Emotional Labor in Teaching: Addressing Challenges and Concerns Among School Teachers

Abstract

Emotional labor, a concept introduced by Arlie Hochschild, involves the regulation of emotions to meet professional expectations, often at the cost of personal emotional well-being. This review explores the challenges, and implications of emotional labor among school teachers. Teachers frequently engage in emotional regulation to create conducive learning environments, maintain relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, and manage classroom dynamics. However, this often leads to emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout, exacerbated by inadequate institutional support and excessive workload. This review also highlights coping mechanisms adopted by teachers, including mindfulness, and peer support, while emphasizing the need for organizational policies that recognize and mitigate emotional labor. By identifying key concerns and proposing actionable recommendations, this review aims to contribute to a better understanding of emotional labor in educational settings and its impact on teachers' mental health and job performance.

Keywords: Emotional labor, school teachers, coping mechanisms, educational settings.

Introduction

Emotional labor, first conceptualized by Hochschild (1983), refers to how individuals manage their emotions to align with professional expectations. Within the teaching profession, educators are required to regulate their emotions continuously, as they engage with students, parents, and colleagues while maintaining a positive classroom environment (Taxer & Frenzel, 2023). The expectations placed on teachers to exhibit patience, enthusiasm, and empathy, regardless of their genuine emotional state, can contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Yin et al., 2021). As the demands of teaching continue to evolve with increased student diversity, changing curricula, and administrative pressures, concerns over emotional labor among school teachers have become more pressing than ever (Frenzel et al., 2021).

One of the central concerns of emotional labor in teaching is the distinction between surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves the suppression of true emotions and the display of organizationally desired emotions, while deep acting entails modifying internal emotions to genuinely align with the professional role (Mesmer 2021). Studies have shown that excessive

reliance on surface acting is linked to heightened stress levels, emotional dissonance, and decreased job satisfaction (Taxer & Frenzel, 2023). On the other hand, deep acting, although considered more sustainable, can still lead to psychological strain if teachers are not provided with adequate institutional support (Aldrup & Eshet, 2022). This ongoing regulation of emotions without proper coping mechanisms exacerbates the risk of burnout, a major concern in contemporary education systems (Kim & Kim, 2022).

The emotional demands of teaching extend beyond the classroom, influencing interactions with parents and administrators. Teachers often face challenging conversations with parents who may have unrealistic expectations or express dissatisfaction with school policies (Kinman et al., 2011). Maintaining professionalism and composure in such situations requires substantial emotional regulation, further adding to teachers' emotional burden (Jingjing, 2024). Additionally, interactions with school administrators and colleagues play a crucial role in shaping teachers' emotional well-being. A lack of collegial support and recognition can intensify stress, making it imperative for schools to establish supportive work environments (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020).

Another growing concern is the impact of emotional labor on teachers' mental and physical health. Prolonged emotional suppression can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, affecting teachers' overall well-being and job performance (Frenzel et al., 2021). Moreover, emotional exhaustion often manifests physically, resulting in sleep disturbances, headaches, and weakened immune function (Tsang et al., 2022). Given these adverse effects, researchers advocate for comprehensive emotional support programs tailored to the unique needs of educators (Kinman et al., 2011).

Despite the challenges, teachers employ various coping strategies to manage emotional labor. Mindfulness practices, peer support groups, and professional development programs focusing on emotional resilience have shown promising results in mitigating stress (Aldrup 2023 & Eshet, 2022). School leadership also plays a critical role in acknowledging and addressing the emotional demands of teaching. Providing structured emotional support, recognizing teachers' emotional contributions, and fostering a culture of well-being can significantly improve job satisfaction and retention rates (Karakus et al., 2024).

Educational policies must evolve to address the growing concerns surrounding emotional labor in teaching. Schools should implement structured programs that promote teachers' emotional well-being, including access to counseling services, workload adjustments, and training on emotional regulation techniques (Kariou et al., 2021). Additionally, integrating emotional labor discussions into teacher training programs can better prepare educators for the emotional complexities of the profession (Tsang et al., 2022). By prioritizing teachers' emotional well-being, educational institutions can enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of the teaching workforce.

In conclusion, emotional labor is an intrinsic and demanding aspect of teaching that requires greater recognition and support. The emotional expectations placed on teachers, coupled with organizational challenges, contribute to stress, burnout, and adverse health effects. Addressing these concerns necessitates systemic changes, including institutional recognition, professional development, and emotional support systems. By implementing comprehensive strategies, schools can create a healthier and more sustainable teaching environment, ensuring both educator well-being and student success (Taxer & Frenzel, 2023; Yin et al., 2021).

