

Negative Emotions and the Negotiation of Professional Boundaries in Pre-service Teaching*

LIU Yuwei

Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

Teaching is widely recognised as an emotionally demanding profession, particularly during the early stages of learning to teach. While research on pre-service teachers' emotions often foregrounds the detrimental effects of negative emotions, less is known about how such emotions contribute to professional learning. This study uses qualitative thematic analysis to explore how 10 pre-service English teachers experience and interpret negative emotions during practicum and how these experiences shape professional boundary negotiation. Drawing on interviews and emotion diaries collected across a seven-week practicum, the findings show that frustration, helplessness, and loss of control surfaced when participants encountered limits of responsibility, authority, and role expectations. Rather than indicating incompetence, these experiences prompted reflection on what teaching can reasonably demand and supported more realistic, sustainable understandings of teaching.

Keywords: pre-service teacher, teacher emotions, professional boundaries

Introduction

Teaching is widely recognised as an emotionally demanding profession, particularly during the early stages of learning to teach. For pre-service teachers, practicum experiences often involve intense emotional challenges as they attempt to enact pedagogical ideals, manage classroom realities, and negotiate emerging professional roles (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). Feelings such as frustration, helplessness, and loss of control are commonly reported during practicum, reflecting the gap between expectations of teaching and the constraints of everyday classroom practice.

Existing research on negative emotions in pre-service teaching has tended to frame these experiences primarily as risks or problems to be mitigated. Previous studies have associated negative emotions with stress, reduced self-efficacy, and emotional exhaustion, often emphasising their potentially detrimental consequences for professional development (Hascher, 2010; Zembylas, 2003). While this body of work has generated valuable insights, it tends to conceptualise negative emotions primarily as indicators of difficulty or failure, rather than as experiences through which pre-service teachers come to understand the limits of teaching.

Less attention has been paid to how negative emotions shape pre-service teachers' interpretations of what teaching entails and where professional boundaries lie. In practicum contexts, moments of frustration or helplessness may compel pre-service teachers to confront the limits of their responsibility, authority, and role

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

expectations. Such emotionally charged situations often make the constraints of teaching more visible and prompt pre-service teachers to reflect on what can reasonably be expected of a teacher in complex classroom settings. From this perspective, negative emotions may function not merely as obstacles to be overcome, but as sites of professional boundary negotiation.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis approach to examine how negative emotions are experienced and interpreted by 10 pre-service English teachers during practicum. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and emotion diaries, the study focuses on recurring emotional situations through which professional boundaries are articulated, questioned, and redefined. It is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do pre-service teachers experience and interpret negative emotions during practicum?
- (2) How do these emotional experiences contribute to the negotiation of professional boundaries in learning to teach?

Literature Review

Negative Emotions in Pre-service Teaching

Teacher emotions have been widely recognised as a central component of teaching and teacher development, with practicum experiences often constituting emotionally intense periods for pre-service teachers (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). Within this literature, negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, anger, and helplessness have been repeatedly documented as common affective responses to classroom complexity, interpersonal tensions, and perceived gaps between pedagogical ideals and what is feasible in practice (Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan, & Titsworth, 2014).

Much of the empirical work on pre-service teacher emotions has adopted quantitative approaches, mapping the prevalence and correlates of discrete emotions and linking them to factors such as self-efficacy, perceived competence, and stress (Park & Ramirez, 2022). For example, Hascher (2010) found that negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration were closely associated with perceived instructional difficulties and heightened stress during practicum. However, this line of research often treats negative emotions as undesirable outcomes to be reduced, which can underplay the interpretive work through which pre-service teachers make sense of difficulty and learn what teaching can realistically demand (Maidment & Crisp, 2011).

Qualitative research has offered richer accounts of teachers' emotional lives by highlighting how emotions are socially situated, relationally produced, and shaped by institutional expectations and power relations (Zembylas, 2003). In language teacher education, narrative and reflective studies further show that emotional experiences are closely tied to teachers' evolving sense of self and professional agency (Golombek & Doran, 2014). Yet even in qualitative work, negative emotions are often discussed primarily in relation to vulnerability, struggle, or emotional labour, with comparatively less attention to what such emotions do for professional learning. In particular, it remains underexplored how negative emotions may serve as moments that make the limits of teaching visible and push pre-service teachers to negotiate professional boundaries in practice.

Professional Boundaries in Learning to Teach

Learning to teach involves more than acquiring pedagogical knowledge and instructional skills; it also entails developing a workable understanding of the teacher's role and its limits. For pre-service teachers, practicum experiences often bring heightened awareness of what teachers can and cannot reasonably do in

classroom contexts (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Flores & Day, 2006). Such boundaries may relate to responsibility, authority, and role expectations (e.g. Anderson, Lubig, & Smith, 2012). Developing a sense of these limits is a crucial yet often implicit aspect of professional learning.

