

## Negative Emotional Adjustment Skills in Communication with Children of Preschool Teachers

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**ABSTRACT** The paper aims to analyse the reality of negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers using a surveying questionnaire on a representative sample of 254 preschool teachers in Tan Phu District, Ho Chi Minh City. Participants were recruited conveniently from a large number of preschool teachers, from 10 preschools including both public and non-public schools. In addition, the questionnaire survey was used as the main method of this research. The research results show that the level of achievement of preschool teachers in negative emotional adjustment skills related to recognising negative emotions is inappropriate for the current situation, and changing negative emotions is still limited, just at an average level.

### INTRODUCTION

Kleinginna and Kleinginna (1981) identified 92 definitions of emotion from different research areas and proposed a definition that included the main dimensions. Their formal definition indicated that “emotion is a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated by neural/hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure, (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labelling processes, (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions, and (d) lead to behaviour that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptive” (Kotsou 2016). Emotion consists of hunger and sex, fear, anger, love, hope, sense of beauty, disgust, joy, laughter, shame, surprise, curiosity, ‘*utsaha*’ or ‘liking to do a specific job’. Emotions like fear, anger and so on are usually considered negative emotions. ‘Fear’ has a positive end of courage, ‘anger’ has a

positive end of revenge satisfaction. But feelings of the positive sides are less frequent compared to their negative sides, as one less encounters situations that evoke positive responses (Das 2017). In general, negative emotions are those that drive one to a negative response or action.

According to Halonen and Santrock, adjustment was defined as the psychological processes used to adapt, cope and manage the problems in daily life. Based on self-efficacy theory developed by Bandura, Caprara... which postulated the concept of regulatory emotional self-efficacy, adjustment includes two dimensions: self-efficacy in managing negative affect and self-efficacy in expressing positive emotions (Mesurado et al. 2018). Key aspects of academic and emotional adjustment include students’ school engagement, achievement, burnout (as well as teacher-student conflict (Longobardi et al. 2016; Engels et al. 2019).

Considerable research indicates that the regulation of one’s emotions contributes to various important outcomes. Such outcomes include decreased risk for depression, increased control over the expression of violence, a more developed sense of morality, and improved psychological development. Despite these broad and important consequences, little is known about how people regulate their emotions in their daily

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lives (Nezlek1 and Kuppens 2008). James Gross defined two strategies of emotional regulation: reappraisal and suppression. Reappraisal means changing the way a situation is constructed in order to decrease its emotional impact. On the other hand, suppression is the way of inhibiting the outward signs of inner feelings (Gross 2002).

In Vietnam, in the context of a constantly developing society, the requirements for educational quality in general and preschool education in particular are increasing day by day. The work of preschool teachers, which was not so easy, is now adding even more pressure. On the one hand, the physiological characteristics of children at this age are very immature and sensitive, as it requires teachers, in interacting and teaching them, to be extremely delicate and skilful (Ho 2012). On the other hand, they have very different starting points for their capacities and family education environment, so helping them integrate with each other and the school education environment is also a very laborious issue of preschool teachers (Le 2004; Ho 2012). At the same time, the care and education for children in developing comprehensively physically and mentally in accordance with the goals of preschool education, ensuring safety for children while at school, and solving complicated pedagogical situations pose many challenges for teachers. In a hard working environment like this, it is easy to understand that negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, anger and boredom appear and affect the actions of teachers, demanding them to have the skills to adjust these emotions accordingly.

In the working environment of preschool teachers, the teachers' communication with children plays an important role in the formation and development of professional personalities of teachers as well as those of a child's personal way. Professional career of teachers in preschool is mainly through communication process (Le 2004). It is in this process that the teachers' emotions are exposed to the outside, creating the psychological atmosphere of the classroom, making the child feel clearly that he/she is safe, loved and happy in preschool or not. That directly affects children, especially their favourite attitudes towards school. When children love preschool, the educational impact will be greatly increased. Therefore, it is necessary to study the negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with

children of preschool teachers, so that taking measures to help them practice this skill is very necessary.

The negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers "*is the ability to recognise inappropriate negative emotions, thereby selecting and making effective adjustments to reduce or change negative emotions of teachers themselves in their interactions with children.*"

The structure of the negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers includes the following component skills:

- a. *The skill to recognise negative emotions that are not appropriate for the current situation.* The skill to recognise negative emotions includes the ability to correctly identify and name negative emotions when they occur and the ability to assess the degree and relevance of negative emotions. Emotional levels include out of control, danger, and under control. In particular, the level of "under control" is the appropriate emotional one (Huynh et al. 2012).
- b. *The skill to change negative emotions.* This skill includes the ability to adjust the level of negative emotions and the ability to navigate negative emotions into positive ones. The skill of changing negative emotions is reflected by whether preschool teachers know how to apply negative emotions adjustment methods. In this research, the main ways of adjusting emotions are investigated based on the process of arising and evolving emotions that have been proposed by Gross and Munoz (Vo 2013).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

To find out the reality of negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers, the researchers conducted a survey of 254 preschool teachers at 10 preschools in Tan Phu District, Ho Chi Minh City, including both public and non-public schools.

The main method used for this research was the questionnaire survey method. In addition, the research also used a combination of other methods such as interview method, observation method and mathematical statistical method.

The main contents of the questionnaire included:

Part 1: General information, including 5 subsections: 1) school where teachers are working, 2) qualification, 3) seniority, 4) age, and 5) classes that the teachers are teaching.

Part 2: Learning the reality of negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers. This content includes two elements of the skill to recognise negative emotions that are not appropriate for the current situation surveyed from question 1 to question 3, and the skill to change negative emotions surveyed with question 4.

In question 1, the researchers investigated the time when participants recognised the occurrence of a negative emotion (question 1a), the identification of the name of that emotion (question 1b), and the ability of participants to identify the signs of 5 negative emotions surveyed (question 1c).

In questions 2 and 3, the researchers examined the skill of assessing the degree and appropriateness of negative emotions that participants had in the current situation, expressed through self-assessment of the ability to identify 5 emotional levels ranking from very little to very high, with scores assigned from 1 to 5 (question 2) and through a specific situation (question 3). The data processing was prescribed as follows:

- ◆ Very little level: average score from 1 to 1.8
- ◆ Less level: average score from 1.81 to 2.6
- ◆ Medium level: average score from 2.61 to 3.4
- ◆ Much level: average score from 3.41 to 4.2
- ◆ Very much level: average score from 4.21 to 5.0

In questions 3, there were three options, respectively, corresponding to 3 emotional levels that are “out of control”, “dangerous” and “in control”.

In question 4, the researchers examined the skill of changing negative emotions through participants’ assessment of the extent to which they used the negative emotional modifications offered. In particular, the 22<sup>nd</sup> way aimed to figure out the extent of not adjusting negative emotions in communication with children of preschool teachers. The convention of data processing was done similar to question 2.

Data was processed using the SPSS 23.0 software.

## RESULTS

### 1. The Skill to Recognise Negative Emotions that are not Appropriate for the Current Situation.

First is the ability to identify and name correctly the negative emotions when they appear. Survey results about the time to recognise negative emotions of preschool teachers are as Table 1.

**Table 1: Time to recognise negative emotions of preschool teachers**

<i>Time to recognize negative emotions</i>	<i>Frequ-ency</i>	<i>Per-cent</i>
As soon as negative emotions appear	139	54.7
When negative emotions are quite strong	73	28.7
When negative emotions are very strong	17	6.7
After performing behaviours at the impulse of negative emotions	25	9.8

Table 1 shows that, most preschool teachers thought that they could recognise negative emotions as soon as it appeared (54.7%). This is a positive sign because the timely recognition of these emotions is a very important foundation in the emotional adjustment process. Besides these positive signs, there are still many preschool teachers who are less sensitive in detecting negative emotions. Specifically, only 28.7 percent of teachers recognised negative emotions when the emotions were quite strong and 6.7 percent of teachers recognised when negative emotions were very strong. Having negative emotions increase to such a strong level will slow down the process of handling emotions as well as choosing ways to manage emotions in time, resulting in the adjustment of emotions becoming more difficult. It should be noted that the percentage of teachers who did not recognise negative emotions to correct in time, only detected emotions after performing behaviours according to the emotional impulse, is quite high, up to 9.8 percent.

Calling the correct names of negative emotions is important because it helps preschool teachers choose the most appropriate way to adjust their emotions (Table 2).