Theoretical background

Hochschild introduced the concept of emotional labor (1983), which revolves around regulating and managing emotions to align with the emotional requirements of a particular role or profession. Hochschild originally explored this concept within the service industry, where employees must manage their emotions to deliver satisfactory customer service. Over time, this concept has been widely applied across professions, including education, to examine how individuals navigate the emotional demands of their jobs.

In the educational context, emotional labor involves teachers regulating their emotions to meet the expectations of students, parents, and the institution. This process often requires surface acting, where teachers' fake emotions to meet external demands, and deep acting, where they genuinely attempt to align their internal emotional state with professional expectations (Grandey, 2017). Both types of emotional labor can significantly affect teachers, influencing their emotional well-being, job performance, and interpersonal relationships (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

Recent theoretical developments emphasize the need to view emotional labor as a dynamic process influenced by contextual factors, such as classroom diversity, administrative support, and societal expectations. Scholars have also highlighted the intersectionality of emotional labor, examining how teachers' gender, race, and cultural backgrounds shape their emotional experiences (Zembylas, 2005). These perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding of

emotional labor, highlighting the importance of tailored interventions to support teachers' emotional well-being.

Objectives of the study

- 1. To review the literature on emotional labor in school teachers.
- 2. To identify the challenges associated with emotional labor in school teachers.
- 3. To explore coping mechanisms and support systems for teachers.

Methodology

This study employed a review method to understand and analyze the research on emotional labor. Studies published between 2000 and 2024 were searched through SAGE publications, Taylor and Francis, Scopus, JStor, Springer, Research Gate, and Google Scholar. A brief description of the literature search, screening strategy, and inclusion and exclusion criteria is given below.

Literature Search and Screening Strategy

The literature search was done to understand how emotional labor manifests among school teachers and its relevance in the educational environment. The search strings used for this purpose were "emotional labor," "school teachers," "educational environment" and "influencing factor". The search was performed through databases such as SAGE publications, Taylor and Francis, Scopus, JStor, Springer, and Google Scholar. After that, the investigator went through the research articles, and after the screening, articles were selected that answered the research objectives.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review included studies published between 2000 and 2024. The studies included were all conducted in India and abroad. The included studies were relevant to the objectives of this paper. The studies which were not relevant to the objectives of the study and those studies which were not related to school teachers were excluded.

Result

1. Emotional Labor in teaching profession

Research related to emotional labor is extended to various people-work professions and teaching professions (Brotheridge 2002 & Grandey, 2017). Teaching is a profession that

requires performing emotional labor to a broad extent as teaching is an interactive practice by its nature (Hargreaves, 1998).

The school has many similarities with other organizations in terms of public relationships. These relationships are between schools, teachers, students, and parents. As an emotional laborer teacher has to show their emotions according to the situation, these situations might be adverse sometimes (Bellas, 1999; Naring, Briet, & Brouwers, 2006). A good teacher possesses virtues of emotions which he or she displays before the students. In the study of Wragg (1994), students described a good teacher as "polite," "kind" "loving," and "friendly." Students would like teachers who are not authoritative but cooperative for them. Teachers are required a wide range of emotional displays during their educational discourse. Smiling face is always appreciated by the students in the class. Also, a teacher needs to show or control his or her emotions in the way that he or she exaggerates some emotions in the course of interaction with students in the class (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) and suppress other emotions (Ybema & Smtlders, 2002) according to the situation. Zembylas (2004) illustrated that teachers are expected to show enthusiasm and cheerfulness as a way of maintaining students' attention in the class for a better teaching-learning process.

1.1. Emotional Engagement in Classrooms

Teachers are expected to maintain an emotionally supportive classroom environment, which fosters student motivation, engagement, and academic success (O'Connor, 2008). They must display enthusiasm, encouragement, and empathy, even when faced with personal or professional challenges (Day & Gu, 2010). Research suggests that teachers who engage in genuine emotional engagement—rather than mere emotional display—develop stronger relationships with students and experience greater job fulfilment (Kinman et al., 2011).

However, constant emotional regulation can lead to exhaustion. Teachers often suppress negative emotions, such as frustration or stress, to maintain an atmosphere conducive to learning (Chang, 2009). This emotional suppression, if prolonged, can contribute to emotional burnout, particularly when teachers lack adequate coping mechanisms.

