

Methods for Meaningful Connection: Supporting Teacher-Child Relationships in Early Care and Education

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Introduction

Young children’s experience of positive, close relationships with their early care and education (ECE) teachers provides a critical foundation for their well-being and learning in ECE settings. Teacher-child relationships characterized by closeness and low conflict are associated with positive child behavior, strong learning gains, and long-term academic success (Zeng et al., 2021; Pianta & Shultman, 2004; Lippard et al., 2018; Rojas & Abenavoli, 2021). Nurturing relationships with children also benefits teachers by reducing children’s challenging behavior, which is a major source of stress for teachers (Smith & Lawrence, 2019).

Evidence suggests that the quality of teacher-child relationships (TCRs) varies widely across different children in ECE classrooms. Less optimal relationships and greater use of exclusionary practices, such as expulsion, have been found for Black boys (Shivers et al., 2022), dual language learners (Trawick-Smith et al., 2022), children with disabilities (Zeng et al., 2021), and children with challenging behavior (Whittaker & Harden, 2010). While some studies have focused on interventions aimed at improving teacher-child relationships (e.g., Williford et al., 2017), there is currently limited research on ECE teachers’ perceptions of practices, experiences with children, and other factors that may support or hinder the development of positive TCRs and how teachers view the benefits of these relationships. A better understanding of how teachers perceive the value of their relationships with children and factors affecting these relationships can inform efforts to design effective interventions and professional learning experiences aimed at promoting positive TCRs.

This brief reports on the results of a pilot project that had two goals related to current gaps in our understanding of TCRs. The first goal was to learn more about salient themes in teachers’ reflections on TCRs, including how they see their role in shaping these relationships and their understanding of why these relationships are important for children’s growth and long-term success.

The second goal was to examine the feasibility and potential value of two professional learning

activities designed to encourage teachers’ reflection on practices and experiences that promote or pose obstacles to positive TCRs. While there is some evidence that teacher reflection is an “active ingredient” in professional learning that has been shown to have positive impacts on teacher practices (e.g., Egert, Dederer, & Fukkink, 2020), our current understanding of promising supports for teacher reflection is limited. The teacher reflection experiences examined in this study are: 1) a three-session community of practice (CoP) with peer teachers focused on different aspects of TCRs and 2) use of a Teacher Reflection Tool (TRT) that encourages teachers to reflect on their experience and practices during a brief period of interaction with a focus child during regular classroom routines. These activities were designed as professional learning experiences that could be implemented by ECE program staff with minimal time and resources.

This report is organized as follows:

- **Program Partners and Methods**
- **Results**
 - Teachers’ reflections on Teacher Child Relationships (TCRs)
 - Teachers’ reflections in the CoP sessions
 - Teachers’ use of the Teacher Child Reflection Tool
 - Teachers’ views about supports for positive practices and TCRs
- **Recommendations**

Program Partners and Methods

Participants were teachers from three early education centers in New York City (NYCEECS) serving children aged 2 to 5 years. Nineteen early childhood educators across 10 classrooms participated in the project during the 2023-2024 school year. Two sites hosted in-person, two-hour CoP sessions, while the third site participated in virtual one-hour sessions during child nap times. The CoP sessions used open-ended questions, vignettes, and the Teacher Reflection Tool (TRT) to guide discussions and encourage reflective practices. Several case scenarios were presented to teachers through vignettes, which allowed teachers to analyze teacher-child relationships in the scenario while also allowing teachers to offer advice or recommendations.

Data collection included audio recordings of CoP discussions and semi-structured interviews with teachers conducted in English or Spanish via Zoom before and after the CoP series. Using a grounded theory approach, researchers coded and analyzed qualitative interview and CoP transcripts to identify themes in teachers' reflections on practices and TCRs during the CoP sessions, experiences using the Teacher Reflection Tool, and views on the usefulness of the project's reflection activities.



Results

TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON TCRS

Several themes emerged from initial interviews with teachers about their relationships with children in their classrooms, and from discussion during the CoP sessions.

Teachers view positive relationships with children as family-like and based on the child's trust.

