



# Drawing from and Expanding their Toolboxes: Preschool Teachers' Traditional Strategies, Unconventional Opportunities, and Novel Challenges in Scaffolding Young Children's Social and Emotional Learning During Remote Instruction Amidst COVID-19

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## Abstract

Building on aspects of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory centering around social interaction and adult scaffolding as essential to children's learning, this study investigated the most prominently used strategies by eight teachers to scaffold social and emotional learning (SEL) in preschool children (ages 3–4) in the context of remote instruction during the 2021–2022 school year amidst COVID-19. These teachers (seven females and one male) came from two urban preschools funded by their local Board of Education in the state of New Jersey in the United States. These teachers (ages 28–44 years,  $M = 32$  years) varied in teaching experience from five to 29 years ( $M = 13$  years). Each teacher was interviewed for an average of 40 min virtually via Zoom. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed for analysis. A thematic analysis of the data revealed that the three most salient strategies the teachers implemented to virtually scaffold the children's SEL were: (1) involving book reading and discussion, (2) utilizing visuals, and (3) engaging in targeted conversations. In addition to adapting these three traditional strategies applied during in-person instruction to remote instruction, the teachers creatively and appropriately leveraged online resources to further scaffold and enhance children's SEL in the unconventional virtual environment, thereby expanding their toolboxes. Despite their intentional efforts, these teachers found that there were unconventional opportunities and novel challenges in scaffolding children's SEL during remote instruction not traditionally found during in-person instruction. Collectively, the findings of this study suggest that in-person instruction, due to its social nature, is still the most optimal condition for promoting children's SEL.

**Keywords** In-person instruction · Preschool · Remote instruction · Socioemotional learning · Teaching challenges · Teaching strategies · Young children

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced unwelcome interruptions on the pre-pandemic rhythms of lives across the globe. In the United States, during the 2020–2021 school year, the typical flow of the teaching and learning process for millions of teachers and their students continued to be altered by COVID-19-imposed unconventional instructional modalities (i.e., in-person following proper safety and health protocols, remote, and a hybrid of the two) (Chen, 2022). Teachers were all learning to navigate these relatively novel

waters, while also supporting their students' learning and development. One area that young children needed support the most was social and emotional learning (SEL), especially because this unconventional instructional process restricted social interaction that was previously a natural catalyst for their acquisition of social and emotional skills in the classroom during the pre-COVID-19 era (e.g., Ho & Funk, 2018; Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000). It is unclear, though, what strategies teachers might have implemented to facilitate preschool children's SEL as part of their learning experiences during remote instruction amidst COVID-19. As an effort to yield insights into this area, we sought to investigate the most common strategies implemented as well as potentially unconventional opportunities and novel challenges

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experienced by teachers in scaffolding SEL in their preschool children during remote instruction.

### What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

According to the updated definition of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2020), “SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (n.p.). This definition is reflected specifically in CASEL’s (2020) SEL model consisting of five core competencies: (1) “self-awareness,” (2) “self-management,” (3) “social awareness,” (4) “relationship skills,” and (5) “responsible decision-making.” *Self-awareness* includes the ability to understand one’s feelings; *self-management* refers to the ability to address one’s emotions in constructive manners; *social awareness* involves the ability to consider others’ perspectives as well as recognize, understand, and empathize with their feelings; *relationship skills* refer to the ability to build relationships with others such as through prosocial behavior (e.g., cooperating, turn-taking, sharing, listening); and *responsible decision-making* includes the ability to constructively analyze and solve problems in social situations and address interpersonal differences (Denham et al., 2010; Zins et al., 2007). SEL is a critical area of learning particularly in early childhood because it involves a unique set of skills (e.g., emotion understanding, emotion expressiveness, emotion regulation, problem-solving, perspective-taking) that children begin to develop at an early age (e.g., CASEL, 2020; Ho & Funk, 2018; Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000; Payton et al., 2000).

### Why is SEL Important?

The preschool years (ages 3–5) are a critical period of rapid development when certain social and emotional milestones are set to be achieved. These important milestones include an increased ability in self-awareness as well as social awareness (Denham et al., 2010; Zins et al., 2007), emotion knowledge (Izard et al., 2001), emotion expressiveness and emotion regulation (Ashiabi, 2000), perspective-taking and empathy (Colwell & Hart, 2006), and understanding of others’ emotions by their expressive body movements (Boone & Cunningham, 1998). The development of social and emotional competence is necessary for preschool children to understand and regulate their own emotions appropriately and engage in prosocial behavior with peers and adults in the social ecology of the classroom (Arnott, 2018; Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000).

Furthermore, SEL skills (e.g., cooperating with peers, expressing and regulating emotions, following directions) are pivotal to preschool children’s readiness for formal schooling (e.g., Denham, 2006; McClelland et al., 2017; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Empirical evidence has corroborated that children who have achieved social and emotional competence upon entering kindergarten tend to exhibit better attitudes toward school and experience positive school adjustment and academic outcomes (e.g., Birch et al., 1997; Ladd et al., 1996, 1999). Unfortunately, many children in the United States are not equipped with social and emotional skills upon entry to formal schooling, which can lead to their experiencing academic difficulties and even failure (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000; Whitted, 2011; Zins et al., 2004). Fortunately, social and emotional skills are both acquirable and perfectible (e.g., Gold et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2017; Navsaria et al., 2020).

### Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory and Teacher Scaffolding

According to Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, learning is considered a social activity that occurs most effectively in social interaction with others. The classroom provides such a social environment for facilitating interaction and learning among children. Through social interaction, children’s learning and development are optimally supported especially by proper scaffolding or assistance from more competent individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Most notably, as the authority in the classroom ecology, teachers serve as the great “socializers” of SEL in young children. Thus, teachers are in a unique position to scaffold children in ways that can advance their development of specific social and emotional skills considered appropriate within their own social and cultural contexts (e.g., Denham et al., 2012; Zinsler et al., 2014). For instance, situated in a school culture and curriculum that support CASEL’s (2020) SEL framework, teachers are expected to design learning activities that can facilitate young children’s development of the five core competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). They may intentionally structure and provide developmentally appropriate scaffoldings to help children achieve social and emotional expectations. Intentionality is at the heart of “developmentally appropriate practice” advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020). Considering the importance of scaffolding during social interaction, it is conceivable that preschool children’s development of SEL would be most optimally nurtured through teachers’ intentional scaffolding such as in the form of strategized instruction. Thus, teacher scaffolding could serve as an effective and sustainable instructional mechanisms for introducing and teaching children socially

and culturally appropriate socioemotional skills. In this connection, we investigated the most prominent strategies that preschool teachers employed to scaffold children's SEL specifically in the context of group remote instruction during COVID-19.

### The Role of the Teacher in Scaffolding SEL

SEL is an important aspect of the overall learning and development of young children, especially during their preschool years (Denham, 2006; McClelland et al., 2017; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Because of its importance, social and emotional skills have been emphasized in the classroom (e.g., Ho & Funk, 2018; Tominey et al., 2017). Some of the most socially and culturally appropriate strategies implemented by teachers to scaffold preschool children's SEL include using visuals (Kidder & McDonnell, 2017); engaging in singing, book reading, playing games, and modeling prosocial behaviors (Ho & Funk, 2018); and applying non-verbal techniques involving physical activities (e.g., dance, yoga poses, expressive body movement) (Rajan & Aker, 2020; Razza et al., 2015; Thom, 2010). Researchers have further categorized commonly used strategies into broad groups (e.g., Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Ng & Bull, 2018). For example, in their focus group interviews with 14 teachers of preschool children in a southeastern region of the United States, Hollingsworth and Winter (2013) identified two broad strategies applied by these teachers in supporting children's prosocial skills: (1) tone setting of the social environment including reading stories (e.g., focusing on feelings), utilizing puppets as a modeling tool of skills (e.g., problem-solving), and engaging in social activities (e.g., playing games); and (2) responsiveness to situations including incorporating "scripted lessons, visuals, or social stories" (p. 1770). While the aforementioned teacher strategies for scaffolding children's SEL were salient in the pre-COVID-19 context, it is unclear if and how they may be applied to remote instruction in the COVID-19 context.

### SEL in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Under pre-pandemic circumstances, the classroom would be an optimal physical place for preschool children to achieve social and emotional competence because it could offer numerous constructive opportunities for social interaction necessary for these children to acquire, practice, and hone their SEL skills, including negotiating with peers, resolving conflicts, taking turns, and regulating emotions (Arnott, 2018; Rademacher & Koglin, 2019). To curtail the transmission of COVID-19, during the 2020–2021 school year, many schools throughout the United States opted to engage in one of the three unconventional instructional modalities: (1) in-person following proper safety and health protocols,

(2) remote, and (3) a hybrid of the two. These instructional variabilities have, in turn, imposed additional pedagogical challenges on teachers in their efforts to scaffold SEL in children (Chen & O'Donnell, in press; Shin & Puig, 2021). Chen and O'Donnell (in press) found that during remote instruction, children in one particular classroom struggled to appropriately identify and regulate their own feelings and emotions, most likely due to the deprivation of in-person social interaction for them to develop social and emotional skills. For instance, even though the classroom teacher made concerted efforts to read aloud socioemotionally relevant books and engage children in follow-up discussion about emotions, the preschool children were still only making slow strides in their SEL. Just as young children struggled to make SEL progress during remote instruction, early childhood educators also struggled in supporting these children's SEL virtually during COVID-19. For example, in their study of 75 early childhood professionals in the state of New Jersey, USA (where the current investigation was also conducted), Shin and Puig (2021) found that the majority of these professionals reported not being able to teach social and emotional skills during COVID-19.

### The Goals of this Study

To contribute knowledge to the SEL and early childhood fields, we sought to understand the most prominent strategies that teachers implemented to scaffold preschool children's acquisition of social and emotional skills and the nature of the opportunities and challenges they might have encountered in the process of applying these strategies. To this end, we investigated the following two core research questions in relation to remote instruction during the 2020–2021 school year in the United States amidst COVID-19:

- (1) What strategies did teachers describe implementing to scaffold SEL in their preschool children (ages 3–4)? And how?
- (2) If, and what unconventional opportunities and novel challenges did these teachers encounter in scaffolding SEL in their preschool children?

## Research Method

### Participant Recruitment

The second researcher recruited participants from two urban preschools funded by their local Board of Education in the state of New Jersey in the United States. The directors at the two preschools helped distribute to their teachers copies of our informed consent letter containing essential information, including the purpose of this study and the participants'

involvement and rights. Given the equal power relationship between the second researcher (who was also a teacher at one of the preschools) and the participating teachers, there appeared no evidence of coercion in the teachers' participation in this study.