1.2. Managing Relationships with Students, Parents, and Colleagues

In addition to emotional engagement in classrooms, teachers must navigate complex interpersonal relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, requiring effective communication and conflict resolution skills to manage emotional expectations (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). Teachers often serve as emotional role models for students, demonstrating patience and encouragement to foster a safe learning space while balancing discipline with empathy, particularly when addressing behavioral issues (O'Connor, 2008). Engaging with

parents requires additional emotional regulation, as teachers must handle parental concerns, conflicts, and expectations professionally, even in challenging conversations (Kinman et al., 2011). Furthermore, teachers must collaborate with colleagues and school leaders while managing institutional expectations and workplace stress, and a lack of collegial support can intensify emotional burden, leading to feelings of isolation and frustration (Day & Gu, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

1.3. The Nature of Emotional Labor in Teaching

Surface Acting vs. Deep Acting

Emotional labor in teaching manifests through surface acting and deep acting, two key emotion regulation strategies (Hochschild, 1983)

- Surface Acting: Teachers display required emotions without genuinely feeling them, such as smiling despite being stressed. This strategy leads to emotional dissonance, where expressed emotions contradict internal feelings, often resulting in exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction (Brotheridge 2002 & Grandey, 2000).
- **Deep Acting**: Teachers attempt to genuinely align their emotions with their professional role, such as reframing a challenging situation positively. Deep acting is linked to greater emotional well-being and more authentic classroom interactions, reducing stress and enhancing job satisfaction (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

Research indicates that teachers who engage in deep acting experience lower emotional exhaustion than those who rely heavily on surface acting (Kinman et al., 2011). Schools that promote emotional authenticity through supportive environments help teachers manage emotional demands more effectively.

1.4. Emotional Dissonance and its Implications for Teachers

Emotional dissonance occurs when teachers' genuine feelings conflict with the emotions they are expected to display (Brotheridge 2002 & Grandey, 2017). This phenomenon is common in teaching, as educators frequently suppress frustration, stress, or personal struggles to maintain a professional demeanor.

- Increased Stress and Burnout: Teachers who experience high emotional dissonance are more likely to suffer from burnout, as suppressing emotions over time depletes psychological resources (Chang, 2009).
- **Reduced Job Satisfaction**: When teachers feel emotionally disconnected from their work, job dissatisfaction and disengagement increase (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

• Impact on Student-Teacher Relationships: Emotional dissonance can weaken student-teacher connections, as students may perceive inauthenticity, leading to reduced trust and engagement (Day & Gu, 2010).

2. Challenges Associated with Emotional Labor in Teachers:

Emotional labor can have both positive and negative impacts. When teachers successfully engage in deep acting, they may experience job satisfaction and stronger connections with students. However, surface acting is frequently associated with negative outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and job dissatisfaction (Brotheridge 2002 & Grandey, 2000). Research has consistently demonstrated that surface acting is a key predictor of teacher burnout, with studies linking it to increased turnover intentions and decreased organizational commitment (Chang, 2009).

2.1. Stress and Burnout

Connection Between Emotional Labor and Teacher Burnout

Emotional labor plays a significant role in teacher burnout. Teachers frequently engage in surface acting (displaying emotions they do not genuinely feel) and deep acting (modifying their inner emotions to align with professional expectations). When teachers must constantly suppress negative emotions or feign enthusiasm, it can result in emotional dissonance—a mismatch between felt and expressed emotions (Brotheridge 2002 & Grandey, 2000). This dissonance contributes to chronic stress and, ultimately, burnout (Chang, 2009).

Emotional Exhaustion Due to Constant Emotional Regulation

Emotional exhaustion, a core component of burnout, occurs when teachers feel drained from the continuous effort of regulating their emotions. They must often remain calm and composed in stressful situations, such as handling disruptive students, mediating conflicts, or dealing with unsupportive parents. Over time, this unrelenting emotional management can deplete teachers' psychological resources, leading to fatigue, disengagement, and reduced job satisfaction (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

2.2. Impact on Mental and Physical Health

Consequences of Prolonged Emotional Labor on Health

The prolonged strain of emotional labor does not only affect teachers' mental well-being but also their physical health. Research indicates that teachers who experience high emotional demands are more likely to suffer from:

- Anxiety and Depression: The pressure to continuously manage emotions can increase stress levels, leading to anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness (Kinman et al., 2011).
- Sleep Disturbances: Stress from emotional labor often results in insomnia and poor sleep quality, which further exacerbates emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).
- Physical Health Issues: Chronic stress can manifest in headaches, high blood pressure, cardiovascular problems, and weakened immune function (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

Teachers who lack adequate coping mechanisms or institutional support are at higher risk of experiencing these health consequences.

