



How Teachers Respond to Children's Sadness: A Mixed-Method Analysis in Elementary School

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Abstract

Background Emotion socialization plays a crucial role in children's emotional development, shaping how they understand, express, and regulate emotions. Little is known about how teachers respond to students' sadness during middle-childhood, despite teachers' role in children's emotional experiences at school.

Objective This study examined how elementary school teachers respond to children's experiences of sadness and whether teachers' emotion socialization behaviors vary as a function of the type of sad event, children's coping strategies, and children's psychopathological symptoms.

Methods Fifty female teachers (age: 25–64, $M=46.8$, $SD=10.9$) completed structured interviews and questionnaires regarding sadness experienced by 346 students. A mixed-method design was employed, combining thematic analysis of interview data with multinomial mixed-effects models to examine associations among events, coping strategies, symptoms, and teacher responses, accounting for clustering within teachers.

Results Three categories of emotion socialization behaviors emerged: emotion-focused, problem-focused, and unsupportive responses. Teachers were more likely to use emotion-focused strategies in response to personal events than to school-related events. Higher levels of children's externalizing symptoms were associated with a greater likelihood of teachers' emotion-focused responses. An interaction effect indicated that teachers were particularly likely to adopt emotion-focused behaviors when children responded to personal events with non-constructive coping strategies, and variability emerged across teachers.

Conclusions Teachers' responses to children's sadness are context-sensitive and related to events, children's behavioral functioning, and individual teacher differences. Results underscore teachers' role in the socialization of sadness during middle-childhood and highlight the importance of supporting teachers in navigating children's emotional experiences in school.

Keywords Emotion socialization · Teachers · Sadness · Coping · Psychopathological symptoms

Introduction

During middle-childhood, a crucial developmental task is the ability to express, manage, and regulate positive and negative emotions, enabling children to achieve social competence and psychological well-being (Thompson, 2015). Throughout daily interactions, caregivers support children in expressing and interpreting emotions in a socially appropriate manner (Cekaite & Ekström, 2019; Sosa-Hernandez et al., 2020). This process is named emotion socialization, and it refers to those social behaviors that influence children's knowledge, expression, and regulation of emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). During this process, children internalize caregivers' contingent reactions to their emotions and the associated emotion regulation strategies (Calkins & Hill, 2007; Cassidy, 1994; Sroufe, 1997).

Among the different emotion regulation strategies, learning to cope with sadness is a crucial aspect of emotional development (Saija et al., 2023, 2024). Evolutionary researchers suggest that sadness serves adaptive functions, facilitating cognitive and behavioral coping strategies in response to challenging events (Panksepp, 2015). Expressing sadness helps elicit caregiver support, mitigating distress. Thus, children's experience of sadness and their coping strategies are crucial for affective and social development (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Zeman et al., 2002, 2019). The concept of "sadness regulation coping" encompasses a set of skills for effectively managing sadness by modulating emotional arousal to avert undesirable outcomes. Indeed, if sadness and other negative emotions are dysregulated, they can lead to psychopathological symptoms. Particularly, dysregulated sadness may be associated with depression (Saija et al. 2024, 2025a, b, c; Zeman et al., 2002).

When children experience sadness, caregivers respond in different ways. Supportive strategies, such as offering comfort and acceptance, foster emotional expression and co-regulation, whereas unsupportive responses, such as ignoring, minimizing, or punishing, may hinder these processes (Denham et al., 1994; Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Caregivers also guide children's emotional regulation through modeling, instruction, validation, or criticism (Cekaite & Ekström, 2019). These interactions provide crucial cues for emotional expression and management (Bassett et al., 2017). Ultimately, emotion socialization plays a key role in developing children's ability to regulate their emotions (Peisch et al., 2020; Shaffer et al., 2012).

However, sadness has often been framed primarily through the lens of psychopathology, linking it to social withdrawal and depressive tendencies (Lomas, 2018; Saija et al., 2024). As a result, many caregivers struggle with how to support their children's experience of sadness, often shaped by the misconception that sadness is a dysfunctional emotion and that children should always be happy. Children's positive affect becomes a sign of competent parenting and healthy development. This "happiness imperative" is internalized early: children as young as three to five years of age already feel cultural and moral pressure to 'find the silver lining' when sharing sad personal stories (Davidson & Welliver, 2021). Such developmental trends reflect a broader societal expectation. These beliefs may lead caregivers to invalidate sadness through minimizing, ignoring, or denying it. In turn, children may internalize these responses, learning to suppress rather than express their sadness: an attitude that can increase the risk of developing depressive symptoms (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Consistent with this, research shows that unsupportive parental socialization of sadness is associated with children's difficulties in coping with sadness and depressive symptoms (Sanders et al., 2015), psychopathological symptoms (Boucher et al., 2013; Morris et al.,

2011; Sanders et al., 2015) as well as high risk of experiencing depressive symptoms in adulthood (Boucher et al., 2013). However, few studies have examined the relationship between parents' socialization of sadness and children's regulation of sadness in primary school-aged children. These studies suggest that when parents adopt supportive emotional socialization practices, children are more likely to develop constructive coping strategies (Cole et al., 2009; Eisenberg et al., 1996; Sanders et al., 2015; Shaffer et al., 2012).

Teachers as Agents of Sadness Socialization

Primary school children may experience sadness due to difficulties in social interactions, frustration stemming from learning challenges, or receiving poor grades. Their coping strategies may vary depending on the contexts in which these experiences occur, such as family or school settings, as well as on the specific typology and severity of the events that triggered sadness (Kushner 2015; Saija et al. 2023, 2025a, b, c).

