



# Teachers' emotions and emotion regulation strategies: Self- and students' perceptions



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Antecedent-focused emotion regulation may be more desirable than response-focused.
- Reappraisal may be more effective than suppression in emotion regulation.
- Suppression in emotion regulation should be discouraged.
- Future research on teacher emotion regulation should include teacher beliefs.

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## ABSTRACT

Based on Gross's process model of emotion regulation, this study related 53 lower-secondary school students' perceptions of their teachers' emotions to four of their teachers' emotion regulation while teaching. A mixed method approach, combining students' surveys and teachers' interviews, revealed associations between teachers' positive or negative emotions as perceived by their students, and teachers' reflections on their emotion regulation. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation appeared more desirable than response-focused emotion regulation, and in particular, reappraisal more effective than suppression in increasing positive-emotion expression and reducing negative-emotion expression. Implications for teaching, teacher education and future research on teacher emotion regulation are proposed.

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## 1. Introduction

The present research aims to investigate teachers' emotion regulation strategies, and relate them to students' perceptions of their teachers' emotions. It is widely accepted that emotion is intertwined with cognition and integral to teaching (Hargreaves, 2001), and that teachers' emotions play a crucial role in students' learning and teacher–student relationships (e.g. Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Turner, Meyer, & Schweinle, 2003). Furthermore, Hargreaves (1998) claimed that good teaching is charged with positive emotions, and good teachers display their passion during teaching, which in turn enthuse their students. Similarly, it has been proposed by Frenzel, Goetz, Stephens, and Jacob (2009) that

recurring teachers' positive emotions are associated with flexible and creative teaching strategies that stimulate student motivation, whereas recurring teachers' negative emotions damage such flexibility and creativity, which in turn affect student learning outcomes. In fact, researchers have paid much attention to teachers' emotional experiences during regular teaching and their impact on teachers' and students' lives (e.g. Cross & Hong, 2012; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014a; Hargreaves, 1998, 2000, 2001; Schutz, Cross, Hong, & Osbon, 2007; Sutton, 2004; Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, & Knight, 2009; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Zembylas, 2005). For example, negative emotions such as anger and frustration, which are frequently reported by teachers, are found to reduce teachers' intrinsic motivation and increase students' negative emotional experiences (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Abundant research has focused on how teachers' accumulating negative emotions damage teachers' well-being and hinder students' learning achievement (see Chan, 2006). Generally, teachers' emotions are crucial factors

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in education, and as Fried (2011) claimed, a new direction in emotional research is to explore how teachers' emotions, especially negative emotions, could be regulated.

Researchers are only beginning to investigate teachers' emotion regulation (Sutton & Harper, 2009). Failure to understand teacher emotion regulation has been found to lead to teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion (Carson & Templin, 2007), and ineffectiveness of teaching and classroom management (Olivier & Venter, 2003), as well as teacher attrition (Macdonald, 1999). In this regard, investigation into teachers' emotion regulation is in urgent need. Early research (Sutton, 2004) has explored teachers' emotion regulation strategies in relation to their teaching goals. According to Sutton, teachers employ a wide variety of emotion regulation strategies such as preventive strategies (e.g. diverting attention and self-talk) and responsive strategies (e.g. deep breathing and controlling facial features). However, even if teachers attempt to mask their emotions, for example by controlling their facial features, it is revealed by Sutton and Wheatley (2003) that students can still be aware of their teachers' emotions through observations of teachers' vocal changes such as pitch, and physiological changes such as facial expressions and body language. In Sutton and Wheatley's literature review, a teacher's example was provided, who reported that her students knew it when she was not herself because her words were inconsistent with her body language. Therefore, it appears important to investigate teachers' emotion regulation in light of students' perceptions of teachers' emotions to examine the relation between these two factors.

