Teachers putting on a brave face

By Saul Karnovsky
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Australian universities enrol thousands of people to become teachers. Some who choose to study education are motivated by a desire to make a difference to the lives of young people, while others are looking for job security and intellectual fulfilment.

A course in education encompasses a broad range of cognitive and technical skills aligned to professional teacher standards. Yet, what is largely missing from a teaching degree is what to do with emotions as a teacher.

Despite all the theory, training and practical experience, research shows teachers' professional lives can be highly demanding, pressured, stressful and at times, emotionally exhausting.

In doctoral research, I followed pre- service teachers throughout their course. I found there exists an invisible rule book that defines what teachers can and cannot do with their emotions.

Emotional labour is hard work

Our teachers recently started the school year. Many are likely facing a range of emotional challenges including working with difficult students and communities, managing increasing administrative control over their work and standardisation reforms. All these can result in substantial mental health issues.

One Australian study found increasing numbers of teachers suffer from persistent anxiety and depression. Up to 50 per cent burn out or simply leave in the first five years of their career.

Early studies are showing the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 are further exacerbating the stresses facing Australian teachers.

Because teaching is emotionally demanding, teachers experience what is known as "emotional labour". This is when teachers have to manage, suppress or feign their emotions as part of the work. Like other forms of labour, doing so can become exhausting.

Understanding these facts is a fundamental part of learning to become a teacher. I've come to know this through years of researching teacher emotions, specifically focused on those learning to teach.

Putting on a mask

I spoke with and collected questionnaires from almost 100 education students in a large Western Australian university. I wanted to find out how someone who wants to become a teacher learnt what they should or should not be doing with their emotions in secondary schools.

I found pre-service teachers learnt about the rules for emotional behaviour from expectations and assumptions about teachers' work, which was confirmed when they began training in school placements.

From interviews, focus groups, diary entries and questionnaires, I have summarised some of the unwritten rules these teaching students spoke of:

- Don't ever cry in front of students, because if you do, they will see you as weak and eat you alive.
- Don't lose your temper, shout or get angry, because if you do, students will lose respect for you.
- Don't show your emotional vulnerability, especially not to other teachers, because if you do, they might think you are not right for the job.

Many pre-service teachers explained they worked at "hiding" or "suppressing" their vulnerable emotions from students and other teachers.

Some said they put on a “mask”, “a brave face” or “facade” to show they were “professional” and could “control” their emotions.

One participant experienced “intense frustration” during school placement in trying to manage and engage a group of behaviourally difficult students, which led to her feeling “emotionally overwhelmed”.

She hid these emotions from her supervising teacher, telling me she did not want to “appear weak”.

So she held back her tears because she would “hate” being the “little woman that cries at work, who gets upset”.

This shows there exists a demand for teachers to behave in ways they believe to be acceptable. All these pre-service teachers have learnt to keep a hold of their “inappropriate” emotions in front of other teachers or risk being perceived as incompetent and unprofessional.

Let’s talk about it

Navigating the emotional rules of learning to teach is a significant aspect of becoming a teacher, yet it goes largely unrecognised in an initial teacher education course.

Such labour in teaching can have personal costs and lead to emotional exhaustion, depression and anxiety.

If we are to ensure thousands of newly enrolled teachers are to thrive in their courses and careers, we must make the invisible emotional rules of the profession seen and heard.

I believe if pre-service teachers can come together with teacher educators to explore these emotional rules, they could build resilience to confront the many emotional challenges of modern teaching.

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