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model may constitute a useful framework for encompassing the complexity of the systems interacting in the genesis of children's sadness, including at the level of the macrosystem, cultural values influencing beliefs about which emotions are desirable and how they should be expressed, the events that elicit it, and the classroom microsystem and its relational dynamics. Particularly teachers play a crucial role in shaping how children navigate sadness (see Valiente et al., 2020, for a review). This role can be understood within the framework of Attachment Theory. Spending several hours each day with students, teachers act as significant caregivers, and the classroom represents a central microsystem in which teacher-child emotional exchanges constitute proximal processes supporting children's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). By serving as a secure base, teachers provide external scaffolding that helps children develop the capacity to experience and regulate sadness in flexible and adaptive ways (García-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Spilt & Koomen, 2022; Stefan & Negrean, 2022). Through daily emotionally meaningful interactions, teachers contribute to this process by structuring supportive or unsupportive responses to children's emotional expressions (Calkins and Hill 2007; Pallini et al. 2019a). Importantly, these socialization processes may influence the development of children's coping strategies, as supportive teacher-child interactions facilitate the internalization of constructive ways to manage distress and master emotionally challenging situations (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

In the classroom, teachers have numerous opportunities to help children regulate their emotions in response to events of varying severity (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Several studies have examined the influence of emotion socialization by preschool and kindergarten teachers on children's emotional well-being and competence (Mashburn et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2013). For example, Bassett et al. (2017) found that when teachers exhibited fewer unsupportive reactions, their students expressed more positive emotions, demonstrated greater socio-emotional competence, and showed improved emotion regulation.

Nevertheless, very few studies have examined teachers' contributions to the socialization of sadness during middle childhood, while considering a broad range of events that may trigger this emotion (Valiente et al., 2020). Some studies have explored how teachers provide support to children experiencing parental separation or loss using focus groups and

interviews. These studies highlighted that genuine listening, interest in the child's emotional experience, and supportive actions by the school represent useful strategies (Dimery & Templeton, 2021; Dyregov et al., 2013; Mahony et al., 2015). Poulou and Denham (2023) found that the interaction between teachers' expressions of emotion and their responses to children's negative emotions predicted children's social and emotional competence and school adjustment. Swanson and Valiente (2019) identified an interaction between students' temperament and second-grade teachers' positive responses, showing that these responses were most strongly associated with higher-quality teacher and peer relationships for students who exhibited low effortful control and high levels of impulsivity and shyness.

Teachers socialize children's sadness through a range of strategies that both model and scaffold emotion regulation. Their responses may include emotion-focused validation and problem-focused guidance, as well as minimization, dismissal, or punitive reactions (Pallini & Baiocco, 2015). Across studies, these responses have been conceptualized using different taxonomies (e.g., supportive vs. non-supportive; coaching vs. rejecting; positive vs. adverse responsivity), yet they converge on the distinction between behaviors that validate and guide children's emotions and those that invalidate or suppress them. Teachers may show empathy and comfort, help solve the problem that caused the sadness, or try to distract children (Becker et al., 2014; Poulou & Denham, 2023). They may also encourage children's understanding of the causes of sadness and help them reflect on whether this emotion is appropriate in relation to specific events (Denham et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2013). In this process, teachers who foster the resolution of sadness may implicitly help children recognize sad feelings as situational and temporary rather than permanent or dispositional, as noted by Goodvin and Romdall (2013) in the context of adult-child conversations.

Jespersen et al. (2021) distinguish positive responsivity reactions (constructive, reactive, and accepting emotions) from adverse responsivity reactions (destructive, punitive, and rejecting emotions). Poulou and Denham (2023) differentiate coaching reactions (expressive encouragement, emotion-focused, and problem-focused responses) from rejection reactions (distress, minimization, and punishment). According to Bassett et al. (2017), pre-school teachers' strategies can be classified as non-supportive (punitive or minimizing) or supportive (problem-focused, emotion-focused, or validation-focused). Similarly, Cekaite and Ekström (2019) explored Swedish preschool teachers' responses to children's negative emotional expressions, such as anger and distress, distinguishing between discipline, comfort, rejection, and validation.

Teacher-Student Relationship and Psychopathological Symptoms in Children

During middle childhood, children face the developmental challenge of navigating complex social environments and managing an increasingly vast range of emotions (Eisenberg, 2000; Saija et al., 2026). Since school represents the primary arena where these skills are tested, the teacher-student relationship emerges as a fundamental regulatory resource; through this bond, a reciprocal process is established between teachers' emotion socialization, children's psychological symptoms, and their social skills (Buyse et al., 2008; Pace et al., 1999). Indeed, children with psychopathological symptoms may evoke different reactions in their teachers. For instance, children's emotional behavior problems might influence the closeness between teachers and children (Bardack & Obradović, 2017; Zee & Koomen, 2017). Children who display externalizing behaviors in response to distress, such as aggression and

anger, may face disciplinary actions from teachers (Alamos et al., 2023; Buyse et al., 2008; Mejia & Hoglund, 2016; Pace et al., 1999). These behaviors can also cause stress and frustration for teachers and disrupt the classroom environment (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Valiente et al., 2020). This stress might lead to unsupportive responses from teachers, potentially exacerbating the children's externalizing symptoms (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2013). Conversely, children with withdrawn behaviors might be neglected by teachers, receiving few opportunities for positive interactions and thereby undermining teacher-child closeness (Baker, 2006; Buyse et al., 2008; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004).

Several studies found a significant association between parents' unsupportive strategies of sadness socialization and psychopathological symptoms in their children (Fabes et al., 2002; Boucher et al., 2013; Morris et al., 2011; Sanders et al., 2015; Zeman et al., 2019). However, very few studies explored this relationship considering primary school teachers. Only Harvey et al. (2022) analyzed the relationship among internalizing symptoms, teacher-student relationship, and negative affectivity, including temperamental sadness. The authors found that negative affectivity was associated with internalizing symptoms only when the teacher-student relationship was characterized by conflict. However, dispositional sadness differs from the physiological reaction of sadness to specific events (Saija et al., 2024). To our knowledge, no studies in primary school examined the relationship between students' psychopathological symptoms and socialization strategies employed by primary school teachers when the focus is students' sadness elicited by specific sad events.

Aim of the Study

Despite the recognized importance of teachers in children's emotional development, little is known about how they respond specifically to students' experiences of sadness and how these responses relate to children's psychological symptoms. This study seeks to fill this gap by combining qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the processes through which elementary school teachers support children during sad events and how such support is associated with children's internalizing and externalizing difficulties.