Statistical calculations show that only 45.3 percent of preschool teachers thought they could call the exact names of their emotions. Besides, it is very worrying that when negative emotions appear, up to 30.3 percent of teachers “just feel

**Table 2: Levels of recognising names of negative emotions**

<i>Levels of recognize of negative emotions</i>	<i>Frequ- ency</i>	<i>Per- cent</i>
Can call out the exact name of negative emotion	115	45.3
Having an idea about the name of an emotion but uncertainly	77	30.3
Only feeling uncomfortable, not sure what emotion is	41	16.1
Neglecting the negative emotions and do not try to name	21	8.3

uncomfortable, but not sure what emotion it is” and 16.1 percent of teachers only “have an idea of the name of emotions but uncertainly”. It can be seen that these preschool teachers were still very vague in identifying the negative emotions. Another group of teachers (8.3%) did not seem to be fully aware of the importance of adjusting negative emotions for themselves and their careers, so they “did not pay attention to the negative emotions and not try to name them as well”.

When surveying the percent of accurately recognising the expression of negative emotions in preschool teachers, the results are as follows. Most preschool teachers recognised the manifestations of angry emotions both physically (66.9%) and behaviourally (85.4%). For the emotion of anxiety, most preschool teachers recognised behavioural behaviours (76.8%). However, when looking at physical manifestations, only 31.9 percent of preschool teachers correctly identified them. Up to 54.7 percent of teachers confused the physical aspects of anxiety as signs of fear. In addition, when considering the sad, fearful and depressed emotions, preschool teachers correctly identified these emotions at a very low level. Besides, 52.8 percent of teachers correctly identified the physical expressions of fearful emotions, and the level of correct identification of other signs of these three emotions was below the average. This result is quite consistent with the self-assessment of the ability to correctly name the negative emotions presented above.

When asked about the ability to determine the level of negative emotions in communication with children, the average of teachers’ answers was 2.99 with a standard deviation of 1.039. Thus, the ability to determine the level of negative emotions of preschool teachers reaches a “medium” level and has a fairly large dispersion. Through

interviews, the interviewed teachers all said that they paid attention to the level of negative emotions in them, but mainly “knew when I could not control it anymore” (Ms. Nh.). Observing the percent of choices in the ability to assess the level of emotions shows that the percentage of teachers who thought their ability to assess the emotional level was at “medium” is the highest, reaching 36.2 percent. Meanwhile, the proportion of teachers who felt that their ability to assess their emotional level was “very little” and “less” (33.1%) is higher than those of teachers with this ability at a “much” level, and “very much” one, which accounted for 30.7 percent. Thus, in general, the ability to evaluate the emotional level of preschool teachers in communication with children is not high.

Examining the differences among groups of participants by ANOVA test with significance level of  $p < 0.05$  gave the result of statistically significant differences in the ability to assess the level of negative emotions among teacher groups, who have different seniority of work due to  $p = 0.017 < 0.05$ . ANOVA in-depth analysis with Post Hoc - Dunnett test method showed the significant difference just between the group of seniority over 20 years and the one of working less than 10 years with significance level  $p = 0.037$  and the mean difference is 0.664. Thus, it can be said that the group of seniority working for more than 20 years is able to assess the emotional level better than the one for less than 10 years.

To assess the ability to determine the emotional response appropriate to the situation of teachers, the researchers presented a specific situation with 3 options corresponding to 3 levels of emotional appropriateness “in control”, “dangerous”, and “out of control”. The number of teachers who chose an appropriate emotional response corresponds to a “in control” level of 53.9 percent. This number is not very different from the self-assessment of teachers above. There was 39.4 percent of teachers rating the emotional response of “trying to control the emotions while solving conflicts in the constructive aspect, keeping an eye on them so that emotions don’t explode”, which is the “dangerous” emotional level as the appropriate emotional response. More interestingly, 6.7 percent of teachers said that they consider “do not care about their emotions, go straight to the constructive aspect, ask children to firstly apologise to their friends and leave that

playing place” to be a sensible emotion. However, this way of responding emotionally is at the “out of control” level because it allows the emotions to spontaneously manifest and acts only on the impulse of emotions.

## 2. The Skill to Change Negative Emotions

The researchers investigated the status of this skill through the preschool teacher’s assessment of using emotional control measures with 22 ways associated with the situation offered. These included:

