



## Fit in but stand out: A qualitative study of parents' and teachers' perspectives on socioemotional competence of children

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the conceptualization of children's socioemotional competence among parents and teachers of preschool children in Hong Kong, China. Focus groups were conducted with 16 parents and 18 teachers from three preschools. Thematic content analysis revealed that, reflecting the cultural as well as contextual characteristics of Hong Kong, parents and teachers expected socioemotionally competent children to master skills in emotion understanding, emotion expressivity, emotion regulation, relationship building, conflict management, and inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. There was diversity within parents' and teachers' interpretations of the characteristics of emotionally regulated and socially skilled children. Findings highlighted the ecosystemic nature of societal ideas about children's developmental competence, demonstrated the utility of qualitative research in exploring these ideas in culturally sensitive manners, and called for the mobilization of parents and teachers as research-informed scaffolders of holistic development of children.

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### 1. Introduction

Socioemotional competence is a set of characteristics and behaviors that allows individuals to establish and maintain relationships and achieve desirable goals within a social group (Denham, 2006). Research indicates that socioemotional competence predicts numerous adjustment outcomes, including psychological well-being, prosocial behaviors, and academic achievement (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). However, according to an ecosystemic model of developmental competence (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), societal ideas about competence are culturally and contextually bound: Socioemotional characteristics and behaviors may carry different meanings, and thus be differentially valued, across groups with different cultural backgrounds and contextual demands. In other words, “cultural models” or “eth-

notheories” of socioemotional competence may vary across groups (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992).

It is important to examine the cultural models of socioemotional competence, because they influence parents' and teachers' dynamics with children, as well as children's development. In their theory of developmental niches, Harkness and Super (2006) argued that parents' and teachers' ethnotheories are part of a hierarchical system that shapes children's socialization experiences. The highest level of this system involves cultural models of children's development, which underlie conscious and unconscious ideas parents and teachers hold about specific domains of children's development. These ideas, in turn, inform parenting and teaching practices, shape children's experiences, and affect children's adjustment. In fact, according to Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory, the home and the school environments—which invariably reflect parents' and teachers' beliefs about children's development (Harkness & Super, 2006)—constitute the microsystems, or the immediate settings in which children develop. Therefore, identifying parents' and teachers' ideas about socioemotional competence of children enables insights into major forces that carve the developmental niches of children.

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Noteworthy is that the home and the school environments also jointly constitute the mesosystem, or the relationship between the microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). However, although both parents and teachers are nested within a wider cultural and political context, the cultural models that parents and teachers have concerning children's development may still vary. Indeed, prior research has identified modest, but important, differences in parents' versus teachers' views about children's development, such as the relevance of literacy knowledge and behavioral compliance to conceptualizing preschool children's school readiness (Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsen, 2012; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2001). Inconsistency between home and school beliefs is not necessarily a threat (Barbarin, Downer, Odom, & Head, 2010), but a comprehensive investigation of both parents' and teachers' beliefs may help identify potential discrepancies in the expectations from key socializers of children. When major discrepancies are evident, such information may help parents and teachers better understand each other, facilitating their cooperation and preempting conflict between them.

Despite the importance of examining ethnotheories of children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Harkness & Super, 2006), few studies have used qualitative methods to explore parents' and teachers' beliefs about what constitutes children's socioemotional competence. Instead, most have used quantitative methods to measure aspects of children's socioemotional competence deemed important by researchers. Furthermore, nearly all existing research on children's socioemotional competence is based on middle-class, European and European American children (Broekhuizen, Slot, van Aken, Dubas, & Leseman, 2017; Hatcher et al., 2012; Huang, Kim, & Sherraden, 2017). Although about 20% of the world's population lives in China (United Nations, 2017), little is known about how socioemotional competence of children is defined in Chinese communities (Chen & Li, 2012). The goal of the present study was to fill gaps in the literature by examining Chinese parents' and teachers' perceptions of children's socioemotional development. Based on focus group data collected from 16 parents and 18 teachers from three preschools in Hong Kong, China, we sought to address the question: What is a socioemotionally competent child like for parents and teachers of preschool children in a Chinese context?

