

Emotionally Significant Situations Experienced by Physical Education Teachers in Training

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Abstract

This research aims to identify the types of emotionally significant situations experienced by Physical Education Teachers in Training (PETTs) during the first year of their pedagogical specialization. Furthermore, the valence, the primary emotions, the intensity, the sharing and the effects of each situation is evaluated. Two emotionally significant situations are collected with a narrative questionnaire that 139 PETTs, representing three flights of students ($n_{\text{flight 1}} = 45$, $n_{\text{flight 2}} = 53$, $n_{\text{flight 3}} = 41$) and aged from 25 to 36 years old ($n_{\text{females}} = 47$ and $n_{\text{males}} = 92$) filled out. Data describes 278 experiences treated with an inductive method that described 12 types of situations (six with negative valence, five with positive valence and the type "Student with special needs" has both, positive and negative). Other areas of significance are analyzed with a cross-tabulated tables and descriptive scales method. Negative situations that lead to negative emotions (181/278) were in particular related to the transgression of rules by students and the threat student's physical integrity. The positive situations (79/278) are linked to motivated students and student's Learning. Some situations (18/278) are beginning negatively but the issue during the lesson is positive. Most PETTs reported that these situations (233/278) have positively contributed to their professional development. Finally, these results challenge traditional teaching methods and open up the potential value in hybridised coursework model of PETTs, particularly when taking into account the subjective nature of the teaching profession.

Keywords: Physical Education, trainee teacher, emotional situation, professional development

The topic of the emotions of teachers has garnered a great deal of attention since the late 1990s (Hargreaves, 1998, 2000). In more recent years, the phenomenon of novice teacher drop-out is taking on worrying proportions in Western school systems, particularly in the United States (Craig, 2017). This early "professional dropout" is also increasing in other countries and qualitative studies tend to relate it to what is described as emotional overload at the beginning of a career (Harfitt, 2015).

An important number of research studies oscillate between a causalist logic (emotion separated from cognition is often presented as a disruptive element of human thoughtful and effective activity) and a conception which Damasio (1994), defines emotions as inseparable from the other dimensions of activity and indispensable to taking rational decisions. Other authors defend a socio-cultural perspective of emotions (Muller Mirza, 2016) by considering emotions as a set of socially and culturally mediated processes. Indeed, like thinking, emotions move from an intersychic to an intrapsychic plane. Vygotskiï (as cited in Veresov, 2014) emphasizes the centrality of emotions in psychic life, learning and development. Hargreaves (1998, 2000) does not separate the issue of teachers' emotions from their actions, cognition, goals and ability to achieve their goals.

This ambiguous position of the literature regarding the place and nature of emotion in teaching work is

reinforced by the multiplicity of concepts used by authors to describe the emotional dimension of teachers' professional activity. In order to avoid conceptual confusion and delimit our research object, we will remember that "emotional skills" are the result of learning, corresponding to a recognition of the emotions of others as well as a certain number of actions (grouped according to the authors into "intelligence", "regulation" or "work"), participating in professional knowledge whose different components are inseparable (emotional and cognitive). This knowledge is learned and cannot be acquired independently of the situation in which it arises (Ria, Sève, Saury, Theureau and Durand 2010). They are also embedded in a culture, in accordance with current norms (Gong, Chai, Duan, Zhong and Jiao, 2013).

We can assume, with Clot (2008), that professional development cannot be considered in the absence of the "ability to be affected". Therefore, knowing when the PETT is affected through emotionally significant situations appears to us as a central issue (Descoedres and Méard, 2019). It is probably the opportunity to experience strong and unpredictable emotions (Ria et al., 2010) in the classroom that gives the teaching profession such an attractive human dimension despite the difficulties of its exercise. However, we believe it is necessary to identify the valence, the types of experiences, their intensity, the sharing and the future of these experiences.

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Nevertheless, existing research fails to explore the nature of the situations that affects PETTs during teaching, nor the impact of these situations on their professional development. Whereas prior research on beginning teachers has often focused on problems and emphasized beginning teachers' lack of competence, with emotional exhaustion, survival or coping, (Johnson et al., 2014), the current study takes a different approach.

