

The Weight of Tiny Hands: Emotional Attachment and Boundaries in Early Childhood Education

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, discussions in early childhood education (ECE) have expanded beyond teaching and learning to include the emotional dimensions of teaching, particularly the emotional labor involved in caring for young children. Early learning settings are characterized by close and sustained interactions with children during a highly formative stage of development, which naturally fosters deep emotional ties between teachers and learners. These relationships play a vital role in supporting children's social, emotional, and developmental growth. However, they also present challenges in maintaining professional boundaries, especially when teachers are expected to address both academic instruction and emotional care.

Research, particularly from Western contexts such as the United States and Europe, suggests that emotional attachment in ECE is both beneficial and demanding. Positive teacher-child relationships are associated with improved behavior, emotional regulation, and learning outcomes. At the same time, excessive emotional involvement—when unsupported by clear professional guidelines—may contribute to emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and burnout among teachers (Goff et al., 2022; Harrison & Gallagher, 2023). These findings highlight a critical tension between care and professionalism that remains central to early childhood teaching.

Attachment theory provides a foundational framework for understanding emotional bonds in caregiving relationships. While much of the literature focuses on children's attachment to primary caregivers, increasing attention has been given to teacher-child attachment, particularly in early childhood settings where educators often function as consistent emotional figures. Scholars argue that understanding adult attachment and caregiving roles is essential, especially in contexts where children spend extended periods in early education environments (Early Childhood Teacher-Child Attachment: A Brief Review of the Literature, 2022). However, attachment alone does not fully explain the complexity of teachers' emotional experiences, as professional identity and boundary-setting are equally significant.

Professional boundaries are a defining element of ethical and effective practice in helping professions. In early childhood education, boundaries shape how teachers manage emotional closeness while maintaining professionalism. Feeney et al. (2020) emphasize that honoring professional boundaries is not only an ethical responsibility but also a core component of professional identity. In early childhood settings—where relationships with children and families are often intimate and informal—the distinction between professional roles and personal involvement can easily become blurred.

Cultural context further complicates this balance. In many Asian countries, including Japan, China, and the Philippines, emotional involvement is highly valued, and teachers are often regarded as caregivers or “second parents.” In the Philippine context, early childhood teachers frequently extend their roles beyond instruction to include emotional, social, and even material support for children and families. While this cultural expectation reflects care and commitment, it also intensifies emotional demands and increases the risk of blurred professional boundaries. Reports from the Department of Education (2023) indicate that many Filipino

preschool teachers experience high levels of emotional stress, often compounded by limited institutional support for mental health and emotional labor.

These challenges are particularly evident in Region I, which includes Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union, and Pangasinan. Teachers in rural and community-based settings often face heightened emotional strain due to limited access to resources and professional development opportunities. According to the Region I ECCD Implementation Report (2024), more than 60% of early childhood teachers reported difficulties in maintaining emotional boundaries, especially when working with children who have experienced trauma, loss, or economic hardship. Local data from the La Union Early Childhood Council further indicate elevated stress levels among preschool teachers, linked to extended caregiving hours, emotionally distressing incidents involving students, and limited access to mental health services.

Despite growing recognition of the emotional nature of early childhood teaching, there remains a notable gap in research examining how teachers balance emotional attachment with professional boundaries, particularly within non-Western and culturally collectivist contexts. Much of the existing literature relies heavily on Western attachment theories, which may not fully capture culturally embedded caregiving practices. There is a need for context-specific research that examines how early childhood educators negotiate emotional closeness and professional responsibility within their own cultural and institutional environments.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of early childhood teachers in private schools in San Fernando City, La Union. It examines how teachers define professional boundaries, manage emotional attachment, and navigate the emotional demands of their work. Grounded in the understanding that teacher identity is a multidimensional construct shaped by perceived responsibilities and boundary-setting, the study seeks to illuminate how these factors influence teacher well-being and classroom practice.

This study aimed to explore how early childhood teachers navigate professional boundaries in their interactions with young learners.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions.

- (1) How do early childhood teachers define and interpret professional boundaries within their teaching roles?
- (2) What strategies do teachers employ to balance emotional attachment and professional boundaries?
- (3) What are the perceived effects of balanced emotional attachment and professional distance to the early childhood learners?

By examining these questions, the study seeks to contribute meaningful insights into the emotional work of early childhood educators and to inform more culturally responsive training, support systems, and professional standards that promote both teacher well-being and healthy teacher–child relationships.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of early childhood educators in balancing emotional attachment and professional boundaries. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and make meaning of their experiences within a particular context (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach was deemed appropriate as the study sought to capture the emotional realities, reflections, and interpretations of teachers whose work is deeply relational and emotionally grounded.

