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Observing Teachers' Emotional Expression in Their Interaction with Students

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to establish the types of emotions that are expressed by primary school teachers, their frequency, and the situations that trigger them. Teachers were observed by primary education students during their practical work at school. The observations of 108 teachers in 93 primary schools in Slovenia were analysed. The results show that teachers express a variety of emotions with the unpleasant ones prevailing. Anger was the most frequently expressed emotion. The situations that triggered emotions were varied. Among them, students' discipline and academic achievement triggered the majority of pleasant and unpleasant emotions in teachers.

Keywords: *emotion, emotional expression, teacher, classroom, observation*

Introduction

Emotions are complex psycho-physiological processes which include specific sequences of physiological changes, cognitive processing, verbal and non-verbal expressions and behaviour or action tendencies (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). They can be understood as subjectively construed processes, influenced mostly by personal characteristics such as temperament, expectations or personal resources that shape the cognitive appraisals given to a specific situation by a specific person (e.g., Lazarus, 1991). Emotional experience is also socially structured and managed through social expectations in an individual's environment (e.g., Hargreaves, 2000).

Different aspects of the emotional process were analysed in previous studies on emotions (e.g., Siegel, 1999; Smrtnik Vitulić, 2009), valence being one of them. Regarding the valence, the most common categories are “positive” and “negative” (e.g., Fredrickson, 2008; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). Positive/pleasant emotions are experienced when we reach a subjectively important goal or expectation, while negative/unpleasant emotions are experienced when we cannot accomplish or fulfil those expectations. Both positive and negative emotions may have an important adaptive function (e.g., Lazarus, 1991).

According to their complexity, emotions can also be categorised into basic and complex ones. Basic emotions seem to appear early on in the developmental process and their expression is thought to be similar in all cultures, they are characterised by specific brain activity patterns, typical adjustment functions and facial expressions (Panksepp, 1994; Plutchik, 1980), which allow their easier recognition. According to Lewis (2002, in Santrock, 2005) the basic emotions are joy, anger, fear, sadness, disgust and surprise. On the other hand, complex emotions appear later in development and their expression is less typical. Hence, the recognition of complex emotions is more difficult and sometimes ambiguous.

Teachers and emotions

Emotions are often insufficiently represented in educational research even though emotions are frequently present at school (e.g., Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011; Zembylas, 2005). Pleasant experiences encourage the learning process, whereas unpleasant experiences have a hindering effect on student motivation, memory or creativity (e.g., Fredrickson, 2008; Lamovec, 1991; Pergar Kuščer, 2002).

Different authors report that teachers at work experience pleasant and unpleasant emotions (e.g., Chang, 2009; Day & Leitch, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000; Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011; Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2005). Several studies observing teachers' emotions in the classroom (e.g., Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011; Shapiro, 2010) have confirmed joy as the most frequently experienced pleasant emotion, whereas anger was the most frequent unpleasant emotion.

Teachers' emotional experience and expression in the classroom are commonly triggered by students' learning process and achievement or by disciplinary problems. For instance, Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura (2011) found that teachers felt anger when students did not follow instructions, did not do their best, did not care about their peers or were involved in dangerous actions, etc. Teachers felt sadness when children displayed unfavourable behaviour regarding discipline, or when they empathised with the children, or when they felt that children were not educated to their full potential. Fear was reported by teachers when they noticed

children misbehaving or participating in physically dangerous activities and when they acknowledged their own high level of responsibility towards children. Teachers felt joy because of children's achievements and autonomy, within pleasant daily interactions with children or when children were joyous themselves.

The type of emotions experienced by teachers depends on their appraisal of the situation in the classroom, influenced by their individual goals, personal resources and previous experiences (Sutton, 2007). Teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of a good teacher are also an important influence on their appraisals (Gordon, 1997). These beliefs, such as being prepared for and reacting effectively to every disciplinary issue, being able to motivate any student to do their schoolwork or being fully responsible for the student's academic achievement, are often unrealistic (Michalak, 2005). These beliefs may be viewed not only as a product of the teacher's individual experience, but also as a product of broader social expectations imposed by colleagues, school management, school policy, cultural settings, etc. (e.g., Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011; Zembylas, 2005).

