

Enjoyment as an Emotional Resource for Pre-service Teacher Persistence in Project-Based Learning

LIU Yuwei

Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

Teacher attrition remains a persistent concern, with decisions about whether to remain in teaching often taking shape during the pre-service phase. While recent quantitative research has identified enjoyment as a key predictor of pre-service teacher persistence, little is known about how enjoyment is experienced and sustained in everyday teaching practice. Addressing this gap, this narrative inquiry explores how enjoyment functions as an emotional resource shaping a pre-service teacher's desire to persist in teaching during a project-based learning (PBL) practicum. Focusing on the narrative experiences of a pre-service English teacher, Yang, the study draws on semi-structured interviews, emotion diaries, and classroom observations collected over seven weeks. The findings show that enjoyment initially emerged from students' engagement and visible learning, but became fragile when Yang encountered instructional uncertainty and emotional strain. Through reflective meaning-making, enjoyment was reinterpreted as something that could coexist with difficulty, enabling it to be sustained. The study reconceptualises persistence as a narrative, future-oriented professional orientation shaped through emotional experience.

Keywords: teacher attrition, teacher emotion

Introduction

Teacher attrition remains a persistent concern across educational systems worldwide, with many teachers leaving the profession within the first few years of practice (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001). Research increasingly shows that decisions about whether to remain in teaching are not formed only after entering the workforce, but are already shaped during the pre-service phase, particularly through early teaching experiences and practicum contexts (Rots, Aelterman, Devos, & Vlerick, 2007; Wang et al., 2015).

Teaching is widely recognised as an emotionally demanding profession (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). For pre-service teachers, emotional intensity is often heightened as they navigate unfamiliar classroom contexts, negotiate relationships with students and mentors, and attempt to enact pedagogical ideals in practice (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). While earlier research focused mainly on negative emotions such as stress or anxiety, more recent studies have drawn attention to the role of positive emotions in teachers' professional lives (Burić et al., 2018). Among these, enjoyment has emerged as a particularly salient emotion associated with engagement, well-being, and instructional quality (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015).

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LIU Yuwei, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Foreign Studies, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China.

Recent quantitative research has shown that enjoyment plays an important role in shaping pre-service teachers' intentions to persist in teaching. Within a control-value framework, Audrin and Hascoët (2024) demonstrated that enjoyment exerted a significant direct effect on persistence intentions. However, variable-centred and cross-sectional designs provide limited insight into how enjoyment is experienced, challenged, and sustained in everyday teaching practice over time (Frenzel, Taxer, Schwab, & Kuhbandner, 2019).

This limitation is especially salient in project-based learning (PBL) contexts, where open-ended tasks and extended interaction can intensify teachers' emotional experiences (Huang, Wang, & Han, 2024). Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a narrative inquiry approach to examine how enjoyment functions as an emotional resource shaping a pre-service teacher's desire to persist in teaching during a PBL practicum. It is guided by the following research question: How does enjoyment function as an emotional resource shaping a pre-service teacher's desire to persist in teaching during a project-based learning practicum?

Literature Review

Teacher Emotions in Pre-service Teaching

Teacher emotions have been widely recognised as a central component of teaching and teacher development. Early research established teaching as an emotionally demanding profession, highlighting how teachers' emotional experiences are closely intertwined with instructional practices, classroom interactions, and professional well-being (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Subsequent studies have extended this work to pre-service teachers, showing that emotional experiences during practicum play a crucial role in shaping professional learning and career-related decisions (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016).

Much of the existing research on teacher emotions has adopted quantitative approaches, focusing on the prevalence, intensity, and correlates of discrete emotions such as enjoyment, anger, anxiety, and boredom (Frenzel et al., 2019). These studies have provided valuable insights into patterns of emotional experience and their associations with instructional quality, self-efficacy, and well-being. However, by relying primarily on cross-sectional survey designs, this body of work tends to conceptualise emotions as relatively stable states or traits, offering limited insight into the temporal unfolding of emotions and teachers' meaning-making processes in specific contexts.

Qualitative studies have begun to address this limitation by exploring teachers' emotional lives through interviews, narratives, and reflective writing (Zembylas, 2003; Zhang & Wang, 2024). These studies emphasise the socially situated and interpretive nature of emotions, demonstrating how emotions are shaped by institutional norms, power relations, and professional expectations. Nevertheless, relatively few qualitative studies have explicitly focused on pre-service teachers' positive emotions, and even fewer have examined how such emotions relate to emerging decisions about whether to remain in the teaching profession.

Enjoyment and Pre-service Teacher Persistence

Within the broader literature on teacher emotions, enjoyment has attracted increasing attention as a particularly salient positive emotion. Research consistently shows that enjoyment is frequently experienced by teachers and is associated with engagement, instructional enthusiasm, and positive teacher-student relationships (Frenzel et al., 2009; Hagenauer et al., 2023). In the context of teacher education, enjoyment has been linked to pre-service teachers' motivation and satisfaction with teaching experiences (Burić, Moè, & Slišković, 2018).