## The Research Context

The two preschools were accredited by NAEYC, suggesting that they had achieved the quality standards set by this accreditation agency. They served children from primarily low-income and middle-income backgrounds, most of whom were African Americans or of Hispanic heritage. The teachers at both preschools followed the HighScope Curriculum. According to the HighScope Educational Research Foundation (2022), a key learning area of the HighScope Curriculum focuses on children's social-emotional development: "Children learn and thrive when they are emotionally secure and socially connected to others...In a HighScope program, teachers intentionally arrange the classroom and daily routines to develop children's sense of competence, support social interactions, and build a secure community" (n.p.). Accordingly, the two preschools expected all teachers to implement strategies to facilitate SEL in their preschool children. In turn, these teachers appeared to have developed an understanding of and beliefs in the importance of SEL in child development and their critical role in facilitating children's social and emotional competence. Since the HighScope Curriculum did not provide explicit suggestions for scaffolding children's acquisition of social and emotional skills during remote instruction, the teachers adapted their

traditional in-person strategies to the virtual environment. Given this contextual factor, we investigated the nature of the most frequently used traditional strategies by teachers to scaffold children's SEL during remote instruction as well as the unconventional opportunities and new challenges they might have encountered in the application of these strategies.

## Participants

The participants constituted a convenience sample of teachers from two preschools familiar to the second researcher. This sample consisted of eight teachers (seven females and one male), with each teaching a multiage group of 3- and 4-year-olds. Table 1 summarizes these teachers' sociodemographic characteristics. Five teachers (Brenda, Darla, Lola, Martin, and Stephanie) were from Preschool #1 where the second researcher was also a teacher, and the other three teachers (Amy, Julia, and Leslie) came from Preschool #2. The participating teachers included one Caucasian, one Hispanic, one Filipino Irish, and five African Americans. They were all lead teachers supported by a teaching assistant in their classrooms. These teachers (ages 28–44 years,  $M = 32$  years) varied in teaching experience from five to 29 years ( $M = 13$  years). All of the teachers held either a bachelor's or a master's degree in early childhood education and were certified to teach preschool–3rd grade in their home state of New Jersey, USA. To ensure confidentiality of all participating teachers, they were identified only by pseudonyms.

During the 2020–2021 school year, the preschool teachers were teaching generally 10 to 15 children, with at least one

**Table 1** Sociodemographic backgrounds of the participating teachers teaching preschool during the 2020–2021 school year

| Pseudonym (Gender) | Age | Race/Ethnicity   | Years of Teaching Experience | Number of Children and Child Characteristics   | Instructional Modality (synchronous) |
|--------------------|-----|------------------|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Leslie (Female)    | 40  | Hispanic         | 20                           | 11 students; 2 students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in speech              | Hybrid <sup>a</sup>                  |
| Darla (Female)     | 32  | African American | 8                            | 15 students; 1 with an IEP in speech   | Remote <sup>b</sup>                  |
| Julia (Female)     | 34  | Caucasian        | 9                            | 10 students; 1 with an IEP in speech   | Hybrid <sup>a</sup>                  |
| Stephanie (Female) | 38  | African American | 9                            | 10 students; 2 with an IEP in speech   | Hybrid <sup>a</sup>                  |
| Martin (male)      | 34  | African American | 7                            | 15 students in the beginning and 18 by the end of the school year; 3 with an IEP in speech | Hybrid <sup>a</sup>                  |
| Brenda (Female)    | 28  | Filipino Irish   | 5                            | 15 students; 2 with an IEP in speech   | Remote <sup>b</sup>                  |
| Amy (Female)       | 44  | African American | 29                           | 10 students in the beginning and 11 by the end of the school year; 1 with an IEP in speech | Hybrid <sup>a</sup>                  |
| Lola (Female)      | 42  | African American | 15                           | 11 students; 1 with an IEP in speech   | Remote <sup>b</sup>                  |

<sup>a</sup>Hybrid instruction involves teaching some children in-person and some remotely from the classroom. Due to the COVID-19-induced school closure during part of the school year, all teachers were teaching remotely from home during that time period

<sup>b</sup>Remote instruction involves teaching remotely from home during the entire school year

child having special needs in speech. During the beginning and latter months of the school year, the teachers had the option of teaching remotely or in-person. Except for three teachers (Darla, Brenda, and Lola), all from the same preschool, who conducted instruction exclusively in a remote format, the rest of the five teachers opted to teach in-person. However, all teachers from the two preschools eventually ended up teaching remotely from home for part of the school year when these preschools closed due to a surge of COVID-19 cases in the region. For Preschool #1, remote instruction for all occurred for four months from November 2020 to February 2021, and for Preschool #2 for six months from November 2020 to April 2021. This study focused on SEL strategies implemented by participating teachers only during remote instruction for two reasons. First, this focus provided a common point of comparison across teachers. Second, it contributed to the literature by understanding if and how teachers might tackle teaching social and emotional skills during remote instruction (a relatively novel and unconventional instructional modality). The insights gleaned might supplement or complement those found about teaching in-person.

### Method of Data Collection

This interview-based study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the researchers' university and research ethical practices were followed. A signed consent letter was obtained from each participant.

To achieve the goals of this study, we developed a general interview protocol by following Patton's (2015) "interview guide approach." The interview protocol consisted of three questions inquiring about the participating teachers' sociodemographic characteristics and seven open-ended questions revolving around teachers' strategies in facilitating children's SEL. These questions included, "What strategies did you use to facilitate children's social and emotional development virtually?" and "How did you use these strategies to facilitate children's social and emotional development virtually?" (see Appendix A for a list of the core interview questions).

