need a hug this morning. I gave her a hug and reassured her everything would be ok. In the same vein, the Validation Principle was used to ease students' transition to school by Teacher #25: *During drop off time, some children cry. I inform them that I know how they feel. I miss my parents too. I assure them that they will be able to see them again at pick up time. I sit with them until they are ready to join the rest of the group. Some children respond faster than others by joining the group immediately afterward. Other children need some time to sit before they participate in the group.*

The Change of Environment Principle was also employed to support transitions in two distinct incidents. Teacher #12 described a restless student who was not getting along with other students. The teacher called upon her Director to take the child outside. The child was refreshed and responded positively.

Research question 3: relationship tracker

To answer research question three (to what extent do early childhood educators report improved relationships with children during a 12-week social-emotional learning course), a paired-samples *t*-test of mean difference scores revealed that, on average, participants attending the SEL course reported improved relationships with children by the end of the course ($M = 7.52$, $SE = .38$) compared to the beginning ($M = 5.64$, $SE = .42$). This difference, 1.88, BCa 95% CI [−2.46, −1.30], was significant $t(10) = -7.23$, $p < .001$, and represented a large effect, $r = .91$ ($d = 2.18$).

Eleven teachers submitted a *Relationship Tracker*. A total of 124 teacher-child relationships were tracked (approximately 11 relationships per teacher). Teachers scored the quality of their relationship with each child once a week for an average of 8 weeks. Of the 124 teacher-child relationships monitored, 77% improved ($n = 96$), 17% were unchanged ($n = 21$) and 6% declined ($n = 7$) between the beginning and end of the 2-month intervention window. The average relationship improved by 1.88 points on a 10-point scale. On average, each teacher improved their relationship with 9 of the 11 children in their care. Meaningfully speaking, comparing mean differences reveals that teachers' average relationship with children changed from 'normal, polite interactions but not a close bond' (4–6 pts) to a 'warm relationship, active friendship' (7–8 pts).

Fidelity of implementation

To track fidelity of implementation, attendance was taken during each class and assignments were submitted with a participant ID number and recorded in a spreadsheet. The median attendance rate was 9 of 12 classes (75%). Nineteen participants attended at least 6 of 12 class sessions (79%). To support fidelity of implementation, all participants who attended at least 75% of class sessions and completed 50% of assignments were given a $99 eGift card to Amazon.com. Participants also needed to meet the same benchmarks to be awarded state-recognized PD hours and a certificate of completion. Fifteen participants met these benchmarks and were considered to have fully completed the course (63%). Participants were retained in the research study if they attended at least 3 classes and worked with young children for at least 10 h per week.

To monitor fidelity, guidance principle templates were collected each week which indicated that teachers were practicing strategies taught in the course and/or presented in the workbook by Kersey and Masterson (2013). Furthermore, the relationship tracker was scored in class weekly to facilitate active reflection and discussion about teacher-child relationships. Given the voluntary nature of the course, and the fact that no college credit was being awarded, the researchers understood from the beginning that participation in class and implementation of recommended strategies would vary widely among participants. We therefore set attendance and assignment completion thresholds for awarding PD hours and a certificate of completion as mentioned above.

Discussion

Teacher change related to valuing and proficiently using guidance principles

To what extent do early childhood educators *value* and reach *proficiency* using positive guidance principles before and after a 12-week SEL course? Teachers were introduced to a wide number of guidance principles during the course (as many as 103!) but only 18 were included on the pre/post survey. Of these 18 principles, teachers experienced a statistically significant and practically meaningful improvement at the level of value or proficiency related to 8 of them (44%). Among these 8, there was a balance between improvement at the level of *valuing* ($n = 4$) and improvement at the level of *proficiency* ($n = 5$), suggesting that the course and related activities contributed meaningfully to teacher change at the level of attitude and expertise in specific tools deemed essential to supporting healthy social, emotional and moral development, redirecting behaviour and solving individual and class problems. The four principles and constructs with the largest effect sizes were valuing the *extinction* and *hand gestures principles* (see Appendix A for definitions) and increasing proficiency in holding *class meetings* and using *hand gestures*. In general, teachers valued principles more highly than they felt proficient in using them, as shown by examining the post-test median scores (Table 3). This implies that teachers still need continued practice in many of the principles even though they already experienced notable growth during the course.