1. I know which situation is negative for me and I limit my participation in that situation if possible.
2. I ask for help from a colleague who cares about the child causing negative emotions for me and refrain from communicating with this child.
3. I actively participate in or create situations that increase positive emotions while communicating with children.
4. I ask others to help me in situations, which I know they will cause me negative emotions.
5. If a child does not like a kind of food, I will give him/her less this food and more other foods to avoid negative emotions caused when the child eats slowly.
6. Before participating in a situation, which I am sure that can cause negative emotions for me, I will think about the positive things of the situation.
7. I spend time tracking my own emotional reactions or writing down my own negative emotions.
8. I talk to my child about the negative emotions I have.
9. I talk to my colleagues about the negative emotion situation I encountered in order to be sympathetic, supported and to learn from experience for the next treatment.
10. As soon as I become aware of the negative emotion, I will focus my thoughts on something else (looking at other children, cleaning up the tables and chairs, etc.), so as to not to get caught up in that emotion.
11. As soon as I know I’m caught up in a strong negative emotion, I adjust it by taking deep breaths or taking a sip of water.
12. As soon as I know I have a strong negative emotion, I try to suppress or prevent this emotion from affecting my work.
13. When an emotion is negative, I focus on doing a lot of work to get rid of this emotion.
14. I think negative emotions are a common sense and don’t condemn me for having them.
15. When facing a negative emotion event, I think of the positive side of the event.
16. When facing a negative emotional event, I remember previous positive experiences I had in similar situations to change my emotions.
17. I focus on thinking to address the event that causes negative emotions rather than on the existing negative emotions.
18. I learn to handle emotions instead of punishing those who cause emotions.
19. I put myself in the situation of the child who caused me negative emotions to sympathise for him or her.
20. I think of the funny, humorous side of a negative emotion situation to change emotions.
21. I consider overcoming negative emotions as a challenge and a joy in my work.
22. I let the negative emotions in communication with children naturally disappear by not caring about them.

The survey results show that most of the preschool teachers used the negative emotional control measures the researchers provide at a “medium” level. Particularly, for resolution number 22, the researchers consider the extent to which preschool teachers allowed negative emotions in communication with children to naturally disappear by not caring about it, in other words, not adjusting it. The average of 3.1 shows that teachers did not adjust their emotions at a “medium” level. Taking a closer look at this, the researchers calculated the percentage of options, and the results are as follows. Only 27.9 percent of preschool teachers rarely or very rarely did not adjust negative emotions. Meanwhile, 39.4 percent of teachers often to very often do not regulate these emotions. Comparing to the degree of emotional response, which is consistent with what was presented above, this figure corresponds very well with the proportion of teachers who

thought that the ‘dangerous’ emotional response is an appropriate emotional response.

To explore the ability to adjust the level of negative emotions, the researchers surveyed 19 ways to adjust the level of emotions according to what Gross and Munoz suggested (the first 19 ways). The results show that there are 2 ways to adjust, and teachers used them “regularly” with an average of 3.5. Method number 5, “If a child does not like a kind of food, I give him/her less this food and more other foods to avoid negative emotions caused when the child eats slowly” (standard deviation = 1,113) is an adjustment that focuses on a negative emotional situation. Method number 19, “I put myself in a situation where the child causes negative emotions for me to sympathise for the child” (standard deviation = 0.960) is used when negative emotions have occurred, and the adjustment focuses on the teacher’s awareness. This is the highly effective emotional adjustment because when being placed in a child’s situation, the preschool teacher temporarily moves attention away from his or her unsatisfied needs (which cause negative emotions). At the same time, putting themselves in the child’s situation helps teachers understand the child better, and sympathise with him or her more.

There are 15 ways to correct negative emotions used by preschool teachers at a “medium” level (the average of 2.7 to 3.4), including number 15, 16, 14, 10 and 3, with medium grades on usage level of 3.4. Having the same the average of 3.3, the ways to adjust negative emotions numbers 17, 18, 12 and 6 are the next emotional adjustment methods used by preschool teachers. Along with the average of 3.2 are ways number 13 and 11. Method number 9, “talking to colleagues about the negative emotional situation to be sympathetic, supported and to learn from experience for the next processing”, is a way of adjusting based on emotional expression, and reflecting the reciprocal correlation among fellow teachers. This adjustment is suitable to correct all negative emotions. Unfortunately, preschool teachers did not use much, and the average is only 3.1, corresponding to the middle of the “medium” level. Option number 1 is the situational technique, which is ranked next with an average of 2.9. Along the bottom of the “medium” level is the average of 2.7, for number 4 and 2.

Along with having the lowest average score of 2.4 points, corresponding to the “rarely” used level are two ways to adjust emotions number 7 and 8, related to a technique that can help to adjust emotions very well, that is, “showing emotions”. With number 7, “I spend time tracking my own emotional reactions or writing down my own negative emotions”, the in-depth interviews show that most of the teachers asked did not know the effects of this adjustment, so it is not implemented. As for number 8, “I tell my children about the negative emotions I have”, teachers said, as they were not used to saying their feelings. Some other teachers thought that they did not speak to children because they were still too young to understand and sympathise for them. In this regard, child psychology proves the opposite. Children of preschool age have shown good emotional and emotional development. Moreover, the sharing of emotions by themselves has helped teachers somewhat to reduce the level of negative emotions by calling the exact name of their emotions and moving those emotions out, using awareness of themselves to describe them.