The interviews were all semi-structured to allow for flexibility to ask the participants pertinent clarification, elaboration, and follow-up questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, each interview was conducted virtually instead of in-person. Each participant was interviewed individually for 30–60 min ( $M = 40$  min) via the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliant version of Zoom, which provided added protection of information shared during the interview process. All of the interviews were conducted in July 2021, a month after the conclusion of the 2020–2021 school year when the teachers were more likely to have had time to

reflect. The responses from each interview were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed utilizing the transcription software of Otter.ai.

### Ethical Considerations

The participants were all teacher acquaintances of the second researcher who conducted all of the interviews. The familiarity between the interviewer and interviewee might have offered either the advantage of ease and comfort or conversely the disadvantage of uneasiness and discomfort. To address the familiarity issue and promote comfortability, all eight teachers were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their participation. The interviewees were also encouraged to elaborate on what they might have thought were obvious to the interviewer because she was an "insider." Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that there was an equal power relationship between the interviewer and each interviewee because they were all fellow teachers. This equal relationship structure appeared to have added another layer of ease and comfort for both the interviewer and interviewee. Furthermore, given that each interview was conducted virtually via Zoom from their own homes, this arrangement also appeared to have provided an added level of comfort for both parties. Engaging in reflexivity, the second researcher felt that interviewing teacher acquaintances made her feel more comfortable asking questions than if she were to interview strangers. Furthermore, she made a concerted effort to refrain from making assumptions based on what she knew because of her professional relationships with the participants.

### Method of Data Analysis

Keeping our research questions in mind, we examined the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analysis followed the six phases of the thematic analysis process as involving: (1) familiarizing oneself with the transcribed data by reading and re-reading them, noting emerging ideas; (2) formulating potential codes by characterizing features of the data systematically across the dataset by relevant codes; (3) collating the initial codes into emerging themes; (4) reviewing these potential themes by checking its relevance to the coded data as well as across the entire dataset, and then creating a thematic web; (5) defining, labeling, and refining the themes; and (6) generating the results to report, including selecting representative extracts from the data as well as checking coherence among the analysis, the research questions, and the scholarly literature. Furthermore, we identified themes only at the semantic level. Braun and Clarke described semantic themes as deriving from describing and interpreting within only what the participants shared explicitly.



The second researcher initially developed codes, relevant themes, and data extracts. The first researcher then followed up by examining the codes and related themes to check if they were supported by the data. Instead of establishing traditional inter-rater reliability in coding, the two researchers engaged in an iterative process of checking and re-checking the data to resolve any disagreements in coding and interpretation through multiple research discussions. For instance, the two researchers initially had a discrepancy in naming the themes that would best represent the data, which was later resolved via the iterative process. The iterative process also led the two researchers to subsequently agree on a set of codes and relevant overarching themes. For example, one set of codes included: (1) creating time for children to talk about their feelings, (2) asking children about their feelings, (3) singing and dancing about feelings to spark conversations about them, (4) inviting children to draw a picture about their feelings and then discussing them, and (5) using the “Morning Message” to assess how the children were feeling and encourage them to share their feelings. Upon identifying these codes, we then collated them into an overarching theme labeled as “Engaging Children in Targeted Conversations.”

In addition to formulating codes and themes through our data analysis process, we conducted what Guba and Lincoln (1989) termed “inquiry audit” to determine the dependability of the data analysis and results by eliciting the assistance of another researcher, who is not part of the project, to examine our identified codes, resultant themes, and data extracts. This researcher’s subsequent confirmation helped establish dependability of our qualitative results. Additionally, we performed “*member checking*” also known as “*respondent validation*” or “*participant validation*” as a method for validating the credibility of qualitative results (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). We did so by sharing the results with participants who, in turn, confirmed that the strategies captured their perspectives.

## Results

All eight teachers (regardless of their age, gender, and years of teaching experience) adapted their conventional in-person strategies to group remote instruction in scaffolding preschool children’s SEL. Particularly, a thematic analysis of the data revealed three most salient strategies implemented by the teachers: (1) book reading, (2) leveraging visuals, and (3) engaging children in targeted conversations. Additionally, the teachers reflected on the barriers to their efforts in facilitating SEL in young children remotely.

Although all of the teachers had at least one child with special needs in speech, they mentioned that their school

district offered one-on-one services by trained professionals to work with these children virtually to address their social and emotional needs. Thus, it seemed that because there were already interventions in place for those children with special needs, the teachers mostly did not prioritize individualized strategies for this specific child population.

## Reading Children’s Books to Teach Social and Emotional Concepts

The teachers all described utilizing book reading to teach social concepts (e.g., kindness, cooperation) as well as emotional concepts (e.g., emotion knowledge, emotion regulation). For instance, while acknowledging that “it was hard to teach social and emotional concepts virtually,” Julia described relying on book reading frequently to teach these concepts, especially utilizing books along with a character puppet to make learning “fun” for children:

I had to do a lot of books. One of the strategies was to reflect on the social and emotional skills of the characters in the book...They liked the Clifford puppet that I have used which was fun, but I also brought that home to use [during remote instruction] because sometimes they pay more attention to a puppet than me.

