

# Expert EFL Teachers' Emotion in Professional Contexts in China

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**Abstract**—The emotional experience of teachers in their professional contexts plays a pivotal role in their career development. Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Hargreaves' (2001) Emotional Geography Theory, drawing on interviews, journals and documents, this paper explores the emotion of expert middle school EFL teachers in their relationships with students, colleagues, administrators and the sociocultural contexts, and five dimensions of teachers' emotional geographies are discussed. In addition, the author discusses the significance of exploring teacher emotion and providing training programs in teacher education and development, and calls on attention to teachers' emotion.

**Index Terms**—teacher emotion, Ecological Systems Theory, professional context, emotional geography, EFL teacher

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the “2022 National Statistical Bulletin on Educational Development” released by China's Ministry of Education on July 5, 2023, there are 201,600 compulsory K-9 schools across the country. Compulsory education enrolled 34.3277 million students, and 10.6546 million full-time teachers. Among them, there are over four million full-time teachers in junior high schools, with a student-teacher ratio of 12.72:1. China's General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out in the report of the 20th National Congress: “Enhance teachers' morality, develop teachers' professional competence, and promote respect for teachers”. Ye (2016) pointed out: “Why do I want to be an educator? Because the richness and complexities of education need to be realized, understood, and expressed with all the richness of the researcher's life. Engaging in pedagogical research makes people constantly eager to learn. The lives of educators become richer, more beautiful, and meaningful”. Paying attention to the emotions of teachers in their professional relationships plays a pivotal role in cultivating teachers' expertise and improving education throughout the world. Over the past two decades, teachers' emotion has received increasing attention in the field of education studies (Hargreaves, 2001; Zembylas, 2007; Gu & Gu, 2015; Wu, 2012; Zhu, 2005; Zhu & Wang, 2019). The focus of teacher emotion research has gradually shifted from examining teachers' emotional experiences in teaching (Hargreaves, 2001; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003) to teachers' professional identity and power relations in schools (Zembylas, 2007; Van & Wheatley Slegers, 2005; Lee & Yin, 2011; Hochschild, 1990). More researchers have started studying teachers' emotions, emphasizing the close relationship between emotions and factors such as teaching practice and identity. Furthermore, they emphasize that emotion has a direct impact on teachers' lives (Xu, 2013).

Palmer (1998) pointed out that teacher emotion is the feeling generated between teachers and students in the teaching process, which doesn't exist in isolation but is complex and dynamic. Zembylas (2003) believed that teachers' emotions reflect teachers' subjective psychological processes in professional situations. It is not only the internal experience of teachers but also the product of cultural, social, and political interactions. Hu and Wang (2014) emphasized that “teacher's emotion” refers to teachers' subjective experiences and behaviors in the workplace. It is not solely a reflection of the teacher's psychological processes; it is also externally manifested. This can be noted as a state or as a dynamic process (Hargreaves, 1998; Cross & Hong, 2012), and teachers' emotion is influenced by “cultural, social, and political relations” (Zembylas, 2007). However, research on the emotions of language teachers remains insufficient. Zhou (2023) argued that studies on language teacher emotion are mainly focused on the relationship between language teachers' emotions and their agency, identity, curriculum reform or the educational system (Pekrun, 2006). Therefore, he contended that language teachers' emotion involves both the teachers' internal experiences and explicit attitudes towards the development of the language subject, their self-efficacy, and professional identity as well as educational reforms in the workplace.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

### A. Theoretical Framework

This study is based upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Hargreaves' Emotional Geography theory. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is a comprehensive framework that examines the complex interactions between individuals and their environment. Bronfenbrenner proposed a hierarchy of ecological systems, namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, each of which plays a role in shaping an

individual's growth and experiences. The microsystem is the immediate environment in which an individual lives. It includes interactions with family, peers, school, and other local settings. These close relationships have a direct impact on the individual's development and experiences. The mesosystem encompasses the connections and interactions between various microsystems. For example, the relationship between a child's family and school can influence the child's development as these two systems interact and influence each other. The exosystem involves external contexts that indirectly affect an individual's development. This can include the workplace of a parent, community resources, and societal institutions. The macrosystem refers to the broader cultural and societal norms, values, and beliefs that influence the other systems. This level encompasses cultural ideologies, economic systems, and social norms that shape individuals' experiences and opportunities.