We investigated the following research questions: Qualitatively, RQ1) From the teachers' perspective, what episodes typically evoke sadness in children? RQ2) According to teachers, what are the most frequent coping strategies used by children to address their emotional needs? RQ3) How do teachers typically navigate and respond to sadness in children? Quantitatively, RQ4) How do the type of sad event, children's coping strategies, and levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms describe the likelihood of different teacher response patterns identified in the qualitative analysis?

Given the interdependence of qualitative and quantitative results, our hypotheses focused on the conditions under which teachers are most likely to use supportive strategies. Specifically, we hypothesized that: H1) Teachers' supportive behaviors would differ based on the specific sad events experienced by children; H2) Teachers' supportive behaviors would differ based on children's coping strategies; H3) Teachers' supportive behaviors would differ based on children's levels of psychopathological symptoms; H4) Individual differences in teacher characteristics are associated with different emotional socialization behaviors.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Fifty female teachers (age: 25–64, $M=46.8$, $SD=10.9$) from 21 elementary school classrooms in central Italy participated in structured interviews and completed a questionnaire. During the interviews, teachers described specific instances in which their students experienced sadness, detailing each child's coping strategies and the supportive behaviors they enacted to help the children. Teachers also provided demographic information and reported students' psychopathological symptoms.

Data were collected between December 2022 and February 2023. In the Italian primary school system, teachers typically follow the same group of students for the entire five-year cycle. Therefore, at the time of the study, given that the children were in grades 2, 3, and 5, the participating teachers had already been with their students for a period ranging from one to four consecutive years. This established continuity facilitated a deep, consolidated understanding of each child's emotional development and coping repertoire. Teachers were asked to describe sad events for each pupil belonging to their classrooms, with a total of 620 children. Of these, 143 children were described as never sad, 6 as always sad, and teachers did not provide any specific event. For another 110 children, teachers did not describe any event. For 15 children, teachers did not provide a complete event description or questionnaire responses. Consequently, all these participants were considered missing data. The final analytical sample included teachers' reports on 346 children. To examine potential attrition bias, included and excluded cases were compared on demographic variables and psychopathological symptoms. No differences emerged in age or gender (all $p > .05$). However, included children showed slightly higher internalizing and externalizing scores; however, effect sizes were small-medium ($d = 0.20$ – 0.32), suggesting a meaningful, even if limited, practical impact.

The Roma Tre Ethics Committee approved the research protocol (Protocol code: EDU-P/02–12/2022), and rigorous measures were taken to guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from the parents of the children, the participating teachers, and the school principals selected for the study. Teachers were asked to provide information only for children in their classes for whom parental consent had been obtained. Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Measures

Teacher Sadness Interview

It is an adapted structured interview based on the Sadness Interview (Saija et al., 2023). In the original version, children were asked to report a significant sad event and to describe how they coped with it. Similarly, teachers were asked to answer the same questions with reference to their pupils. Specifically, teachers were asked to report events they perceived as particularly saddening for each child in their classrooms ("Briefly describe an event in which the child [child's name] was sad"), to describe how each child coped with the sad event ("What did the child do to make him- or herself feel less sad?"), and to indicate how

they supported each child in dealing with sadness (“What did you do to help reduce his or her sadness?”).

Psychopathological Symptoms

The teacher-report version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997) assessed externalizing and internalizing symptoms. It is composed of 20 items each rated on a 3-point scale (0=Not true, 2=Absolutely true) subdivided into two subdimensions, each consisting of ten items: externalizing symptoms (“Often fights with other children or bullies them”, $\alpha=0.86$), internalizing symptoms (“Many worries or often seems worried”, $\alpha=0.79$).

Data Analysis

We adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). The integration occurred at two levels: (1) connecting, where the qualitative thematic categories provided the framework for the quantitative variables, and (2) merging, where the qualitative nuances of teacher-child interactions were used to interpret the statistical probabilities of the multinomial models, allowing to transcend mere frequency counts, capturing the why behind teachers’ choices of socialization behaviors in specific contexts. More specifically, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods ensures that the categorical variables used in the models remain grounded in teachers’ lived experiences. The qualitative analysis of events, coping strategies, and teachers’ emotion socialization provides the necessary framework to interpret the quantitative relations among variables, ensuring that the reduction of qualitative categories into statistical models clarifies rather than oversimplifies the phenomenon.

From a qualitative perspective, the first and third authors employed a Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) to systematically analyze the structured interview data. We adopted a combined inductive and deductive approach to capture both theoretically grounded dimensions and data-driven nuances. Specifically, a deductive (top-down) approach was used to identify the overarching dimensions based on established literature: types of sad events (Kushner 2015; Saija et al. 2023, 2025a, b, c; Shirai et al., 2021), children’s coping strategies (Eisenberg et al., 1996; Quiñones-Camacho & Davis, 2019; Saija et al. 2023, 2025a, b, c), and teachers’ emotion socialization behaviors (Cekaite & Ekström, 2019; Jespersen et al., 2021; Poulou & Denham, 2023). Simultaneously, an inductive (bottom-up) approach was applied within these dimensions to allow specific themes and subthemes to emerge directly from the teachers’ descriptions of real-life instances (e.g., school-related vs. personal events). This dual approach allowed us to maintain theoretical consistency with previous socialization research while ensuring that the unique contextual elements of the school environment were fully represented. The identified themes were further categorized into overarching categories. When disagreements arose, the data were re-examined, and consensus coding was achieved through discussion and agreement among the coders.

Lastly, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted to assess the relationships among sad events, coping strategies, psychopathological symptoms, and emotional socialization behaviors, while accounting for the interaction between events and coping strategies. Since

the data were clustered within teachers, each of whom reported on multiple children, we included random effects to account for potential teacher-level variability. This allowed us to examine how much of the remaining variability in the relationships among the variables could be attributed to differences between teachers. Statistical analyses were conducted using R 4.4.0.