Research on teacher identity has shown that becoming a teacher involves ongoing negotiation of role expectations and professional positioning (Beijaard et al., 2004). Studies have documented how pre-service teachers grapple with conflicting demands from students, mentors, and institutional norms, and how these tensions shape their emerging sense of self as teachers (Flores & Day, 2006; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). Within this body of work, boundary-related issues often appear indirectly, for instance in discussions of classroom management difficulties, role ambiguity, or perceived inadequacy. However, professional boundaries are rarely treated as an explicit analytic focus in studies of practicum experience.

This represents an important limitation, as boundary negotiation is central to developing sustainable professional practices. Research has suggested that when teachers hold overly expansive or idealised views of their responsibilities, they are more likely to experience emotional strain and professional vulnerability (Pillen et al., 2013). Conversely, learning to recognise the limits of responsibility and authority can support more realistic expectations and more sustainable forms of professional engagement (Flores & Day, 2006).

Despite its importance, little empirical research has examined how professional boundaries are negotiated through everyday emotional experiences during practicum. In particular, there has been limited attention to how moments of difficulty, such as when teaching does not proceed as planned, prompt pre-service teachers to articulate limits such as “what is beyond my control” or “what is not my responsibility” (Bloomfield, 2010). Addressing this gap requires analytic attention to the emotional situations in which professional boundaries become salient and are actively negotiated.

Negative Emotions as Sites of Boundary Negotiation

Bringing together research on negative emotions and professional boundaries suggests a productive analytic perspective: Negative emotional experiences may function as sites through which professional boundaries become visible and negotiable. In practicum contexts, negative emotions often arise precisely when pre-service teachers encounter constraints (Teng, 2017). These moments are emotionally charged because they expose the mismatch between what pre-service teachers hope to achieve and what is realistically possible in classroom practice.

From this perspective, negative emotions are not merely internal affective states, but relational and interpretive experiences shaped by situational demands and professional norms (Zembylas, 2003). Feelings of frustration, helplessness, or loss of control frequently signal encounters with professional limits, prompting pre-service teachers to reflect on questions such as how much responsibility they can assume, how much control they can exercise, and what falls outside their legitimate role. Rather than indicating personal failure, such emotions may initiate processes of sense-making through which professional boundaries are articulated and renegotiated.

Although previous qualitative studies have acknowledged that emotions are intertwined with teacher identity and agency, they have rarely examined negative emotions explicitly as moments of boundary negotiation. Much of the existing work focuses on how teachers cope with emotional difficulty or manage emotional labour, leaving less attention to how emotional disruption can clarify the contours of professional roles (Golombek & Doran, 2014). As a result, the potential contribution of negative emotions to professional learning remains underexplored.

Attending to negative emotions as sites of boundary negotiation makes it possible to develop a more process-oriented understanding of learning to teach. It foregrounds how professional boundaries emerge through repeated encounters with difficulty in everyday practice. Accordingly, the present study uses qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring emotional situations through which pre-service teachers negotiate boundaries of responsibility, authority, and role expectations during practicum.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative thematic analysis approach to examine how negative emotions function as sites of professional boundary negotiation during pre-service teachers' practicum experiences. Thematic analysis is well suited to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts while remaining attentive to contextual meaning and interpretive processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Rather than tracing individual narrative trajectories, this approach enabled analysis of shared emotional situations through which professional boundaries were negotiated (Dawadi, 2020). Consistent with a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, analysis was iterative and supported by reflexive memoing to document analytic decisions and evolving interpretations.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a public lower-secondary school in southern China that implemented an English dubbing project as part of a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum. Forty seventh-grade students participated in the project and worked in small groups to produce an 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 during the practicum. Their role involved guiding students' dubbing practice, providing feedback, and supporting group collaboration. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as all 10 pre-service teachers experienced the same practicum context and instructional demands. This shared context enabled comparison across participants and facilitated identification of recurring emotional situations relevant to professional boundary negotiation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a seven-week practicum period using multiple qualitative sources to capture participants' emotional experiences across time and contexts. Each pre-service teacher participated in three semi-structured interviews conducted at Week 1, Week 3, and Week 7, each lasting approximately 20-40 minutes. The interviews invited participants to recount emotionally challenging teaching episodes, reflect on moments of frustration or helplessness, and discuss how these experiences shaped their understanding of their professional role and responsibilities.