Existing literature explored the influences and functions of emotions and how the PETTs habit to cope with their emotions during the first years of their career teacher, even the factors influencing the professional development in teacher education. Our emphasis is on understanding the types of emotionally significant situations lived by PETTs during their first year of learning teaching while they are supervised by a mentor. Therefore, the key research objectives are to identify the valence, enumerate and categorize the types of emotionally significant situations experienced by the PETTs during their first year at the university of teacher education, define the links between those emotionally significant situations and the different types, emotions and their intensities, the sharing of those situations, and finally, their effect on PETTs' development.

Method

Study design

A qualitative longitudinal research design based on a combination of data collected from a narrative questionnaire and a clinical activity analysis was adopted. In this paper, we focus on the first method.

Participants

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 139 PETTs, 47 females and 92 males, representing three flights of students, during the first year of their pedagogical specialization at the University of Teacher Education in Lausanne (Switzerland). The first flight included 45 students, the second flight 53 and the third flight included 41. All volunteers, aged from 25 to 36 years old, had graduated from the University of Lausanne in Physical Education. No exclusion criteria were applied. During this pedagogical study, they learned to teach Physical Education in secondary schools (students from 10 to 16 years old) and in college (16 to 19 years old). They also had lectures at university three and a half days every week. The remainder of the time, they taught children in classes, supervised by a mentor.

Procedure

PETTs reported, as in previous research (Petiot, Visioli and Desbiens, 2015; Petiot, Desbiens and Visioli, 2014), two emotionally significant situations experienced during their PE teaching, which could be classified in positive, negative or moving from one to the other. The data collection process was scheduled for autumn

2015, 2016 and 2017. The instructions were given orally to the students by the same lecturer that subsequently gave respondents 40 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. The questionnaire took stock of five main areas of significance: the valence, the emotion (Parrott's primary emotions) and the intensity, the sharing and the effects from each situation. The author decided to remove the emotion love which appeared inadequate in the teacher profession. We also asked in the questionnaires the level (1 = low, 2 = medium and 3 = high). As Parrott argues, the primary emotions are deeper, more intense and harder to deal with. This internal research funded by HEP Vaud was validated by the institution's Management Committee in accordance with the Research Ethics Code for Universities of Teacher Education. The data obtained were stored in a safe.

Data analysis

This study first examined the primary emotions of Parrott (2001) who proposed a comprehensive list that organizes emotions into a dimensional tree structure where basic emotions (surprise, joy, anger, sadness and fear) are divided into secondary emotions, and tertiary ones. Subsequently, all the answers pertaining to reported situations, valence, emotions, intensity, sharing and effects were transcribed in chronological order and anonymized (Step 1). In order to evaluate the important diversity of these complex data, the 278 emotionally significant situations were categorized according to the procedures of an inductive theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The authors specify that these sets should be designated initially according to original designations derived from the field (Step 2: *in vivo* calls). After specifying each category (Step 3: *axial coding*), the researcher takes a step aside and conceptualizes. This step of *selective coding* (Step 4) aims at defining a central category from which one seeks to relate the set of properties of all the other categories discovered previously. This abstraction process leads to the identification of a *key link* (Step 5). Two researchers collaborated in the data analysis, step by step, during a period of several months. Below is one example illustrating the five steps of coding.

PETT n°134, situation 134b: Step 1, transcription of reported situation, valence, emotions, intensity, sharing and effects.

Lesson that degenerates, loss of control of the boys' class due to the presence of a disruptive student (student who gradually integrates the lesson) that influences the whole class. Notes in all teachers' lockers and students' diaries. The following week, the students behave perfectly (the disruptive student is no longer present).

Valence: Negative. Emotion: surprise 2, fear 1, anger 3, sadness 2. Sharing with others: colleague. Effect (2): I question myself; I try to know what to improve, which errors have been made in order to

avoid them, but I also realize that we are not always responsible for everything.