Results

Qualitative Results

A comprehensive summary of events, coping strategies, emotion socialization behaviors, and their respective frequencies is provided in Table 1. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for a portion of the entire set of responses, encompassing approximately 67% of the dataset. Results indicated robust consensus among raters for emotion socialization ($k = 0.87$), events ($k = 0.92$), and coping ($k = 0.95$). Across narratives, sadness emerged not only as a reaction to loss or separation, but also as a frequent response to everyday school-based frustrations and peer dynamics. Importantly, teachers' responses appeared to vary depending on whether sadness was rooted in academic performance, peer relationships, or family-related events. The findings suggest that teachers function both as emotional regulators and as contextual problem-solvers, navigating between validating children's feelings and restoring classroom functioning.

Events Evoking Sadness (RQ1)

Sad events experienced by children were coded into five themes: Frustration, Bullying/Quarrels, Experienced/anticipated separation, Loss, and Accident/Illness.

Frustrations. Frustration, the emotional response to the failure to achieve a goal (Deveney et al., 2013; Jeronimus & Laucelle, 2017), was the most frequent theme. Teachers described episodes in which children were sad because their desires or plans did not align with their expectations. A child who was sad because he was having trouble with the school assignments:

“During the past academic year, especially in the initial months, he was frequently sad when faced with tasks he could not manage”. (Male, 7-years-old)

These aspects were often related to performance anxiety:

“For a period, he was very sad because he was unable to cope with his schoolwork for all the required hours.” (Male, 9-years-old).

Often children displayed sadness after receiving a bad grade or reprimands from teachers:

“[He felt very sad when] he was reprimanded for walking around during class”. (Male, 9-years-old)

Table 1 Percentage of events, coping, and emotion socialization behavior

Classification	%	Quotations
<i>Emotion socialization behaviors</i>		
Emotion-focused behaviors	31.9	I talked to her and stood by her.
Problem-focused behaviors	48.4	We looked together for a solution to play without incident.
Unsupportive behaviors	19.7	I never intervened.
<i>Events</i>		
Frustrations	48.2	His mistake was pointed out to him.
Bullying/Quarrels	26.0	Her classmates would not let her play.
Experienced/Anticipated separations	12.2	The child expressed a state of sadness due to an episode of conflict between the parents.
Loss	7.5	The child was sad about the loss of his grandfather.
Accident/Illness	6.1	His dad had surgery.
<i>Coping strategies</i>		
Seeking help	31.6	She reassured herself with the help of a classmate, to whom she is very close, by talking about the good memories of her grandfather.
Problem-solving	14.8	To overcome the sadness [of not being elected class representative], he offered his help to the child who had been elected.
Cognitive reappraisal	3.1	She found strength in thinking that now [the deceased dog] had stopped suffering.
Passively received help	6.9	After crying, she calmed down with the intervention of the teacher and classmates.
Distraction strategies	4.5	Not to be sad, he talked about his favorite sport, soccer.
Dysregulation	31.0	He expresses his distress by crying or isolating himself.
Inaction	8.1	At school, he did not exhibit any behavior [aimed at resolving his emotional state].

Many school-related events involved children experiencing frustration due to unmet desires or encountering situations of defeat:

“This year at school, when the elections for class representative occurred, he ran but was not elected, having received fewer votes than all the other candidates. He immediately reported that he felt extremely sad”. (Male, 9-years-old)

Bullying/Quarrels. Teachers often described episodes of bullying and victimization, social exclusion, mockery, teasing, or conflicts. One teacher reported an episode of bullying:

“Classmates teased him because the child had undergone several operations for severe cleft lip and palate.” (Male, 9-years-old).

Several teachers focused on episodes of exclusion:

“The child cried and was sad when excluded from a game”. (Female, 7-years-old)

Finally, other narratives were focused on peer conflicts:

“One afternoon, during recess in the garden, she quarreled with her best friend, and she got very upset”. (Female, 9-years-old)

Experienced/Anticipated separation. Experienced or feared separation from parents or other family members:

“Last year, when she had to stay in school for the afternoon session, she arrived in the morning in tears and with a lump in her throat. In particular, she complained because she missed her mom”. (Female, 7-years-old)

Another recurring sub-theme is marital conflicts, with the consequent perception of a lack of family integrity.

“[She was very sad when] she shared that her parents had separated”. (Female, 7-years-old)

A further recurring theme pertains to aspects of financial ruin and the loss of economic stability:

“The child is experiencing a challenging family situation. He was saddened by losing his home”. (Male, 9-years-old)

Loss. Events in which children lose a parent, a relative, or an animal:

“The child lost her father when she was little, and on occasions like Christmas or Father’s Day, she became sad”. (Female, 7-years-old)

Accident/Illness. Children or someone important to the child (a parent, a sibling, a relative) have been injured, experienced minor accidents, or suffered from illnesses. Concerning school-related events, a teacher reported:

“In class, he suddenly complained of a stomachache that made him unable to continue working”. (Male, 10-years-old)

On the other hand, concerning personal events, a teacher reported:

“Knowing that his grandfather is in the hospital made him sad all day”. (Male, 10-years-old)

Overall, school-related frustrations and peer conflicts were the most frequently described events which elicited sadness, suggesting that in middle-childhood sadness is grounded in achievement and relational contexts rather than exclusively in major life stressors. While loss and illness were present, they appeared less central in teachers’ narratives, possibly reflecting the salience of everyday classroom dynamics in shaping teachers’ perceptions of children’s emotional experiences. Sad events occurred in two primary contexts: the school environment (school-related events) and outside the school (personal events), both of which impacted children’s attitudes in the classroom. School-related events primarily included frustrations linked to academic performance and peer conflicts, both embedded in daily classroom dynamics. In contrast, personal events encompassed experiences such as experienced/anticipated separation or loss. The accident/illness theme could occur in both contexts. Teachers appeared to address children’s sadness differently depending on whether its source was internal to classroom functioning or external to it.

Children’s Coping Strategies (RQ2)

Teacher-reports on children’s coping strategies in response to sad events were categorized into seven themes: Seeking help, Problem-solving, Cognitive reappraisal, Passively received help, Distraction strategies, Dysregulation, Inaction. The coping strategies were further classified into two overarching themes: constructive strategies (seeking help, problem-solving, cognitive reappraisal), and non-constructive strategies (passively received help, avoidant strategies, dysregulation, inaction).

