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## Teaching with the Heart: Navigating the Tension between Professional Ideals and Structural Constraints

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### ABSTRACT

Educational research has firmly established that the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching, what we term “*teaching with the heart*”, are central to student engagement, motivation, and achievement. A 2017 meta-analytic update by Roorda et al. (2017) synthesized 189 studies with 249,198 students from preschool through high school and found that positive and negative affective teacher-student relationship qualities were associated with engagement and achievement, with engagement partially mediating these associations, while systematic reviews of teacher burnout show that when this relational capacity is compromised, the consequences travel directly to students’ motivation and, more weakly and inconsistently, to their achievement (Madigan & Kim, 2021a; Wartenberg et al., 2026). This article presents an integrative literature review that (a) defines the theoretical foundations of affective teaching around four pillars: pedagogical empathy, educational benevolence, active listening, and pedagogical patience; (b) examines the motivational and self-efficacy mechanisms that sustain or erode this engagement, drawing on evidence regarding teachers’ emotional labor (Yin, Huang, & Chen, 2019) and self-efficacy (Zee & Koomen, 2016); and (c) analyzes the structural constraints: class size, contradictory institutional mandates, digital hyper-connectivity, and the blurring of professional and private life, that condition its practical realization, while nuancing the class-size debate in light of systematic-review evidence reporting smaller and less consistent effects on achievement than commonly assumed (Filges, Sonne-Schmidt, & Nielsen, 2018). We argue that for teacher affective engagement to become a sustainable professional practice rather than a guilt-inducing ideal, working conditions must change in tandem with individual capacity-building: a relationally justified reduction in class sizes, evidence-based social-emotional training for teachers (Jennings et al., 2017), and formal institutional recognition of the invisible emotional labor that teachers perform daily.

**Keywords:** *teacher affective engagement; pedagogical relationship; emotional labor; teacher self-efficacy; professional well-being; structural constraints.*

## INTRODUCTION

The question of teachers' affective commitment to their professional practice constitutes a major issue in contemporary educational sciences. Pedagogical research has extensively demonstrated the importance of the relational and emotional dimension of teaching and learning (Hamre & Pianta, 2021), a finding corroborated at considerably larger scale by a meta-analytic update covering 189 studies and close to 250,000 students, which confirmed that affective teacher-student relationships remain robust, partially mediated predictors of both engagement and achievement, from preschool through secondary school (Roorda et al., 2017). Emotion, far from being a peripheral or private matter, is now widely recognized as constitutive of the pedagogical act itself (Pharand & Doucet, 2013). Yet the translation of these theoretical principles into the reality of everyday teaching practice raises fundamental questions.

The notion of “affective involvement” refers here to teachers' ability to mobilize their emotional, empathetic, and relational resources in the service of the pedagogical act (Visioli et al., 2015). However, recognizing the necessity of such a posture is not enough to guarantee its feasibility within current school contexts. Indeed, when this relational capacity is compromised by chronic stress, the consequences travel directly to students: a recent meta-analysis of 86 studies found that all three dimensions of teacher burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, are negatively associated with the quality of teacher-student interactions and with student motivation, even though the association with standardized achievement scores proved weaker and more inconsistent than commonly assumed (Wartenberg et al., 2026).

This article specifically examines the gap between prescription and realization: to what extent does teachers' affective involvement remain possible within the school institution as currently organized? More precisely, it addresses three guiding questions: (1) What are the theoretical foundations and constitutive dimensions of “teaching with the heart”? (2) Through which motivational and psychological mechanisms is this affective engagement sustained or eroded over the course of a career? And (3) what structural conditions, at the level of the classroom, the school, and the wider social context, enable or constrain its expression in practice?