Similar to Julia, Lola also utilized puppets for facilitating SEL in children. However, unlike Julia who used a puppet as a fun tool to encourage children to reflect on the socioemotional state of the characters in the book, Lola relied on a puppet as an instrument to encourage children to “retell” and “react” a story read to demonstrate their understanding of certain concepts (e.g., kindness, sharing) and addressing negative emotions.

I intentionally built in social emotional components, whether it was building a puppet, and then using that puppet to retell the story that we have been reading together. Reenacting scenes from a story that we have been sharing that is focused on being kind to people or sharing with one another or how to problem solve when you are angry.

While being able to intentionally leverage available and free online resources, especially YouTube book reading videos, to scaffold children’s SEL and engage them in post-reading discussions, Brenda also perceived the book reading strategy as more challenging to implement remotely than in-person:

We normally would pull them up on YouTube. And then we would have that play for the kids or if I had the book, I would read the book myself sometimes, like the “Color Monster,” “Rainbow Fish,” “Have you Filled a Bucket Today?”...After reading the books, I would ask the children as a follow-up activity to draw

what they like most and from there, we would talk about the concepts of feelings and solving problems... but [the book reading strategy] was a lot harder [to put into practice] because [the children] weren't in-person...

Just like the other teachers, Leslie was intentional in choosing specific children's books to scaffold their understanding of certain social and emotional concepts. She particularly noted the challenge of engaging children in SEL during remote instruction while using a reading app because at times, children would lose their engagement due to home distractions:

I used an app for reading books called "Epic books" and I would read the books myself... From there, I guess I would choose books that related to how they were feeling and maybe certain rules I had set for my virtual teaching. Sometimes though, while I'm reading, children would get distracted by I guess things around their home, where they would get up and leave, unmute their buttons, and sometimes scream which, in turn, caused distractions to the other children listening to the story. So they sometimes missed the content of the book and the follow-up lessons.

### **Incorporating Visuals to Promote SEL**

In combination with other strategies, the teachers leveraged visuals as an effective means for scaffolding specific aspects of SEL. For instance, Leslie capitalized on visuals to teach social and emotional skills, such as sharing and problem solving:

I used a lot of visuals, such as picture cards showing different types of feelings and visuals to teach things like sharing and what would [the children] do scenarios. When my assistant and I saw that there was a problem that needed to be brought up, I would use those visuals to redirect the behavior and to talk about calming strategies.

Similarly, Stephanie capitalized on visuals as a method for helping children constructively develop their emotion knowledge through modeling, discussing possible feelings shown on the pictures, and using emotions cards for conversing about their emotions:

I taught social skills mainly through modeling and visuals about identifying feelings. This is how we communicated. The visuals that I would hold up to the children also encouraged [them] to love pictures and talk about how they were feeling while describing what they saw in the pictures. They made connections about their feelings with the one in the picture. And again,

we use different kinds of emotions cards to expand on their conversations.

Martin perceived the use of visuals as an effective means for scaffolding children's acquisition of emotion knowledge by connecting their feelings and emotions directly and immediately to their current concerns (i.e., restrictions imposed by COVID-19):

We used visuals [e.g., picture cards] about feelings. We focused more on emotions of feeling happy, sad, frustrated, lonely, things like that and [this activity] really ties into students' questions about why they couldn't play in school or why they had to wear [a face mask]. It was the perfect opportunity for children to identify how they were feeling during that time.

In addition to using physical visuals during remote instruction like the other teachers, Leslie leveraged online resources, especially an app to engage children in a card game to promote effective problem solving and responsible decision-making skills:

I used a lot of visuals. We also used an app and sometimes they had games in there. They will have socioemotional games like how to [determine] what to do while the teacher is giving a lesson on the iPad so you are given two examples like, do you sit nicely with eyes on the teacher, or are you eating or drinking out of a bottle? So the children had the chance to play the game online and learn that way and then I would just explain why one was correct.

Stephanie got creative in utilizing what she called a "Solution Box" filled with picture cards depicting various challenging social and emotional situations as prompts for children to discuss solutions and as a catalyst for her to scaffold their SEL, such as teaching them "calming techniques."

I used a "Solution Box." I also use this strategy in person and I felt I would have the same success virtually. So it's just a regular shoebox that I covered in white paper... On the inside, I have emotion cards, conflict resolution cards, calming solution cards, and picture cards which ask about what you will do if... So for instance, the picture may show a child crying, then I would say, "What would you do if you see your friend crying? Does he/she look happy or sad, how are they feeling?" So the picture cards were the connection to how I explained emotions to the children, as well as calming techniques like taking deep breaths. They enjoyed it. They were excited to see what picture I would pull next from the box.

## Engaging Children in Targeted Conversations

Although inherent in the two aforescribed common strategies (book reading and using visuals) were conversations, these conversations served only an auxiliary function within these strategies. Instead, there is evidence that the teachers also intentionally devoted time and space for targeted conversations to anchor their scaffoldings of specific social and emotional contents. Although engaging routinely in focused conversations is an effective approach to scaffolding children's SEL, the teachers manifested this strategy in their own unique ways. For instance, reflecting on the way in which he created time for conversations about feelings as an integral part of his daily instructional routine, Martin found the conversation strategy to benefit children's understanding of emotions and feelings, as well as development of relationship skills:

A big part of my daily routine was creating time to talk about feelings. So the conversations focused on introducing new feelings and talking about the pandemic. This strategy was very useful with my early learners to teach them about relationship skills and understanding how they feel.