Seeking help (seeking help, care, or consolation from a parent, friend, or teacher). A child coped with the mother’s loss:

“Generally, she talks with the teachers or her best friend”. (Female, 10-years-old)

Problem-solving (strategies and behavior aimed at solving problems). For instance, a child coped with homework that was problematic due to a minor developmental coordination disorder:

“He practiced more and more to do his homework better”. (Male, 10-years-old)

Cognitive reappraisal (strategies aimed at transforming negative emotions through cognitive processes). It includes considering different aspects of a situation or focusing on possible positive outcomes. A teacher described how a child coped with the dog’s loss:

“She cried a lot and gathered strength saying that now [the pet] was in a better place, and he stopped suffering”. (Female, 8-years-old)

Passively received help (strategies in which children receive help from adults or peers without actively seeking or asking for it). A child was frustrated for not being able to complete a school assignment:

“She was unable to overcome the situation until an adult intervened to reassure her”.
(Female, 7-years-old)

Distraction strategies (strategies redirecting attention from negative situations and emotions). A child worried for his grandfather’s illness:

“He played with the school materials, organizing them on his desk”. (Male, 10-years-old)

Emotion dysregulation (disruption of coping strategies and the expression of overwhelming negative emotions). It includes unregulated emotional displays like prolonged crying or loud outbursts. A child who was pranked by a classmate:

“Generally, he cries a lot and isolates himself from the group”. (Male, 7-years-old)

Inaction (instances in which children did nothing to cope with events). A child who did nothing in response to the discomfort caused by the many hours spent at school:

“He rarely reacts on his own initiative”. (Male, 7-years-old)

The set of coping strategies described by teachers portrayed children’s responses to sadness as varied and multifaceted. Children’s attempts to deal with distress ranged from active engagement with the situation to emotional expression or withdrawal. Some strategies reflected active, intentional efforts to manage the source of sadness or reinterpret the experience, whereas others involved a passive stance or a breakdown of regulatory capacity. The seven themes were grouped into two broader categories: constructive and non-constructive strategies. Constructive strategies included coping strategies in which children actively engaged with either the emotional experience or the situation that generated it, such as seeking support, attempting to solve the problem, or reframing the event. In contrast, non-constructive strategies encompassed responses characterized by avoidance, reliance on external regulation without active initiative, dysregulation, or absence of action. This higher-level distinction highlighted different regulatory orientations that emerged across narratives and reflected ongoing processes of negotiation between emotional intensity, perceived controllability of the situation, and the availability of relational support within the school context.

Teachers’ Responses to Children’s Sadness (RQ3)

Finally, drawing from the literature (Denham et al., 2022; Fabes et al., 2001; Fosha, 2005; Parr et al., 2016), teachers’ emotion socialization behaviors in response to children’s sad events were coded into three themes: Problem-focused behavior, Emotion-focused behavior, and Unsupportive behavior.

Emotion-focused behaviors. The teacher provided emotional support, recognized, validated, and empathized with the child’s feelings of sadness. It involved proximity, listening, and support. For example, following the divorce of a child’s parents:

“I understand how difficult it can be for a girl to accept the situation, and to the best of my ability, I allowed her to express her feelings”. (Female, 10-years-old)

Problem-focused behaviors (teachers’ strategies aimed at helping children in solving the problem that leads to sadness). In contrast to emotion-focused behaviors, which target the child’s emotional state, problem-focused behaviors address the specific situations causing sadness. A teacher helped a child who felt lonely due to Covid-19:

“I tried to involve him as much as possible in school activities, attempting to maintain connections with his classmates as well”. (Male, 9-years-old)

Problem-focused behaviors may involve negotiating a solution with the child. For example, after an episode of exclusion experienced by a girl, a teacher structured an activity with the children in the class to discuss both the incident and possible shared solutions aimed at avoiding similar events in the future:

“We all talked together with the group of children involved in the episode, addressing the reasons for exclusion on both sides and identifying possible shared solutions”. (Female, 7-years-old)

Unsupportive behaviors. Following Bassett et al. (2017), teachers reported doing nothing for children when they were sad but instead adopting punishment behaviors or minimization without recognition of, support for, or attunement to children’s emotions (see also King & Paro, 2018). A teacher, when a child felt sad because he was having trouble with his homework, said:

“I told him there was no need to cry about it.” (Male, 7-years-old).

Minimizing behaviors can also refer to downplaying or mitigating negative emotions without directly addressing them. In the following example, a teacher uses optimistic language praising a student’s intelligence as a form of consolation, instead of directly acknowledging and responding to her sadness about her difficulties with history:

“I told her about her talents... that she is a very intelligent student”. (Female, 10-years-old)

Punitive behaviors refer to actions taken by teachers in response to sadness derived from school-related events. For example, in response to a child sad for having not completed his assignments due to errors in recording them in the diary, a teacher reported:

“I had to punish him with additional homework and have him tutor a struggling classmate for a week”. (Male, 10-years-old).

The emotion socialization behaviors described by teachers reflect qualitatively different ways of positioning themselves in relation to children’s sadness. In these instances, the relational dimension appeared central. Emotion-focused behaviors captured moments in

which teachers prioritized recognition, validation, and containment of the child's emotional state, emphasizing proximity and acknowledgment of feelings. Problem-focused behaviors, by contrast, were characterized by efforts to address the circumstances surrounding the sadness. Here, the teacher's role shifted toward guiding action, restructuring situations, or facilitating solutions. These responses foregrounded the practical dimension of regulation, linking emotional experience to behavioral or contextual adjustment. Unsupportive behaviors represented a qualitatively different stance, in which sadness was minimized, discouraged, or met with punitive responses. In these cases, the emotional experience itself was not treated as a legitimate focus of attention. Taken together, these categories suggest that teachers' responses to sadness vary not only in the degree of support but also in their orientation toward emotion, problem-solving, or interpersonal support. Table 2 summarizes the frequencies of events, coping strategies, and emotion socialization behaviors.