The second step, called *in vivo* coding, has been entitled “Loss of control of the school class due to a disruptive student”, while the third step (axial coding) has been entitled “Voluntary transgression in

Table 1

Example of the Successive Steps of the Procedure

| N° | Emotions and intensities | <i>In vivo</i> coding | Axial coding | Selective coding | Key link |
|-----|--|---|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 92a | Surprise 2 Fear 1 Anger 3 Sadness 2 | Loss of control of the class, due to a disruptive student | Voluntary transgression in individual opposition | Rules violation by student(s) | Sensation of powerlessness |

Results

Valence and types of emotionally significant situations

The findings about the valence reported that PETTs experienced 65% of negative (181/278), 29% of positive (79/278) emotionally significant situations and 7% (18/278) that were negative at the beginning, but with a positive issue (see figure 1):

Student sporadic, regularly dispensed (...). I gave her a special program for injured students in PE. She was surprised but she had to do it. Since that time, she keeps on working on this program she continued to work and manage herself independently. Almost all the time, she feels pleasure and seems much more active (situation 43b).

The frequency of each type of emotionally significant situations

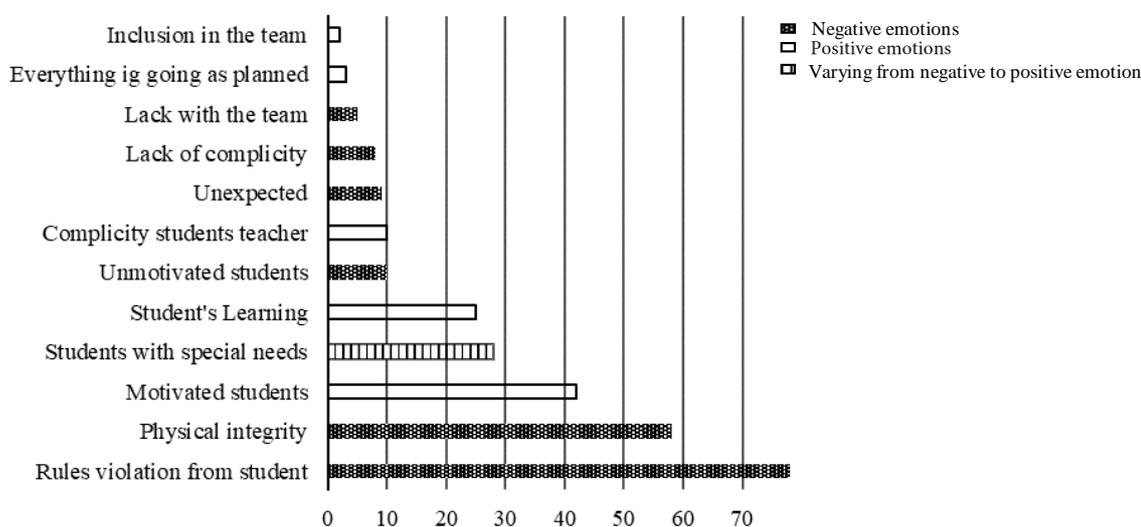


Figure 1. The frequency of each type of emotionally significant situations.

This procedure led us to distinguish 12 types of emotionally significant situations lived by the PETTs (see figure 1). Concerning those emotional situations with negative valence, some revealing categories emerged: the “rule violation from one or more students” 28% (78/278) represented the most common one. For example, when a group of students disrupts classes or when a pupil explicitly refuses to practice and prefers to talk and laugh with friends, like when “Three students bothered the group by doing anything (hanging on the goal, shooting a ball anywhere, etc.). I had to take them out of the class for

the last ten minutes and discuss with them” (86a). Other situations concern “unmotivated behaviors” 4% (10/278), when for example:

During a basketball game, a student sits on the bench. I guess he is feeling bad, but he responds to me simply, “I’m tired of playing, I stop, I’m tired». I talk to him a couple of minutes, I try to encourage him, to motivate him finally he gets up. I felt anger and fear, because I was afraid that he would stay there and not move (35b).

“Physical integrity” 20% (58/278) is also an important part of the emotionally significant situations lived by the PETTs:

Also, when the students seemed safe, an accident happened. I insist on the danger of that event and on how to be safe in this and other activities. When students are too engaged, I ask them to mind to the safety rules (6a).

