

Connecting Through Emotional Labor: Implications for Teacher and Principal Preparation Programs

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Abstract

Emotional labor is an underexamined aspect of teaching with direct implications for both teacher and principal preparation. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how high school teachers experience and manage emotional labor in their professional roles. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 educators at a suburban high school in central Texas. Findings revealed that emotional labor is a continuous and dynamic component of teaching as teachers navigate surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions in response to classroom demands. Four themes emerged: acting styles, emotional impact, affective events, and job impact. Although emotional labor contributed to meaningful relationships, it also resulted in emotional strain and challenges related to workload and recovery time. These findings demonstrate the need to prepare educators to navigate emotional load successfully. By intentionally integrating training in emotional awareness and reflective practice, both teacher and principal preparation programs can better prepare candidates for the emotional realities of practice.

Keywords: *emotional labor, teacher preparation, principal preparation, mental health, educator well-being.*

The concept of emotional labor, first introduced by Dr. Arlie Hochschild in 1983, has gained increased attention as a significant aspect of professional roles. Regarding the management and regulation of emotions, emotional labor is how one fulfills job expectations and maintains a certain emotional climate in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). This study explored the emotional labor of high school educators, focusing on how teachers not only navigate but also manage their emotions in response to the demands of the teaching profession. The purpose of this study was to investigate the subtle strategies, coping mechanisms, and emotions employed by teachers to comprehend the effects of emotional labor in an educational setting. The secondary aim of the study was to heighten the comprehension of the intricate relationship between emotional labor and education, ultimately contributing to the development of educational environments that not only nurture intellectual growth but also emotional well-being (Nwoko et al., 2023).

This study was guided by the following research question: *How and to what extent do high school teachers feel that emotional display rules affect their performance?*

Emotional labor was initially associated with service industry jobs, such as fast-food employees, nurses, waitresses, and call center representatives; the concept of emotional labor has since expanded to include education as an industry significantly impacted by its expectations (Kariou et al., 2021). Within the educational context, schools are seen as the service, with districts and teachers as the service providers and students and their parents/guardians as the clients. Emotional labor in teaching is produced through interactions with students, colleagues, administrators, and other stakeholders, requiring regulation of emotions in line with institutional expectations (Han et al., 2021).

Emotional labor can be broken down into three main components: surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions. Hochschild (1983) identified two of these components as surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting pertains to the pretending or faking of emotions to align with the desired display rules (Hochschild, 1983). Petiot and Kermarrec (2024) provided a similar description in that surface acting refers to the discrepancy between felt emotions and the emotions teachers display publicly, often

requiring them to mask emotional expression due to challenging classroom environments. Deep acting entails genuinely feeling and expressing the required emotions by modifying one's feelings to match expectations (Hochschild, 1983). Singh et al. (2025) described deep acting as a form of emotional regulation in which individuals actively attempt to modify their internal feelings so that the emotions they display outwardly reflect what they intend to express. The third component, naturally felt emotions, was first introduced by Diefendorff et al. (2005) and refers to spontaneous and genuine emotional experiences. Naturally felt emotions refer to authentic emotional experiences that are genuinely expressed without deliberate emotional regulation, as teachers' emotional displays are not always the result of surface or deep acting processes (Frenzel et al., 2022). The study shows that teachers engage in emotional labor across professional interactions and responsibilities, reinforcing that emotional processes are embedded throughout teaching practice (Brown et al., 2023). Recent research has continued to demonstrate that emotions are embedded throughout teaching practice, influencing classroom instruction, teacher-student relationships, classroom climate, and professional collaboration, making emotional labor a central component of educators' work (Ross et al., 2023).