### 1.1. Review Approach

This article adopts the form of an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005), a method well suited to synthesizing a heterogeneous body of empirical and conceptual scholarship, spanning educational psychology, occupational health, and the sociology of the teaching profession, around a shared set of questions. Sources were selected to privilege, wherever available, meta-analyses and systematic reviews published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Roorda et al., 2017; Zee & Koomen, 2016; Filges et al., 2018; Yin et al., 2019; Wartenberg et

al., 2026), supplemented with foundational monographs (e.g., Hochschild, 1983; Noddings, 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2016) and, for the francophone sociology of the teaching profession, key empirical studies and institutional reports (e.g., Barrère, 2002, 2017; Lantheaume & Hélou, 2008; OECD, 2020, 2025). Because the aim is conceptual synthesis rather than the exhaustive, protocol-driven aggregation characteristic of a systematic review, findings are presented thematically rather than through formal effect-size pooling; where systematic reviews and meta-analyses exist for a given claim, however, they are prioritized over single-study evidence, and the strength and consistency of the evidence base is flagged explicitly throughout.

The remainder of the article is organized around four complementary axes: the theoretical foundations of teaching “with the heart” (Section 2); the motivational drivers of the teaching profession (Section 3); the question of professional well-being as a condition for affective engagement (Section 4); and an analysis of the structural constraints that condition the daily exercise of the profession (Section 5). Section 6 discusses the implications of this synthesis, Section 7 acknowledges its limitations, and Section 8 concludes.

## **2. Teaching with the Heart: Theoretical Foundations**

### **2.1. Principles of Relational Teaching**

The expression “teaching with the heart” refers to a set of affective and relational dispositions now considered essential to pedagogical effectiveness. Research in educational psychology has repeatedly highlighted the decisive role of the quality of teacher-student relationships in academic success (Roorda et al., 2011). We propose that this relational stance rests on four interdependent pillars that jointly structure teachers’ affective engagement: pedagogical empathy, educational benevolence, active listening, and pedagogical patience.

#### **2.1.1. Pedagogical Empathy**

Teacher empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the emotional and cognitive states of students (Warren, 2018). Empirical work has shown that teacher empathy significantly promotes learners’ academic engagement (Jormsri et al., 2005), a socio-emotional skill that allows teachers to adjust their pedagogical practices to the affective and cognitive needs of each student (Cooper, 2011). Pedagogical empathy, however, cannot be reduced to simple emotional contagion; it requires what Noddings (2012) calls “regulated empathy”, which preserves the professional distance necessary for sound judgment. This emotional regulation constitutes a protective factor against burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

This capacity for regulated empathy converges with meta-analytic evidence on teachers’ emotional labor: deep acting, the genuine internal regulation of felt emotion, is associated with

higher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, whereas surface acting, the mere performance of expected emotional displays without corresponding internal regulation, predicts higher burnout and lower satisfaction (Yin et al., 2019). Emotional regulation is therefore not simply a personal virtue but an empirically measurable skill with direct consequences for teachers' sustainability in the profession.

### **2.1.2. Educational Benevolence**

Teacher benevolence, conceptualized as “attention paid to the well-being and development of the student” (Jellab, 2018, p. 67), has become a normative reference point for contemporary educational policy. Bressoux and Pansu (2016) showed that benevolent practices, particularly formative evaluation, contribute to strengthening students' academic self-esteem. This posture nonetheless assumes a delicate balance between high expectations and care, which Prairat (2017) calls “benevolent authority”: a professional ethic in which care and demand are not opposed but mutually constitutive (Prairat, 2012). Benevolence should not be confused with complacency, which would deprive students of the productive confrontation with difficulty that their development requires (Robbes, 2016).

### **2.1.3. Active Listening**

Active listening, a concept initially developed by Rogers (1969) within humanistic psychology, constitutes a central dimension of the pedagogical relationship. It implies cognitive and affective availability on the part of the teacher, together with attentive presence to students' verbal and non-verbal expressions (Jorro, 2016). Research in professional didactics has shown that this listening skill allows teachers to better identify the cognitive obstacles encountered by learners (Vinatier & Numa-Bocage, 2020), while also encouraging students' expression as subjects and contributing to a classroom climate conducive to learning (Reeve, 2009).