About half the teachers described both feeling like and being viewed as a parent figure to children ("a mom away from home") in their relationships with children. This view seemed especially common when there was a cultural match between the children and the teacher. One teacher observed, "Me being a part of the community ... feeling connected in that way, ... like, you know, the kids like to call me Mom, ... they look like me, and I look like them." Teachers also highlighted the child's experience of trust as an essential ingredient in a positive TCR. As one teacher explained, "... when a child feels comfortable, they open up, ... they know they're safe.... They have someone to depend on and rely on." Teachers invariably smiled and spoke warmly when talking about these features of their relationships with children, conveying the value they place on positive TCRs.

Teachers reported that they formed positive relationships with children by learning about their individual interests and maintaining a nurturing style. Several teachers explained that they try to learn about children's individual interests and needs as a way to develop close relationships with them. One teacher observed that when she is able to interact one on one with a child, she "is better able to understand the child and learn about the child—what they like to do, learn more about the child's family." A few teachers highlighted a "long view" of how teacher-child relationships develop. For example,

one teacher said, "The bond is built over time with 'good mornings,' hugs, goodbyes, one-on-one time." Another said, "Try to understand the child's behavior.... Don't give up. Through being present, calm, caring, and persistent, [I] was able to connect with the child."

Other teachers spoke about nurturing behavior as key to forming close relationships. One teacher stressed her efforts to have "consistent positive interactions," and to redirect children instead of using a harsh tone. Another stated, "I try to be nice; the hugging that I love you, ... the positive reinforcement."

Teachers observed that their relationships with parents influence their relationships with children. Over a third of the teachers spontaneously mentioned their relationships with parents as a factor in their closeness with children. One teacher explained, "I also feel like when you build a trusting relationship with the parent, ... [the] child ... sees that and then becomes okay with trusting you; if they see the parent is trusting the teacher, ... they feel like, okay, if my parents trust you, then I should be able to trust you."

Other teachers described the negative effects a poor teacher-parent relationship can have on the teacher-child relationship. Describing a parent who seemed ready to blame the teacher if the child had "a bad day," a teacher shared, "Because sometimes ... the parent first thing is ... 'What did the teacher do to you? What did the teacher say to you?' And I don't like those kind of situations.... So I kind of stay my distance, you know. Be pleasant, but kind of stay away from that child and the parent." Another teacher noted, "A difference of opinion with the parent, ... it's kind of like an invisible barrier between the student and the teacher."

“Me being a part of the community, ... feeling connected in that way, like, you know, the kids like to call me Mom, like they look like me, and I look like them.”

“Step away, take a break, evaluate what you are doing in the classroom and how that might affect or contribute to what the child is doing.”

In the CoP sessions, several teachers at one site also reported on negative interactions and relationships with parents that left them feeling that parents did not respect them or the important work they do with children. For example, one teacher said, “There are always going to be those parents that have that bias like oh, you work with young kids and you’re just in daycare.... Don’t tell me anything about my child, ... you’re just the babysitter.” Teachers conveyed considerable distress when they reported parents’ lack of respect. While one teacher in a CoP session described her persistent and ultimately successful effort to develop a friendlier relationship with a parent, most teachers presented problems in relationships with parents as going unsolved.

Teachers reported that child behavior they find challenging can interfere with the teacher-child relationship. Not surprisingly, children’s behavior that teachers find challenging was described by about half the teachers as an obstacle to building a positive, nurturing teacher-child relationship. Teachers often observed that children are “not to blame” for concerning behaviors that arise from their special needs or that “they learn [behaviors] at home.” But the behavior has negative effects on their relationship nonetheless. One teacher shared, “But I mean realistically, ... you’re not gonna have a close bond.... You don’t treat them differently, and you try to do the best that you can.” Another teacher noted that when children with special needs are impulsive or aggressive, it “pushes your buttons as a human, ... triggers me.” One teacher reported feeling “frustrated” and “helpless” about a child who repeatedly responds with yelling and hitting when she tries to “redirect” him. A few teachers expressed particular distress about children’s behavior that they view as “disrespectful,” such as “using bad words like shut up, other bad language, running away from the teacher, talking back.” Overall, when responding to

child behavior they find challenging, teachers appear less able to engage in the positive, one-on-one, individualized interactions that they cite elsewhere as the building blocks of closeness and connection.