The objective of this study was to comprehensively investigate the dimensions of emotional labor as experienced by high school teachers at a suburban high school in north central Texas. Examining these experiences also contributes to ongoing conversations in educator preparation regarding how programs can better align training with the realities of classroom practice, as studies have shown that teachers' perceptions of preparedness evolve with experience (Mayhall, 2023). Investigating emotional labor provides additional insight into how preparation programs might address the emotional demands inherent in teaching. These findings extend educator preparedness research by suggesting that readiness for teaching involves not only instructional competence but also the ability to navigate the emotional demands that become more visible as teachers transition into the classroom. By examining the emotional labor inherent in these roles, this study sought to shed light on the perceptions and strategies that impact teachers' personal

well-being and job satisfaction (Kariou et al., 2021; Nwoko et al., 2023). The study examined how and to what extent high school teachers feel that emotional display rules affect their performance.

Review of Literature

The concept of emotional labor is an overarching theme that emerged throughout various facets of the educational landscape. Shulman (2004) argued, "after some 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species ever invented" (p. 504). Maynard's (2022) exploration of safeguarding practices in schools added a layer to the emotional labor experienced by educators, noting that school staff, regardless of their roles, must navigate the emotional impact of supporting students and their families and often find themselves unable to detach from work. The unique role of schools in supporting students and families, even in complex social situations, is a common theme emphasizing the emotional labor educators face (Maynard, 2022). Lyndon et al. (2020) provided a comprehensive perspective on emotional labor among teachers, emphasizing both its positive and negative aspects, highlighting feelings of exhaustion, stress, and burnout alongside the satisfaction derived from deepening connections with students. This duality in the experiences of emotional labor resonated with the broader theme of emotional labor's complexity.

Teacher Preparation

Within the literature, educator preparation for emotional labor is presented as crucial for ensuring that teachers are equipped to navigate the emotional demands of their profession effectively (Agyapong et al., 2023). Teachers should be introduced to emotional labor and its implications for practice as part of educator preparation (Paiboon & Araya, 2024). A key component of educator preparation related to emotional labor includes emotional training, which involves being more self-aware (Soutter, 2023). Teachers require training and professional support to effectively regulate their emotions, which is essential for maintaining instructional quality and classroom relationships (Aldrup et al., 2023). Teacher training interventions have been shown to enhance educators' self-

regulation skills, supporting their ability to manage emotional responses in challenging instructional situations (Sáiz-Manzanares et al., 2022). Reflective teaching encourages teachers to engage in reflective practices that allow them to examine their emotions, experiences, and teaching methods, fostering continuous improvement (Gkonou & Miller, 2020). Classroom management techniques should also be extended in educator preparation classes and include training on managing classroom dynamics (Molyneux, 2021; Simonsen et al., 2019).

The literature increasingly acknowledges the emotional demands placed on teachers; gaps remain in how educator preparation programs systematically address emotional labor in practice. Although many programs incorporate classroom management and reflective practice, fewer explicitly address emotional labor or provide structured opportunities to prepare candidates for emotionally complex situations (Dunn et al., 2025; Kim & Morita-Mullaney, 2020). This lack of explicit integration may leave novice teachers underprepared for the relational and emotional challenges of the profession, particularly in high-needs or diverse school settings. Traditional preparation models often prioritize pedagogical knowledge while overlooking the emotional dimensions of teaching, despite evidence linking emotional labor to burnout and attrition (Collins, 2025). This work highlights the need to educate the whole teacher, including the intentional development of emotional awareness, identity, and self-care practices as foundational elements of preparation. In accountability-driven contexts such as Texas, this expanded focus is increasingly necessary as programs are expected to prepare teachers who are not only instructionally effective but also emotionally resilient (Texas Education Agency, 2022). Strengthening this connection between theory and practice may better position beginning teachers to navigate the realities of emotional labor while sustaining their effectiveness and well-being.