Aims of the study

The observations in our study aimed to establish (1) the emotions expressed and the frequency of such expressions, by primary school teachers in their interactions with students in the first five grades and (2) the situations that trigger these emotional expressions.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred and thirteen teachers were observed in this study. Five cases were excluded since they were not properly administrated (i.e., observation of students' emotions instead of the teacher's). In further analysis, observations of 107 female teachers and one male teacher were included, in the first ($n=24$), second ($n=21$), third ($n=29$), fourth ($n=20$) and fifth grades ($n=14$). 93 primary schools from various Slovenian regions were included in the study.

Observational scheme and data collection

Teachers were observed by first year primary education students from the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, during their practical work experience in the

classroom. At the faculty, students participated in a special two-hour educational course on recognizing and describing emotions. They were also trained to use an observational scheme that included the type of emotion displayed and description of the situation in which the emotion appeared. The students used the described scheme to observe and record the teachers' emotional expression in the classroom.

Each student did their practical work experience at the primary school of their choice, mostly in their hometown. The headmaster of the school then selected the classroom for the student's practical work (first to fifth grade). The students visited the selected classroom for five days during their practical work experience. During their fourth visit, they observed teachers' emotions for five hours on one school day. Each teacher emotion was recorded when it occurred, in chronological order. If a certain emotion appeared more than once, it was recorded each time. The teachers were informed about the goals of the students' practical work experience, including the observation of their work in general. After the observation of their emotional expressions, the teachers were fully informed about the study and were asked for their consent to use the data. All the teachers gave consent.

The data collected by the students was checked by all three authors of the present article, for clarity of descriptions in all observed categories.

Results and discussion

In the results and discussion section, the type and frequencies of emotions, and the situations triggering them, will be presented and discussed.

Type and frequency of teachers' emotions

The results show that teachers expressed various emotions in the classroom and that these differed considerably in their frequency. On average, five emotions ($M = 5.01$) were expressed by each teacher during the observational period in the classroom.

Table 1. Types and frequencies of teachers' expressed emotions

| Emotions | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Unpleasant emotions</i> | 353 |
| Anger | 262 |
| Disappointment | 52 |
| Fear | 20 |

| Emotions | Frequency |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| Sadness | 11 |
| Shame | 5 |
| Guilt | 3 |
| <i>Pleasant emotions</i> | 188 |
| Joy | 151 |
| Surprise | 25 |
| Pride | 12 |
| Σ (all emotions) | 541 |

During the observations nine different emotions were recorded. Among the unpleasant emotions were anger, disappointment, fear, sadness, shame and guilt, and among the pleasant emotions were joy, surprise and pride (Table 1). Unpleasant emotions ($n=353$) were expressed more often than the pleasant ones ($n=188$). Anger, the most frequently reported ($n=262$) of all pleasant and unpleasant emotions, was expressed approximately twice by each teacher ($\text{modus}=2$). Our results are in line with the findings of Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura (2011) and Shapiro (2010), who also found that anger was the unpleasant emotion most frequently expressed by teachers in the classroom. The second most frequently expressed unpleasant emotion was disappointment ($n=52$), followed by fear ($n=20$), sadness ($n=11$), shame ($n=5$) and guilt ($n=3$). Among pleasant emotions joy was most frequently reported ($n=151$), expressed approximately once by each teacher ($\text{modus}=1$), followed by surprise ($n=25$) and pride ($n=12$).

These results were in accordance with other studies on teachers' emotions in school (e.g., Chang, 2009; Hargreaves, 2000; Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011), which have reported teachers experiencing and expressing pleasant and unpleasant emotions.

The overall ratio between pleasant and unpleasant emotions was approximately 1:2. Fredrickson (2008) recommends a ratio of 3:1 in favour of pleasant emotions. Unpleasant emotions influence the emotional balance more powerfully and thus an individual needs to compensate for unpleasant emotions with three times the amount of pleasant emotions, in order to maintain an overall positive ratio between the emotions. Our results showed approximately twice as many unpleasant emotions as pleasant ones, and were not in line with Fredrickson's recommendation. Since pleasant emotions in teacher-student interactions may contribute to a pleasant atmosphere, supporting students' competence and autonomy (Meyer & Turner, 2007), teachers should be encouraged to express pleasant emotions more

often (Sutton, 2007). However, it is also important to consider the authenticity and sensitive placement of such emotions. Furthermore, teachers' expression of unpleasant emotions should be effectively regulated (Chang, 2009).