Teachers reported a variety of strategies that help them respond effectively to children’s challenging behavior. Several teachers reported on self-calming and problem-solving strategies they use in response to children’s behavior problems. One teacher explained: “Step away, take a break, evaluate what you are doing in the classroom and how that might affect or contribute to what the child is doing.” Another teacher similarly spoke about the importance of teachers examining “how they approach things” and asking “How can I regulate myself?” A few teachers mentioned asking a co-teacher for ideas about strategies they might try or to actually step in to help when they are struggling with a child’s behavior. One teacher said, “I would ask my co-teacher to kind of like see if they could make a better connection with them.”

Teachers identified many short- and long-term benefits of a positive teacher-child relationship. When asked in the interviews about the benefits of a close, positive teacher-child relationship, about a quarter of the teachers responded that these relationships help children feel comfortable in the classroom and give them opportunities to learn. One teacher said, “If we don’t make the connection then I feel like academically it would be kind of a struggle.... When this happens, children develop maturely, learn how to navigate the classroom independently, [are] more confident.” Another said, “When you build trust and relationship with the child they can be themselves.... Because if they’re not comfortable or they are afraid to be who they are, how could you assess them to be able to teach them?” About a third of the teachers described long-term benefits of positive teacher-child relationships, with most explaining that children learn to trust others,

including their future teachers. A teacher shared her view that “children need to have good healthy relationships with teachers early. Supports trust with teachers as they move into different grades. If you don’t have a good relationship in early childhood, it can lead to not trusting teachers in the future.... Might not learn as much.” Another observed that these early relationships help children “know how to form bonds with other people, connections with other teachers or other staff members.” Taken together, teachers’

reflections on how they promote positive TCRs highlighted both their overall nurturing behavior toward children and their efforts to understand and value them as individuals. Teachers also underscored two barriers to building close TCRs: unfriendly relationships with parents and children’s challenging behavior. While some teachers identified helpful approaches to addressing children’s behavior, fewer teachers cited successful ways of managing challenges with parents.

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TEACHERS’ REFLECTIONS IN THE COP SESSIONS

During the CoP sessions, teachers reflected on their practices in response to facilitators’ open-ended questions about particular topics (e.g., how have you worked to overcome barriers to positive relationships with parents and children?) and questions related to vignettes that illustrated different ways teachers manage challenges in interactions with parents and children. Teachers also responded to their peers’ description of challenges, offering suggestions about strategies. This section highlights features of teachers’ reflections in response to these prompts.

While teachers also talked about their practices while using the TRT tool in sessions two and three, these reflections are discussed in a later section on how teachers responded to the TRT.

Teachers highlighted reasons *why* certain practices are effective. When teachers talked about practices they use or recommend, they typically conveyed their understanding of “why” a practice

is effective. This focus was evident in one teacher’s positive comments about a teacher described in a vignette who responded to a parent’s concern that her child was recently resistant to attending preschool. “The teacher acknowledged the parent’s concerns. And listened, ... and she validated ... how the mother was feeling.” A teacher in another classroom had a similar reflection: “As far as the teacher [-parent] relationship, it is good....The teacher is validating the parent’s concerns. That’s important. She’s not being dismissive, and [the parent] feels more comfortable to open up and talk about the other things that have been going on at home.” Another teacher praised the efforts by the teacher in the vignette to understand possible changes at home, as well as in the classroom, that might be affecting the child. She observed: “Sometimes things overlap one another. The changes at home ... and then school. It doesn’t make it easier.” These and other examples suggest that teachers are drawing on a deep understanding of effective practices in the CoP sessions, rather than simply identifying these practices.

Teachers frequently reflected on parents' or children's experiences and feelings. During the CoP sessions, teachers showed considerable sensitivity to the feelings and experiences of parents and children in their reflections. One teacher recalled noticing parents' facial expressions and wondered, "What is this parent feeling like today? Because, you know, sometimes ... we catch them in a bad mood, or they come in angry." Another teacher reported that she tries to determine a parent's mood by listening to their tone of voice, and sometimes wonders, "Should I just say good morning, not expecting to hear a good morning back?" Teachers often recognized that parents were reacting to circumstances in the parents' lives rather than to the teacher. One teacher observed, "I'm clear that it's not with me.... They're going through [something] in their life."