Quantitative Results

The thematic categories derived from the interviews were operationalized as the dependent variables in a series of regression models. To explore whether the three types of sadness socialization behaviors exhibited by teachers in response to children's sadness would be associated with specific sad events experienced by children, their coping strategies, and psychopathological symptoms, two different multinomial mixed models were conducted. The first included only principal effects, while the second included an interaction between events and coping. The Intraclass Correlation Index highlighted a considerable amount of variance attributed to the differences among teachers for both Model 1 ($ICC = 0.44$) and Model 2 ($ICC = 0.43$). Therefore, there was some heterogeneity among the clustering units that contributed to the total variance: around 42% of the observed variability was attributed to differences among the teachers. The regression models are shown in Table 3.

Results from Model 1 showed that when children were sad about personal events rather than school-related events, teachers were more likely to use emotion-focused behaviors rather than unsupportive or problem-focused behaviors. Moreover, when children showed high levels of externalizing symptoms, teachers were more likely to use emotion-focused behaviors than unsupportive or problem-focused behaviors. The tendency to use problem-focused behaviors rather than unsupportive behaviors was not significantly associated with the type of events or externalizing symptoms. Children's coping strategies and internalizing problems were not significantly associated with any outcomes. Results from Model 2 showed a significant interaction between events and coping strategies in teachers' likelihood to use emotion-focused rather than unsupportive behavior. Specifically, teachers were more

Table 2 Contingency table

Emotion socialization behaviors	Coping strategies	Events	
		School-related events	Personal events
Emotion-focused	Constructive	29	25
	Non-constructive	37	13
Problem-focused	Constructive	67	13
	Non-constructive	70	13
Unsupportive	Constructive	26	2
	Non-constructive	26	7

Table 3 Multinomial fixed effects

	Model 1					Model 2				
	OR	SE	95% CI		p	OR	SE	95% CI		p
			Lower	Upper				Lower	Upper	
Emotion-focused behavior vs. Unsupportive behavior										
Intercept	0.13	0.49	0.05	0.35	<0.001	0.29	0.54	0.10	0.82	0.020
Events	4.01	0.43	1.74	9.24	0.001	1.56	0.54	0.55	4.47	0.405
Coping	1.01	0.34	0.52	1.94	0.985	0.18	0.88	0.03	0.98	0.047
Externalizing	1.12	0.05	1.01	1.23	0.031	1.11	0.05	1.01	1.23	0.038
Internalizing	0.98	0.06	0.88	1.09	0.665	0.98	0.06	0.88	1.09	0.664
Events*Coping						8.78	0.95	1.36	56.82	0.023
Emotion-focused behavior vs. Problem-focused behavior										
Intercept	0.42	0.37	0.21	0.87	0.020	0.60	0.45	0.25	1.44	0.248
Events	3.11	0.31	1.70	5.70	<0.001	2.01	0.45	0.84	4.82	0.119
Coping	1.17	0.27	0.70	1.97	0.550	0.66	0.53	0.23	1.87	0.435
Externalizing	1.10	0.04	1.01	1.19	0.024	1.10	0.04	1.01	1.19	0.029
Internalizing	0.97	0.05	0.89	1.06	0.542	0.98	0.05	0.89	1.06	0.566
Events*Coping						2.27	0.61	0.69	7.51	0.178
Problem-focused behavior vs. Unsupportive behavior										
Intercept	0.33	0.49	0.13	0.86	0.024	0.49	0.55	0.17	1.42	0.187
Events	1.21	0.43	0.52	2.82	0.653	0.77	0.54	0.27	2.20	0.621
Coping	0.86	0.31	0.47	1.57	0.623	0.26	0.91	0.04	1.56	0.141
Externalizing	1.02	0.04	0.94	1.12	0.600	1.02	0.05	0.94	1.12	0.620
Internalizing	0.99	0.05	0.90	1.09	0.804	0.99	0.05	0.90	1.09	0.792
Events*Coping						3.91	0.97	0.59	26.09	0.159

1) Events reference: Personal events; Coping reference: Non-constructive coping. 2) Emotion-focused behavior, Model 1: Variance = 0.078, Residual Variance = 0.529; Model 2: Variance = 0.079, Residual Variance = 0.485. Problem-focused behavior, Model 2: Variance = 0.150, Residual Variance = 0.502; Model 2: Variance = 0.145, Residual Variance = 0.495

likely to use emotion-focused behaviors rather than unsupportive behaviors when children used non-constructive coping strategies in personal events.

To analyze individual differences in teacher responses, we examined how much variance was accounted for by the model with random effects. The Marginal R^2 , which estimates the variance explained only by fixed effects, and the Conditional R^2 , which estimates the variance explained by fixed effects along with random effects, were estimated. The estimated coefficients show that the variance explained by fixed effects together with random effects was much larger than the variance explained by fixed effects alone for both Model 1 (Marginal $R^2 = 0.09$; Conditional $R^2 = 0.49$) and Model 2 (Marginal $R^2 = 0.09$; Conditional $R^2 = 0.48$).

Discussion

This study aimed to categorize teacher behaviors in response to children experiencing sad events, recognizing that teachers' responses may vary depending on the nature of the sad event, children's coping abilities, and children's psychopathological symptoms. Three main emotion socialization strategies emerged from a qualitative, bottom-up analysis: Emotion-

focused strategies, problem-focused behaviors and unsupportive behaviors. Emotion-focused strategies emphasize emotional support: Teachers offer empathy, validation, and reassurance to help children process their feelings. Research has shown that these strategies promote emotional competence and improve children's ability to regulate emotions (Denham et al., 2012). Problem-focused behaviors involve addressing the causes of sadness by helping children solve their problems, often through engagement in group activities or discussions. As noted by Eisenberg et al. (1996), this approach may promote resilience and social competence by effectively reducing distress.

Unsupportive behaviors, such as inaction or minimization, involve failing to recognize children's emotions, which can sometimes result in punitive responses. These behaviors can have long-term negative effects, such as reduced social skills (King & Paro, 2018). Teachers mentioned problem-focused behavior most, followed by emotion-focused behavior (both considered supportive behaviors). Non-supportive behaviors were the least adopted. This result showed that teachers intervened either emotionally or concretely in children's sad events. Likewise, the high frequency of emotion-focused behaviors would still indicate teachers' awareness of their pupils' need for emotional attunement and validation, and their attempts to mitigate sadness, similar to what parents do (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Raval & Martini, 2011).