When an accident happens, when the students refuse to work or break the rules, it's very surprising for the PETTs. However, the findings show that they were also astonished by many other situations they consider unpredictable (9/278):

Monday morning, I am informed gyms are not available (storage of an event that took place during the weekend). Five minutes later, new information: my colleague was ill, and I was supposed to teach to 40 students outside where the weather was rainy and cold (47a).

Instead of that, the emotional situations with positive valence that impacted on the PETT are mainly “motivated students' actions” (42/278) and “students learning” (25/278). On this point, it is important to highlight that “particular students' actions”, because of unanticipated disabilities or invisible or overlooked health problems always cause intense emotion for the PETTs. Most of the time, this causes upset because “the harm has been done” (the student failed or could not participate) but sometimes significant sense of joy increases empowerment of the PETT:

An overweight student who had to take a race test and had a lot of trouble running. I supported him during all previous lessons, sometimes running with him. In the end, he managed to do the assessment without walking (26b).

Links between those emotionally significant situations and the different types, the emotions and their levels

The results of this study show no recurrent link between the type of situations and such types of emotions. The surprise is present in more than 80 % of the emotional situations evoked by the PETTs. The surprise can be present by positive or negative situations and has been mentioned with another emotion (positive or negative), never alone.

On the negative side, anger was present (43.9%) as well as fear (30.6%) and sadness (28.8%). The sadness is felt at a low intensity. Anger is felt at a middle intensity. Surprise is felt at high or middle levels of intensity. All those emotions seem to be linked to the sensation of powerlessness.

The emotion with positive valence is joy (32.4%) that is linked to the sensation of empowerment. Joy is felt when students engaged and when they learnt. When the PETTs felt joy, this joy is felt at a relatively strong intensity:

This lesson was difficult to manage because of the complexity of different levels and problematic situations. However, some students outdid themselves and they performed the skills they thought impossible

for them at the beginning of the cycle. I felt a strong sense of joy after this lesson (24b).

The sharing of those emotionally significant situations

Almost all emotionally significant situations lived by the PETTs are discussed with one or several persons (260/278). More than half of them are shared with the tutor (151/278) or with the colleagues (144/278), both being the preferred interlocutors selected by PETTs to discuss an emotionally significant situation. Some are shared with the administrative hierarchy (31/278) and a certain number with non-professional interlocutors like a spouse (98/278) or friends (93/278). Unprofessional persons also offer opportunities to “share” an emotionally significant situation.

The reported effects of the emotionally significant situations on the professional development of PETTs

The last question concerns the effects of those emotionally significant situations on the professional development. More than 83% of the PETTs declare that emotionally significant situations (233/278) had a positive influence on their progress in the teacher profession: “*Each error is an apprenticeship, you need to reflect on your practice, and they draw the right conclusions so you can adjust and make changes for the next time*” (52b). The change, the adaptation after an emotionally significant situation can be reflected in the lesson plan, in the way they organize the lesson, or how they give instructions. The PETTs react mostly positively after what happened, even if it's a negative situation: “*Faced with this failure, I had to quickly change my teaching and my choices, to find solutions*” (2a).

The situations experienced negatively or very negatively do not seem to be an obstacle to the professional development as only a very small number of emotionally significant situations experienced lead to a harmful effect on the teachers' professional development (3/278). The PETTs declare also that some situations don't have any effect on them (42/278). In those cases, the singular nature of the situation is highlighted, like when “*a student arriving at school with a weapon the day after the Paris bombings. The weapon was fake, but made of metal, of real size and weight*” (42a). This situation, although emotionally significant for the PETT (anger, intensity 2/3 and fear, intensity 2/3), did not, according to the participant, have any effect on his development because it remains an isolated case.

The situations experienced as emotionally negative during transgressions of rules or problems related to physical integrity are reported most frequently. Those that lead to the most perceived effect: the same is true for the motivated actions of students for school work and the actual learning of students on the positive side. Figure 2 illustrates the declared positive effect that the vast majority of situations experienced have on the development of the activity of PETTs and the absence

of a perceived effect. It bears to note that the type of situation where there is a lack of complicity between the teacher and the students is the only type of

situation where the lack of perceived effect is greater than the perceived positive effect.