In addition, participants completed three emotion diaries at Week 1, Week 4, and Week 7. The diaries focused on emotionally salient incidents and encouraged participants to describe the situation, their emotional response, and any reflections on what the experience revealed about the limits of teaching. Classroom observations were conducted by the researcher to document instructional activities, student engagement, and situational constraints. Observational notes were used to contextualise interview and diary data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Analysis

began with repeated reading of interview transcripts and emotion diaries to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on episodes in which participants described negative emotions in relation to perceived limits of responsibility, authority, or role expectations.

Codes were examined across participants to identify recurring emotional situations and patterns of boundary negotiation. Through an iterative process, codes were clustered into candidate themes capturing shared ways in which negative emotions made professional boundaries visible. Themes were refined through constant comparison with the dataset to ensure coherence and analytic depth. Rather than treating emotions as predefined categories, analysis attended to how negative emotions were embedded in specific teaching situations and linked to participants' evolving understandings of professional limits.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents three themes identified through qualitative thematic analysis, illustrating how negative emotions functioned as sites of professional boundary negotiation during pre-service teachers' practicum experiences. Across the 10 participants, experiences of frustration, helplessness, and loss of control frequently coincided with reflections on the limits of responsibility, authority, and role expectations. While not all participants experienced each type of boundary-related difficulty, every participant reported at least one emotionally challenging episode that prompted reflection on what teaching could and could not reasonably demand.

Negotiating the Boundary of Responsibility: "I Can't Help Everyone"

Experiences related to the boundary of responsibility were reported by seven of the 10 participants, though with varying intensity and frequency. Four participants described recurring and emotionally intense frustration when they perceived an inability to meet all students' needs, particularly during moments when multiple groups required support simultaneously or when some students struggled despite repeated assistance.

One participant reflected on a particularly demanding session, stating, "I felt anxious and frustrated because everyone was asking for help at the same time, and I realised I simply couldn't take care of all of them" (Interview 2). Similar experiences were documented in the emotion diaries of these four participants, where frustration was closely linked to an emerging awareness of limited responsibility. One diary entry noted, "I wanted every group to do well, but I started to see that I couldn't fix everything for them" (Emotion diary, Week 4).

For three additional participants, frustration related to responsibility appeared less frequently and was typically confined to specific incidents rather than ongoing concern. These participants described moments when their expectations of teacher support exceeded practical constraints, leading to temporary emotional strain. Over time, they began to reinterpret such frustration as an indication of unrealistic assumptions about teacher responsibility. As one participant reflected in a later interview, "Maybe part of being a teacher is knowing when to step back, not when to do more" (Interview 3).

The remaining three participants did not emphasise frustration related to responsibility in their accounts. Instead, they focused on other emotional challenges during practicum, such as issues of authority or role ambiguity, suggesting that responsibility-related boundary negotiation was not equally salient for all participants.

Negotiating the Boundary of Authority: "I Can't Control Everything"

Issues related to authority and classroom control were reported by six participants, who described negative emotions such as helplessness, irritation, or discouragement when students ignored instructions, resisted

participation, or disrupted group work. These experiences were particularly salient given the participants' ambiguous status as pre-service teachers rather than full classroom teachers.

One participant described feeling "powerless" during a session when students continued chatting despite repeated reminders, explaining, "I realised they didn't see me as someone who could really enforce rules" (Interview 1). Emotion diaries written by these participants similarly captured moments when loss of control triggered emotional strain. As one diary entry stated, "When they didn't listen, I felt frustrated and started questioning whether I had any authority at all" (Emotion diary, Week 1).

In later interviews, most of these six participants reflected on the structural constraints of their authority as pre-service teachers. Rather than interpreting loss of control solely as personal inadequacy, they increasingly recognised it as a feature of their institutional position. One participant noted, "I used to think good teaching meant full control, but now I think it's more about managing what you can, not everything" (Interview 3). Through these emotionally challenging experiences, authority was renegotiated from an expectation of total control to a more situational and negotiated form of classroom influence.

The four participants who did not foreground authority-related frustration tended to report fewer behavioural challenges or described relying more heavily on the supervising teacher's presence, suggesting that authority-related boundary negotiation varied depending on situational and relational conditions.

Negotiating the Boundary of Role Expectations: "This Is Not My Role"

Negative emotions related to role expectations were reported by five participants, who described feelings of confusion, discomfort, or frustration when they were uncertain whether certain responsibilities fell within their remit as pre-service teachers. These situations often involved expectations that extended beyond instructional support, such as managing student conflicts or addressing behavioural issues typically handled by full-time teachers.

One participant explained, "I felt uncomfortable and stressed because I didn't know if I should step in or leave it to the main teacher" (Interview 2). Emotion diaries written toward the end of the practicum similarly documented role-related tension. One participant wrote, "I realised some things were beyond what I should be responsible for, even though I felt bad stepping back" (Emotion diary, Week 7).