### **2.1.4. Pedagogical Patience**

Teacher patience, often neglected in the scientific literature, is nevertheless an essential professional virtue (Korthagen, 2004). It manifests as the ability to accommodate differentiated learning rhythms, to treat error as a constructive process, and to sustain a supportive posture over time (Bucheton & Soulé, 2009). Work on “didactic time” highlights the tension between the institutional constraints of curricular progression and respect for individual learning temporalities (Chopin, 2011). Pedagogical patience thus appears both as a resource for managing this tension and as a potential source of emotional exhaustion when the gap between aspirations and achievements becomes too great (Day & Gu, 2014).

### **3. Teacher Motivation and Affective Engagement**

Understanding teachers' affective commitment requires examining the motivational drivers underlying the choice of this profession. International research has identified a typology of motivations that structure entry into teaching (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Intrinsic motivations refer to the desire to transmit knowledge and the intellectual satisfaction derived from teaching (Sinclair, 2008); altruistic motivations correspond to a desire to contribute to individual development and the improvement of society (Thomson et al., 2012); and extrinsic motivations concern job security, working conditions, or the social status of the profession (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010). This typology also applies, with some variation, to teachers entering the profession as a second career, whose motivational profiles combine prior occupational experience with a renewed search for meaning (Berger & D'Ascoli, 2011).

Fokkens-B Bruinsma and Canrinus (2012) demonstrated that teachers guided by intrinsic and altruistic motivations report greater professional satisfaction and a stronger capacity for relational engagement with students. Conversely, when extrinsic motivations predominate, the risk of affective disengagement increases in the face of professional difficulties (Watt & Richardson, 2008). This pattern is corroborated by meta-analytic evidence linking self-efficacy beliefs to sustained commitment to the profession, with teachers who feel more capable of managing the demands of their role showing markedly lower attrition risk (Chesnut & Burley, 2015).

Motivation therefore proves decisive for understanding the affective resources that a teacher can mobilize in daily practice. French-language research has further highlighted the importance of "motivation through the meaning of work", teachers' ability to identify coherence between their personal values and their professional practice (Perez-Roux, 2012), and its close relationship with professional satisfaction and continued engagement in training (Amathieu & Chaliès, 2014). This search for meaning appears particularly crucial in difficult school contexts, where the relational and affective dimension becomes compensatory in the face of didactic obstacles, and where new teachers in particular must renegotiate their professional identity against the backdrop of a changing relationship to the profession (Rayou & van Zanten, 2004).

### **4. Professional Well-Being as a Condition for Affective Engagement**

Teachers' affective involvement cannot be dissociated from the question of their own professional well-being. Research in occupational psychology has established that teacher well-being constitutes both a prerequisite for and a consequence of relational engagement with students (Viac & Fraser, 2020). This cyclical dimension of well-being echoes Fredrickson's (2001) "broaden-and-build" theory of positive emotions: positive emotions expand the

repertoire of available cognitive and affective resources, thereby fostering better pedagogical practices, which in turn generate satisfaction and further well-being.

This positive spiral is closely linked to teachers' sense of self-efficacy, their belief in their own capacity to bring about desired student outcomes even amid difficulty (Bandura, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). A synthesis integrating four decades of research confirms that self-efficacy is one of the most consistent predictors of classroom quality, students' academic adjustment, and teachers' own psychological well-being (Zee & Koomen, 2016), making it a plausible mechanism through which affective engagement is either sustained or eroded over the course of a career.

The professional experience of novice teachers illustrates this dynamic concretely: the first years of practice are frequently characterized by a "reality shock" generating suffering and disillusionment (Ria, 2015). This critical phase can durably alter the capacity for affective engagement if it is not institutionally supported (Huberman, 1989). Conversely, teachers who manage to build what Barrère (2017) calls "situated professional satisfaction" find a source of emotional gratification within the pedagogical relationship itself.