Hargreaves posited emotional geographies which covered five dimensions: moral, sociocultural, professional, physical and political. Sociocultural geography refers to the ways in which sociocultural factors such as race, culture, gender and the way people express and experience emotions can distance or unite people. Moral geography is concerned with the condition of involved parties to either pursue common goals and feel a sense of accomplishment collectively or to become defensive about their own goals and disagree with those of others. Professional geography occurs when the parties' definitions and standards of professionalism either divide them or allow them to collaborate on professional issues. Physical geography is concerned with time and space and how they can bring and keep people together, or how they can reduce these relationships to a string of episodic interactions. Political geography is concerned with power and status disparities that can either distort interpersonal communication or serve to protect and empower others (Hargreaves, 2001a, 2001b).

### B. Research Methods

#### (a). Narrative Inquiry of Teacher's Emotion

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) stated that narrative research is a way to comprehend and interpret experiences. In recent years, with the paradigm shift in social science research, the interaction between narratives and personal experiences in various social, cultural, and political contexts has once again gained research prominence. Because emotion is contextual, this study utilizes narrative inquiry to investigate teachers' emotions.

#### (b). Research Site and Participants

The researcher is an associate professor with 17 years of teaching experience, who was also working as an administrator at the affiliated middle school of the university (F Middle School as the pseudonym hereafter). During the past five years, the researcher extensively observed the professional relationships of EFL teachers in the school. With saturated information, two expert teachers Daisy and Lily (pseudonyms) from the school were purposefully selected for this study. Both teachers had over 15 years of teaching experience and had received numerous honors and awards from the school or the local bureau of education. Selection was based on the following factors: firstly, the researcher and the participants had established mutual trust during the past years; secondly, both participants demonstrated expertise and enthusiasm for their careers, and achieved remarkable teaching outcomes; additionally, female teachers take up the majority number of language teachers in schools, so focusing on female English teachers will help with an in-depth exploration of their professional emotions, enhance insights into effective teacher education in the future; last but not the least, given that different school cultures would significantly impact teachers' emotional experiences, choosing teachers from the same school is favorable in analyzing emotions within a specific context (Zembylas, 2003).

#### (c). Data Collection and Analysis

This study employs a narrative case study approach, adopting various methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, reflection journals, classroom observations etc. In order to make in-depth interviews with both teachers, the interviews were conducted in Chinese and transcribed verbatim and later translated into English for analysis. Based upon content analysis (Manning & Cullum-Swam, 1994), the study analyzes teachers' emotions in professional relationships.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. The Stories of Two Teachers

After graduating from university, both Daisy and Lily became teachers in their local public schools. Daisy, after working for eight years, came to Guangdong due to her husband's job transfer. Firstly she worked in a private middle school, and soon she became very popular among students. For some reason, she quit the job several years later and came to work in F Middle School till today. Lily also began her career in a local public school, then she quickly developed from a novice to a promising experienced teacher in the school. After seven years, she moved to F School, and gradually became an expert teacher over the past years.

### B. Teacher's Emotion in the Microsystem

#### (a). Teacher-Student Interaction: Teacher-Student Emotional Geography

Effective interaction between teachers and students, both inside and outside the classroom, can significantly enhance teaching and learning. Daisy's long-standing practice of communicating with students, understanding their interests, and dealing with their difficulties helped with a positive classroom environment. She designed various classroom activities, including games, field investigation and presentations, greatly promoted participation and collaboration among students. The story illustrates how her approach cultivated enthusiasm, effective communication, and a positive teacher-student relationship.

Compared with students in the past decades, students nowadays are much more active, with strong desire to express themselves. They are knowledgeable and brave enough to challenge "authorities" like teachers and books. Even though I am very familiar with the textbooks, I would design different classroom activities for different classes every year based on their learning situations. They are so creative! Take the last classroom performance, for instance. There was a scene where a character died, and each group designed different ways for the character to die. The performance was vivid and lively. Some students might not express themselves as well on the spot as their peers, but each student can show their strengths. (Daisy, July 22, 2022)

Similarly, Lily's account of addressing disruptive behaviors during a school drama rehearsal shows her ability to handle negative situations with rapport and creating a positive atmosphere.

On the day of our first rehearsal for the drama competition, which is a significant event for the school, all classes were waiting for their turn in the auditorium. When it was our class's turn, halfway through our performance, two boys suddenly became excited and started yelling and laughing, disrupting the performance of their fellow students nearby. I was extremely angry at the time and immediately shouted at them to stop. Nevertheless, our rehearsal was still disrupted. Moreover, with so many classes present, including the principal, my colleagues, and some parents, I felt extremely humiliated and outrageous.

