Editorial: Teachers’ Emotional Labor

As the Editors of *Beijing International Review of Education* we were very happy to accept a proposal from our colleague Kwok Kuen Tsang to edited a special issue on ‘Teacher Emotions in Chinese Societies’, not only because in these COVID times teachers must cope with their own fears and anxieties and at the same time remain in control of so-called ‘negative emotions’ in relation to their students and colleagues, generally under conditions that have increased workloads in all aspects of teaching including face-to-face teaching, administration, and assessment (ie., what Lyotard refers to as neoliberal performativity). We are additionally pleased that Kwok Kuen Tsang should team up with his colleagues Lianjiang Jiang, and Gang Zhu to edit this special issue that faces up to the question of ‘Teacher Emotions in Chinese Societies’, a much-needed and little researched theme. That teachers’ emotions needs such research is almost self-evident -- if a teacher is burned-out, stressed, forever anxious, or constantly full of fear or anger, then it is impossible for them to teach in a way that is aware of their students’ emotions and respond appropriately. An angry or fearful teacher who is frightened or anxious requires help, support and treatment. They need to be able to recognise and read their own emotions; they need to be able to understand how to engage in self-help strategies and also to seek help. It’s always the case that when there is stress in times of crisis, when families, communities and societies are suffering the consequences of a crisis, teachers bear the brunt of this crisis as they are the front line who see crisis manifest in their students. It is a timely and important research theme that may provide institutional and personal coping strategies for student, teachers and their schools. We are also pleased that Kwok Kuen Tsang has the opportunity to follow up on his own passion and concern for this topic, extending his analysis from an earlier issue of BIRE.
The paper that have been edited for this issue cover a broad sweep of topics that probe teachers’ emotional experiences, actions, drives and labor. The term ‘emotional labor’ resonates in a number of the contributions and we think this a useful concept for as Hochschild (1983) puts it teachers get paid for managing their emotions and ‘performance’ including the management or control of ‘visible facial expressions’ or ‘body language’ required by the organisation and profession. Emotional labor also surely means that teachers ‘live their emotions’ as an integral aspect of their paid employment – they perform emotionally as part of the job – and it is a labor based on the ethic of care, on their pastoral duties and responsibilities, on their spiritual demeanours, on their professional education and on their rapport and interactions with their students. Teaching is a profession that is based on emotional labor not only in the sense of the way that the external environment of the institution (school ethos, policies, professional organisations, regional, community and national frameworks) regulate, monitor, evaluate and control teacher’s labor but also ‘labor’ in the sense of an expenditure of psychological energy that requires maintenance, understanding and management in the requirements of professional performing or acting. This is something that teachers share with physicians, nurses, therapists, police, retirement carers, childcare and those working in hospitality, in fact all jobs and professions where workers daily come into contact with other human beings. One might argue that teachers’ emotional labor in addition has special characteristics, obligations or responsibilities in that they must act in loco parentis, always acting in the interests of the child or student. It has an affective labor component in that teaching is also teaching of the emotions, if only by example.

One might argue that the words ‘manage’ or ‘control’ in this context themselves should be open to scrutiny especially if it is taken to mean that teachers need to be able to disguise how they are feeling in front of a class. Surely, it is more about understanding emotional dispositions and sensibilities; in particular, firstly a better and more sophisticated theoretical understanding of emotions and the psychopathology of teaching, careful not to reify or standardise emotions by culture, age, race or gender. It is a strength of the present collection that the Editors and the contributors argue that 1. emotions are culturally constructed, and 2. teacher emotions in Chinese societies have been absent from the discourse in the West. It is noteworthy that the Editors mention differences between Chinese and western societies in terms of individualism/collective dimension but also in terms of the purpose of learning. We might be forgiven for suggesting that emotions are shared cultural norms that are learned situationally growing up in a culture: they are not formally taught but are acquired tacitly and comprise an emotional collective unconscious full of ‘rules’ concerning the
expression of strong or negative emotions in relations with children as parents or teachers. They exist as a informally learned cultural repertoire of reactions/ responses. Some argue that while central components of emotions are universal, their patterns are deeply cultural – cultures regulate emotions and emotional exchanges cross cultures are often difficult because people are unsure how positive relationships are culturally maintained or how an exchange between first contacts or with strangers might be managed. Emotions it seems are as much a matter of cultural socialisation as overt behaviour and the cultural regulation of emotion governs the show and display of exuberance and enthusiasm or its reverse. It might be argued that the concept emotional labor can be useful outside the context of professional paid employment to include also the emotional labor between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents, colleagues and leaders (Ye & Chen, 2015).

It is to our Special Editors and contributors to this issue that we extend our acknowledge and thanks for path-breaking research work on teachers’ emotional labor in a range of different and important contexts – EFL teachers, preschool interns, rotation teachers, in the entrance exam, in relation to management (‘the managed heart’), in terms of a mediation model, in relation to teacher burnout, and in relation to leadership and knowledge-sharing. This is cutting-edge research and we warmly welcome its results hoping that such understanding can improve conditions for teachers, students, parents and the profession.

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