Recent research has increasingly highlighted the role of positive emotions in shaping teachers' professional commitment and willingness to remain in their jobs (Hagenauer et al., 2023). Rather than functioning merely as

pleasant by-products of instructional success, positive emotional experiences appear to play an important role in supporting teachers' motivation to continue teaching, thereby shifting attention away from an exclusive focus on stress, burnout, and negative emotional states.

Despite these promising findings, existing research remains limited in several respects. First, most studies conceptualise persistence as an intention measured at a single point in time, providing limited insight into how persistence is formed and negotiated through lived experience. Second, enjoyment is typically treated as a latent variable, which obscures its situational variability and the ways in which it may be threatened, diminished, or restored in response to specific teaching events. Finally, the dominance of quantitative designs leaves unanswered questions about how pre-service teachers themselves interpret enjoyment and connect it to their emerging professional futures.

Project-Based Learning as an Emotional Context

Project-based learning (PBL) has been widely promoted for its potential to enhance student engagement, autonomy, and deep learning (Huang et al., 2024). From a pedagogical perspective, PBL emphasises open-ended tasks, collaboration, and the production of tangible outcomes. These features also have important emotional implications for teachers, particularly those who are still developing professional confidence.

Research suggests that PBL can intensify teachers' emotional experiences by increasing instructional uncertainty and relational demands (Ren, 2022). For pre-service teachers, PBL may generate strong enjoyment when students are actively engaged and learning becomes visible, while also giving rise to moments of emotional strain related to classroom management, time constraints, and perceived loss of control. However, empirical research examining teachers' emotional experiences in PBL contexts remains limited, and studies rarely focus on how such emotional dynamics influence pre-service teachers' intentions to remain in the profession. Moreover, existing PBL research has largely prioritised student outcomes, with comparatively little attention to teachers' emotional trajectories.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore how enjoyment functioned as an emotional resource shaping a pre-service teacher's desire to persist in teaching during a project-based learning practicum. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to research that seeks to understand teachers' lived experiences, as it views experience as storied, relational, and situated within specific temporal, social, and institutional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Rather than treating emotions or persistence as static constructs, narrative inquiry enables close examination of how meanings are constructed and reinterpreted over time through engagement with concrete events and relationships. In the present study, narrative inquiry was used to capture the processual nature of enjoyment and its connection to future-oriented professional orientations.

Research Context and Participant

The study was conducted in a public lower-secondary school in southern China that offered an English dubbing project-based (PBL) curriculum. Fifty-two eighth-grade students participated voluntarily in the project and were organised into groups of four to five. Their final task was to produce an approximately four-minute

English dubbing video based on selected film or animation clips. The project emphasised pronunciation, intonation, collaborative performance, and creative interpretation.

Ten third-year English major students from a local university served as pre-service tutors, supporting students' dubbing practice and performance. This article focuses on one pre-service teacher, Yang (pseudonym). She was selected as an information-rich case because her accounts contained frequent references to emotionally salient teaching episodes and explicit reflections on whether teaching was a career she wished to pursue.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a seven-week period and consisted of multiple sources to capture Yang's emotional experiences across time and contexts. These included three semi-structured interviews, five emotion diaries written by Yang, and field notes from five classroom observations conducted by the researcher.

The interviews were conducted at Week 1, Week 4, and Week 7, aiming to explore Yang's emotionally significant teaching events, interactions with students and mentors, and reflections on her evolving feelings about teaching. Emotion diaries were written during the practicum and provided contemporaneous accounts of moments that triggered noticeable emotional reactions, particularly enjoyment and emotional strain. Classroom observations offered contextual grounding, documenting classroom interactions, student engagement, disruptions, and institutional arrangements that shaped the emotional climate of the PBL sessions.

Data Analysis

Following narrative inquiry principles (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), data analysis involved chronologically reconstructing Yang's practicum trajectory and identifying narrative episodes that were emotionally salient and relevant to her emerging desire to persist in teaching. Particular attention was paid to how enjoyment was experienced, challenged, and reinterpreted across episodes, as well as how these emotional experiences were linked to expressions of professional value, perceived competence, and future-oriented talk.

Analysis was iterative and comparative, moving between interviews, diaries, and observational data to refine interpretations. Rather than coding emotions as predefined categories, the analysis focused on how Yang narrated emotional meaning in relation to specific events and contexts. Preliminary interpretations were shared with Yang through member checking to enhance credibility.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was enhanced through data triangulation, prolonged engagement in the research context, and reflexive memoing throughout the analytic process. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided consent prior to data collection. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Findings

This section presents three narrative episodes that illustrate how enjoyment emerged, became challenged, and was reinterpreted during Yang's project-based learning practicum. Together, these episodes show how enjoyment functioned as an emotional resource shaping her evolving desire to persist in teaching.