TA was also conducted to identify the types of sad events teachers referenced when describing their supportive behaviors. As anticipated, teachers primarily highlighted events occurring within the school environment, reflecting their role and the context in which they interact with children, mainly, if not exclusively, at school. Several categories of sad events emerged, with Frustration being the most frequently reported, followed by Bullying/Quarrels, Experienced/Anticipated Separations, Loss, and Accident/Illness.

Regarding the Frustration theme, sadness in these situations arises from unmet expectations and blocked goals (Deveney et al. 2013; Leibenluft 2011; Saija et al. 2025a, b, c, 2025). In such cases, sadness may derive from a perceived lack of control over the situation, a loss of self-esteem (given that failing to achieve one's goals can impact self-confidence) or the recognition of lost opportunities, leading to the awareness of having missed a relevant chance (Meng et al., 2023; Shirai et al., 2021). Consistent with previous research (Newman et al., 2023; Pham & Adesman, 2017; Sibold et al., 2015), bullying and quarrels were also common sources of sadness for children. These experiences can undermine their sense of security and contribute to feelings of powerlessness, mainly when they are unable to confront their aggressors (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005), or lead to social exclusion (Schaafsma et al., 2015).

Another common category of sad events involves experienced or anticipated separation, with sadness arising from a sense of helplessness in response to perceived threats to family bonds or the reality of loss (Crockenberg & Forgays, 1996; Stein & Levine, 1987). Actual loss is a deeply personal experience that extends beyond the school context, though it can also affect children's academic performance (Dyregrov et al., 2015; Luecken, 2008). In the context of loss, sadness plays a crucial role in the grieving process, facilitating adaptation through a temporary decrease in arousal, social withdrawal, and the promotion of resignation and acceptance (Bonanno et al., 2008).

Last, accidents and illness involve situations in which children experience physical harm or illness, placing them in a state of vulnerability. However, individual responses to this vulnerability can significantly vary from child to child. In such cases, sadness emerges as

a natural response to pain (see the review of Linder & Hooke, 2019). Additionally, when a loved one experiences an illness or accident, children's sadness may derive from feelings of insecurity and disorientation triggered by the vulnerability of the other person or the fear of their potential loss (Helseth & Ulfset, 2003; Mukherjee et al., 2002).

Another TA showed seven main strategies children used to manage a sad event, as observed by teachers. Teachers cited help-seeking as a common way of dealing with difficult situations, while the distraction strategy was the least frequent (Saarni, 1997). Help-seeking and problem-solving represented active efforts to handle difficult situations, while distraction temporarily shifted attention away from distress (Khan et al. 2016; Pallini et al. 2019a, b; Wills 1987). However, emotion dysregulation and inaction suggested that some children have difficulty coping with overwhelming emotions or fail to engage in coping attempts; the presence of passively received help indicated that children may sometimes rely on external support without actively seeking it (Saija et al. 2023, 2025a, b, c).

In our quantitative approach, we examined how teachers' support strategies varied depending on whether the sad event was personal or school-related, whether children's coping strategies were constructive, and whether children exhibited externalizing or internalizing symptoms. When addressing personal events, teachers were significantly more likely to use emotion-focused strategies than to engage in unsupportive behaviors. This result is consistent with previous studies underscoring teachers' attentiveness to students' personal experiences and their tendency to adopt comforting and validating approaches (Dyregov et al., 2013; Dimery & Templeton, 2021; Mahony et al., 2015).

Moreover, teachers were more likely to use emotion-focused rather than problem-focused behaviors when responding to personal events. This pattern may reflect differences in perceived controllability and role boundaries across contexts. As coping theory suggests, problem-focused strategies are more likely to be adopted when individuals perceive the stressor as controllable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Compas et al., 2001). In school-related events, teachers are directly involved in the context in which the sadness emerges and therefore have greater opportunities to implement concrete, solution-oriented interventions, given that the source of distress falls within their domain (Denham et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2013). Conversely, for personal events occurring outside the school environment, teachers may lack the opportunity to intervene directly in the source of distress. In such cases, providing emotional support and empathy may represent the most professionally appropriate and relationally attuned form of intervention, in line with attachment-based perspectives that emphasize the regulatory function of emotionally responsive adults when stressors are uncontrollable (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Spilt & Koomen, 2022).

Furthermore, problem-focused strategies often require time, individualized attention, and coordinated action, which may be difficult to implement in complex classroom environments characterized by high demands and limited resources (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 2016). Emotion-focused responses, such as validation and reassurance, may therefore constitute a more immediate and feasible way to support a distressed child (Oplatka, 2007). Besides, teachers frequently balance emotional care with classroom management imperatives, adjusting their responses to maintain both relational attentiveness and instructional continuity (Cekaite & Ekström, 2019; Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Our results showed that teachers' behaviors were not significantly associated with the level of constructiveness of the coping strategies children enacted. This finding suggests that teachers' responses are not significantly associated with children's emotional regula-

tion strategies but rather with the context in which sadness emerges (Denham et al., 2012). However, the moderation models showed that teachers were more likely to prefer emotion-focused over unsupportive behaviors depending on the cause of sadness and how children handled it. Specifically, when children experienced personal sad events, teachers tended to adopt emotion-focused behaviors more often when children used non-constructive coping strategies. Instead, they were less inclined to intervene when they perceived that children could adequately manage their emotional needs.

On the other hand, in response to school-related or personal frustrations, children's use of non-constructive coping strategies led to emotional outbursts that disrupt classroom management, necessitating teacher intervention (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2023). Therefore, teachers may consider emotion-focused behaviors a useful way to calm the child and avoid outbursts and dysfunctional behaviors (Korpershoek et al., 2016; Raval & Martini, 2011; Whear et al., 2013). The adoption of such strategies may have the primary role of facilitating in-the-moment emotional regulation within and outside the classroom when children used non-constructive coping strategies in reaction to school-related or personal challenges (Ahn, 2005; Etchebehere et al., 2023; Oplatka, 2007; Poulou & Denham, 2023), reflecting the contextual assessment process in which teachers adjusted their responses according to the nature of the triggering event and the child's emotional reaction.