Summary of ways to adjust the negative emotions of preschool teachers according to the situation-adjusted adjustment groups, focusing on response and on awareness, the results show that preschool teachers use negative emotions focusing more on cognitive than other emotional emotions. This is a highly recommended adjustment by psychologists. It can be said that preschool teachers are on the right track in the process of training their negative emotion adjustment skills.

For the ability to turn negative emotions into positive emotions, the main ways to navigate emotions are based on techniques focusing on cognition and survey with two ways, that is number 20 and 21 in the questionnaire. The average score obtained is 3.2 with adjustment number 20, that is, “I think of the funny, humorous aspect of a negative emotion situation to change emotions” and 3.3 with adjustment number 21, that is, “I consider overcoming negative emotions is a challenge and a joy in my work”. As such, preschool teachers consider themselves to have used these emotional modifications in the “medium” level.

Investigating the correlation coefficient of  $r$  between general emotional modifications and the groups of participants, the results were as following.

There is a correlation between teachers from different clusters with a correlation coefficient of  $r = 0.249$ , and significance level  $p = 0.000$ . Accordingly, preschool teachers in public schools have better skills to change negative emotions than those in non-public schools.

There is a positive correlation between qualification and using level of negative emotional control methods with  $r = 0.180$ ,  $p = 0.004$ . These results suggest that highly qualified preschool teachers are more likely to be able to change negative emotions than those with lower qualifications.

Among seniority of preschool teachers, the level of using the negative emotional adjustment is also positively correlated with  $r = 0.226$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . Thus, the longer the preschool teacher stays in service, the better their skills in changing negative emotions are.

The correlation between age and the use of negative emotional control is  $0.196$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . It shows that the older the teacher is, the better the skill in changing negative emotions is.

Looking at the correlation coefficients above, the researchers see that the  $r$  is generally quite small compared to 1. That proves that the degree of correlation between the above factors is not very tight. There was no correlation between the classes the teacher was in charge of and the negative emotional change skill.

### DISCUSSION

This research has described the reality of negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers, thereby identifying the advantages and limitations of preschool teachers in these skills. The results show that, for the skill of recognising negative emotions that are not appropriate for the current situation, the positive point is that preschool teachers have recognised the occurrence of negative emotions. However, they still have many limitations in identifying the exact expressions and names of each individual negative emotion as well as the ability to determine the degree and suitability of negative emotions to situations that are not high. As for the ability to change negative emotions, the level of skills gained by current teachers is still limited. There are statistically significant differences and positive correlations among the target groups related to type of pre-

school, professional level, seniority and age of the object. This result is consistent and partly explains the causes of some mental health problems of preschool teachers that some recent studies have mentioned such as the problem of preschool teachers' stress, and the state of the art emotional management skills of students in Early Childhood Education, which are not high (Pham 2017; Trinh 2016). When overcoming the limitations of negative emotional adjustment skills, the quality of emotional life of preschool teachers is better, positive emotions, which appear regularly will minimise occupational stress, making preschool teachers love their profession more and more so that they actively work to build a high quality educational environment.

### CONCLUSION

Results of the survey on the reality of negative emotional adjustment skills in communication with children of preschool teachers show that preschool teachers have initially recognised the occurrence of negative emotions but calling names exactly as well as the recognition of the expression of these emotions is limited. The ability to assess the level of negative emotions is not high and there are still many preschool teachers who have not determined the right emotion level appropriate to the circumstances. Thus, to improve this skill, it is essential to equip teachers with basic knowledge about negative emotions. In the skill to change negative emotions, most of the teachers have used the methods of adjusting negative emotions, but they are still spontaneous, sporadic and "medium" only. A group of measures focusing on the awareness have been used by most preschool teachers. There is a statistically significant difference and positive correlation among the target groups related to the type of preschool, professional level, seniority and age of the object. In general, preschool teachers' skills of adjusting negative emotions at present are only "average". Helping preschool teachers understand the methods of effective and systematic adjustment of negative emotions and knowing how to use them at the right time will bring significant improvements to these skills. Preschool teachers themselves also need to actively learn and practice skills every day. In this way, the quality of emotional life of preschool

teachers themselves as well as that of childcare and education they are undertaking can bring good results.

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