Enjoyment as Emergence: "Seeing Students Come Alive"

At the beginning of the project, Yang described a strong sense of enjoyment associated with students' active engagement in the dubbing tasks. She recalled feeling energised when students rehearsed lines enthusiastically, negotiated pronunciation collaboratively, and took ownership of their performances (Emotion diary 2). These

moments were frequently narrated in her diaries as emotionally rewarding because they made learning visible and confirmed Yang's sense that her efforts as a tutor were meaningful.

Across her early emotion diaries, Yang repeatedly referred to the pleasure of "seeing students come alive" during practice sessions. When students successfully synchronised their voices with video clips or improved their intonation after feedback, she experienced a sense of satisfaction and excitement (Emotion diary 1; Emotion diary 2). One diary entry noted that such moments made her feel that "teaching is not just about explaining, but about creating moments when students want to participate" (Emotion diary 3). Enjoyment in these early stages was closely tied to students' responsiveness and to Yang's perception that the project-based format allowed learners to express creativity and agency.

These experiences also carried a future-oriented dimension. In an early interview, Yang reflected that enjoyment enabled her to imagine herself as a teacher who could facilitate engaging learning environments (Early interview). She associated enjoyment with a sense of professional value, suggesting that teaching felt "worth doing" when students were visibly involved. At this stage, enjoyment functioned as an affirming emotional signal that aligned teaching with her emerging aspirations.

Enjoyment Under Strain: Emotional Disruption and Doubt

As the project progressed, Yang's enjoyment was increasingly placed under strain. She encountered moments of frustration related to uneven student participation, time pressure, and difficulties managing group dynamics. In several sessions, some students appeared disengaged or resistant, which disrupted her expectations of collaborative learning. These incidents triggered emotional discomfort and prompted her to question her competence in handling classroom challenges (Emotion diary 3).

Yang's diaries revealed that enjoyment did not simply disappear in these moments, but became fragile. She described feeling torn between enjoyment and emotional strain, noting that "when things don't go as planned, it's hard to feel the same excitement as before" (Emotion diary 3). Enjoyment was particularly threatened when Yang experienced a sense of lost control, such as when students ignored instructions or when conflicts within groups remained unresolved.

Importantly, these emotionally challenging episodes were linked to emerging doubts about persistence. In a later interview, Yang reflected that repeated disruptions led her to wonder whether teaching would always be this emotionally demanding (Interview 2). Although she did not explicitly express an intention to leave teaching, she described moments of hesitation and uncertainty about whether she could sustain the emotional labour required. Enjoyment, once taken for granted, became something that could no longer be assumed.

Reframing Enjoyment: Sustaining the Desire to Teach

In response to these challenges, Yang engaged in reflective processes that reshaped her understanding of enjoyment. Rather than expecting teaching to be consistently enjoyable, she began to reinterpret enjoyment as something that could coexist with difficulty. Through reflection and informal conversations with peers, she adjusted her expectations of what successful teaching might look like within a project-based learning context (Interview 3).

Yang described learning to recognise smaller moments of enjoyment, such as brief instances of student improvement or cooperation, even when overall sessions felt chaotic. One later interview captured this shift, as she noted that "maybe enjoyment does not mean everything goes smoothly, but that there are still moments that

remind you why you're doing this" (Final interview, translated excerpt). By recalibrating her expectations, Yang was able to reclaim enjoyment in more modest but sustainable forms.

Toward the end of the practicum, Yang reflected that although teaching was more emotionally demanding than she had anticipated, enjoyment remained an important reason for continuing (Final interview; Emotion diary 5). She described teaching as "tiring but meaningful" and suggested that without moments of enjoyment, she would struggle to imagine herself staying in the profession. These reflections indicate that enjoyment continued to play a role in supporting her willingness to persist in teaching.

Discussion

This study examined how enjoyment functioned as an emotional resource shaping a pre-service teacher's desire to persist in teaching during a project-based learning practicum. By tracing Yang's emotional experiences across time, the study complements existing quantitative research on teacher emotions and persistence by illuminating the processes through which enjoyment is experienced, destabilised, and sustained in practice. The discussion below focuses on the theoretical contributions of the study and situates the findings within the broader literature on teacher emotions and teacher persistence.

Enjoyment and Persistence: A Process-Oriented Perspective

Recent large-scale quantitative research has established enjoyment as a key emotional predictor of pre-service teachers' intention to persist in the teaching profession (Audrin & Hascoët, 2024). The findings of the present study supported this conclusion by showing that enjoyment played a central role in shaping Yang's evolving orientation toward teaching. When enjoyment was present, teaching was experienced as meaningful and worth pursuing; when enjoyment was threatened, doubts about persistence began to surface.