Teacher well-being rests on several interdependent factors:

- The sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001)

The quality of relations with colleagues and management (Janot-Bergugnat & Rasclé, 2008)

The balance between professional and personal life (Fotinos & Horenstein, 2011)

The social recognition of work accomplished (Lantheaume & Hélou, 2008)

Recent surveys reveal a worrying degradation of teacher well-being across many educational systems, understood in the occupational-health literature as the endpoint of a chronic imbalance between job demands and available resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The most recent round of the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey confirms that this degradation is not merely anecdotal: teacher and school-leader well-being has declined since 2018 in several participating systems, and in a number of countries primary school teachers report lower satisfaction with the profession than six years earlier, alongside persistently high administrative workloads cited as a leading source of stress (OECD, 2020, 2025). This paradoxical situation directly bears on our central problem: how can authentic affective engagement be maintained when working conditions themselves generate professional suffering?

Research on "emotional dissonance" shows that the obligation to perform positive emotions that contradict one's actual affective state constitutes a major factor of exhaustion

(Hochschild, 1983; Zapf, 2002). Meta-analytic evidence corroborates this picture at scale: a synthesis of studies conducted across multiple countries found that teachers who rely on surface acting, masking their true feelings to comply with the profession's emotional display rules, report significantly higher burnout and lower job satisfaction than those who regulate their emotions more authentically through deep acting or the expression of genuinely felt emotion (Yin et al., 2019). Compounding this, systematic reviews estimate that teacher burnout is directly implicated in reduced student motivation and engagement (Madigan & Kim, 2021a), while also standing as one of the strongest predictors of teachers' intentions to leave the profession altogether (Madigan & Kim, 2021b). Teachers thus find themselves caught in a contradictory injunction: to mobilize their affective resources while simultaneously managing the deleterious emotional impact of degraded working conditions.

Importantly, this cycle of exhaustion and disengagement is not presented in the literature as inevitable. Cluster-randomized trials of structured social-emotional training programs for teachers, such as Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), have demonstrated that a comparatively modest investment (approximately 30 hours of in-person training combined with individual coaching) can produce significant reductions in psychological distress and time-related stress, alongside measurable gains in mindfulness and adaptive emotion regulation (Jennings et al., 2017). Critically, a subsequent follow-up study with the same sample of 224 teachers across 36 high-poverty urban schools confirmed that these positive effects were sustained across two full school years (Jennings et al., 2019). Such findings suggest that institutional recognition of emotional labor need not remain a rhetorical gesture: it can be operationalized through concrete, evaluable professional-development investments.

## **5. Structural Constraints on Affective Engagement**

### **5.1. Inside the Classroom: Class Size and the “Problem of Numbers”**

Teachers' affective involvement first encounters the material reality of the classroom space and the decisive question of student numbers. Research has established a negative correlation between class size and the quality of teacher-student interactions (Blatchford et al., 2011). In overcrowded classes, common in many educational systems, teachers find it structurally difficult to establish individualized relationships with every student (Piketty & Valdenaire, 2006).

It should be noted, however, that the empirical picture regarding class size is more contested than the intuitive link between numbers and relational quality might suggest. A Campbell systematic review synthesizing 148 reports from 41 countries found, at best, only a small effect of smaller classes on reading achievement and a statistically insignificant effect on mathematics achievement (Filges et al., 2018). This does not undermine the relational

argument advanced here; the mechanism under discussion is the quality of affective interaction rather than test-score achievement alone, but it does mean that advocacy for reduced class sizes should be grounded explicitly in relational and socio-emotional outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2011; Roorda et al., 2017) rather than in assumed, and empirically fragile, achievement gains. Framing class-size reduction primarily as an achievement intervention exposes the claim to legitimate empirical challenge, whereas framing it as a condition for relational and affective engagement is considerably better supported by the evidence reviewed here.

