An ecological examination of teachers' emotions in the school context

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HIGHLIGHTS

► Teachers' sense of vocation is an important factor in their decisions to leave the profession.
► Teachers' identity, beliefs and goals greatly impact the nature of their emotional experiences.
► Teachers' emotional experiences are influenced by the immediate and distal environmental contexts.
► Vocation, identity, positive outcomes and deep knowledge of students tend to mitigate burnout.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study discusses teachers' emotions, in particular two elementary teachers in a school serving a high-poverty, high-minority population. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological system framework, we examined how these teachers' internal psychological characteristics transact with external environments to produce emotions. Both teachers experienced unpleasant emotions such as disappointment and frustration in their daily work. However, instead of dwelling on the unpleasant emotions, they shifted their thinking to consider ways they could achieve more favorable outcomes. Our findings showed that these coping strategies were deeply connected to their individual psychological biographies, specifically their pedagogical beliefs and well-developed professional identity.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. The study of emotions in education

Emotional experiences are central aspects of teaching and learning; thus, research into the role of emotions in education, broadly speaking, has increased in recent years (e.g. Schutz, Cross, Hong, & Osbon, 2007; Cross & Hong, 2009; Chang, 2009; Cowie, 2011; Day & Lee, 2011; Hastings, 2008; Schutz and Pekrun, 2007; Schutz and Zembylas, 2009; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). In particular, researchers worldwide (e.g. Schutz, Hong, Cross, & Osbon, 2006 (U.S.); Day and Kington, 2008 (England); Lee & Yin, 2011 (China); Zembylas, Charalambous, Charalambous, & Kendeou, 2011 (Greece)) have sought to investigate the nature of emotions and teachers' emotional experiences during regular teaching and educational reform (e.g. Cross & Hong, 2009 (US); Lee & Yin, 2011 (China)), and how teachers regulate their emotions related to teaching (e.g. Fried, 2011 (Australia); Pines, 2002 (Israel); Gross, 1998; Boler, 1999). This increased attention is motivated by the realization

that emotions greatly impact teachers' and students' lives (Zembylas, 2011), and are critically important to teaching quality, teacher–student relationships and educational change (Schutz and Pekrun, 2007; Schutz and Zembylas, 2009).

Schutz et al. (2006) defined emotion as "socially constructed, personally enacted ways of being that emerge from conscious and/ or unconscious judgments regarding perceived successes at attaining goals or maintaining standards or beliefs during transactions as part of social-historical contexts" (p. 344). We use this definition of emotions as it rests on the assumption that emotional experiences involve person–environmental transactions, which includes both "internal" personal characteristics and "external" environments (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This perspective on emotion, which is often foreshadowed by more psychological and sociological perspectives (Schutz and Zembylas, 2009), draws attention to the "…link between microscopic perspectives focused at the level of the "teacher self" and the macroscopic level of social, cultural and political structures of schooling" (Zembylas, 2011, p. 31).

These critical aspects of emotional experience (the individual and the social) often discussed separately are combined here to provide a more comprehensive and thorough examination of

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teachers' emotions in context. In so doing, we hope to provide insights on a key question posed by Day and Lee (2011) in their recent book *New Understandings of Teacher's Work*. They ask "How do working conditions, organization structures, school/teacher cultures and individual biographies affect teachers' emotional well-being?" (p. 1).

To do so, we focus on two elementary teachers who work in a school with a high-poverty, high-minority student population. Similar to educators internationally (e.g. Sava, 2002 (Australia); van Tartwijk, de Brok, Veldman, & Webbels, 2009 (Netherlands); Leung & Lam, 2003 (Hong Kong)), these teachers were challenged with teaching students from the non-dominant ethnic and cultural group. However, in contrast to what research (e.g. Bloland & Selby, 1980; Heyns, 1988; Mont & Rees, 1996; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) states about teachers who work in such adverse conditions, both teachers reported high levels of job satisfaction, commitment, and tended to show positive and optimistic attitudes including feelings of joy and fulfillment. In this regard, what we can learn from these teachers would be of value for educators and researchers worldwide.

Through examining how these teachers successfully navigated the emotionally-laden and politicized context of schooling, we expect to gain insight into how the interplay between the individual and the environment constitute emotions and the regulatory strategies teachers employ to minimize the occurrence of unpleasant emotions and its long-term effects (e.g. emotional exhaustion, teacher burnout). The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for teacher education, professional development and school leadership.