By using phenomenology, the researchers were able to explore not only what teachers experienced in their interactions with young learners, but also how these experiences were understood and emotionally processed. This design allowed for rich, descriptive accounts that revealed the complexities of emotional attachment, boundary-setting, and professional identity in early childhood education.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Data were gathered using a **semi-structured interview guide**, designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding emotional attachment, professional boundaries, and teacher well-being. The interview questions were informed by existing literature on emotional labor, attachment theory, and professional ethics in early childhood education. To ensure content validity, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by **five (5) experts in Early Childhood Education**, including **four (4) early childhood teachers and one (1) school principal** from the Elementary Laboratory School of Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University. Their feedback led to revisions that improved clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research questions. Prior to the main data collection, **pilot testing** was conducted with **five (5) early childhood educators** from Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University–Mid La Union Campus (DMMMSU-MID). The pilot test confirmed that the questions were understandable, appropriate, and capable of generating rich and meaningful responses.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts while ensuring that key topics were consistently explored. The interviews encouraged teachers to share not only factual accounts but also emotional reflections on their experiences as educators who navigate care, responsibility, and professional boundaries. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. The recordings were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the research process.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, the study results are presented and discussed based on the gathered data through the process of interviewing with ten (10) various Tenured Early Childhood Educators.

Theme 1. Certain meaning and definition of the professional boundaries, as interpreted by the teachers in their teaching activities.

As per the interview conducted, two (2) themes emerged and were discussed in the light of research question 1 that incorporates (1) **Professional Limits**; (2) **Emotional Boundaries**; (3) **Classroom Management**.

Professional Limits. Professional boundaries are our personal and ethical boundaries that we come up with to make sure that our working relations are respectful and equal. They help us to care about others and do our work appropriately without losing our way in the spheres that may make us feel misunderstood and uncomfortable. It is knowing how to be warm and encouraging and also respecting us and the individuals we do business with.

Emotional Boundaries. Boundaries Emotion Boundaries are those boundaries that we create so as to protect our emotions and ourselves. They help us to have a decision on what we are comfortable to share or receive other people. Being emotionally constrained that is understanding when to feel seriously and when to be back to make sure that we are not engrossed in feelings of other people. It is concerning appreciation of our emotions and simultaneously be good and supportive towards others. Emotional boundaries save our hearts intact and intact and allow us to love and help and relate without becoming tired and hurt in a crude manner.

Classroom Management. The matter of classroom management does not lie in maintaining the order but rather in the friendly, respectful and supportive environment, in which every learner is appreciated and encouraged to develop. It presupposes directing students in an understanding way, being clear of expectations and promoting positive relationships that will make not only the organization of learning process, but also the learning process joyful and significant to the entirety.

Theme 2. Strategies Employed by Teachers to Balance Emotional Attachment and Professional Boundaries.

This paper examines the strategies that could be employed by teachers in an attempt to establish positive teachers-student relationships (TSRs). They have reported that positive TSRs enable a favorable learning experience, academic and social development and prevent and/or lower the instances of disruptive behavior. As

per the interview conducted, research question 2 has two (2) main themes and analysis, **(1) Social-Emotional Learning; (2) Balanced Emotional Attachment; (3) Professional Development.**

Social – Emotional Learning. SEL is learning how to think about and manage our emotions, develop positive relationships, make wise choices and dealing with and overcoming obstacles in life in an emphatic and confident way. Neither is it confined to the issue of academic growth only but it is also human growth as human beings who are caring, self-conscious and strong.

Balanced emotional attachment. Balance emotional attachment is the formation of significant and emotional relationships with other individuals and good sense of identity and boundaries. It encompasses the capacity to be nurturant yet not over protective, supportive but not clingy and emotional, without allowing the emotional aspect of that equation to do the decision making.

Professional Development. Professional development is the process of constant learning and professional development. It is the process of learning to do what we are doing better, learning and becoming more confident and efficient in working. It does not only enable us to serve our work better, but it also enables us to develop as a person, learn to survive in changes and to achieve our optimum potential.

Perceived Effects of Balanced Emotional Attachment and Professional Distance in Early Childhood Learners.

This article is a reflection paper of the perceived implications of Balanced Emotional Attachment and Professional Distance among early childhood learners. Moreover, as an early childhood professional, one must both make sure that he or she cultivates a sense of compassion and empathy towards his/her small students and the boundaries must be appropriate. Teachers play an important role to contribute towards social and emotional growth of children. They also are a vital part of the lives of the child, the families and end up forming an intimate emotional attachment to one another. Based on the interview conducted, the research question 3 has three (3) main themes raised and analysis: **(1) Theme 3. Healthy Classroom Climate; (2) Healthy Teacher-Student Relationship; (3) Effective Classroom Management.**

Healthy Classroom Climate. A healthy Classroom climate may be regarded as the environment, in which students are not only safe, respected, and valued, but also so because of their grades, but also as of their personality as a person. It is a place where a person may be curious enough, perceive mistakes as learning points, and each teacher and student are able to give his or her opinion without being rated. It is highly hospitable, warm, and accommodating where laughter, teamwork and the goodness are automatic and where education is not seen as a duty but a shared experience.