The “problem of numbers” is not merely a quantitative obstacle: it qualitatively transforms the nature of the pedagogical relationship itself (Meirieu, 2013). Ethnographic observation has documented the invisible “emotional labor” involved in simultaneously managing the affective states of twenty-five to thirty students (Barrère, 2002), a load that intensifies in contexts of significant heterogeneity, where teachers must respond to highly differentiated affective and cognitive needs (Rochex & Crinon, 2011).

Pedagogical differentiation, presented as the institutional response to this diversity, requires detailed knowledge of each student that can only be built through substantial relational investment (Tomlinson, 2014). Classroom management itself mobilizes significant emotional resources: rule transgressions, conflicts between students, or resistance to learning generate stress and affective exhaustion (Chang, 2009), and teachers must constantly arbitrate between maintaining authority and preserving a relationship of trust (Gaussel, 2017). This permanent emotional regulation constitutes an “invisible work” that taxes the resources available for positive affective engagement (Ria & Leblanc, 2011), a pattern also visible at scale: meta-analytic evidence shows that all three burnout symptoms are consistently, if modestly to moderately, associated with weaker classroom management and lower emotional support for students, regardless of whether these are assessed through teachers’ own reports or observed externally by researchers (Wartenberg et al., 2026). The temporal dimension exacerbates these constraints: the time slots imposed by school organization fragment interactions and often prevent the deepening of individual exchanges (Chopin, 2011), leaving teachers with the recurring frustration of being unable to “follow through” with personalized support, constrained by the imperative of the class group’s collective progression (Kherroubi & Rochex, 2004).

## **5.2. Within the School: Institutional Culture and Contradictory Injunctions**

Beyond the classroom, the school establishment constitutes an institutional space whose organization largely conditions the possibilities for affective engagement. School climate, now a central concept in educational research, refers to the quality of relationships among all actors in the educational community (Debarbieux et al., 2012). A degraded school climate, characterized by tensions between colleagues, mistrust of the hierarchy, or repeated violence,

exhausts teachers' emotional resources and compromises their capacity for investment in their students (Janosz et al., 2013).

The professional culture of the establishment also plays a decisive role. In schools where "teacher individualism" predominates, individuals find themselves isolated in their classrooms, unable to share difficulties or receive collective support in the face of the profession's emotional challenges (Lessard & Tardif, 2003). Conversely, establishments that have developed a "collaborative culture" offer spaces for collective development that allow the affective load of the work to be metabolized (Gather Thurler, 2000).

Contradictory institutional injunctions constitute another source of difficulty. Teachers are simultaneously summoned to cover heavy curricula and achieve measurable results on standardized assessments, while also individualizing their pedagogy and addressing the socio-affective difficulties of their students, an identity increasingly experienced as "under pressure" (Maroy, 2006; Périer, 2004). This "crisis of prescriptions" (Lantheaume & Hélou, 2008) generates a feeling of powerlessness and a dilution of professional meaning that erodes the motivation to engage affectively. These tensions are corroborated by the most recent international survey data: the 2024 round of the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey found declining teacher and school-leader well-being since 2018 in several countries, alongside persistently high administrative workloads reported as a principal source of stress, a pattern consistent with the "crisis of prescriptions" described in the francophone literature (OECD, 2025).

The question of material and human resources also proves crucial. In under-resourced establishments, the absence of specialized personnel (school psychologists, social workers, nurses) leads to socio-affective support missions being shifted onto teachers, missions for which they are neither trained nor remunerated (Fotinos, 2014). This "mission inflation" (Périer, 2014) exceeds individual engagement capacities and transforms the relational dimension into a burden rather than a resource, particularly for early-career teachers who are frequently assigned to the most challenging postings (Périer, 2014).

### **5.3. Beyond the School: Digital Connectivity, Families, and Precarity**

Teachers' affective engagement does not stop at the school gates; it extends into the private sphere, with ambivalent consequences. Research on the porosity between professional and personal life has shown that teachers "take school home with them", particularly through recurring concerns about certain struggling students. This "professional mental load" invades personal time and can generate chronic emotional exhaustion.