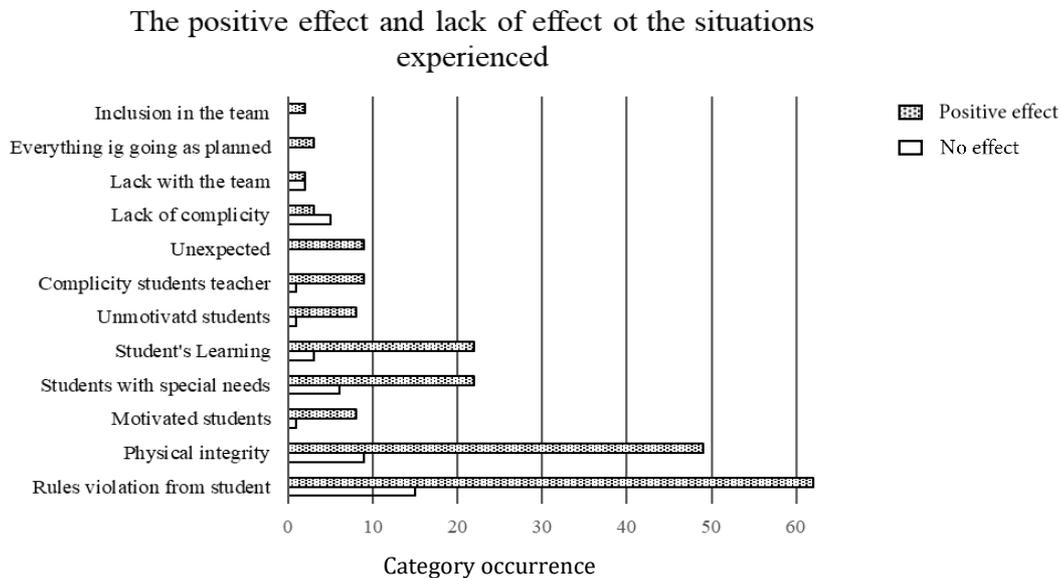


Figure 2. The positive effect and lack of effect of each type of emotionally significant situations.

The emotional professional life of PETTs

The results of this study reveal four sensations. The first sensation (key link, Step 5) linked with negative valence is the majority of the situations reported by the PETTs (181/278). It seems to translate the idea of an inability to deal with the emotionally significant situation: situations with students who categorically refuse to participate, or students with special needs, students who are mostly not succeeding or in case of an accident, or when the students break rules. This sensation of powerlessness, of not being able to deal with the reality, is sometimes associated with a second sensation: the lack of recognition from the team (5/278) or from the students (lack of complicity between the PETT and the pupils, 8/278). Therefore, situations where students transgress (28.1%) or refuse to practice (3.6%) are presented not only as situations where the PETT feels unable to deal with the reality, but also as deviations from the basic educational contract that deny the role and status assigned to the PETT. Even with this sensation, the effect is positive on the professional development. The author distinguishes the situations with negative valence (181/278) from the situations with negative effects (3/278).

On the other hand, all the situations with positive valence give PETTs an impression of overcoming difficulties and achieving specific teaching objectives: motivated students, even those with special needs. The ubiquitous impression that arises from these situations is a sensation of empowerment. Feelings of joy based on success are also linked to a sensation of being

recognized professionally, sometimes explicitly by colleagues (2/278) and students (10/278).

Discussion

The main research objectives were to identify the valence and categorize the types of emotionally significant situations experienced by the PETTs. The most important finding in the present study is that two thirds of the emotions in PETTs teaching are felt as negative. However, there are also many events (one third) felt as positive. In this regard, Chen (2016) found that most pleasant emotions are related to classroom and collegial interactions, whereas the unpleasant ones are associated with educational policy, changes, and imbalance in teachers' lives. Instead of this, the present study concludes that negative emotions can also be linked to classroom situations, because the negative emotional situations experienced by PETTs, as addressed in our study, relate to "risks to physical integrity", "unmotivated students' actions", "unpredictability", "rules violation from one or more students". The emotion of anger is prevalent over all negative emotions, often linked with difficulties to deal with the class reality. Furthermore, among these sensations, it appears, as Ria and colleagues suggest, that surprise is strongly present by the trainee teacher (2010). We observe that it appears in more than 80% of the emotional events reported by PETTs. Surprise, something unexpected during the lesson, leads to the shock of reality (Kim and Cho, 2014), to unpredictability (Bullough, 2009). Such surprise is at the same time the signature of inexperience of the beginning teacher and, in class, it risks making