From a different approach, Julia described how she used social conversations as a springboard for assessing children's feelings and encouraging them to articulate their feelings verbally. She even invoked the child-friendly nursery rhyme "If You're Happy and You Know It" as a vehicle for children to express their current feelings and reasons for such feelings, especially in addressing their emotional turmoil associated potentially with "not being in the classroom." Julia perceived the conversation strategy to be effective, as evident in the children's expansive explanations of feelings beyond just simple one-word expressions:

I talked a lot with my kids. I mean 3- and 4-year-olds, teaching through a screen, having discussions was a must. I would just simply say, "If you are happy and you know it, touch your nose." And I will do that for "sad," "scared," "worried," "lonely," just about all the feelings I know they were experiencing not being in the classroom as a result of the pandemic. So then, I will say, "tell me why you are feeling this way." From there, the class would just have an ongoing conversation about how and why they were feeling that way. I think this strategy really worked because I could see that the children were learning to express themselves more than just saying, "happy" or "mad." It was now "I'm happy because..."

In addition to singing, Amy incorporated dancing as a catalyst for teaching emotional skills. For instance, just like Julia, Amy also engaged children in singing the nursery

rhyme "If You're Happy and You Know It." Additionally, Amy involved children in dance and movements to represent their state of feeling and emotion. She then followed up by prompting children to explain why they felt a certain way. Together, a combination of social approaches (singing, dancing, representing feelings through movement, and explaining feelings) seemingly served as a catalyst for Amy to scaffold children's acquisition of emotion knowledge and expressiveness and as a point of departure for her to engage in conversations with them about their feelings:

I also did a lot of singing songs and dancing as a way to teach about emotions. I used the song "If You Are Happy and You Know It" as a way to identify being sad, happy, excited, fearful. I would have a happy dance with the children, moving, swaying, jumping, and a different one for feeling excited like flying arms, tapping, and motions like that. And children would also come up with their own movement...[A child] might say, "I am afraid so I am bending." Then I will say, "what makes you afraid?" I will say something back depending on their answer like "what you can do to not feel afraid?"

Darla expressed how conversations were her primary means for scaffolding SEL in children. Specifically, she capitalized on small-group time to focus children systematically on learning one feeling at a time by engaging them in a two-step process involving first nonverbal expression (drawing a picture depicting their feelings) and then verbal articulation (inviting them to discuss their drawings of feelings):

I used my small-group time at least once per week to focus on a lesson about mainly feelings, where we will focus on just one feeling. So the goal was for children to draw a picture of how they were feeling, and what made them feel that way. As a follow-up activity, we will have a discussion about their drawings about managing their emotions and just making good decisions. So conversations really were a big way of how I was able to teach socioemotional learning.

Lola capitalized on "Morning Message" as an opportunity to engage children in focused conversations about their feelings. Additionally, she provided them with a feeling chart as a guide, asked about how they were feeling, and invited them to find something concrete to represent a certain feeling:

I used "Morning Message" time to have conversations with my children about how they were feeling. On my message board, I will always include a section which has some type of feeling chart. So for example, I may have a question about, how are you feeling? If you are feeling happy, find something yellow. So the kids



will find something yellow and talk about what makes them feel happy.

### Challenges Affecting Teachers' Efforts to Scaffold SEL Remotely

Although the teachers appeared to have all made intentional efforts to scaffold preschool children's SEL remotely using developmentally appropriate strategies (i.e., book reading and relevant discussion, incorporating visuals, engaging children in focused conversations), they also identified barriers that made the virtual environment less conducive than the in-person one for nurturing children's social and emotional growth. The challenges as identified by the teachers included home distractions, lacking in-person social interaction, and limited social and emotional support at home.

Reflecting on how challenging it was to facilitate SEL in children during remote instruction, Amy described the different ways she attempted to tackle a meltdown and find solutions that would also work for children with special needs and challenging behaviors.

It was definitely harder to teach [social and emotional expectations] or I didn't do it as much as I would as if I was in-person. But if the children had a meltdown..., try to get them to use their vocabulary to express their words as much as possible, try to do the calming technique where we will be like "breathe with me, take a deep breath." Try to get them to take deep breaths and then see if they want to communicate afterwards and express what's wrong and maybe come up with a strategy that will work also with the child with special needs when he was displaying behavior that wasn't conducive to the classroom.

Lola further noticed the behavioral differences and expectations in children between school and home, which made teaching social and emotional skills remotely all that more challenging:

Once we did change to virtual, the socioemotional part, I noticed that drastically impacted students as well as their behavioral expectations because now they were at home. The expectations and the environment were different and each child's environment was different, so you know what was normal for them to do and that space was translated on the screen. Yes, we saw examples of children, three year-old children, who were self-sufficient and independent in school, being treated like a baby at home.

Similarly, Leslie also explained the benefits of the physical classroom in providing authentic situations and play interactions for children to acquire social and emotional skills. She found it particularly challenging to teach

certain socioemotional skills (e.g., sharing, turn taking) during remote instruction when the children were learning from home:

Because the classroom is set up in centers and where they could work together so different situations arise in which you could guide them into how you would solve it socially online. They were just each in their iPad. There was no real, like no play interaction. So it was hard to teach sharing and taking turns.