Exploring teacher experiences with guidance principles

How do early childhood educators describe their experiences using positive guidance principles? Teachers used guidance principles to support positive interactions and to redirect behaviour in the classroom. Most situations described by the teachers resulted in favourable outcomes. Guidance principles were frequently employed to address overarching and common themes: conflict resolution, cleaning and hygiene routines, redirecting disruptive behaviours, and transitions. We reviewed Guidance Principle Templates describing how teachers applied 47 unique principles to classroom situations. Qualitative analysis of the themes described by teachers on the guidance principle templates, presented earlier, showed that principles were broadly applicable across myriad circumstances and helped promote a more inclusive and loving classroom culture.

Understanding change in teacher-child relationships

To what extent do early childhood educators report improved relationships with children during a 12-week social-emotional learning course? When teachers intentionally focus on creating a more loving and affectionate relationship between themselves and the children in their care, and pursue this goal systematically by evaluating each of their relationships once a week using a chart system, a significant improvement can be fostered within 8 weeks. The *Relationship Tracker* activity was one among several that teachers were completing each week. They were also intentionally practicing positive guidance strategies once a week, and learning new strategies during the weekly class meetings. These experiences combined to have a strong positive effect on the quality of teacher-child relationships from the perspective of the educator.

Summary

This study found that a relatively simple activity, namely, asking teachers to practice and reflect upon specific guidance principles with children by completing a prepared reflection template, appears to be effective in significantly changing the extent to which teacher's *value* and reach *proficiency* using these principles (avg. ES = .35), in the context of a 12-week social-emotional learning course. This study also found that while early childhood teachers were learning about and practicing positive guidance principles, they also significantly improved the level of warmth and affection between

themselves and the children they serve (avg. ES = .91 to 2.18). Over an 8-week period during the SEL course, teachers reported changing the average quality of their teacher-child relationship from 'normal polite interactions, but not a close bond' to a 'warm relationship, active friendship.' Teachers on average improved 9 of 11 relationships with children in their care, to large effect.

Limitations

This study used a nonexperimental cohort design, meaning that a causal relationship between participation in the social-emotional learning course and effects on valuing and practicing guidance principles, or increasing the quality of teacher-child relationships, cannot be claimed. Using teacher-report data rather than researcher observation also reduces confidence in the findings. However, triangulation of results between the *Guidance Principles Survey*, *Guidance Principles Template* and weekly documentation of the quality of teacher-child relationships using the *Relationship Tracker*, combined to imply that meaningful changes occurred for teachers and children. Fifteen of the 24 participants were considered to have fully completed the course based on attendance and assignment completion expectations. Fidelity of implementation would likely be more robust if this course had been taught for college credit, and graded, rather than being voluntary professional development.

Results may be difficult to replicate given the unique nature of the curriculum, the prior experience of the course instructor and the situational demographics of the participants. However, there is an increasing trend to provide SEL courses and PD, which is steadily increasing the necessary experience and background knowledge among researchers and instructors to create, modify or improve SEL courses and PD. Furthermore, many early childhood professional development instructors are familiar a competency-based, cooperative inquiry pedagogy. The learning activities used in the current programme are straightforward and have been made available for use as appendixes. There are many urban centres in the United States and around the world serving diverse, urban populations. The current programme may provide a helpful case study for educators focused on similarly diverse settings.

Recommendations

Practice

Teacher preparation programmes in the United States have traditionally not emphasized social-emotional learning or adequately prepared preservice teachers for classroom management (CPSE, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Walter, Gouze, & Lim, 2006) while fifty-seven percent of teachers responding to a national survey 'indicated that their educator preparation programmes had not adequately prepared them to address students' social and emotional learning' (Education Week Research Center, 2015, p. 3). We recommend that the early childhood professional workforce be given the opportunity to complete a competency-based social-emotional learning course which addresses key areas including core knowledge of SEL, development of teachers' own SEL competencies (particularly the ability to apologize to one's colleagues to restore adult relationships), using positive guidance principles, curricula and instruction (i.e. morning meetings, SEL lesson plans), assessment (including use of published measures of child SEL development[3]) and transferring SEL knowledge and practices to parents and caregivers (facilitating SEL parent workshops).

