



Why Educational Leaders and Policymakers Should Attend to Emotions

Tanetha Grosland, Texas Christian University

Education has been tied to some of the most contentious and longstanding debates in U.S. political history. While much research has been done about the effectiveness of educational programs, little research has focused on the role emotions play in the politics and policy of education programs. My research examines how emotions can contribute to, or prevent, the success of policy and change in schools. I focus on the emotions of educators, who are often on the front lines of such changes in schools.

In the worst case scenarios, school change can leave educators feeling frustrated, anxious, incompetent, and even hopeless. To make matters worse, it is commonly believed that emotions are isolated – that an emotional responses exist solely in a particular moment and within a particular person. However, research has shown that groups and organizations can also be affected by emotional events. And schools are often emotional places.

Educational leaders and policymakers trying to improve U.S. public education should take a more holistic approach when engaging school stakeholders. To do so, emotional health and emotional responses must be taken seriously.

The Importance of Emotional Narratives

Race and anti-racist education policy have been part of a longstanding educational debate, in part, because race and racism often create feelings of uncertainty about social conflict. When conversations about race and racism trigger emotions that end or stall anti-racism efforts, then robust anti-racist initiatives become impossible. For this reason, studying emotions about race and racism can provide a window into the emotional complexities of school policy and politics. In a recent study, I investigate the role emotions play in education initiatives, and particularly those that deal with issues of race and racism explicitly.

For example, I studied a college education class, recording each session and collecting and analyzing handouts, online writings, and assignments. I also conducted one-to-one, in-person interviews. The interviews helped me surface a narrative about the class's emotional responses to the instructional material, which focused on race and racism in higher education practices and policy. This narrative approach, provided information about the participants' beliefs and experiences, which otherwise would have gone unnoticed, in some cases even by the participants themselves.

The class I studied was multiracial, mostly female, predominantly made up of U.S. citizens, and spoke openly about racism. Some students described experiences where they were a target of racism, while others described being witnesses to racist acts. Students reported feeling overwhelmed, guilty, empowered, scared, and distraught.

My research shows that it is essential to address emotions in order to reconcile race and racism within and beyond classrooms. Educators and policymakers must address the politics of emotion to fully address racism and the other contentious social issues that are bound up in the U.S. education system. Understanding the politics of emotion requires careful listening and thoughtful observations, which draw out the underlying narrative of *what is important and why people feel the way they do when talking about race and other social concerns*.

Tapping the Political Power of Concerns

Educators and policymakers who hope to improve educational outcomes – particularly in communities underserved by common schooling – must consider the role emotions. To start, decision makers should work to raise awareness about emotions within themselves and the broader dialogue and how they relate to the issue at hand. The questions I use in my own practice and interviews may be helpful:

- What do notice in yourself when discussions of racism or conflict arise?
- If you were a [particular constituency], what might you be thinking/feeling?
- What feelings are easily or more difficulty discussed with others?
- What about educational justice raises doubts for you? And hopefulness?

Next, leaders should ask questions about the decisions they are making. A professionally trained coach can assist with this. The below are good questions with which to start:

- Who stands to benefit?
- Who is disadvantaged/underserved by this initiative?
- How can there be more beneficiaries among those overwhelmingly disadvantaged?
- And how can we account for one's own advantages/disadvantages and emotions while and evaluating the justness of a policy?

The *Describe, Interpret, Evaluate* method is another helpful tool for addressing emotions in schools. First, participants discuss a topic while collecting data about the emotions that arise during a conversation or broader dialogue (e.g. audio recordings, handwritten notes, reflective notes). With that information, participants interpret their data, making an action plan to attend to the emotions that arose for those overwhelmingly disadvantaged by the initiative (simply describing what your notes/data say), interpreting the data using your background knowledge and your goals of more just and inclusive practices and policies. Finally, participants evaluate the initiative or policy changes proposed based on the data collected (how stakeholders feel about the initiative or policy, whether or not the changes address their concerns). Once completed, decision makers along with other stakeholders can determine if they have reached a just outcome and/or make an action plan to continue toward it.

The lack of awareness about the relationship between politics and emotions is felt acutely in education. Addressing the role of emotions in education can hasten the creation of a more just society. To address pressing social issues in schools, decision makers must understand and address the importance of emotions in their policymaking. This itself is an inherently emotional endeavor.

Read more in Tanetha J. Grosland, "Through Laughter and through Tears: Emotions and Antiracist Pedagogy," *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 22, no. 3 (2019): 301-318; Tanetha J. Grosland and Sharon I. Radd "Desirablizing Whiteness: A Discursive Practice in Social Justice Leadership that Entrenches White Supremacy," *Urban Education* 54, no. 5 (2019): 656-676.