At the same time, this study extends existing research by demonstrating that enjoyment does not function as a stable emotional disposition. Prior quantitative studies have largely conceptualised enjoyment as a latent variable measured at a single point in time (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). In contrast, the narrative evidence presented here illustrates how enjoyment fluctuated across teaching situations and was closely tied to concrete classroom events, student engagement, and perceived instructional control. These findings suggest that the relationship between enjoyment and persistence cannot be fully captured through static, variable-centred measures alone. A narrative, process-oriented perspective reveals how enjoyment gains its sustaining power through its entanglement with lived experience over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Enjoyment as a Fragile Emotional Resource

A central theoretical contribution of this study lies in conceptualising enjoyment as a fragile emotional resource. In Yang's practicum experience, enjoyment initially emerged in response to students' engagement and visible learning outcomes, a pattern consistent with control-value accounts of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006). However, this enjoyment was repeatedly placed under strain by instructional uncertainty, classroom management challenges, and time constraints inherent in project-based learning contexts.

Importantly, the findings show that enjoyment was not automatically restored once challenges subsided. Instead, Yang engaged in reflective and interpretive work to sustain enjoyment under difficult conditions. By recalibrating her expectations of what constituted successful teaching and by learning to value smaller moments of progress, enjoyment was transformed into a more resilient resource. This process resonates with qualitative

research highlighting teachers' emotional regulation and meaning-making practices in demanding professional contexts (Han, Wei, & Wang, 2023; Zembylas, 2003).

This conceptualisation advances research on teacher emotions by moving beyond binary distinctions between positive and negative emotions. Consistent with recent calls to examine the complexity and coexistence of teachers' emotions (Frenzel et al., 2019), enjoyment in this study did not eliminate emotional strain; rather, it coexisted with difficulty and uncertainty. Its sustaining function lays in its capacity to make teaching feel meaningful despite emotionally challenging circumstances.

Reconceptualising Persistence as a Narrative Orientation

The findings also invite a reconceptualisation of how persistence is understood in pre-service teacher research. Persistence has often been operationalised as an intention or commitment measured through self-report scales (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Wang et al., 2015). While such approaches have generated important insights, they offer limited understanding of how persistence is formed through lived experience.

The present study illustrates persistence as a narrative orientation that develops through emotional experience. Yang's desire to continue teaching was expressed through reflective evaluations, imagined professional selves, and ongoing considerations of whether teaching represented a life she wished to pursue. From this perspective, enjoyment plays a mediating role between present experience and future commitment. Experiences of enjoyment provided experiential evidence that teaching could be meaningful and worthwhile, even when emotionally demanding.

Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to capturing this process, as it foregrounds how emotions are woven into teachers' stories about who they are becoming (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By focusing on narrative meaning-making, this study complements existing quantitative models of persistence and offers a process-oriented understanding of the emotional foundations of early career commitment.

Conclusion

This narrative inquiry examined how enjoyment functioned as an emotional resource shaping a pre-service teacher's desire to persist in teaching during a project-based learning practicum. By tracing Yang's emotional experiences across time, the study showed that enjoyment was neither a stable emotional state nor a simple by-product of successful teaching. Instead, enjoyment emerged as a fragile yet consequential resource that was repeatedly challenged, reinterpreted, and sustained through engagement with concrete classroom events and reflective meaning-making, extending existing understandings of teacher enjoyment in practice (Frenzel et al., 2019).

The study contributes to the literature on teacher emotions and persistence by offering a process-oriented, narrative perspective on findings that have largely been established through quantitative research. While prior studies have identified enjoyment as a significant predictor of pre-service teacher persistence (Audrin & Hascoët, 2024), this study illustrates how enjoyment operates as something that can be undermined by emotional strain but also repaired through reframing expectations and recognising meaningful moments of teaching. In doing so, the findings advance an understanding of persistence as a narrative orientation toward a possible professional future, rather than as a static intention measured at a single point in time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The findings also suggest implications for teacher education. In emotionally demanding pedagogical contexts such as project-based learning, teacher education programmes may need to attend more explicitly to the emotional sustainability of pre-service teachers. Providing structured opportunities for reflection on emotional experiences, offering mentoring that normalises emotional difficulty, and supporting pre-service teachers in

making sense of emotionally challenging teaching moments may help protect enjoyment as a resource that sustains the desire to teach.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a single-case narrative study, the findings are not intended to be generalisable but to provide insight into underlying emotional processes. Future research could explore how enjoyment functions as an emotional resource across different pedagogical contexts and among diverse groups of pre-service teachers, thereby further illuminating the emotional foundations of teacher persistence.

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