After the rehearsal, I gathered the naughty students. It turned out that one of the boys accidentally slipped while performing, and the other boy joined in. I told them not being irresponsible like this next time. Before school ended, they came to me and apologized. During the second rehearsal and the final performance, they were both very focused and committed. After the formal performance, I praised them for their performance. Adolescents care a lot about their face and reputation, and I could tell they were both very glad that I respected them and saved their face. (Lily, July 21, 2022)

Although Lily obviously had negative emotions at the time, she knew about teenagers. Instead of scolding them in public further, she gave them a chance to behave better and motivated them to perform well and later saved face for them. This effectively resolved the conflict and promoted mutual understanding between the teacher and the students.

From the above examples, it can be seen that whether a teacher can have positive emotional experiences in teacher-student interactions partly depends on whether students understand and appreciate the teacher's efforts, as well as whether they make progress in their academic performance. When Daisy's students made progress, she felt joy from work; and when Lily's students appreciated her dedication, she also had positive emotional experiences. The traditional Chinese concept of the teacher-student relationship highlights the teacher's dominant position, emphasizing the dignity and respect of the teacher. Confucius' belief on teacher-student relationship is centered around "benevolence," advocating respect for teachers and love for students, fostering harmony and affection. However, the "love" and "affection" is not unconditional but constrained by "ritual" (Huang, 2010). Li (2016) pointed out that Confucius and his students shared a relationship of moral and emotional community, including emotional and communal ties (Li, 2016). Lily's anger due to students disrupting discipline illustrates the importance of "psychological rewards" (Huang, 2010) in narrowing the moral distance between teachers and students.

Simultaneously, political distance is also a key factor determining the teacher-student emotional relationship. In traditional Chinese culture, the teacher-student relationship is akin to a father-son relationship. The saying "one day as a teacher, a lifetime as a father" confirms the superior and privileged position of teachers over students. Confucius, as the "teacher for all ages," is deeply revered by his numerous disciples. Therefore, in the context of Chinese education, political distance becomes an indispensable part of the teacher-student power dynamics. Furthermore, the extended time teachers and students spend together in school and the reduction of physical distance also helps teachers gain positive emotional experiences.

#### (b). *Interaction Between Colleagues: Emotional Geography Among Colleagues*

Relationships between colleagues in the teaching profession balance between intimacy and distance. Daisy's experience underscores the value of collaboration and mutual support within a team, fostering a favorable environment for teaching and research. Lily's straightforward style and decisive approach occasionally led to differing opinions among colleagues, but her adeptness at resolving conflicts maintained harmonious work atmosphere.

I've been working in collective communities since I started working until now. When I first arrived in Guangzhou, the English teachers' offices in our school were full of young people, and we were all full of energy and often worked overtime until eleven or even twelve o'clock in the evening. We were engrossed in doing pedagogical research and reform. We took the initiative in using Oxford and National Geographic as teaching materials. I was among the first teachers to get school and provincial grants for teaching research. And then I became the English team leader, and we applied for and got grants for several research projects and published journal papers. As a result, our team rapidly became well known in Guangzhou, and thousands of

parents and students applied for our school every year. After coming to F School, I also get on good terms with my colleagues. The school has provided me with an excellent platform so that I can communicate with and learn from the senior teachers. Now as the team leader, my colleagues support me and we work together to help young colleagues participate in teaching competitions, engage in teaching design, and help students do better. I really enjoy the atmosphere in our office. (Daisy, July 20, 2022)

The collaborative teaching and research system at F School encouraged teacher cooperation rather than competition. It greatly inspired teachers' enthusiasm and particularly encourages expert teachers to tutor the younger teachers. However, when it came to interactions with colleagues, Lily had different emotional experiences.

I might be accustomed to a straightforward style in communication. Many colleagues and I have worked together for quite a few years, and they understand me. But it's inevitably for people to hold different opinions. Some colleagues might find me insisting on some rules. Actually, it's not personal and we all respect each other's opinions. We focus on work rather than personal matters. (Lily, July 21, 2022)

Lily's straightforward personality and professionalism in her work had earned her respect from colleagues. As a result, she gained trust and understanding in interactions with colleagues.