Healthy Teacher- Student Relationship. Healthy teacher student relationship is a relationship which is established on trust, respect and care. It is not the actual imparting of lessons to students, but it is about knowing students, learning about their needs, and not merely enabling them to succeed in school through some manner of influence, but rather to be a comfortable type of student, asking questions, making mistakes and getting advised, encouraged and tolerated by the teachers.

Effective Classroom Management. An effective classroom management is creating a safe, respectful, and learning classroom. It is to follow rigid regulations, schedules, and demands and be supportive and empathetic. A well managed classroom balance is one that is maintained with empathy wherein the student remains attentive, attentive to others and feels that he or she is being appreciated in the learning process.

DISCUSSION

The results portray the complex nature of the relationship that exists between emotional attachment and professional boundary in early childhood education. Therefore, in accordance with the attachment theory by Bowlby (1988), the teachers went out and proceeded to observe that intimate attachments with feelings allow the cultivation of trust and social-emotional stages in children. In the meantime, loss of professionalism or burnout is uncontrollable emotional interaction. The participants' strategies were based on the intentional attempt to provide the balance between the care and professional responsibility and demonstrated that they were conscious of the relational and ethical aspects of their work.

The ways teachers interact directly with young children have a profound impact on both their development and learning (Hamre et al., 2014; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These interactions are shaped not just by the activities in the classroom, but by the social and emotional atmosphere that surrounds them (Coplan et al., 2011). Because teachers' responses to children are influenced by their own emotional well-being and social skills (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), their ability to manage emotions effectively becomes essential for creating positive, supportive classroom experiences. In fact, Flores et al. (2025) found that when teachers intentionally guided children during discovery-based learning, students showed significant improvement in environmental skills, highlighting how emotionally balanced and professionally mindful teaching can enhance learning. Levine (2023) also pointed out that teachers' emotional regulation matters in adult interactions—whether with colleagues or families—because healthy, collaborative relationships among adults into the classroom, strengthening the overall experiences and development of the children.

These findings are in line with the concept of emotional labor by Hochschild (1983) that proves that the educators possess an active regulation of their feelings so that they could be capable of playing the roles of meeting the demands that are attached to being a professional. Emotional boundaries and classroom management strategies are coping mechanisms of dealing with emotional stress of teaching without negatively affecting oneself-being. The study is also consistent with the recently conducted research, which indicated that the success of teachers in the implementation of emotional labor is positively correlated with the level of professional development and reflection practices (Shakimova, 2024; Ong, 2024, 2025).

Some of the cultural findings that have been made include the additional pressures that are placed on the Filipino teachers who are regarded as the second parents. The study concludes that the chances and challenges of developing emotional ties with the alternatives of being a professional depend on cultural expectations (Feeney et al., 2020). The experiences of teachers corroborate the requirements of context-specific strategies and institutional support in order to ensure healthy relationships between teachers and students.

Overall, the discussion indicates that emotional attachment and the professional boundaries do not oppose each other, on the contrary, they can rely on each other. Efficient boundary setting by teachers produces desirable relationship quality, an improved classroom climate as well as protecting their respective emotional wellbeing.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study reveal three major themes based on the participants' responses. First, early childhood teachers described how they define and interpret professional boundaries within their teaching roles. This theme highlights teachers' understanding of their professional limits, emotional boundaries, and responsibilities in classroom management. The participants emphasized the importance of setting clear boundaries while still providing care and support to young learners, ensuring that their roles remain professional and appropriate. Second, the teachers shared strategies they employ to balance emotional attachment and professional boundaries. This theme includes practices related to social-emotional learning, maintaining a healthy balance of emotional attachment, and engaging in professional development. Teachers explained that fostering children's social and emotional growth is essential, but they must also remain mindful of their professional roles. Continuous training and self-awareness were seen as important tools in helping teachers manage their emotions and maintain appropriate boundaries. Lastly, the participants discussed their perceptions of the consequences of balancing emotional attachment and professional distance in early childhood education. This theme highlights the development of a healthy classroom climate, positive teacher–student relationships, and effective classroom management. According to the teachers, maintaining this balance helps create a supportive and respectful learning environment where children feel safe, teachers remain effective, and classroom routines are managed successfully.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conclusion of the study, the following recommended;

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are put forward. Teachers are encouraged to clearly establish professional limits to guide children's behavior and ensure that classroom rules and expectations are understood and consistently followed. Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is

also essential in safeguarding the teacher–student relationship and in promoting a safe, respectful, and supportive learning environment. In addition, teachers should communicate with all students in a professional and balanced manner to prevent feelings of jealousy and to ensure fairness in teacher–child interactions. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct further studies that examine the long-term impacts of emotional attachment and professional boundaries in early childhood education, particularly how these factors influence children’s social, emotional, and academic development over time.

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