2.3. Organizational Factors

Lack of Institutional Support and Recognition

A major challenge associated with emotional labor in teaching is the lack of organizational support. Many educational institutions fail to recognize the emotional efforts of teachers, instead prioritizing measurable outcomes such as student performance and standardized test scores (Day & Gu, 2010). This lack of acknowledgment can make teachers feel undervalued, contributing to dissatisfaction and a reduced sense of professional fulfillment. Furthermore, limited access to mental health resources, peer support programs, and professional development on emotional resilience exacerbates the issue (Kinman et al., 2011).

Workload and Bureaucratic Pressures

Teachers not only manage emotional labor but also juggle heavy workloads and administrative responsibilities. Increased demands for lesson planning, grading, student evaluations, and documentation reduce the time available for self-care and emotional recovery (Chang, 2009). Additionally, bureaucratic policies and standardized testing requirements add layers of stress, often forcing teachers to prioritize institutional goals over their well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). These factors contribute to higher attrition rates, as many educators leave the profession due to excessive emotional and bureaucratic pressures.

3. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems:

The organizational culture within schools plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of emotional labor. Supportive policies, such as professional development programs and access to counseling services, can help teachers develop effective coping strategies. Peer support groups and mentoring programs also provide opportunities for teachers to share experiences and alleviate feelings of isolation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Furthermore, fostering a school

culture that recognizes and values emotional labor can enhance teachers' resilience and job satisfaction (Kelchtermans, 2005).

3.1. Coping Strategies by Teachers

Teachers adopt various strategies to manage emotional labor and prevent burnout. Some of the most effective personal coping mechanisms include:

Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation

Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and deep breathing exercises, help teachers manage stress and regulate emotions effectively. Research suggests that mindfulness-based interventions can reduce anxiety and improve emotional resilience in educators (Hülsheger et al., 2013). Additionally, cognitive reappraisal—reframing negative experiences in a positive light—has been found to lower stress levels among teachers (Chang, 2009).

Peer Support and Professional Networks

Colleagues can be an essential source of emotional support. Peer discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and mentoring relationships help teachers navigate the emotional demands of their work (Kinman et al., 2011). Support groups allow educators to share experiences and develop collective coping strategies, reducing feelings of isolation and frustration (O'Connor, 2008).

Professional Development and Emotional Resilience Training

Engaging in continuous professional development programs equips teachers with skills to handle emotional challenges effectively. Workshops on stress management, emotional intelligence, and resilience training enable teachers to develop adaptive coping strategies (Day & Gu, 2010). Training in classroom management also reduces the emotional strain of handling student behavior, allowing teachers to feel more in control of their work environment (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

3.2. Role of School Leadership in Supporting Teachers

School leaders play a crucial role in recognizing and addressing the emotional labor demands placed on teachers. A supportive leadership approach can enhance teachers' job satisfaction and reduce emotional burnout.

Fostering a Supportive Work Environment

A positive school culture, where teachers feel valued and supported, can mitigate stress and emotional exhaustion. School leaders can promote open communication, encourage teacher collaboration, and provide access to psychological support (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Creating a culture of emotional openness allows teachers to express their concerns without fear of judgment, leading to better mental well-being (Kinman et al., 2011).

Recognizing Emotional Labor as Part of Professional Responsibilities

The emotional labor of teachers often goes unnoticed and unappreciated. School administrators should formally recognize teachers' emotional efforts through feedback, acknowledgment, and incentives (Day & Gu, 2010). Implementing policies that acknowledge emotional labor as an integral part of teaching can validate teachers' emotional contributions and prevent feelings of undervaluation (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

3.3.Policy Recommendations for Institutional Support

Educational institutions and policymakers must implement structured programs to support teachers' emotional well-being. These include:

Developing Structured Programs for Emotional Well-Being

- Emotional Support Initiatives: Schools should introduce regular workshops on emotional intelligence, stress management, and conflict resolution (Chang, 2009).
- Teacher Assistance Programs (TAPs): Similar to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) in corporate settings, TAPs can provide confidential counseling and emotional support for educators (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Institutional Support for Mental Health Resources

- Access to Mental Health Services: Schools should offer free or subsidized counseling services for teachers. Having on-site counselors or mental health professionals can help educators process workplace stress effectively (Kinman et al., 2011).
- Flexible Work Policies: Allowing teachers adequate breaks, workload adjustments, and mental health days can help prevent burnout (Day & Gu, 2010).
- Reducing Bureaucratic Pressures: Simplifying administrative tasks and reducing non-teaching responsibilities can help teachers focus on their core work, thereby alleviating emotional strain (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

Discussion and conclusion

Emotional labor is an intrinsic aspect of the teaching profession, requiring educators to regulate their emotions to align with institutional and societal expectations. While emotional engagement fosters positive student-teacher relationships and enhances the learning environment, excessive emotional labor particularly surface acting can contribute to stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Taxer & Frenzel, 2023). Teachers are expected to exhibit

enthusiasm, patience, and empathy regardless of their internal emotional state, making emotional labor a significant challenge in modern education (Yin et al., 2021). As educational demands evolve with increasing student diversity, administrative pressures, and shifting curricula, emotional labor among school teachers remains a critical issue that requires urgent institutional and policy-level interventions (Kariou et al., 2021).