Sharing Lola's and Leslie's concern about the non-conducive home environment for learning as challenging for them to scaffold SEL in children, Brenda further explained the need to teach parents how to facilitate their children's SEL at home:

Because virtually we're all home...and they're not getting the same kind of support at home as they would at school...It felt like we were also teaching the parents how to help their child with behavior and socioemotional learning...We taught them to encourage the child to talk about their problems.

## Discussion

This study, focusing on conventional strategies implemented as well as potentially unconventional opportunities and novel challenges experienced by preschool teachers in scaffolding children's SEL during remote instruction, revealed important findings. Specifically, the three most popular tools the teachers all utilized were: (1) reading and discussing children's SEL-related books, (2) utilizing visuals, and (3) engaging children in targeted conversations. However, the specific manners in which they applied these common strategies were qualitatively different.

### Book Reading and Discussion

Besides supporting language and literacy development, children's books offer a wealth of resources for SEL learning (Ho & Funk, 2018; Schapira & Aram, 2020). Thus, it is not surprising to find that the preschool teachers in this study intentionally utilized book reading and related discussion to target specific SEL skills. This book reading strategy is considered one of the tone-setting practices that Holligsworth and Winter (2013) found in their study of U.S. preschool teachers' teaching of social and emotional skills.

An important finding was that although the teachers all similarly incorporated the traditional in-person strategy of reading print storybooks for discussion on social and emotional concepts during remote instruction, they seemingly

capitalized on remote instruction as an opportunity for them to be creative in adding new resources to their toolboxes. For example, as a novel aspect of their book reading strategy, some teachers incorporated readily available and free online resources, such as digital SEL-related stories from YouTube or a reading app (i.e., Epic books). The incorporation of digital resources in scaffolding children's SEL is perhaps not surprising, especially considering the virtual nature of remote instruction. Nonetheless, it does demonstrate the teachers' intentional effort to adapt to instructional circumstances as well as explore and experiment with new and contextually relevant resources to expand their teaching repertoires beyond just tapping into existing traditional in-person strategies from their toolboxes.

### Utilizing Visuals as an Effective Means for SEL

This study revealed that the teachers employed various visuals, especially picture cards, emotions cards, and the "Solution Box" to promote the development of social skills (e.g., sharing, problem-solving) and emotion skills (e.g., emotion knowledge, emotion expressiveness). At this stage of their early development, as some preschool children might not have the language facility to express their feelings and understand those of others, the use of visuals might be particularly effective in scaffolding SEL in these children. The finding of leveraging visuals as an effective teaching tool corroborates that of previous studies (e.g., Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Kidder & McDonnell, 2017), revealing that preschool teachers' effective use of visuals provides the scaffolding needed for the children to express, understand, and regulate their emotions as well as resolve interpersonal conflicts.

Just like the way in which they leveraged online resources as an unconventional opportunity to expand their book reading options to promote SEL in children, the teachers in this study also incorporated online visuals (e.g., visual apps, socioemotional learning-related games) that went beyond the traditional form of visuals (e.g., picture cards, emotion cards). While there are various developmentally appropriate strategies for facilitating SEL in children during in-person instruction (e.g., Ho & Funk, 2018; Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000), the teachers' incorporation of online resources in their teaching demonstrates their adaptability and creativity in supplementing and complementing the assets currently available in their toolboxes.

### Engaging Children in Focused Conversations

The benefits of conversation for children's learning and development were evident in this study. First, conversations offered teachers a critical means for assessing the children's

social and emotional knowledge or lack thereof. Second, the insights gained from such an assessment, in turn, served as a guide for the teacher to scaffold the children's development of specific social skills (e.g., sharing, problem-solving) and emotion skills (e.g., emotion knowledge, emotion expressiveness). Specifically, the teachers in this study perceived engaging children in conversations as an effective strategy because conversations provided the opportunity for these children to develop social and emotional competence including the ability to identify, understand, and articulate their own feelings and those of others. In practice, the manners in which the teachers went about providing scaffoldings aligned with what Hollingsworth and Winter (2013) described as tone setting (e.g., reading feelings-focused stories, engaging children in social activities) as well as responsiveness to the children and their situations (e.g., using visuals for understanding and expressing emotions, leveraging social stories to develop social awareness and promote interpersonal relationships). Like book reading and using visuals, conversing was another important tool through which SEL in children was seemingly optimized.

### Same Strategies but Different Manifestations

Drawing on their previous teaching experiences, the teachers in this study were able to simulate some in-person teaching strategies in the remote instructional environment. Furthermore, as suggested by the strategies they implemented, the teachers seemed to have intentionally orchestrated learning activities in ways that facilitated SEL in their preschool children. Although the teachers all followed the SEL component of the HighScope Curriculum as expected by their preschool, they implemented similar strategies but in their own unique ways. For instance, while Julia incorporated a character puppet to go along with her book reading, Amy, Stephanie, and Brenda leveraged YouTube videos of book reading as an additional resource for meeting children's unique social and emotional needs.