Teachers also frequently commented on children's social and family experiences, reflecting on both positive and challenging aspects of a child's feelings and behavior. For example, one teacher described a child who frequently had trouble "controlling his body" but who took great pleasure in working with shaving cream to which teachers added "drops of color." The teacher added that this activity attracted other children, allowing the child to enjoy playing with peers. Another teacher observed that children are similar to the teachers in bringing their outside experiences into the classroom each day: "They come with whatever happened at breakfast, or at home, or waking up, or mommy rushing. They ...bring that to the classroom."

Teachers provided understanding and support to their peers in the CoP sessions. Responding to teachers' discussion about parents behaving with irritation toward them when they are told their child has a behavior or developmental issue, a teacher empathized with her peers while also providing guidance: "I think we need to put aside our feeling and try to understand...parents and have empathy and find a way to create that bond and that trust with the parents,...even when they talk bad to you. I need to create that ... in order to help that child." Another teacher asked for and received support from her peers when talking about a child she could connect with only briefly before the child lost interest or became angry. Teachers in different classrooms who knew the same child because the child had experienced behavior problems in both teachers' classrooms over two years expressed empathy and support for each other, sharing approaches they had tried. In an early CoP session, a teacher described her distress concerning a parent who seemed harsh and disrespectful towards her. Another teacher responded by sharing similar frustrations and challenges with a parent. The teacher also described her persistent and ultimately successful efforts to improve her relationship with the parent by maintaining a friendly manner and consistently showing that she cared about her child.

“ I think we need to put aside our feeling and try to understand... parents and have empathy and find a way to create that bond and that trust with the parents,...even when they talk bad to you. I need to create that ... in order to help that child. ”

TEACHERS' USE OF THE TEACHER REFLECTION TOOL (TRC)

The Teacher Reflection Tool was introduced and reviewed in the second CoP session (see box). Teachers were asked to try it out before the third CoP session and to bring it to that session so that they could share what happened, how they answered the tool's reflection questions, and how they viewed the experience. Because no teachers at two sites had tried out the tool by the third CoP session, the facilitators invited a few teachers to use the tool during this session by recalling a one-on-one interaction with a child and answering the reflection questions. This exercise helped teachers understand how the TRT is different from documenting children's behavior, a task they are required to do on a regular basis.

Several teachers from the third site shared their experiences using the tool in the last CoP session. What follows is a discussion of teachers' responses to trying out the tool in their classrooms. The summary is drawn from both their reflections in the CoP sessions and in the final interviews.

Overall, teachers who used the TRT had a positive response, reporting that it helped them notice new skills and interests in children, build a stronger connection to individual children, and better meet children's individual needs. Several teachers tried out the tool with a focal child they did not feel especially close to or who had behavior they found challenging.

One teacher reported on her interaction with a child who enjoyed playing with peers but who seemed more reserved with adults: "When I decided to sit with her in the family play area, I didn't talk, I just observed her, and you know, little by little, she began to get closer to me to give me food that she was making.... She asked me if I wanted spaghetti, if I wanted her meatballs, and we began a little bit of conversation. I thought that was a great one." The experience appeared to shift the teacher's thinking about her way of interacting with children during centers time: "That is something that I'm doing more instead of moving so much around. I think it's important to spend an extra bit of time with whoever you

TEACHER REFLECTION TOOL (TRT)

Purpose of tool: The TRT aims to help teachers become more aware of their interactions with children so that they can better understand what helps build positive relationships with children. To use the TRT, teachers engage in interactions with a particular child ("focus" child) for a short period of time during everyday activities and then briefly answer a few questions.

How to use the TRT:

- Choose a time when you will be able to interact with one "focus" child for about 5 (five) minutes. This might be during Centers time or a transition.
- Select one "focus" child for the interactions. **Please try to select a child you have found a little more difficult to connect with (for example, a child who has trouble getting along with other children or who is very quiet).** You will focus attention on interacting with this child, but it is fine if other children are also part of the play and conversation.
- After your interaction, briefly answer the questions below. If you cannot do this immediately, please take some notes, and fill in this form later.