In our study, the basic emotions prevailed in the teachers' expressions. The basic emotions recorded among the teachers ($n=469$) were anger, joy, surprise, fear and sadness. The complex emotions recorded among the teachers ($n=72$) were disappointment, pride, shame and guilt. The prevalence of basic emotions may be partly due to the fact these emotions are easier to recognise *via* their distinctive facial expressions than complex ones.

Situations that trigger emotions

Descriptions of the situations that triggered emotions in the teachers were reviewed by all three authors of the study and organised into several response categories for each observed emotion. Each description was then placed into one of these categories. The situations which triggered particular emotions were varied, though different emotions could be triggered by the same situation. The following section will discuss the most common situations that trigger emotional expressions and the frequency of each unpleasant and pleasant emotion.

The situations that triggered the teacher's *anger* ($n=262$), were: when students lacked discipline ($n=105$; i.e., fighting with each other), when they did not follow instructions ($n=69$; i.e., doing the exercise incorrectly because the students did not follow the teacher's directions), when they were inattentive ($n=60$; i.e., a student losing their belongings), when they did not perform well academically ($n=13$; i.e., a student not knowing the answer when asked), when they were in danger ($n=10$; i.e., students jumping from a great height) and in a few other situations ($n=5$; i.e., when a student rebelled). Our observations of the situations that triggered anger are similar to those found by Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura (2011); e.g., teachers felt angry when students did not follow instructions or did not do their best. If these expectations are not fulfilled by their students, teachers may feel anger.

Disappointment ($n=52$) was expressed by the teachers when the students did not follow instructions ($n=32$; i.e., a student did not bring the required equipment), did not perform well academically ($n=12$; i.e., when any student did not score all points on the test), were not paying attention ($n=5$; i.e., students were restless) and in some other situations ($n=3$; i.e., a student cheated at games). Consequently, when the students failed to meet expectations, their teachers experienced disappointment.

Teachers expressed *sadness* ($n=11$) in situations where the students did not follow instructions ($n=6$; i.e., the students did not start their work when instructed to do so), did not perform well academically ($n=3$, i.e., when a student still did

not know how to multiply), and in some other situations; e.g., when a student was scorned at home because of bad grades. Similarly, in the study by Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura (2011), teachers felt sadness when children displayed unfavourable behaviour regarding discipline, when they felt empathy with the children when they were sad, or when they felt that the children did not receive adequate education. In our study teachers expressed sadness to change the students' behaviour. Some authors (e.g., Krevans & Gibbs, 1996) perceived such intentional expression of emotions as inappropriate disciplinary practice towards children.

Fear ($n=20$) was triggered in situations when the teacher was concerned about a student's health ($n=16$; i.e., when a student got hurt) and when the students did not perform well academically ($n=4$; i.e., students did not know the answer). Similarly, Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura (2011) reported that teachers experienced fear when they noticed children misbehaving or engaging in physically dangerous activities. On the other hand, their study showed that teachers sometimes were also afraid because they felt a high-level of responsibility for the children. In our study, the situations that triggered fear in the teachers were probably connected with beliefs that the students were in danger or that they were not able to cope with a situation; but in some cases of underachieving students, the teachers may have acted frightened in order to motivate the students to learn.

Shame ($n=5$) was observed in situations when a teacher did not know the answers to the students' questions ($n=3$) and when the students did not perform well academically ($n=2$; i.e., a student answered incorrectly in front of an observer). *Guilt* ($n=3$) occurred when the teachers forgot to give sufficient instructions and as a result the students did not do their homework ($n=2$) and in one case, when the teacher had to tell the students about unnecessary absence. In our study the majority of the situations that triggered these two emotions were connected with the teacher's negative self-evaluation and feelings of having let down their students.

Among pleasant emotions, the situations that triggered *joy* ($n=151$) included: the students' achievement ($n=58$, i.e., a student did the calculations correctly), funny events ($n=35$; i.e., a student told a joke), relaxing events ($n=24$; i.e., students' play), following instructions ($n=19$; i.e., a student brought the required equipment), novelty ($n=9$; i.e., a student brought an interesting toy) and a few other situations ($n=5$; i.e., a vet's visit to the classroom). Also in the study by Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura (2011) teachers mostly felt joy because of children's achievements, within pleasant daily interactions with children or when children were joyous themselves. In our study, the situations that triggered the expression of joy were more diverse (including students following instructions). Based on the reasons given in our study, it can be concluded that the teachers perceived the students'

achievement and diligent behaviour as subjectively important. They also shared the students' joy when something funny, new or relaxing happened.