Principal Preparation

Principal preparation programs play a critical role in shaping how emotional labor is understood and supported at the organizational level. School leaders not only experience their own forms of emotional labor but also influence the conditions under which teachers manage emotional demands (Grissom et al., 2021). Preparation

programs that emphasize instructional leadership without equal attention to relational and emotional dimensions may overlook a key aspect of effective leadership practice. Emerging research highlights the importance of preparing principals to recognize emotional labor in their staff and to implement structures that promote teacher well-being, such as collaborative cultures and supportive feedback systems (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Within the Texas context, Atchley and Ross (2024) emphasized the value of continuous improvement models in principal preparation, particularly those that incorporate data-informed reflection and adaptive leadership practices. Likewise, Collins et al. (2025) reinforced the importance of leadership in fostering environments that acknowledge and support the emotional dimensions of teaching, positioning principals as key agents in mitigating the negative effects of emotional labor across school systems. Consequently, principal preparation that integrates emotional intelligence and organizational support may be essential for sustaining both teacher effectiveness and well-being.

The literature highlights both the complexity of emotional labor in the profession and the need for intentional educator preparation across roles to fully understand how teachers and principals experience emotional labor within the context of their professional practice. The gaps in the literature suggest a critical need for a systemic approach that will prepare educators and school leaders to navigate the emotional dimensions of their work. Teacher preparation programs can address this need by offering training on emotional awareness and reflective practices while principal preparation programs can focus on cultivating supportive leadership strategies. These efforts can bridge the gap between theory and practice, equipping educators and principals with tools to sustain professional effectiveness and well-being.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to examine how high school educators experience and make meaning of emotional labor in their professional roles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological approach was utilized to gather information and describe the commonalities of individuals who experienced the same phenomenon, allowing for a deeper understanding of the

essence of the shared experience. The study utilized in vivo coding to provide a verbatim description of participants' experiences and amplify participants' voices (Manning, 2017; Saldaña, 2021), ensuring that meaning was grounded in participants' own language.

Participants included 10 high school educators employed at a suburban high school located in central Texas, selected through criterion based purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants represented a range of professional experience levels across core academic areas, and all participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect identity and maintain confidentiality. The single-site research setting provided a bounded context for exploring emotional labor within the daily environment of high school educators.

Data were collected through individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes, conducted in a private setting to encourage open dialogue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews followed a consistent protocol designed to elicit detailed accounts of emotional labor. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were reviewed to remove or redact any identifying details to further protect participants. Data analysis followed phenomenological procedures that included clustering of significant statements into themes, and the development of textural and structural descriptions to capture both what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Sinfield et al., 2023). Dedoose software (2021) was used to support system coding and organization of the data.

To ensure trustworthiness, strategies were implemented to establish credibility, and transferability throughout the research process (Stahl & King, 2022). Credibility was supported through member checking, allowing participants to review their interview data for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability and confirmability were enhanced through an audit trail and reflective journaling, while transferability was supported through detailed contextual descriptions (Stahl & King, 2022). Ethical procedures included informed consent and voluntary participation (NCES, 2024).

The phenomenological approach allowed for exploration of how individuals make sense of experiences and transform these experiences into consciousness, both individually and through shared meaning (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach supported the identification of patterns and themes across participants' descriptions, providing insight into the essence of emotional labor as experienced in the high school context.

Results

Four overarching themes were identified through an in-depth analysis of the data utilizing Dedoose software (2021) for coding data and determining recurring patterns and themes. These four themes were Acting Styles, Emotional Impact, Affective Events, and Job Impact. These themes were further segmented into components.

Acting Styles

Across participants, emotional labor emerged as an ongoing process rather than an isolated response to stressful situations. Teachers reported shifting among surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions depending on contextual demands. These emotional strategies reflect how teachers adapt their responses to meet professional expectations and organizational display rules, shaping their performance within the classroom. Table 1 demonstrates the number of occurrences of each acting component.