Within the school's teaching community, colleagues serve as a source of professional identity and appreciation for teachers due to their shared professional goals and challenges (Xu, 2013).

The narratives of the teachers in this study also demonstrate that the most critical factor influencing emotional experiences between teachers and colleagues is professional distance. Good teamwork at F School contributed to reducing professional distance between teachers, maintaining positive emotional experiences, and ultimately enhancing teachers' professional performance. These two cases also illustrate that both Daisy and Lily, as expert teachers, have played significant roles in teaching and research within the school. Additionally, they had positive emotional experiences and strong sense of achievement when they were recognized and supported by the colleagues.

Both cases highlighted the importance of professional distance in shaping emotional experiences between teachers and colleagues.

*(c). Parent-Teacher Interaction: Emotional Geography Between Teachers and Parents*

Parent-teacher interaction is influenced by factors such as teachers' and parents' sense of responsibility in students' school life and academic performance, and requires mutual devotion. Daisy emphasized maintaining a balance between responding to parents and ensuring her personal space. This strategy ensured her positive emotional experience and enthusiasm for work. Lily, on the other hand, addressed the enthusiasm of parents with due distance to ensure both effective communication and personal well-being.

Nowadays, most parents are highly educated and generally place a strong emphasis on their children's education, therefore they have high expectations for teachers. In our school, many students come from well-educated families. Sometimes, parents would call to discuss on various topics with me about their children's school life. They also politely give me suggestions and even recommend books to me. They are very enthusiastic. Of course, there are times when I've just finished a day of work and want to take a rest. However, if a parent texts me or talks to me on WeChat, asking about their child's school life during the day, I used to reply immediately. But gradually, I started feeling exhausted and mentally strained. So now, at the beginning of the semester, I would tell the parents that unless it's an emergency, they are supposed to contact me before 9 PM in the evening or during the daytime. I think that worked. (Daisy, July 20, 2022)

Teachers, through appropriate communication with parents, ensure both necessary interaction and their own personal space. This ensures positive emotional experiences, energy, and work enthusiasm. Lily's interactions with parents reflect another aspect of her emotional experiences.

Some parents hope that I can offer extracurricular tutoring for their children. I directly told them that tutoring is not necessary, and I don't provide paid tutoring for students. I give them suggestions on how to learn English effectively, like reading English stories or magazines for 30 minutes each day, with an additional 20 minutes of listening like what I practiced in class. Some parents were initially skeptical and insisted on tutoring. After a semester, they saw their children's progress. They extended appreciation for me. I believe this also gives me confidence in my work. (Lily, July 21, 2022)

Lily's strong belief in her teaching competence and students' learning capabilities had impressed the parents with her sincerity in interacting with them. The teachers' narratives in this section indicate that the emotional experiences of teacher-parent interactions depend primarily on moral distance and sociocultural distance. Teachers value recognition and respect from the parents. When the parents show greater understanding and support for teachers, both parties can experience positive emotional interactions.

*(d). Interaction Between Superiors and Subordinates: Emotional Geography Between Teachers and Leaders*

Since both expert teachers play leading roles in various teaching and research activities in the school, they frequently interact with the school's administrators.

Our school organizes many student activities and conducts regular teaching competitions and research. Each semester, there are teaching contests, and the principals and directors have high expectations for outstanding performances. In regular circumstances, our principal would listen to every teacher if any of us wants to talk to

him about work. The principal would also talk to us regularly in school and he cares about our difficulties. (Daisy, July 20, 2022)

Daisy's experience highlights the requirement for teachers to adhere to proper conduct within the hierarchical power relations while interacting with the superiors. Similarly, Lily's interactions with administrators portray a balanced approach:

While we may not meet the principal daily during working hours, we would play badminton together after work every day. During the break, the principal would talk with us, particularly with the new colleagues, and give advice to them if necessary. However, we know well about the rules for interaction with the leaders. (Lily, July 21, 2022)

Both stories underline that the hierarchical power relations dynamics between leaders and teachers, deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, demand the subordinates' respect for the leaders. Moreover, these interactions are most effective when naturally aligned with the professional relationship between the two parties, ultimately influencing the emotional experience of teachers.