When teaching early childhood educators to use positive guidance principles (or teacher-child interaction strategies), we recommend providing teachers with a master list of strategies (such as the 101s available free online), selecting about 10–15 strategies to directly teach,[4] and asking teachers to practice using these interaction strategies on a weekly basis by completing a corresponding reflection template (describe the scenario, how a principle was used and the results). Some versatile principles, found in this study to be highly valued and practiced by teachers, include (1) make a big deal over respectful, helpful behaviour (give attention to the positive), (2) provide two alternative choices to a child to redirect behaviour (rather than demands or negations), (3) connect with the

child personally before correcting them, (4) validate children's feelings throughout the day (accept feelings as normal), (5) practice increased love and respect for children (including in challenging circumstances), (6) ask the child to give suggestions to a problem, (7) change the environment (e.g. go outside if an inside activity is not working), (8) ignore minor misbehaviour that is not dangerous, destructive, embarrassing or an impediment to learning (extinction principle), (9) use hand gestures and cues to communicate (i.e. thumb up for 'yes'), and (10) call a class meeting (solicit suggestions from children to solve problems and build community). Qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that future SEL training programmes should teach, and provide multiple opportunities to practice, these 10 principles to maintain loving, peaceful and emotionally supportive relationships, foster social, emotional and moral development, and positively address needs and challenges. Although these 10 principles emerged as the most useful to early childhood educators in a large U.S. city, an international audience will want to critically examine if these interaction practices are appropriate in other cultural settings.

Policy

Educational policy and decision makers may wish to consider 1) requiring all early childhood teachers to attend social-emotional learning professional development with a competency-based focus that includes the practice of multiple evidence-based positive guidance strategies, and 2) providing the resources and building the necessary support systems.

Research

Following Masterson (2008), research on SEL support systems and professional development programmes should include observation of teachers in the classroom using instruments such as the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS) to correlate SEL training with changes in teacher-child interaction on dimensions known to predict children's social, emotional and academic achievement.

Conclusion

This study investigated how to effectively provide social-emotional training to urban early childhood teachers so that positive guidance principles, predictive of children's social, emotional and academic achievement (Masterson, 2008), would be more highly valued and proficiently practiced, while also meaningfully improving the level of warmth expressed between teachers and children. Based on multiple methods and triangulation of results, this study found that two activities running parallel with a 12-week SEL course appear to be effective in helping participants meet these objectives, namely, encouraging teachers to complete a weekly reflection templates describing how they are practicing guidance principles and, secondly, scoring the level of warmth between each teacher-child relationship by using a weekly checklist, with the intentional goal of moving beyond polite interactions, towards loving and affectionate relationships.

Notes

1. The 101 Positive Principles of Disciple. Retrieved from http://ww2.odu.edu/~kkersey/101s/101principles.shtml
2. Teachers were given the *101 Principles for Positive Guidance with Young Children* workbook and were encouraged to experiment with as many of the 101 principles as they wished. Time limitations restricted our in-class discussion to 18 guidance principles as presented in Appendix A.
3. Students learned to score the Deveraux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) by practicing how to complete it on two children. This included discussion of related scales (self-regulation, initiative, attachment relationships, behavioural concerns) and corresponding items (behaviours). The DECA was purchased and distributed to teachers to facilitate learning how to assess SEL competencies in children.
4. After teaching college-level courses in social-emotional learning and providing related professional development, we have found that directly teaching 10 - 15 strategies is feasible given time constraints and the need for learners to practice and reflect upon the strategies being taught.
5. Activity adapted from Katherine Kersey.

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Appendix A

Guidance Principles Survey

Directions

1. Read the following Expertise Scale.
2. Read each of the numbered guidance principles.
3. On Row A: Circle your highest level of expertise about the principle.
4. On Row B: Circle the degree to which you value each principle.

Expertise Scale: read this scale as you answer each item

Beginner – I am learning about this principle, but have not yet implemented it.
Developing – I have implemented this principle, but have not yet mastered it.
Proficient – I implement this principle regularly with confidence.
I could teach it to other people.
Advanced – In addition to regular implementation**, I do teach this** principle to others, such as children, parents and teachers.

1. **Incompatible Alternative Principle (redirect)** - Give the child something to do that is incompatible with the inappropriate behaviour. 'Help me pick out 6 blocks' (instead of running around the room).

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

2. **Choice Principle** - Give the child two choices, both of which are positive and acceptable to you. 'Would you rather tiptoe or hop upstairs to bed?' ('You choose or I'll choose.') This can be used with spouses. 'The garage needs to be cleaned out. Would you rather do it tonight or Saturday?'

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

3. **When/Then - Abuse it/Lose it Principle** - 'When you have finished cleaning up the art center, then you may go outside.' (No art clean up, no outside time.) Use 'when … then … .' statements to facilitate valued or necessary behaviour among children.

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

4. **Validation Principle** - Acknowledge (validate) his wants and feelings. 'I know you feel angry with your teacher and want to stay home from school. I don't blame you. The bus will be here in 45 min.'

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

5. **Connect Before You Correct Principle** – Be sure to 'connect' with a child – get to know him and show him that you care about him – before you begin to try to correct his behaviour. This works well when relating to parents, too. Share positive thoughts with them about their child before you attack the problems!