Surface acting frequently occurred when teachers suppressed frustration, fatigue, or disagreement to maintain classroom stability and professionalism. The qualitative data demonstrated 18 occurrences of surface acting (see Table 1). While participants recognized this strategy as necessary, they also associated it with emotional strain and depletion. Participants described how surface acting requires them to consciously set aside their own emotions to maintain classroom stability and meet professional expectations. One teacher explained, "I try to put my own emotions to the side. It doesn't always work, but I know my emotions can impact the setting of this classroom and how kids feel. So, I always try to like brush it aside if I am having a bad day." Another participant highlighted the need to conceal personal beliefs or disagreements to uphold classroom expectations, stating, "I just don't agree with a

lot of them. However, I can't let the kids see that... so I have to pretend."

A third participant explained, "I feel as though I have a positive mood, but then there are times where I feel kind of annoyed or aggravated, and I pretend like I don't." The participant further noted that these instances typically occurred following a disruptive class period or disciplinary issue. Although feeling frustrated or aggravated, the teacher reported having to "put on a happy face" when greeting the next class, so as not to let the emotions affect additional students. These experiences reflect how teachers engage in surface acting to align with organizational display rules, demonstrating the ongoing regulation of emotions required to maintain a productive learning environment and support student outcomes.

Deep acting was described as a more intentional and sustainable strategy. There were 14 occurrences of deep acting (see Table 1). Teachers reported consciously reframing situations to cultivate empathy, patience, and compassion. An example of deep acting occurred for a teacher participant when a student came to her about being pregnant. The teacher stated, "I had a student who approached me when I first started, and I was like, I don't know what to do." The student had discovered that they were pregnant as a very young teenager and were "emotionally distraught." The teacher explained that they tried to maintain composure and worked to keep emotions and personal beliefs out of it. She focused on how to "work with that student to keep them calm." This teacher's excerpt provides a glimpse into her personal beliefs and how she consciously reappraised the situation to align her emotions with the students' needs. Instead of reacting emotionally from her own set of personal beliefs, one participant focused on feeling empathy for her student by "putting myself in their place and truly felt what they were feeling".

One participant described working with a student who consistently refused to complete assignments and often appeared disengaged during class. Initially, the teacher felt frustrated by the student's lack of effort. However, rather than remaining focused on the behavior exhibited by the student, the teacher intentionally considered the student's circumstances outside of school. The participant explained,

"I have this student who refuses to do anything in class... So now where is this kid ever seeing anything positive? They're not." By shifting focus from the student's behavior to the challenges the student may be facing, the teacher reported feeling greater empathy and compassion. This process of reframing the situation allowed the teacher to genuinely respond with patience and encouragement for the student rather than frustration, illustrating deep acting through the conscious modification of one's internal emotions.

Naturally felt emotions were associated with moments of connection and enthusiasm. Naturally felt emotions occurred in 10 instances (see Table 1). For this study, one teacher shared how he gets emotional about specific units of instruction: His excitement, directness, and enjoyment come from authentic engagement with the topic and his students, not from reappraising or suppressing any emotions. Similarly, one participant acknowledged their naturally felt emotions in relation to the debate curriculum, stating, "I'm very passionate and excited about a lot of the things that we cover in that classroom. So there's a lot of genuine excitement coming out, and then there are a couple of times where we get topics within debate that make me angry as a person, so those emotions will kind of genuinely come out with the kids, but to me, it helps the kids understand the different perspectives of the debate that we're having." This response highlights how the participant's authentic emotional expressions, ranging from enthusiasm to frustration, emerge organically in response to curriculum content and are perceived as pedagogically valuable in fostering students' understanding of multiple perspectives.

Table 1*Acting Strategies, Descriptions, Frequencies, and Representative Quotes*

Component	Description	Frequency	Representative Quote
Surface Acting	Managing emotional display without changing internal feelings.	18	"Sometimes I try to put my own emotions to the side. It doesn't always work. But I know my emotions can impact the setting of the classroom."
Deep Acting	Attempting to modify internal feelings to align with professional expectations.	14	"I try to reframe how I feel to genuinely show compassion. It's about reminding myself that they are the most important part of my job."
Naturally Felt Emotions	Expressing genuine feelings that align with both internal state and role.	10	"I don't hold back. I want them to be real with them. That day I just told them, 'I lost my grandmother, but we got this.'"