### 1.1. Existing conceptualization of children's socioemotional competence

Research shows that socioemotional competence develops rapidly in the preschool years. One line of work focuses on children's abilities to understand, regulate, and express emotions (Denham, 2006). *Emotion understanding* refers to children's abilities to discern the states and origins of their own emotions, differentiate between their own and others' emotions, and understand the emotions of others (Morgan, Izard, & King, 2010). *Emotion regulation* refers to children's abilities to induce, inhibit, and maintain the occurrence, intensity, and duration of different emotional states (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). Finally, *emotion expressivity* refers to children's abilities to differentiate between internal states and external displays of emotions, understand cultural rules that define appropriate displays of emotions, and comply with these rules in order to enhance social relationships (Halberstadt & Lozada, 2011). It is worth noting that, although these three sets of abilities are conceptually distinct, they act in concert in real life. For example, a child with high emotional competence may be able to suppress his disappointment at an undesirable gift (i.e. emotion regulation), smile and thank the giver instead of frowning and rejecting the gift (i.e. emotion expressivity), and later on explain his change of emotions, "I thought it was a toy car and got all excited, but it turned out to be a book so I was sad" (i.e. emotion understanding).

Another line of work, though less explicit about the underlying components of its outcome measure of interest, focuses on children's social competence, including their abilities to "achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across settings" (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992, p. 285), to "[respond] to various problematic situations which confront [them]" (Goldfried & D'Zurilla, 1969, p. 161), and to "[formulate and adopt] personal goals that are appropriate and adaptive to specific social situations and [implement] effective behavioral strategies for achieving goals" (Taylor & Asher, 1984, p. 57). These social abilities fall into two categories: *relationship building* and *conflict management*. Relationship building behaviors, such as expressing empathy, collaborating, being polite and honest, and sharing and helping, are conducive to social inclusion in both Western and Chinese contexts (Dalton, 2010; Yang, Jin, & Sun, 2014). Efforts to build relationships, however, do not eliminate situations where one's interests are at odds with others'. Conflict management behaviors facilitate problem-solving in such situations by helping children identify problems, generate solutions, anticipate consequences, and accommodate the needs of different parties (Shure & Spivack, 1992). A child who builds relationships and manages conflict well, for example, would be able to initiate and maintain conversations with a new friend and suggest that they take turns when they both want to play with the same toy.

Collectively, researchers have theorized socioemotional competence as children's abilities to comprehend, modulate, and express emotions, build relationships, and resolve disagreement. Whether the beliefs of parents and teachers align with these theoretical views, however, remain underexplored. Moreover, the manifestations of specific socioemotional abilities have largely been gleaned from middle-class, European and European American children: As different characteristics and behaviors may be interpreted and valued differently in various contexts, the same manifestation of child competence may or may not be generalizable across different cultures. For example, filial piety, which refers to respect and care toward one's parents, is traditionally emphasized in many East Asian cultures (Chow, 2001; Ikels, 2004). However, although respect and care toward one's parents is also looked upon favorably in other cultures, it is not always emphasized in isolation from respect and care toward others in general, nor does it incorporate such cultural meanings as taking care of the self as an extension of taking care of one's parents, or extending the family name through studying hard. Similarly, there may be components of socioemotional competence that are unique to some cultures but unheard of in others, underlying the need to explore this construct in different sociocultural contexts.

The current study aimed to enrich existing conceptualization of children's socioemotional competence through an ecosystemic lens. Grounded in the view that children's competence is often culturally and contextually bound (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), it examined parents' and teachers' understanding of preschool children's socioemotional competence in Hong Kong.

### 1.2. An ecosystemic model of children's socioemotional competence

An ecosystemic model of developmental competence highlights the importance of both *traditional cultural legacies* and *current contextual demands* in shaping societal ideas about competence (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). On one hand, cultural views and expectations inform socialization values and goals, such as those about what constitutes competence among children. On the other hand, contemporary and immediate influences affect how these socialization values and goals are actualized. The result is *adaptive culture*—the embodiment of traditional cultural legacies tailored to fulfill imme-

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