In conclusion, the study reveals the profound impact of professional interactions on teachers' emotions within the microsystem. Teacher-student, teacher-colleague, teacher-parent and teacher-leader relationships shape the teacher's emotional experiences, showcasing the importance of factors like mutual understanding, recognition of effort, and professional distance. The examples of Daisy and Lily, both expert teachers, emphasize the role of leadership, dedication, and positive recognition in shaping positive emotional experiences and a sense of accomplishment.

### *C. Teachers' Emotional Experience in the Mesosystem and Exosystem*

Beyond interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and leaders, teachers also have extensive interactions with peers from other schools or authorities from the local bureaus of education, which also influence their emotional encounters.

This year, I participated in a provincial training program for school administrators. Such opportunities for learning are rare and I was lucky to get the only opportunity in our school. I really feel grateful to the principals of our school. Those teachers in the training program came from all the districts in Guangdong Province. They are very talented in administration, and have sharp insights about school affairs. I really learned a lot from the tutors and other peers in our learning community. But of course, I also feel the pressure from the peers and the tutors as well, you know, because they are also experts and leaders in our community. (Daisy, July 21, 2022)

Daisy's narration highlights peer pressure within the academic community, portraying both motivational and challenging factors in their professional contexts. Simultaneously, interactions with superiors generate both gratitude for guidance and challenges arising from high expectations. Consequently, the key factor influencing teachers' emotional experience within the intermediate and outer systems is political distance.

### *D. Teachers' Emotional Experience in the Macrosystem*

Within the framework of social, political, economic, and cultural aspects, namely the macrosystem, teachers grapple with societal expectations and constraints affecting their professional development. Emotional experiences are complex, dynamic, and unpredictable.

Teachers, including myself, avoid constant interactions with parents and the surrounding community. Sometimes it's hard to keep an appropriate stance towards them. While most parents are cooperative, and the public may be polite and understand us, some seek to be a little peculiar. I used to be straightforward which occasionally led to misunderstandings from the parents. And some of them would spread unfavorable words about me and my colleagues. So I'd rather spend time reading, improving my teaching, talking with the students and solving their problems. But of course, I would keep in touch with the parents and the society to keep up with what's going on. Generally speaking, my students, their parents and my professional community at large hold a favorable view of my devotion into work. (Lily, July 21, 2022)

Lily's account illustrates the intricate interplay of students, parents, society, and more within the current social and cultural context. Teachers' emotional experiences are shaped by a diverse range of factors, both positive and negative, including societal expectations, parental influence, and cultural norms.

### *E. Emotional Geography of Expert Teachers*

In line with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Hargreaves' Emotional Geography Theory, the above analyses delve into the emotional experiences of the two expert teachers across various professional relationships. Given their status as experienced educators, their emotional experiences possess distinct characteristics. In their interactions with colleagues, expert teachers established mutual trust with them, assuming roles as "givers" and "helpers". Political and professional distances largely contributed to the positive emotional encounter. Similarly, the relationships between expert teachers, students, and parents are grounded in a shared goal of achieving optimal learning outcomes, with moral distance playing a pivotal role. In their interactions with administrative leaders, hierarchical power relations (Xu, 2013) emerge as a critical factor. While informal settings enable amicable interactions, formal professional contexts necessitate a respectful distance. Figure 1 provides an illustrative representation of the emotional

geography within expert teachers' emotional ecosystems.