Emotional Impact

Participants described the emotional impact of teaching as a significant and ongoing component of their professional roles, requiring them to consistently manage and regulate their emotions in response to students' emotional needs, classroom challenges, and job demands. The emotional impact plays a critical role in shaping both the individual and the overall classroom environment, as teachers navigate the expectations of their role. Components of emotional labor within this theme included emotional strategies, stress and burnout, and emotional display rules, highlighting how teachers respond to the emotional demands of teaching and the ways these experiences influence their well-being.

In the course of this study, there were 10 occurrences of emotional strategies being utilized, 8 occurrences of stress and burnout, and 6 occurrences of emotional display rules (see Table 2). One participant described the emotional toll of these demands, stating, "You're just absolutely drained." Another participant emphasized the expectations associated with emotional regulation, explaining, "We're expected to always be calm, even when we're not." A third respondent characterized the masking of emotions required to be effective in her role, stating, "Even on days when I'm really tired or stressed, I feel like I have to present energy and positivity in the classroom. The kids expect that version of

me, so I try to push through it." These experiences reflect how emotional labor requires teachers to continuously regulate their emotions to meet professional expectations, contributing to emotional strain within their roles.

Table 2*Emotional Impact, Descriptions, Frequencies, and Representative Quotes*

Component	Description	Frequency	Representative Quote
Emotional Strategies	Techniques used by teachers to regulate emotions before or during the workday.	10	"So, before I come to school, I try to sit in my car for about five minutes just to ground myself."
Stress and Burnout	Emotional exhaustion or fatigue resulting from prolonged emotional labor.	8	"You're just absolutely drained."
Emotional Display Rules	Expectations or norms regarding how teachers should express emotions at school.	6	"We're expected to always be calm, even when we're not."

Affective Events

The third theme that emerged from participant data was affective events. Affective events were demonstrated 17 times in the data (see Table 3). Positive events enhanced motivation and reinforced teachers' commitment to their roles, while emotionally challenging events required increased emotional regulation and intensified emotional strain. Teachers described how daily classroom interactions, student needs, and organizational expectations contributed to the emotional nature of teaching.

Participants explained how specific classroom interactions required them to actively manage their emotional responses in ways that influenced both their behavior and their students' experiences. One teacher explained, "I have this student who refuses to do anything in class... So now where is this kid ever seeing positivity? They're not," illustrating the challenge of maintaining a positive classroom climate while responding to persistent negative student behavior, and the perceived impact this may have on the student's exposure to positive interactions. Another participant described the need to regulate their response in these moments, stating, "I try to step back and look at it and understand why things are this way... because it's not something that is going to help them grow." A third participant acknowledged enforcing a disciplinary consequence despite experiencing empathy and internal

conflict regarding the situation. The participant consciously regulated these emotional responses to uphold consistency and fairness in classroom management, and in support of long-term behavioral expectations. These experiences reflect how affective events require teachers to consciously adjust their emotional responses to support student outcomes and maintain a productive learning environment.

Table 3
Affective Events, Descriptions, Frequencies, and Representative Quotes

Component	Description	Frequency	Representative Quote
Affective Events	Routine interactions with colleagues, students, and administrators consistently influenced their emotional states, requiring them to engage in various forms of emotional acting.	17	"They tell you these stories and you carry them all day long. It stays with you."