### 1.1. Emotions in teaching

Appraisal theory advocates that emotions are responses to evaluations or judgments of events, rather than events themselves (Roseman & Smith, 2001; Smith & Lazarus, 1990). In primary appraisal, people evaluate whether the situation is relevant or important to their needs or well-being, and whether the situation is consistent with their goals, so relevance and goal congruence are two most important components in the significance of an emotional stimulus (Lazarus, 1991). In the classroom context, Chang (2009) argued that the more a teacher cares about his or her students, the more likely an emotional encounter would be judged to be important; a student's disruptive behaviors might be a threat to a teacher's goal achievement, if a teacher's goal is to teach students academic skills. Consequently, according to Chang, teacher–student relationships and teaching goal congruence are two most important components in teachers' primary appraisal and contribute greatly to teachers' daily experiences of emotions. It is not surprising that in the context of teaching in higher education, Hagenauer and Volet (2014b) placed the affective dimensions of the teacher–student relationship in the center of their framework for future research. To be more precise, Sutton and Wheatley (2003) suggested that appraisal theory explains why the same classroom event elicits different emotions in individual teachers or why individual teachers experience different emotions in response to the same student behavior. Moreover, a number of empirical studies (e.g. Emmer, 1994; Godar, 1990; Hargreaves, 1998; Oplatka & Eizenberg, 2007; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Zembylas, 2005) have revealed that in everyday teaching teachers frequently experience positive emotions such as joy, excitement, warmth, and affection, and negative emotions including anger, frustration and anxiety. Therefore, as claimed by Hargreaves (1998), teaching is an emotional practice, and it is necessary for teachers to regulate their emotions when they sense that a particular emotion expression is inappropriate in a particular situation (Sutton, 2004).

### 1.2. Emotion regulation

From the perspective of social psychology, Gross (1998a) defined emotion regulation as “the processes by which individuals consciously or unconsciously influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them”. Gross (1998a, 1998b) also distinguished between two broad classes of emotion regulation: antecedent-focused emotion regulation, which occurs before emotions are generated, and response-focused emotion regulation, which occurs after response tendencies are triggered. According to Gross (1998a, 1998b), antecedent-focused emotion regulation includes situation selection, which refers to approaching or avoiding certain people or situations to modify their emotional impact; situation modification, which involves directly changing a situation to regulate emotions; attention deployment, in which individuals focus attention on or move attention away from a situation to change the influence of the situation on individuals' emotions; and cognitive change, which refers to modifying one's evaluations of a situation or one's ability to manipulate a situation in order to alter its emotional impact. Response-focused emotion regulation involves modifying the physiological, experiential or behavioral responding after an emotion has been generated. The effects of these two broad classes of emotion regulation including their certain forms were also discussed by Gross.

Gross' (2002) literature review of emotion regulation showed that his theoretical and empirical studies (Gross, 1998a, 1998b; Gross & John, 2003) on emotion regulation are derived from the coping theories of Lazarus and colleagues (Lazarus, 1966; 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In his model, and consistent with Lazarus conceptualization, Gross refers to situation modification as problem-focused coping, aimed at changing the person–environment realities behind negative emotions or directly changing a situation to regulate emotions. Emotion-focused coping is another strategy proposed by Lazarus, which involves reducing unpleasant emotions through dealing with the emotion itself, or internally changing the appraisals of the demanding situation. It could be argued that Lazarus' emotion-focused coping overlaps with Gross' cognitive change, which also involves altering the appraisal of a situation. Therefore, and as posited by Chang (2013), Lazarus' coping and Gross' emotion regulation are connected with each other, and both are believed to be mediating factors in the emotion processes.

Gross (1998b) speculated that antecedent-focused emotion regulation (e.g. reappraisal) might be better than response-focused emotion regulation (e.g. suppression) in consideration of individuals' physical and psychological health. This is because, according to Lazarus and Alfert (1964) (also see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), reappraisal is a way of reinterpreting the meaning of an emotional stimulus so as to alter its emotional impact, whereas suppression is defined as the inhibition of ongoing emotion-expressive behavior (Gross & Levenson, 1993; Gross, 1998b). In addition, reappraisal affects the emotion response tendencies early in the emotion-generative process (Gross & John, 2003). It is worth noting that Gross (1998b) also carried out an experiment to identify the influences of reappraisal and suppression on emotional expression and experience. In this experiment, undergraduate participants were assigned to either a reappraisal or a suppression condition, when watching a negative emotion-eliciting film. He found that reappraisal led to an increase in both the experience and expression of positive emotion and was effective in reducing both the experience and expression of negative emotion. Another finding in this experiment was that, suppression occurred after the emotion response tendencies had been generated, and reduced the expression of negative emotion to some extent. However, it was

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