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

6. **Wants and Feelings Principle** – Allow the child to want what he wants and feel what he feels. Don't try to talk him out of or feel guilty for his wants and feelings.

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

7. **Belonging and Significance Principle (e.g. class helper jobs)** – Remember that everyone needs to feel that s/he belongs and is significant. Help your child to feel important by giving him important jobs to do and reminding him that if he doesn't do them, they don't get done! Help him/her feel important by being responsible.

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

8. **Timer Says it's Time Principle** - Set a timer to help children make transitions. 'When the timer goes off, you will need to put away your books.' 'In five minutes, we will need to line up for lunch.' It is also a good idea to give the child a chance to choose how long he needs to pull himself together. 'It's okay to be upset, how long do you need?' Then allow him to remove himself from the group and set the timer. You may offer the child a choice (and set the timer) when it's necessary for him to do something he doesn't want to do. 'Do you want to pick up your toys/let Susan have the wagon/take your bath - in one minute or two?'

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

9. **Take Time to Teach Principle** – Often we expect children to read our minds to know how to do things they have never been taught. Although our expectations may be clear to us, our children may not have a clue. This principle involves directly teaching a needed skill or competency to children that they may be missing.

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

10. **Courtesy Scripts Principle** – Provide exact language for children to speak, such as 'will you please' or 'that wasn't me' to replace demanding / snatching behaviour ('give me that!') or angry outbursts 'No I didn't!' Also includes teaching the 'listener' exactly how to respond. Post these scripts and phrases. Children role-play courtesy scripts in pairs each day. Teachers guide the whole group to practice scripts using call & response about likely scenarios. Require / reinforce their use all day.

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

11. **Build up Virtues of Character Principle** – teach and model virtues to change children's language, behaviour, emotions or attitudes. Introduce and reinforce the existence of virtues throughout all activities and integrated across the day. Verbally acknowledge when you see virtues in action. *Examples*: gentleness, peacefulness, humour & happiness, kindness & friendship, patience, love, truth & honesty, fairness & equality, cleanliness & order, care & empathy, service & helpfulness, cooperation & unity, reflection, courage, etc.

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

12. **Make a Big Deal Principle** – Make a big deal over responsible, considerate, appropriate behaviour – with attention (your eyeballs), thanks, praise, thumbs-up, recognition, hugs, special privileges, incentives (NOT food).

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

13. **Best Friend Principle** - Elicit help from the child's best friend. Ask the friend to see if he can encourage the child to 'do the right thing.'

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

14. **Blame it on the Rules Principle** – 'Our school /family rule is to wash your hands before eating.'

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

15. **Change of Environment Principle** - If the child's misbehaviour cannot be stopped, move to another room or location. (Go outside.)

A	Expertise:	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

16. **Class/Family Meeting Principle** – Class and family meetings give children an opportunity to reflect, listen, empathize, and problem-solve. Focus on two-way communication rather than preaching to children. Listen more than you talk. Parents and children continue to learn from each other.

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

17. **Extinction Principle** - Ignore minor misbehaviour that is not dangerous, destructive, embarrassing or an impediment to learning. (Look the other way. Play deaf.)

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

18. **Hand Gestures Principle** - Develop hand gestures which signify, 'Please,' 'Thank you,' 'More,' 'Stop,' 'Be Careful,' 'Use your words,' and 'No.'

A	**Expertise:**	Beginner	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
B	**Value:**	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

Source of most principles: 101 Principles of Positive Guidance with Young Children by Kersey and Masterson (2013)

Appendix B

Relationship Tracker

Score how loving and close your relationship is with each person, on a scale of 1–10

1–3: Feeling estranged, not close, possible tension or conflict
4–6: Normal, polite interactions but not a close bond
7–8: Warm relationship, active friendship
9–10: Very loving and affectionate

Child's Name	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	10	11	12

Appendix C

Guidance Principles Template[5]

Each week, read through the 101 Positive Principles of Guidance. Select two principles that you would like to try implementing or practicing each week. Try to select new principles each week rather than repeating the same ones. You can practice these with children **and/or** with friends, coworkers, family members, etc. The purpose is to use a variety of positive principles in all settings to strengthen relationships by interacting with others in ways that support SEL. Write a brief self-reflection after practicing each principle in a real situation (each 101):

1. 1. **Date when the principle was implemented:** _____
2. **Name of the principle**_____
3. **Situation with children/adults that prompted you to use this principle**. What was happening prior?
4. **How did you implement the principle?**
5. **What were the results?** How did children respond? How did the principle influence your interactions with the child (ren) or adult(s)? Other outcomes?