Digital hyper-connectivity has intensified this porosity in a specifically measurable way. A five-week diary study of more than 500 elementary school teachers found that after-hours contact via information and communication technologies constituted a significant source of

weekly strain, including negative rumination and insomnia, and that teachers who actively adopted boundary-protecting habits, such as disabling work-email notifications on personal devices, reported significantly lower perceived intrusion of work into their personal lives (Park et al., 2020). The same study found that school principals who modeled and supported clear work-family boundaries reduced teachers' weekly technology-related work demands, whereas parents' expectations of after-hours availability increased them, underscoring that this boundary is not simply a matter of individual teacher discipline but a structural feature that schools can actively shape.

The relationship with families constitutes another dimension of this extra-muros engagement. While school-family cooperation is theoretically valued, it often faces mutual misunderstandings, contradictory expectations, and sometimes reciprocal mistrust. Teachers working in socially disadvantaged contexts frequently report carrying the burden of students' affective and cognitive development largely alone, without commensurate family support (Thin, 1998), a difficulty compounded, for some families, by their own precarious circumstances and consequent distance from the school institution (Périer, 2019). This asymmetry in educational engagement generates frustration and a sense of injustice on both sides.

### **Contemporary societal developments further complicate this dimension:**

Digital hyper-connectivity makes teachers potentially reachable by families at all times, blurring the boundaries between professional and private time (Park et al., 2020).

Teachers face an increasing "judicialization" of their profession, fearing complaints or litigation in cases of perceived failure in students' affective care.

This legal insecurity can paradoxically lead to relational withdrawal as a precaution, transforming affective engagement into a professional risk factor.

Finally, teachers' own material living conditions condition their capacity for engagement. The precaritization of part of the teaching workforce, notably contract teachers, stagnating purchasing power, and the degradation of social recognition for the profession create an unfavorable context for affective investment. It is difficult to generously mobilize emotional resources for others while feeling personally weakened, devalued, and exhausted.

## **6. Discussion: Toward a Sustainable Model of Affective Engagement**

Taken together, the evidence reviewed here supports three interrelated conclusions. First, the relational and affective dimension of teaching is not an optional refinement but a well-evidenced driver of student engagement and, to a lesser and less consistent extent, achievement (Roorda et al., 2017; Wartenberg et al., 2026); it therefore deserves the same

evidentiary seriousness in policy debates as more traditionally quantifiable outcomes. Second, this relational capacity is not an inexhaustible personal trait but a psychological and physiological resource that is built through self-efficacy and emotional regulation (Zee & Koomen, 2016; Yin et al., 2019) and depleted by chronic structural strain (Madigan & Kim, 2021a, 2021b). Third, the structural constraints identified in Section 5, class size, institutional culture, digital connectivity, and socio-economic context, do not operate independently of teachers' psychological resources; rather, they determine whether those resources can be replenished or are progressively exhausted.

This synthesis has two direct implications for policy and school leadership. The first concerns the framing of evidence: because the achievement-based case for smaller classes is considerably weaker than commonly assumed (Filges et al., 2018), advocacy grounded in relational and socio-emotional outcomes is both more accurate and, arguably, more persuasive in the long run, since it will not collapse under the scrutiny of achievement-focused evaluation. The second concerns the object of intervention: policies that treat emotional labor purely as an individual disposition to be selected for at recruitment, rather than as a professional competency that can be trained and a resource that can be structurally protected, are unlikely to be sustainable. Evaluated programs such as CARE (Jennings et al., 2017) demonstrate that comparatively modest, well-designed investments in teachers' socio-emotional competence produce measurable results, suggesting a viable middle path between purely individual responsabilization and purely structural reform.