Reflection questions:

1. **What did you notice about your interaction with the target child?** Some things you might think about are: How much (or little) did you enjoy the interaction, and why? How do you think the child experienced the interaction, and why? Did this experience raise any questions for you? Did you think about the child in new ways?
2. **How do you think the interaction contributed to your relationship with the child?**
3. **Was this reflection useful in any way? If so, please explain.**

“The thing is, ... you have to sit with those quiet children.... I had not sat with her enough to understand that she does have a lot of conversation. So it helped. You know. It helped a lot. ”

know is having trouble or is just quiet or reserved.” This teacher also observed that quiet children are sometimes overlooked, and using the TRT helped her connect with a child: “The thing is, ... you have to sit with those quiet children.... I had not sat with her enough to understand that she does have a lot of conversation. So it helped. You know. It helped a lot.”

Another teacher reported using the TRT with a child who was upset and crying in the morning. She spent time with her, “taking care of her emotional needs,” and then taking the child to get breakfast in the classroom. Responding to the tool’s reflection questions, she noticed that after the child had breakfast, “she was able to follow the class routine ... to really calm down.” For herself, she observed, “I enjoyed the interaction; It was very, very meaningful.”

While using the tool with a child during breakfast, another teacher found herself in an extended conversation with a child, discovering their mutual enjoyment of walking and hiking outdoors. The teacher shared her own interests in these activities after the child mentioned walking in the woods and visiting a farm. This teacher said, “It helped me learn more about the child, think about that individual child.” She added that the interaction also gave her ideas about classroom activities centered around the child’s interests.

One teacher who turned in her TRC form noted that the interaction with a child and reflection on the experience helped her better understand that some of the child’s behavior was compensating for his limited vision. This teacher reflected on the child’s enjoyment of feeling special as she focused only on him, and the experience gave her ideas about how she could support him more in the classroom (e.g., encouraging him to be closer to a book or other visual materials they were using).

Teachers reported that they found the tool was easy to use, once they tried it. Following positive experiences that occurred when they used the TRT, several teachers reported that they plan to continue to use it in their classrooms.

Speaking of her experience using the tool, another teacher said it “helps you to be present and intentional in your interactions with the kids.” This teacher explained that using the tool led her to interact with a child who talked at length about upcoming travel on a plane while drawing a plane, and then asked to make a plane with sticks and glue. The teacher was “amazed” by the vocabulary the child used. She added that while she interacts with children every day, she usually “doesn’t go as deep” or have conversations that are as “personal” as the one she had with this child.

Because teachers offered detailed accounts of their interactions with children when they reported on their use of the tool, it appeared that the chance to share their experiences with the TRT prompted helpful reflections. In this way, teachers’ use of the tool may offer benefits directly related to the one-on-one interactions (e.g., increasing the experience of a connection with the child, making a child feel special while receiving focused attention), as well as benefits related to the learning derived from the teacher’s reflections and the sharing of these with peers (e.g., the teacher reinforcing the value of understanding a child’s behavior and interests and using this understanding to shape experiences for children.) One teacher highlighting the value of sharing their experience using the TRT said, “We know, quote-unquote, what we’re doing, but when you do the writing and when you have to express it, ... when you have to share it with other people, you really realize the impact.”

TEACHERS' VIEWS ABOUT SUPPORTS FOR POSITIVE PRACTICES AND TCRS

During the CoP sessions and final interview, teachers offered reflections on the supports they need to promote positive relationships with children and families. These reflections provide important context for their responses to the reflection experiences the project provided.

Several teachers remarked that they do not have the planning time they need. One teacher recalled that other staff used to take over their classes once a week for an hour, “and the teacher and assistant teacher were able to step out and do planning work...to discuss the children and plan for the week.... We don’t have that anymore because, ... I guess, no funding. And then maybe that would alleviate some of that burden, you know.... We really don’t take a lunch break.... I mean, when the children go down to sleep, what we do is, we discuss, we do paperwork, we take down our work, we put up our work, we do everything that we need to do for the classroom, when the kids are laying down.... Sometimes it’s even hard to get a bite to eat because we have to get it done. You have to get the work done.” Other teachers said that they missed meetings that brought teachers and other staff together to plan and address problems: “We used to share whatever was happening in your classroom, and we used to hear techniques... or maybe from the family workers. You know, she has some information that we don’t have about the family, and then it had clicked—like why they were going through what they were going through.”