incompetence visible to all, including students. The study results draw a kind of pendulum swing between sensations of powerlessness, accentuated (or not) by a lack of recognition and, on the opposite end, a sensation of empowerment, accentuated (or not) by a recognition from the teachers and the students.

Consequently, our study shows that, most of the time, the emotional situations lived by the PETTs, the negative and the positive ones, have a beneficial effect on the teaching. This allows to propose, like Vygotskii (1998), explicitly inspired by Spinoza, that it is vain to imagine or hope for an “emotionless activity”. Moreover, in the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the emotional moment is understood through the concept of *perezhivanie* (usually translated as “unforgettable experience”) which is presented as a necessary condition of human development (*ibid.*). In that framework, emotion, cognition and action, are integrally connected in the “activity” and its development, and are the real driving forces of the action (Damasio, 1994).

From there, the question is rather to understand under which conditions this empowerment is possible. In other words, how does the PETT cope with all those emotional situations? About that question of development process “after” the emotion, our study highlights that sharing with others seems to be very important because we notice that, in any case, almost all emotional situations experienced by the PETTs (260/278) are discussed with somebody (Vygotskii, 1998). According to Lindqvist and colleagues (2017), the more experience PETTs gain, the less support they need. Half of them are shared with the tutor or with the colleagues. But sometimes, beginning teachers adopt the strategy of silence regarding an emotional situation (Lassila and Uitto, 2016). Specifically, in the 278 emotionally significant situations reported in our study, the findings show that discussing with others about those moments is part of the profession and that sharing with professional or non-professional people seems to be a good way to cope with one’s own emotions.

It seems clear that students and teachers talk about seeking guidance as a tactic in resolving their professional inadequacy at the beginning of their teaching careers. Teachers in training experienced tensions about professional identity (Pillen, Beijaard and den Brok, 2013) like our category “gap with the

teamwork” which leads to a lack of recognition. As our key link allows us to presume, the lack of recognition is related to the lack of professional identity that PETTs feel during the first year of teaching. For example, some PETTs are included in the teamwork and others are not. The challenges are not only related to classroom discipline problems, individual differences among students, workload and work pressure (Kyriacou and Kunc, 2007), but also to finding and to negotiating a place of their own in the school’s culture.

The present study leads to an image of emotionally significant situations felt by PETTs in South West Switzerland, from a *bottom-up* built categorization. As Schutz (2014) observed, teaching is an emotional practice and the actions of trainee teachers are situated at a crossroad of intense emotions. This study had several limitations and opened new horizons for research. Firstly, the results obtained should be extended to include work in other contexts and in other school subjects. It is likely that the specificities of Physical Education accentuate certain phenomena, and may shine a particular light on sources of emotions like insecurity problems or the excesses of students who break the rules which may not be as prevalent in studies related to other subjects. In addition, given the large amount of data and despite the careful attention of two researchers over several months, the categories built by an inductive theory deserve to be subjected to more systematic experiments to check their fidelity and their relevance.

At the very least, this study does not provide a final answer to the following questions: how does the subjective emotional part of the profession contribute to the PETTs activity development? Why, following strong emotional experiences, do some novice teachers abandon the profession and why do others develop? Nevertheless, thanks to a qualitative longitudinal study, this research enables us to better understand the nature of discussions and silences, of PETTs, their requests for help and the effects of isolation, as well as the nature of the best kind of support that can be provided for improving the training of these beginning teachers. In conclusion, this study shows that emotionally significant situations seem not to lead PETTs to early drop-out because they are discussed, and they are at the root of the thinking that leads to change.

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