For most of these participants, such emotionally charged situations prompted clearer articulation of role boundaries over time. Rather than viewing uncertainty as personal failure, they came to recognise it as part of learning to teach within institutional constraints. As one participant reflected, "Knowing what is not my role actually made me feel more confident, not less" (Interview 3).

The remaining five participants did not report strong role-related emotional conflict, often because their interactions with students were more narrowly focused on instructional tasks or because role expectations were clearly mediated by the supervising teacher. This variation suggests that role boundary negotiation was contingent on how responsibilities were distributed within the practicum context.

Discussion

This study examined how negative emotions functioned as sites of professional boundary negotiation during pre-service teachers' practicum experiences. By analysing recurring emotional situations across 10 university student participants, the findings extended existing research on teacher emotions by showing that negative emotions did not merely signal difficulty or vulnerability but actively contributed to how pre-service teachers learn the limits of teaching. In what follows, the discussion elaborates on three key theoretical insights.

Negative Emotions as Triggers for Boundary Negotiation

Consistent with previous research, negative emotions such as frustration and helplessness were common during practicum experiences (Hascher, 2010; Zembylas, 2003). However, rather than treating these emotions solely as detrimental outcomes, the present findings suggest that negative emotions often emerged at moments when pre-service teachers encountered professional limits. Experiences of frustration coincided with situations in which participants realised they could not support all students equally, exert full classroom control, or assume all role-related responsibilities.

From this perspective, negative emotions functioned as triggers for boundary negotiation. Emotional discomfort drew participants' attention to mismatches between their expectations of teaching and the structural constraints of classroom practice. In doing so, negative emotions prompted reflection on what teaching could reasonably demand.

Negotiating Professional Boundaries for Sustainable Teaching

The findings also highlight boundary negotiation as a crucial mechanism for developing sustainable professional understandings. Across themes related to responsibility, authority, and role expectations, participants gradually shifted from expansive and idealised views of teaching toward more bounded and realistic interpretations. Learning that one cannot help every student, control every classroom interaction, or assume every professional role enabled participants to reposition themselves more sustainably within their emerging professional identities.

This insight resonated with research on teacher identity that emphasised the importance of role clarity and realistic expectations in early career development (Beijaard et al., 2004; Flores & Day, 2006). The present study added to this literature by showing how such clarity was often achieved through emotionally difficult experiences rather than through formal instruction alone. Negative emotions helped make professional limits visible and negotiable, supporting more viable professional positioning.

Rethinking Negative Emotions in Teacher Education

A further contribution of this study lays in reframing how negative emotions were conceptualised within teacher education. Much existing research has positioned negative emotions as risks to be managed or reduced (e.g., Hascher, 2010; Zembylas, 2003). While emotional support remains important, the findings suggest that negative emotions may also function as informative signals that prompt reflection on professional limits.

From this perspective, teacher education programmes may benefit from creating spaces where pre-service teachers can reflect on emotionally challenging experiences and articulate emerging professional boundaries. Structured reflection, mentoring conversations, and guided discussion of practicum difficulties can help pre-service teachers interpret negative emotions as part of learning to teach, rather than as indicators of personal failure. Attending to boundary negotiation may thus support more realistic and sustainable professional learning trajectories.

Conclusion

This study examined how negative emotions were experienced and interpreted by pre-service teachers during practicum, focusing on how such emotions became moments through which professional boundaries were negotiated. Drawing on qualitative thematic analysis of interviews and emotion diaries from 10 pre-service teachers, the findings show that emotions such as frustration and helplessness were closely tied to encounters with the limits of responsibility, authority, and role expectations in teaching.

Rather than indicating incompetence or insufficient preparation, these negative emotional experiences often marked points at which participants reassessed what teaching could reasonably demand of them. Through emotionally challenging situations, pre-service teachers began to recognise that they could not support every student equally, control all classroom interactions, or assume every professional responsibility. In this sense, negative emotions contributed to the development of more realistic and sustainable understandings of teaching, grounded in everyday practice rather than idealised expectations.

By conceptualising negative emotions as sites of professional boundary negotiation, this study contributes a process-oriented perspective to research on teacher emotions, highlighting that learning to teach involves not only acquiring skills and confidence, but also learning where professional limits lie and how to work within them. Attending to these moments of emotional difficulty offers insight into how pre-service teachers gradually position themselves within the profession.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a specific practicum context with a small participant group, which limits transferability. Future research could examine boundary negotiation across varied instructional settings and stages of teacher development, and its longer-term consequences.

Overall, this study suggests that negative emotions deserve greater analytic attention in teacher education research, not only as challenges to be managed, but as meaningful experiences through which pre-service teachers learn what it means to teach in sustainable ways.

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