Job Impact

This theme encompasses the interconnected ways in which teachers’ job satisfaction and the effects of their professional performance align to their overall well-being and classroom experiences. Components of this theme included job satisfaction with 18 occurrences, performance impact with 5 occurrences, and support needs with 3 (see Table 4). Participants described the need to manage multiple emotional roles, including motivator, counselor, nurturer, disciplinarian, and advocate. Participants detailed how emotional labor influenced their performance through both the demands of the role and the outcomes they experience in the classroom. One participant emphasized how workload and limited recovery time can affect their ability to perform effectively, stating, “It’s the hours we put in. Money would certainly help, but I think just time to decompress and relax is needed.” This reflects how external demands and emotional exhaustion can limit teachers’ effectiveness and engagement in their roles. In contrast, participants also described moments where emotional labor contributed to positive performance outcomes. One teacher shared, “There are times when my students are working on something, and they’re all in their little groups working and I’m just watching them happily talk about and work on a problem, and I’m just like, yeah this is what I wanted... and that makes me excited and engaged too.” A third participant described positive job

impact, explaining: “When I observe a student who has previously struggled begin to demonstrate consistent behavioral or academic improvement, I experience a sense of pride and encouragement. This reinforces my perception of my instructional impact and leads me to engage with the student in a more positive emotional manner.” These experiences illustrate how emotional labor can both hinder and enhance teachers’ performance, influencing their engagement, effectiveness, and overall sense of purpose within the classroom.

Table 4
Job Impact: Descriptions, Frequencies, and Representative Quotes

Component	Description	Frequency	Representative Quote
Job Satisfaction	Teachers feel positively about their work but note that high demands can reduce overall job enjoyment.	18	"I love what I do, but the workload sometimes takes the joy out of it."
Performance Impact	Emotional labor affects teachers' ability to perform instructional and relational duties effectively.	5	"It gets to a point where your emotional exhaustion affects how you teach."
Support Needs	Teachers identify a need for more emotional and structural supports to sustain their roles.	7	"We absorb everything but have nowhere to unload it. We need space and time to decompress."

Findings and Discussion

The findings provide insight into how emotional display rules influence teachers’ performance within their professional roles. Emotional labor emerged as a continuous element of teaching rather than an occasional challenge. Teachers described the need to regulate emotions daily to maintain classroom stability, build relationships, and meet professional expectations (Brown et al., 2023). Surface acting was frequently described as necessary but emotionally taxing, whereas deep acting and naturally felt emotions were associated with authenticity, resilience, and stronger connections with students (Ma et al., 2023).

Participants’ experiences demonstrate how emotional labor operates within a broader organizational context shaped by expectations, relationships, and daily interactions (Horner et al., 2020). These findings also align with research

indicating that teachers' perceptions of preparedness often evolve once they encounter the realities of classroom practice, suggesting that emotional labor represents a dimension of teaching that may not be fully addressed within teacher education programs (Mayhall, 2023). In this way, emotional labor can be understood as an experiential dimension of preparedness that becomes more apparent as teachers move from preparation into full-time teaching roles. These findings illustrate how teachers' emotional strategies are shaped by workplace events and social expectations, influencing both their emotional well-being and their professional performance (Peng et al., 2023).

Emotional labor in teaching is deeply intertwined with the expectations and responsibilities placed on educators within their professional roles. Teachers are tasked with maintaining certain emotional standards and organizational display rules as a part of their jobs, which requires continuous emotional regulation (Hochschild, 1983; Brown et al., 2023). Teaching is a profession that requires constant emotional regulation, as teachers interact with multiple stakeholders, including students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. These interactions often occur in emotionally charged contexts, requiring teachers to manage their emotional responses while maintaining professionalism (Keller et al., 2014).

The findings of this study reinforce the notion that emotional labor is not an isolated component of teaching but rather a continuous and dynamic process that influences teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and professional effectiveness (Lee, 2019). Teachers described how emotional labor requires them to adapt their emotional responses to meet situational demands. Similar patterns are evident among school leaders, as principals must continuously adapt their emotional responses to meet situational demands across multiple professional contexts (Bailey et al., 2023).