Pleasant *surprise* ($n=25$) occurred when the students achieved unexpectedly ($n=9$; i.e., a student fulfilled a difficult task), did something new ($n=8$; i.e., a student found a new solution to a task), were highly motivated for school work ($n=4$; i.e., students were enthusiastic when writing an English test) and offered creative solutions ($n=4$; i.e., students proposed an unusual idea). We can conclude that teachers perceive achievement, motivation for school work and creativity as something nice happening unexpectedly (Milivojević, 2008).

In our study, the teachers expressed *pride* when the students excelled academically ($n=12$). For example, when a student put more effort into learning about a certain subject the teachers felt pride as they obviously perceived these achievements as non-standard and personally important events.

From these results it can be seen that there are two triggering situations that are common to different unpleasant and pleasant emotions. The occurrence of these two situations that trigger different emotions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Emotions triggered by achievement vs. under-achievement and following instructions vs. not following instructions

| | (under)achievement | (not) following instructions |
|----------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Pleasant emotions</i> | | |
| Joy | 58 | 19 |
| Surprise | 9 | / |
| Pride | 12 | / |
| <i>Unpleasant emotions</i> | | |
| Anger | 13 | 69 |
| Disappointment | 12 | 32 |
| Sadness | 3 | 6 |
| Fear | 4 | / |
| Shame | 2 | / |
| Σ | 113 | 126 |

In the classroom setting, student achievement and following instructions triggered different emotional expressions in the teachers (Table 2). The students' academic achievement resulted in the teachers' feeling of joy, surprise or pride, while the students' underachievement resulted in the teachers' anger, disappointment, sadness, fear or shame. Students who followed instructions triggered joy in

the teachers, while the opposite was a reason for triggering anger, disappointment or sadness in teachers. Obviously, the same situation may arouse different emotions, thus supporting the notion that specific emotions are the consequence of the teacher's subjective appraisal of the situation.

Since student achievement and following instructions were most frequently connected with the teachers' emotional expressions in our study, it may be concluded that these two issues were important for the teachers. This could be a result of the teachers feeling responsible for the students following their guidance at school work and consequently performing well academically (Chang, 2009; Shapiro, 2010).

Teachers' responsibility for student discipline and achievement may also be connected with teachers' beliefs regarding what "a good teacher" should be. These beliefs can be unrealistically high, such as being prepared for and reacting effectively to every disciplinary issue or being fully responsible for students' academic achievement (Gordon, 1997; Michalak, 2005). Perhaps these expectations contributed to the fact that student achievement and disciplinary issues most frequently evoked emotional experiences and expression in the classroom.

Conclusions

The results of the presented study indicate that primary school teachers express various emotions. Unpleasant emotions prevailed, and anger was overall the most frequently expressed emotion. The teachers' emotions were triggered in different situations, but student discipline and academic achievement appeared to be the two primary sources of the different pleasant and unpleasant emotions in the teachers. These results indicate that the same situation may be perceived in different ways, resulting in different emotional experiences. The results also implied the special importance of the two situations for teachers: (1) *student discipline*, highlighting the strategies teachers use in managing discipline in their classroom; (2) *students' academic achievement*, which may be connected with the teacher's feeling responsible for their students' success. The teacher cannot take full responsibility for their students' achievement and discipline (Gordon, 1997; Michalak, 2005), even though it is sometimes hard to decide the limits of the teacher's responsibility.

The results of our study have many implications for the professional development of (future) teachers. In their educational programmes, awareness and understanding of emotions should be encouraged (Chang, 2009; Zembylas, 2005). The development of strategies to regulate emotions, particularly unpleasant emotions,

may help teachers improve their teaching and facilitate the learning process in their classroom.

The advantage of our study was the observation of many different aspects of emotions, especially the situations triggering teachers' emotions. On the other hand, the one-person observation of teachers' emotions may be subjective, and it represents a weakness of the study. Further research could combine observations with teachers' self-experience and/or students' emotions.

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