



The importance of teachers' emotions and instructional behavior for their students' emotions – An experience sampling analysis[☆]



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Teachers' emotions are an important predictor of students' emotions in class.
- Teachers' emotions and instructional behavior in class are of comparable importance.
- Structural relations were consistent across four different school domains.
- Students' mood shapes how teachers' emotions and instructions are perceived.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

The present study focuses on the relationship between teachers' emotions, their instructional behavior, and students' emotions in class. 149 students (55% female, *M* age = 15.63 years) rated their teachers' emotions (joy, anger, anxiety) and instructional behavior, as well as their own emotions in an experience-sampling study across an average of 15 lessons in four different subject domains. Intraindividual, multilevel regression analyses revealed that perceived teachers' emotions and instructional behavior significantly predicted students' emotions. Results suggest that teachers' emotions are as important for students' emotions as teachers' instructional behavior. Theoretical implications for crossover theory and practical recommendations for teachers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

“I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather (...).” (Ginott, 1976, Teacher and Psychologist).

Students spend a significant amount of time in the classroom – an interactive setting which is full of emotions. Emotions are an

important outcome as they are an integral part of personal well-being (e.g., Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002; Schimmack, 2008) and also predict important learning and career related outcomes, including learning strategies (e.g., Goetz, Zirngibl, Pekrun, & Hall, 2003), academic achievement (Pekrun et al., 2002; Valiente, Swanson, & Eisenberg, 2012) and future career choices (e.g., Wigfield, Battle, Keller, & Eccles, 2002). In his book “Teacher & Child” Haim G. Ginnot pointed out the power that teachers' emotions and moods have on their students and the whole class climate. This was almost 40 years ago – but until today, there is little empirical support for his assumption, an issue that can be attributed to a lack of research on teachers' emotions. Historically, teaching was primarily viewed as a predominately cognitive activity with research focusing on teachers' thoughts and beliefs, teaching skills, and their pedagogical and content knowledge (e.g., Frenzel, Goetz, & Pekrun, 2008; Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991).

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Furthermore, emotions were considered as elusive constructs that were difficult to measure reliably and also a rather “feminine” issue, therefore not a worthwhile research topic (Zembylas, 2003, p. 106).

Fortunately, over the past decade, scholars have started to acknowledge the importance of investigating the impact of the emotional dimension of teaching on student outcomes (e.g., Baumert & Kunter, 2006; Demetriou, Wilson, & Winterbottom, 2009; Zembylas, 2005). For instance, Hargreaves (1998) stated that the emotional dimension is “one of the most fundamental aspects of teaching” (p. 835) and a study by Baird, Gunstone, Penna, Fensham, and White (1990) revealed the importance of a balance between affect and cognition for effective teaching and learning in undergraduate science courses. Nevertheless, empirical support for the relationship between teachers’ and students’ emotions is scarce.

The goal of the present study is to address this gap in the literature by examining the strength of the relationship between teachers’ emotions and students’ emotions. Based on findings from the crossover theory, which posits that emotions can be elicited directly or indirectly from the emotions of others (Härtel & Page, 2009), it is hypothesized that teachers’ and students’ emotions are interrelated. To investigate the importance of the emotional dimension of teaching on students’ emotions, we compared the strength of the relationship between teachers’ emotions and teachers’ instructional behavior on students’ emotions.

Given that our research interests relate to intraindividual functioning (i.e., how teachers’ emotions and instructional behavior influence one students’ emotions in specific lessons), we adopted an experience-sampling method, an approach with several unique advantages. First, prior research demonstrates that one-time, recall-based ratings (i.e., self-reports) of emotions have limited validity as these approaches are often contaminated by, for example recall inaccuracies, cognitive and memory limitations (Carson, Weiss, & Templin, 2010; Robinson & Clore, 2002), and can be influenced by personality (e.g., neuroticism and extraversion can influence retrospective ratings of emotions, see Barrett, 1997) or subjective beliefs (Goetz, Bieg, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Hall, 2013). Experience-sampling procedures are less vulnerable to biases, especially recall inaccuracies, as they measure emotions directly in the situations that they arise in and evaluate *actual* emotions rather than *beliefs* about emotions. Second, one-time examinations of emotions usually focus on relatively stable habitual emotions (i.e., trait-based emotions) and gauge the “overall emotional tone” in a classroom (Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009, p. 712), but they are not capable of assessing micro-processes that are at work when it comes to emotional crossover. Conversely, experience-sampling methods can account for the dynamic nature of certain emotions that vary according to situational factors (i.e., state-based emotions). Finally, experience-sampling approaches produces data of greater ecological validity than self-report based approaches as constructs are assessed within their natural occurring context (i.e., “in-situ assessment” or “ecological momentary assessment”, see Carson et al., 2010).