Participants described the emotional demands of teaching as multifaceted, involving both the regulation of negative emotions and the cultivation of positive emotional expressions. Surface acting was described as a strategy used to maintain professionalism and classroom stability, while deep acting was associated with authenticity and stronger relationships with students. Naturally felt emotions

were described as moments when teachers experienced alignment between their internal feelings and external expressions, which contributed to job satisfaction and a sense of purpose (Frenzel et al., 2018).

These findings highlight the importance of preparing educators to understand and manage emotional labor as part of their professional development (Molyneux, 2021; Soutter, 2023). Educator preparation programs can play a critical role in equipping teachers with the skills necessary to navigate the emotional demands of teaching, including strategies for emotional regulation, reflective practice, and resilience building (Gkonou & Miller, 2020; Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2023).

Implications for Texas Educator Preparation

The findings underscore the need to recognize emotional labor as a central component of teaching rather than an implicit expectation. Educator preparation programs can benefit from integrating emotional awareness and regulation strategies into training experiences (Molyneux, 2021). Research on educator preparation further highlights that strengthening teacher readiness requires collaboration across universities, pre-kindergarten through 12th grade (PK–12) schools, and local communities. Collaborative approaches to educator preparation demonstrate how shared professional learning, dialogue between practicing educators and faculty, and coordinated support structures can enhance preparation experiences and ensure programs remain responsive to the realities of classroom practice. This collaborative approach reinforces the idea that preparation is not limited to coursework alone but is a continuous process shaped through engagement with authentic school contexts and professional communities, ultimately supporting more responsive and practice-informed teacher development (Tejeda-Delgado et al., 2023).

Preparing educators to recognize emotional labor, understand emotional triggers, and develop coping strategies may support educator effectiveness and sustainability in the profession (Nwoko et al., 2023). Professional development and preparation experiences that emphasize emotional intelligence, reflective practice, and resilience can provide essential tools for managing the emotional demands of teaching (Soutter, 2023).

Participants highlighted the value of opportunities for emotional decompression, structured planning time, and professional learning focused on emotion regulation. These findings suggest that teacher preparation programs should consider how emotional labor is embedded across teaching responsibilities and contributes to teacher well-being, burnout risk, and long-term professional sustainability (Brown et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2023). Conceptualizing emotional labor as a component of teacher readiness emphasizes the importance of preparation experiences that expose candidates to the relational and emotional realities of teaching. Addressing emotional labor within preparation programs may help bridge the gap between training and practice by ensuring that teachers enter the profession with a more comprehensive understanding of the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of their work. This recommendation aligns with research indicating that teachers' perceptions of preparedness often change once they enter the classroom, highlighting the importance of examining areas of practice that may not be fully addressed during preparation (Mayhall, 2023).

Limitations and Future Directions

The study was conducted at a single suburban high school with a small sample of participants, which limits generalizability to broader populations or contexts. Additionally, because participants were colleagues of the researcher, responses may have been influenced by familiarity despite confidentiality measures. The qualitative design provides in-depth insight into teachers' experiences but does not capture the full range of emotional labor across different school settings or career stages.

Future research should expand on the findings of this study by exploring emotional labor across diverse educational

contexts. This study focused on a suburban high school; additional research is needed in urban, rural and alternative school settings. There is also a need to examine how teacher and principal preparation programs address emotional labor. Future studies could evaluate specific program components to determine which practices best prepare educators to manage and support emotional demands effectively.

Conclusion

Overall, this study highlights emotional labor as a defining feature of high school teaching that shapes educators' well-being, professional relationships, and perceptions of effectiveness. Educators continually navigate the tension between authentic emotions and organizational expectations, drawing on a range of emotional strategies to meet the complex demands of their role and shape their professional performance. Recognizing and supporting the emotional dimensions of teaching is essential for fostering sustainable careers and healthy school environments. Preparing educators to understand and manage emotional labor can contribute to stronger teacher and principal preparation, improved well-being, and improved professional performance.

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