One of the most concerning aspects of emotional labor in teaching is the distinction between surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting where teachers suppress their true emotions and present a facade has been linked to emotional dissonance, heightened stress levels, and decreased job satisfaction (Grandey 2017 & Melloy, 2021). Teachers who consistently engage in surface acting experience psychological strain due to the mismatch between their authentic emotions and the emotions they are required to display (Aldrup 2023 & Eshet, 2022). This phenomenon, known as emotional dissonance, can lead to exhaustion and detachment from their professional role, ultimately contributing to burnout (Kim & Kim, 2022). In contrast, deep acting—where teachers attempt to align their emotions with professional expectations can be more sustainable but still requires emotional effort that, without adequate institutional support, can also result in psychological strain (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2023).

Beyond the classroom, teachers must manage relationships with parents, administrators, and colleagues, further adding to their emotional workload. Teachers are often required to handle difficult conversations with parents who may have unrealistic expectations or express dissatisfaction with school policies, necessitating high levels of emotional regulation (Kinman et al., 2011). Additionally, school administrators and colleagues play a crucial role in shaping teachers' emotional well-being. A lack of collegial support and recognition can heighten stress and make it more difficult for teachers to sustain emotional resilience (Jingjing 2024). Without strong institutional backing, educators may feel isolated in their emotional struggles, exacerbating feelings of frustration and disillusionment with the profession (Tsang et al., 2022).

The negative consequences of prolonged emotional labor extend beyond job satisfaction and retention rates; they also have serious implications for teachers' mental and physical health. Research has consistently demonstrated that chronic emotional suppression can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Frenzel et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers experiencing high emotional labor often report sleep disturbances, headaches, and weakened immune function, further impacting their ability to perform effectively in the classroom (Tsang et al., 2022). Given the growing concerns surrounding teacher well-being, there is an urgent

need for structured emotional support programs that address the unique emotional challenges faced by educators (Kinman et al., 2011).

Despite these challenges, various coping strategies can help teachers navigate emotional labor. Mindfulness practices, peer support groups, and professional development programs focusing on emotional resilience have been shown to mitigate stress and enhance teachers' ability to manage emotional demands (Aldrup & Eshet, 2022). Mindfulness-based interventions, such as meditation and cognitive reappraisal techniques, can help teachers regulate their emotions more effectively and reduce the negative impact of emotional dissonance (Hülsheger et al., 2013). Furthermore, fostering a supportive school culture where teachers feel valued and recognized for their emotional contributions can significantly enhance job satisfaction and retention rates (Karakus et al., 2024).

School leadership also plays a vital role in alleviating the burdens of emotional labor. A positive work environment, where open communication and emotional support are encouraged, can reduce stress and promote teacher well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2023). Recognizing emotional labor as an essential component of teaching rather than an unacknowledged expectation can help validate teachers' experiences and prevent feelings of undervaluation (Day & Gu, 2010). Policies that provide structured emotional support, such as counseling services and workload adjustments, can further support teachers in managing their emotional labor effectively (Chang, 2009).

Educational policies must evolve to address the growing concerns surrounding emotional labor in teaching. Schools should implement structured programs that prioritize teachers' emotional well-being, including access to professional counseling services, training in emotional regulation techniques, and adjustments to workload distribution (Kariou et al., 2021). Additionally, integrating emotional labor discussions into teacher training programs can better prepare educators for the complex emotional demands of the profession (Tsang et al., 2022). By equipping teachers with the necessary tools and institutional support, educational institutions can create a more sustainable and effective teaching workforce.

In conclusion, emotional labor is an unavoidable yet demanding aspect of the teaching profession that requires greater recognition and support. The expectations placed on teachers combined with organizational challenges contribute to significant stress, burnout, and adverse health effects. Addressing these concerns requires systemic changes, including institutional recognition, professional development, and emotional support systems that help teachers manage emotional labor effectively. Schools must cultivate an environment where teachers' emotional well-being is prioritized, thereby ensuring both educator satisfaction and student success (Taxer & Frenzel, 2023; Yin et al., 2021). By acknowledging the emotional dimensions of teaching and implementing comprehensive strategies, educational institutions can foster a healthier, more sustainable teaching profession that benefits both teachers and students alike.

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