The finding, that the three SEL strategies were implemented by all of the teachers, is not surprising because they have also been found to be the most common among teachers during the pre-COVID-19 in-person instruction (e.g., Ng & Bull, 2018; Rajan & Aker, 2020; Rakap et al., 2018; Razza et al., 2015). Notably, these strategies corroborate the current knowledge of what is known about effective methods for supporting SEL in young children, such as using visuals (Kidder & McDonnell, 2017), engaging in singing, book reading, playing games, using puppets (Ho & Funk, 2018; Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013), and applying non-verbal techniques involving physical activities (e.g., dancing, expressive body movement) (Rajan & Aker, 2020; Razza et al., 2015; Thom, 2010). The teachers' various developmentally appropriate practices involving the three most

common strategies identified also align with the social and emotional learning goals embedded in the CASEL's (2020) five core competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making). Furthermore, the teachers' intentional implementation of these strategies appeared to have helped enhance the children's development of both interpersonal abilities (e.g., self-awareness and management) and intrapersonal abilities (e.g., social awareness, relationship building, and sensible decision-making in social situations). This finding is consistent with that reported by other researchers (e.g., McCormick, 2015; Zinsser et al., 2014).

Although one of the strategies focused specifically on engaging children in targeted conversations, all three strategies actually overlapped and bounded at the conversation level because they tended to all inevitably involve conversations to various extents. It may be because teachers applied these strategies in combination rather than in isolation during particular teaching contexts. This finding suggests that teacher–child conversations and child–child conversations are essential in promoting SEL in the physical or virtual classroom. It may be because conversations provide opportunities for social interaction between the teacher and children and for the teacher to assess children's SEL progress and needs to be scaffolded accordingly (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013).

Overall, demonstrating their knowledge of child development, especially social and emotional development, the teachers appeared to have devoted intentional efforts to determining, planning, and implementing developmentally appropriate learning activities that would encourage children to develop, practice, and hone their social and emotional skills. These teacher actions reflect NAEYC's (2020) idea of intentionality inherent in developmentally appropriate practice for young children. However, despite their intentional implementation of developmentally appropriate strategies for scaffolding children's SEL, the teachers encountered challenges in their efforts.

### Challenges in Scaffolding Children's SEL During Remote Instruction

Although the teachers selected from their own toolboxes some strategies found to be successful during in-person instruction and applied them accordingly to remote instruction, they learned that constraints (e.g., home distractions, lacking social interaction with peers) within the virtual environment made these strategies less potent. This evidence appears to affirm what we know all along from theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and practice (e.g., Chen & O'Donnell, in press; Ho & Funk, 2018) that young children thrive socially and emotionally in positive interactions with others

supported by nurturing environments and that these social experiences are irreplaceable by any other modes (remote instruction in this case). In the same vein, the findings of this study further affirm that teacher strategies are highly contextualized in such a way that they may operate effectively in one type of setting (in-person classroom), but may not be as effective in a different type of setting (virtual environment). These findings also suggest that children's social and emotional growth relies on support from the "right" conditions (e.g., positive social interaction, conducive learning environment, developmentally appropriate teacher scaffolding).

### Limitations of the Study and Direction for Future Research

Two noticeable methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The first concerns the small size of a relatively homogeneous, convenience sample of eight teachers from two preschools sharing similar sociodemographic characteristics. Furthermore, by default of teaching the same curriculum, all eight teachers seemingly implemented similar SEL strategies, albeit in their own unique ways. Given these contextual similarities, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to those with dissimilar characteristics. Future research might like to confirm or disconfirm these findings or even add new insights by interviewing a more diverse sample of teachers from different preschools serving children from diverse backgrounds.

The second methodological limitation concerns the use of interviews as the only source of data. While interviews could yield richly nuanced details, in this study, the perceived strategies implemented and challenges experienced could only be characterized as deriving solely from the teachers' perspectives. Furthermore, perceptions may not always represent actual realities. To ascertain the extent to which the teachers' perceptions match their actual practices, future research might consider conducting classroom observations of the teachers' teaching in addition to interviewing them. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19-related teaching restrictions, it was not feasible for us to conduct such observations. When classroom observations become practical to conduct, they can serve as a valuable source of data triangulation. Additionally, assessing the impact of teacher scaffolding of SEL as an intervention on children's progress in SEL will also help triangulate the data. For instance, teachers can consider rating each child's SEL progress by using checklists such as those described by Lawhon and Lawhon (2000) to determine if and the extent to which their strategies are effective in facilitating the children's SEL.

## Implications for Practice

At all times and in all teaching contexts, teachers are expected to implement pedagogical strategies felicitous to student learning and success. However, it is one thing to implement SEL strategies, it is quite another for teachers to reflect on such implementation experiences to inform their future practice accordingly. The findings of this study demonstrated that through reflection, the teachers had the opportunity to compare and contrast their teaching experiences between in-person and remote instruction in scaffolding SEL in preschool children. This process appeared to lead them to determine that in-person instruction would be a contextually and developmentally more appropriate condition for nurturing these children's SEL because it would afford them the opportunities to engage in social interaction needed for developing social and emotional skills. Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that teachers, regardless of the instructional modality, should creatively orchestrate learning experiences and strategic developmentally appropriate and responsive conditions (e.g., book reading, engaging in conversations, and leveraging visuals) to support young children's social and emotional development within whatever pedagogical opportunities and challenges presented to them.

## Appendix A

### Core Interview Questions (the wording and order of questions are adjustable to suit each individual interview context)

1. How did you teach the socio-emotional component of the curriculum?
2. How did you incorporate social and emotional expectations within your curriculum's goals?
3. What strategies did you use to facilitate children's social and emotional development virtually?
4. How did you use these strategies to facilitate children's social and emotional development virtually?
5. What tools did you use to assess children's social and emotional development?
6. What opportunities or challenges did you encounter virtually in supporting children's socio-emotional development?
7. What resources, if any, did you provide parents virtually to support their children's social and emotional development?

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