Emotion-focused strategies were employed significantly more frequently for children with higher levels of externalizing symptoms than unsupportive or problem-focused approaches. This finding suggests that teachers may use these behaviors to mitigate emotional dysregulation and stabilize their affective state through an empathetic approach to distress. In contrast, children's internalizing symptom scores were not significantly associated with teachers' supportive behaviors. Studies on the association between parent socialization and internalizing symptoms have shown that high levels of unsupportive responses to emotions were related to children's inability to cope with sadness and greater depressive symptoms, hypothesizing a causal relationship between these two variables (Boucher et al., 2013; Sanders et al., 2015; Zeman et al., 2019). Similarly, in the school context, children with higher internalizing symptoms may tend to repress their emotions, making it more difficult for teachers to empathize with and validate their sadness (Gross & Cassidy, 2019; Shapero et al., 2016).

Finally, our models showed a significant difference between teachers' variance on the use of supportive behaviors. This result is likely due to individual teacher characteristics, which influence their responses to children's sad events, such as emotion regulation strategies, classroom emotion management training, teaching experience, and so on (Byun & Leon, 2023; Runion, 2020). Future research could explore how specific characteristics of teachers are related to their sadness socialization.

In conclusion, results showed that teachers played a crucial role in supporting children through sad events. Their responses are shaped not only by the nature of the event but also by children's coping mechanisms and behavioral tendencies, highlighting teachers' inclination to intervene using strategies focused on the problem or emotion. The findings also suggest that teachers are particularly attentive to children displaying externalizing behaviors, using emotion-focused strategies to regulate emotional dysregulation and maintain classroom stability. The variability in teachers' supportive behaviors further underscores the importance of individual teacher characteristics, such as training, experience, and personal emotion

regulation strategies. Future research should examine these factors to better understand how to enhance teachers' ability to provide adequate emotional support to distressed children.

Additionally, considering the Italian educational landscape where this study was conducted, the number of Italian students with behavioral or socio-emotional disorders has been rising for several years (ISTAT, 2022, 2023, 2024). At the same time, the educational system struggles to meet children's increasingly pronounced educational needs since the resources allocated to schools are insufficient. This implies that teachers often find themselves alone in large classes, including children with special needs with very little support. In this context, teachers' ability to recognize and respond to children's emotional needs becomes even more critical. Without sufficient institutional support, their capacity to implement effective emotional socialization strategies may be compromised, potentially impacting students' long-term emotional development. Therefore, educational policies should prioritize increased training and resources to equip teachers with the tools necessary to support children's emotional well-being, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and responsive school environment.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Implications

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the study relies on a self-report instrument regarding teachers' strategies, which may be subject to response bias. However, using this type of instrument could be advantageous, as a bottom-up approach involving teachers' self-assessment allows for information more sensitive to participants' experiences. In this perspective, the methodological approach applied in this study ensured a deeper, more detailed understanding of teachers' subjective experiences and emotional processes in the school context, while considering the individuality of the teacher-student relationship. A further limitation of this study concerns its external validity, as the sample was restricted to fifty female teachers and their students within a specific region of central Italy. Consequently, these findings should be interpreted with caution when generalized to the wider student population or to different school districts that may exhibit distinct demographic and cultural characteristics.

Another limitation concerns the lack of information about each teacher's individual aspects. Teacher-level characteristics were not assessed by design, as teachers were already asked to complete questionnaires for each child in the class, which involved a significant commitment on their part; therefore, it was decided not to administer additional instruments. Although a significant random effect indicates meaningful individual differences among teachers, the absence of information on how teachers express, regulate, and communicate their emotions, or on the type of training received in emotion management in the classroom, prevents attributing this variability to specific measured teacher-level predictors. Future studies should include these characteristics to provide more refined evidence on the sources of teacher variability.

Lastly, another limitation concerns attrition bias due to missing values. Although the differences were small, the final sample included children with slightly higher symptom levels. This may reflect greater recall salience of emotionally significant events, as episodes involving children with more noticeable emotional or behavioral difficulties may be more memorable and easier for teachers to describe. The significant workload of teachers, who are responsible for many children may lead them to focus more intensely on children with externalizing problems, and, thus, to have more information about them. Furthermore, providing detailed reports for many students represents a significant cognitive and professional

burden. Consequently, they tend to report on children whose emotions are more visible or severe. Conversely, children with lower symptom levels may have experienced sadness in less observable forms, potentially leading to underreporting. Future studies should explicitly assess teachers' reasons for case selection to clarify the role of recall processes.

Despite the limitations of this study, this research provides a novel contribution to the largely understudied area of sadness socialization, particularly within the context of primary school teachers. Results of this study demonstrated that teachers' responses to sadness are not uniform but depend significantly on the type of sad event, the child's coping strategy, the presence of externalizing symptoms, and teacher-specific factors. It confirmed the crucial regulatory role teachers played in children's emotion socialization, especially when children exhibit dysregulated or non-constructive behaviors. Moreover, it highlighted teachers' specific strategies in response to different emotional events, offering new perspectives on situational factors related to children's emotional well-being.

This study has important implications, noteworthy for various stakeholders: educators, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. Firstly, the results highlight the crucial role of teachers in shaping students' experiences of sadness. Identifying the different approaches teachers use to socialize sadness can inform the development of targeted interventions to promote students' emotional well-being. Secondly, the results show that teachers are often left alone to manage complex classroom situations, making it difficult to choose the right strategy consistently. Teaching is highly stressful for various reasons (Greenberg et al., 2016). Therefore, the training aimed at supporting teachers on how to intervene in difficult situations would have positive repercussions on the quality of teaching, which involves not only the transmission of knowledge but also emotional socialization. Further, policies should not only promote broader access to emotional training but also ensure regular supervision and emotional support for teachers managing complex classroom dynamics.

Lastly, the results have important implications for researchers, underscoring the need to move beyond parent-centered models of emotion socialization to include the role of teachers, especially during middle childhood, a period often overlooked in emotional development research. The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods used here suggests the value of mixed-method approaches for capturing the complexity of emotional interactions in classroom settings.

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Declarations

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