## **7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

As an integrative, thematically organized review rather than a systematic review with a fully pre-registered search protocol, this article does not provide an exhaustive or quantitatively pooled account of the literature; readers seeking effect sizes for specific relationships should consult the meta-analyses and systematic reviews cited throughout (e.g., Roorda et al., 2017; Zee & Koomen, 2016; Filges et al., 2018; Yin et al., 2019; Wartenberg et al., 2026) directly. The evidence base itself is also unevenly distributed: much of the meta-analytic literature on burnout, self-efficacy, and emotional labor is predominantly cross-sectional, and, as Wartenberg et al. (2026) explicitly note, longitudinal studies capable of establishing the direction of these relationships over time remain scarce, a gap that future research on teacher affective engagement should prioritize. Much of the sociological literature on the francophone teaching profession cited in Sections 3 and 5, while methodologically rich, is also geographically and institutionally specific to the French and Belgian school systems, and comparative research is needed to establish which structural mechanisms generalize across educational systems with different class-size norms, curricular autonomy, and welfare provisions.

Future research would also benefit from deepening the analysis of the coping strategies that teachers themselves develop to sustain affective engagement in constraining contexts, and from documenting institutional experiments, in scheduling, staffing, or digital-boundary policy, likely to create more favorable structural conditions. Intervention research that combines individual-level social-emotional training with structural changes to working conditions, rather than testing either in isolation, would be particularly valuable for establishing which combination of measures most reliably sustains teachers' affective engagement over a full career.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis of the conditions of possibility for teacher affective engagement reveals a concerning gap between prescription and realization. While research in educational sciences has solidly established the necessity of affective involvement for student learning and development (Hamre & Pianta, 2021; Roorda et al., 2017), the structural conditions of contemporary professional practice largely compromise this possibility.

The “problem of numbers” appears as a fundamental and often invisible obstacle: no authentic and lasting affective engagement can unfold when a teacher must simultaneously manage the needs of thirty students in an overcrowded class (Piketty & Valdenaire, 2006), though, as noted above, this claim is best grounded in relational and socio-emotional evidence rather than in the more fragile achievement-based evidence base (Filges et al., 2018; Roorda et al., 2017). This structural constraint is compounded by contradictory institutional injunctions that exhaust teachers' emotional resources while simultaneously demanding increasing relational investment from them (Lantheaume & Hélou, 2008).

The degradation of teacher well-being, attested by numerous international surveys (OECD, 2020, 2025), constitutes another major limiting factor: one cannot sustainably mobilize affective resources while personally experiencing professional suffering. Meta-analytic evidence now allows this intuition to be stated with more precision: burnout is measurably associated with weaker teacher-student interactions and reduced student motivation (Wartenberg et al., 2026), and stands among the strongest known predictors of teachers' intentions to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021b). The injunction to affective engagement can even become an additional form of institutional violence when it is not accompanied by effective transformation of the profession's working conditions.

For teacher affective involvement to become truly possible, rather than an unattainable ideal that generates guilt, several conditions must be met:

A significant reduction in class sizes, framed explicitly around relational and socio-emotional benefits rather than uncertain achievement gains alone (Filges et al., 2018; Roorda et al., 2017).

Initial and ongoing training in managing professional emotions, following the model of evaluated programs such as CARE, which have demonstrated measurable reductions in distress and improvements in emotion regulation (Jennings et al., 2017).

Institutional recognition of invisible emotional labor, informed by meta-analytic evidence quantifying its costs in burnout and turnover intention (Yin et al., 2019; Madigan & Kim, 2021b).

Strengthening of multi-professional teams within schools.

Clear institutional boundary-setting around after-hours digital contact, given evidence that principal support measurably reduces teachers' off-hours connectivity demands (Park, Liu, & Headrick, 2020).

Restoration of the material and symbolic conditions necessary to practice the profession with dignity.

If we sincerely want teachers to teach “with the heart,” they must be given the effective means to do so. These means will serve, at a minimum, to preserve teachers' capacity for affective engagement from erosion, and at best, to allow it to flourish, an outcome that would serve teachers and learners alike.

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