2. Theoretical framework

In understanding teachers' emotional experiences, we note that emotions are relational (Schutz et al., 2006; Denzin, 1984; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). This means that emotional experiences do not exist within an individual or within an environment independently, rather it involves person–environmental transactions. Thus, in order to understand teachers' emotional experiences, we must examine both the psychological sources of emotional experiences *and* the contributory role of the environment on individual teacher's emotions. We found Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System to be a useful framework for examining the immediate and distal environments in which teachers are embedded. In the next section, we discuss the research underlying a model representing the interplay between the teachers' emotions, beliefs, identity, goals, and the social–cultural environment.

2.1. The interplay between teachers' emotions, beliefs, identity and goals

Emotion is a type of affect that can be conceptualized as either a state or a process. From a process perspective, emotion involves four elements that we usually experience simultaneously: the perception and evaluation of a stimulus, the activation of a bodily response (e.g. changes in heart rate, body temperature), the display of expressive gestures and "…a cultural label applied to the constellation of first three elements (Hochschild, 1990, pp. 118–119). The occurrence of an emotion depends on how the individual understands and interprets the stimulus. For example, one teacher may be angry at the cancellation of school, while another may feel relieved — it depends on how the teacher interprets the event. This evaluative element means that an emotion is not a simple, direct response to an event; rather occurrence depends on the outcome of the interplay among several psychological constructs, namely beliefs, goals and identity. Emotions are

responses to specific events and tend to have "intentional content", meaning that they are directed toward something. For example, the teacher is angry that school is canceled.

Thus, we understand that emotional experience is a social, interactional and psychological process (Denzin, 1984; Winograd, 2003), which is reflective of the individual's personality, thoughts, beliefs and motivation in conjunction with the social norms and culture within which the individual is situated (Lazarus, 1991, 2001). The intensity and type of emotion elicited is dependent on how the individual interprets the outcome of the person–environment interaction. These interpretations are mediated by the individual's personal psychology including beliefs, identity and goals.

We regard *beliefs* as an individual's personal thoughts and ideas about him/herself, the world and their perceived role in it, that are developed over time through interaction and membership in various social groups, and that the individual considers to be true (Cross & Hong, 2009). With regard to teaching, beliefs are considered to be greatly influential in teachers' pedagogical decisions (Lumpe, Haney, & Czerniak, 2000; Pajares, 1992; Torff & Warburton, 2005). They tend to shape the role teachers enact in the classroom by prescribing how they interact with their students, the instruction and learning goals they set and how they organize classroom transactions to meet these goals.

The beliefs teachers hold are not only situated in the context or content, but also within the person's unique belief system (Kagan, 1992). This belief system developed over time shapes their sense of self or *identity*. The 'self' is crucial in constructing the way we interact with the environment and make judgments in a given context (van den Berg, 2002; Day, Elliott, & Kington, 2005; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Lasky, 2005). Thus, the way teachers perceive themselves influences their choice of action and judgment thereby making identity a critical factor in understanding teachers' classroom behaviors and emotional experiences.

Based on their beliefs and identity, teachers set long-term (broad teacher goals) and/or immediate (instructional) *goals*. Goal setting is a key dimension in executing what they believe, because teachers' behaviors, strategies and decisions are guided by the goal (Schutz, Crowder, & White, 2001). Teachers appraise consciously or unconsciously how well the goal is being attained in their classroom. These cognitive appraisal processes are the key part of the emotional experiences. For example, Weiner (2007) distinguished that emotions such as shame, envy, and sympathy are generated by appraisals of uncontrollability; while some other emotions (i.e., anger, gratitude, and regret) are associated with appraisals related to causal control. For example, an individual teacher may evaluate that a parent's work place and what was happening there (exosystem) is not something she can control. Thus, if the student's parent is laid off, then the teacher would feel sympathy as opposed to anger. The way individual teachers perceive their controllability and exercise their agency in relation to different layers of the environment can provide informative resources to understand teachers' emotions. This appraisal process foregrounds the importance of context or the environmental realities affecting the outcome.

Individuals are situated in and profoundly impacted by several nested environments. Similar to other researchers (Haritos, 2004; Woolfolk-Hoy & Davis, 2006) who investigate teachers' psychological worlds and the environmental influences on these processes concurrently, we organize our discussion using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 2005).

2.2. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) highlights the complexity