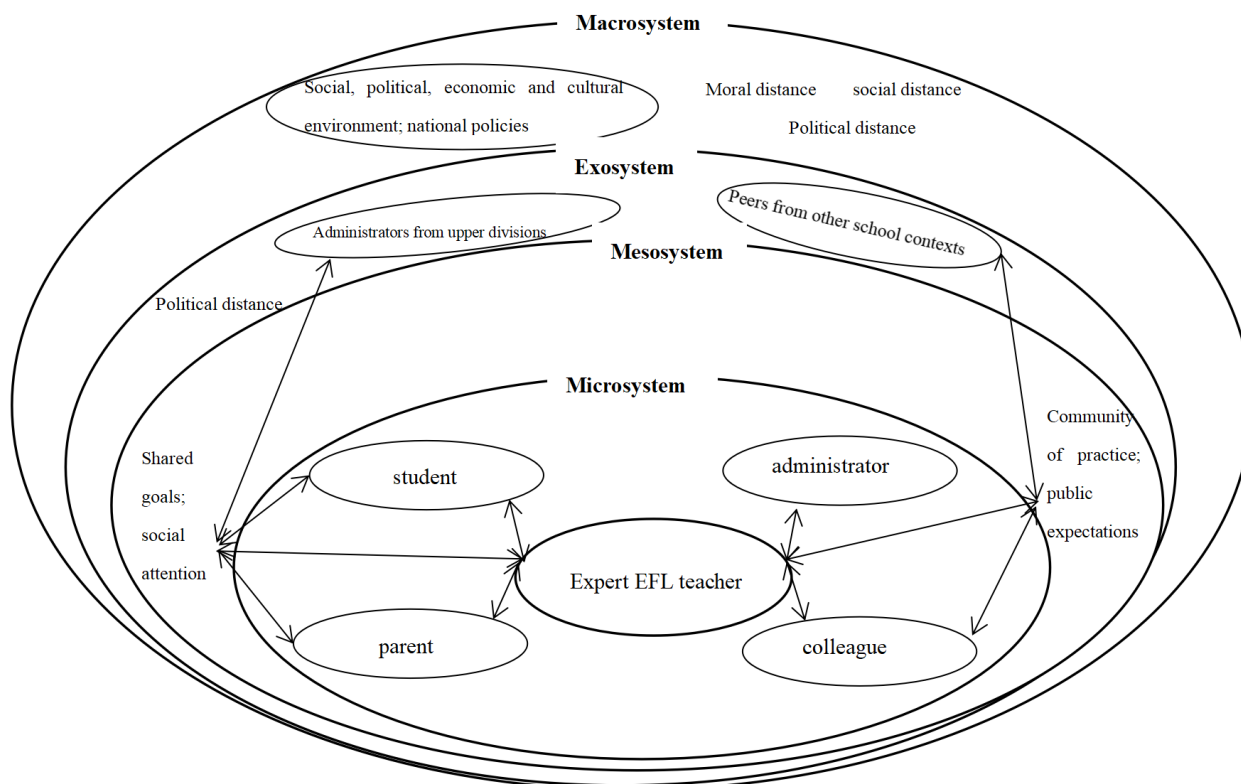


Figure 1. Diagram of Expert EFL Teachers' Emotion in Professional Contexts

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Teachers play a pivotal role in the development of education. Teachers' professional relationships and emotions directly impact their professional identity, well-being, and significantly contribute to the development of education. At present, while research exploring teachers' identity and agency is relatively extensive, studies on teachers' emotions in interplay within their professional contexts in China remain relatively scarce.

This paper delves into the emotional experiences of expert teachers within professional relationships. It unveils that among the various dimensions of the emotional ecosystem experienced by expert English teachers in secondary schools, teachers' professional emotions are primarily influenced by five intertwined dimensions: sociocultural distance, political distance, professional distance, moral distance, and physical distance. Primarily, political distance plays a pivotal role across micro, meso, and macro levels of emotional ecosystem. It encompasses the emotional experiences of relationships between teachers and students, parents, leaders, and even administrative members at all levels. In the context of Chinese society, Confucianism emphasizes the ethical dynamics of personal relationships, scrutinizing the interactions between individuals. Consequently, the emotional experiences within relationships such as between teachers and students, and teachers and leaders, are shown through tangible interactions within the complex relation network.

Secondly, considering professional distance, the paper unveils emotional dynamics within micro, intermediate, and outer levels of emotional ecosystem. Teachers and colleagues, as well as those within the professional community, collectively experience a sense of professional achievement and anxiety. Collaborative efforts and achievements within this academic realm effectively enhance teachers' positive emotions.

Furthermore, moral distance impacts teachers' emotional experiences across micro and macro levels. The recognition and respect for teachers' profession by students, parents, and the whole society contribute to positive emotions and a sense of professional well-being.

Lastly, sociocultural distance influences emotional ecosystem at all levels. Sociocultural factors, encompassing social norms, economic conditions, political requirements and national policies, exert continuous and pervasive influence on teachers and other factors intertwined in their profession, including students, parents, and the whole society at large. This intricate interplay across different levels culminates in the current state of teachers' professional emotional ecosystem.

In conclusion, this study proposes two suggestions for future research on teachers' emotions. Firstly, researchers in

teacher education can delve further into exploring teachers' emotions, along with relevant emotion regulating strategies within specific contexts, such as educational reforms. Additionally, courses or training programs on emotion regulation are suggested to be provided for pre- or in-service teachers. Meanwhile, teachers' community of practice is encouraged to pay attention to teachers' emotional well-being.

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