Teachers expressed their appreciation for the CoP sessions, suggesting these offered support similar to what they gained in the meetings they missed. Others agreed, saying they want more chances to communicate with other teachers. Reflecting on the value of sharing ideas and reflecting on practices, a teacher said, “Listening to others, ... it makes you think, ‘I do not question myself, and maybe you should try this way. But if you’re just... focusing, focusing on your own [classroom] ... and there’s nobody to talk to, [you] just keep doing the same things.” Another teacher observed that she sometimes uses practices “automatically,” and “sometimes it’s good to look at what you’re doing and know if it’s good to continue in that direction or veer a little.”

One teacher emphasized the value of consulting with colleagues in the program: “We talk to other colleagues in other classrooms ... that we trust and ... to see if they have a different idea or if they have had similar situations and how they have handled it, and if they have given good results.” But this teacher also noted that they have too little time to engage in these types of exchanges.

In addition to opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, teachers voiced the need for increased compensation and improved benefits. They also stressed the need for more family workers and mental health specialists to help address needs that affect the well-being of children. One teacher said that staff could also benefit from mental health specialists who could suggest “techniques to relieve stress.”

“We used to share whatever was happening in your classroom, and we used to hear techniques ... or maybe from the family workers. You know, she has some information that we don’t have about the family, and then it had clicked—like why they were going through what they were going through.”

Recommendations

The TCR pilot study findings suggest promising approaches to supporting effective practices in ECE programs that can help teachers build supportive relationships with children and their parents. While recognizing the limits of this small-scale study, we offer several recommendations for using professional learning strategies and policies that could offer important supports for teacher-child relationships and opportunities to assess their benefits.

- **Design and evaluate staff-led professional learning activities, such as regular community of practice sessions (CoPs).** These activities should be designed to engage teachers in reflection on their interactions with children and families and in peer-to-peer sharing of effective practices. CoPs that elicit and validate the types of experiences and knowledge demonstrated in teachers' reflections in this study may be of particular interest and value to teachers. For example, teachers explained "why" particular practices are effective, conveyed sensitivity to children's and parents' feelings, and stressed their understanding that both children and parents bring their home circumstances to the program. Drawing on such naturally occurring stores of experience and knowledge in CoPs may help highlight and reinforce teacher perspectives that support effective practices. This can be accomplished through the use of open-ended questions about teachers' practices and experiences (e.g., "How do you build positive relationships with children?") and with vignettes that invite teachers' reflections on practices, children's needs, and their own responses to common challenges and opportunities.
- **Consider regular use of a Teacher Reflection Tool (TRT) and peer-to-peer sharing of experiences using the tool.** Teachers can share their experiences with the TRT in CoP sessions or similar meetings with teaching staff focused on

practice. The TRT could also be used by coaches to encourage teachers to try out practices that promote positive teacher-child relationships in focused interactions with individual children. Coaching provides another opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practices and relationships with individual children.

- **Develop and evaluate professional learning activities that help directors, PD specialists and others support teachers' engagement in reflection activities.** Program directors, PD specialists, and social workers could learn how to implement and support teachers' engagement in CoPs and use of the TRT and similar resources (e.g., an adaptation of the TRT focused on interactions with parents). Reflection activities could be used to amplify and extend the benefits of teachers' work with external specialists, such as coaches and social workers who help teachers address challenges with parents and children. Program leaders could play an important role in creating the time, space, and structure for CoPs and opportunities for teacher reflection during staff meetings.
- **City and state leaders should advance policies that support ECE teachers' engagement in professional learning experiences that provide opportunities for reflection and peer-to-peer support. Examples of such policies include:**
 - Incentivizing or requiring ECE programs to provide adequate staff time to plan
 - Providing professional development credits for reflection activities (e.g., participation in a CoP series or for time spent using the TRT as part of a series of coaching or group training)
 - Promoting teacher well-being through adequate compensation and benefits since teachers' well-being is a factor ...in their well-being and ability to fully engage in professional learning

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