2. Emotional crossover

It is well known that emotions and other psychological states are contagious; in fact there is a whole body of research that looks at this specific phenomenon. This idea that humans “catch” psychological states of others with whom they interact has been described from various theoretical perspectives in social psychology, neuroscience, communication research, and industrial–organizational psychology often in the context of emotional contagion or crossover theory. Emotional contagion refers to the “tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of

another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994, p. 5). In contrast, crossover theory is a broader approach that includes the crossover of emotions, but also other psychological constructs. As such, emotional contagion is an explanatory mechanism for the transmission of experiences between interaction partners within crossover theory, in addition to other, more conscious processes.

In its original conceptualization, crossover theory focused on crossover effects of work-related stress and strain (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). More recently, this theory was expanded to include positive and negative feelings and states such as depression, well-being, flow, burnout (e.g., Bakker, 2005; Westman, 2001), and further refinements by Härtel and Page (2009) incorporate discrete emotions such as anger and joy. The majority of studies in the crossover literature focus on employee well-being, stress, and burnout; however the academic context has largely been overlooked. To our knowledge, only two studies have investigated emotional crossover processes in academic settings. First, Bakker (2005) examined the crossover of flow experiences between music teachers ($N = 178$) and their students ($N = 605$) in a questionnaire based study. Specifically, he found a significant relationship between teacher’s and student’s reported flow experiences (consisting of three dimensions: absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation) in music classes. Bakker concludes that the mechanisms for flow crossover are both conscious and unconscious and recommends that since students tend to automatically imitate their cheerful and happy teacher (direct, unconscious crossover), work enjoyment may be transferred through emotional contagion. Moreover, he states that teachers, who are motivated, tend to put more effort and energy into their lessons, which in turn leads students to recognize their teacher’s dedication to their work and consequently promotes student motivation (indirect, conscious crossover). The second study, by Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, et al. (2009) examined emotional transmission (i.e., emotional crossover processes) between teachers and students in mathematics classes. A sample of 1542 students from 71 classes reported their emotions in class and their teacher’s enthusiasm at two time points (grades 7 and 8), and teacher reports of their emotions in class were available for the second time point. The authors employed a value-added design (for more information on this technique, see e.g., Seidel & Shavelson, 2007) by exploring the relationship between teachers’ emotions and students’ emotions in grade 8 while controlling for important prerequisites (i.e., students emotions one year earlier). The study showed that teachers’ and students’ enjoyment in mathematic classes were significantly related, with teacher enthusiasm partially mediating this relationship. Teacher enthusiasm is regarded as a behavioral aspect of enjoyment during teaching that enables students’ to perceive their teachers’ enjoyment.

Although these studies contribute to the emotional crossover literature by bringing it into academic settings and offering important new insights on possible underlying mechanisms in the crossover process, they are not without their limitations. Most importantly, they used trait-based self-reports. As such, they assessed more general, retrospective estimations of emotional experiences. As previously mentioned, this methodological approach captures the overall “emotional tone” of classrooms (Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, et al., 2009), but is prone to retrospective biases (Carson et al., 2010) and tends to reflect evaluations or beliefs about ones emotions (Goetz, Bieg, et al., 2013; Härtel & Page, 2009; Robinson & Clore, 2002) rather than the actual emotion. The goal of the present study is to examine interactive processes in the classroom with an experience-sampling methodology; a more fine-grained approach that considers that emotions fluctuate based on specific situations and allows for intraindividual analyses.

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