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EMOTIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION:
EVIDENCE FROM A RURAL TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGE

EMOCIONES Y PRÁCTICAS PEDAGÓGICAS EN LA FORMACIÓN NORMALISTA:
EVIDENCIAS DESDE UNA ESCUELA NORMAL RURAL

Gladis Hernández Medina
J. Guadalupe Aguilera Rural Normal School, Mexico
ORCID: 0009-0007-5986-0952

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the relationship between emotions and meaningful learning among teacher education students at the *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* Rural Normal School in Durango, Mexico, based on an emotional exploration exercise conducted with students in their first, third, and seventh semesters of the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education and the Bachelor's Degree in Teaching and Learning in Telesecundaria. Using a guide of open-ended questions, the study identified the emotions that predominated in the classroom, the factors that triggered them, the self-regulation strategies employed by the students, and the pedagogical activities that fostered deep learning processes. The results show that emotions such as happiness, calmness, and enthusiasm are associated with dynamic classes, supportive environments, and clarity in teachers' explanations; whereas anxiety, stress, and uncertainty arise in the face of academic overload, poorly structured activities, and teaching styles focused exclusively on demands. It is highlighted that practical, playful, collaborative, and contextualized activities are those that contribute to building meaningful learning, as they allow for linking theory with real-world experience and facilitate understanding. It was observed that teacher education students developed emotional self-regulation strategies such as mindful breathing, seeking support from peers, and reorganizing study times; however, they expressed the need for greater institutional spaces to manage their emotions within the educational process.

Keywords: emotions, meaningful learning, neuroeducation, teacher training, normal school education

RESUMEN

La investigación examinó la relación entre las emociones y el aprendizaje significativo en estudiantes normalistas de la Escuela Normal Rural *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* de Durango, México, a partir de un ejercicio de exploración emocional realizado con alumnos de primero, tercer y séptimo semestre de la Licenciatura en Educación Primaria y Licenciatura en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje en Telesecundaria. A través de una guía de preguntas abiertas se identificaron las emociones que predominaban en el aula, los factores que las desencadenaban, las estrategias de autorregulación empleadas por los estudiantes y las actividades pedagógicas que favorecieron procesos de aprendizaje profundo. Los resultados evidencian que emociones como la felicidad, la tranquilidad y el entusiasmo se asocian con clases dinámicas, ambientes de apoyo y la claridad en las explicaciones docentes; mientras que la ansiedad, el estrés y la incertidumbre emergen ante sobrecarga académica, actividades poco estructuradas y estilos docentes centrados exclusivamente en la exigencia. Se destaca que las actividades prácticas, lúdicas, colaborativas y contextualizadas son las que contribuyen a construir aprendizajes significativos pues permiten vincular la teoría con la experiencia real y facilitan la comprensión. Se observó que los normalistas desarrollaron estrategias de autorregulación emocional como la respiración consciente, la búsqueda de apoyo entre compañeros y la reorganización de tiempos de estudio; sin embargo, expresaron la necesidad de contar con mayores espacios institucionales para gestionar sus emociones dentro del proceso formativo.

Palabras clave: emociones, aprendizaje significativo, neuroeducación, formación docente, educación normalista

1. INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the relationship between emotions and meaningful learning among pre-service teachers, given that the affective component plays a decisive role in cognitive processes and in the construction of knowledge. The neuroeducation literature highlights that emotions act as a filter that enhances or inhibits attention, memory, and motivation toward learning (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). From this perspective, understanding how emotions are experienced, regulated, and expressed in educational contexts is essential for strengthening teaching practice and promoting educational environments that foster students' overall well-being.

Ausubel (1983) argues that meaningful learning occurs when new information is substantively linked to the student's prior knowledge, a process that is facilitated when the student is in a balanced emotional state and has a positive attitude toward the task. Similarly, recent studies emphasize that the interaction between emotion and cognition is inseparable and directly affects analytical skills, content retention, and problem-solving. In the field of initial teacher education, this interdependence takes on greater relevance, as future teachers need to develop social-emotional competencies that enable them to manage their own well-being and create environments conducive to their students' learning.

Furthermore, teacher education, particularly in rural institutions, involves academic, community, and social dynamics that significantly influence students' emotional well-being. Identifying the predominant emotions, the factors that generate them, and the self-regulation strategies employed by teacher education students is a fundamental step toward understanding how these variables impact their educational process and the development of deep learning (Sousa, 2014). Therefore, this study draws on theoretical frameworks from neuroeducation, educational psychology, and critical pedagogy to comprehensively analyze the relationship between emotion, the school environment, and meaningful learning.

2. METHOD OF RESEARCH

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, as its primary objective was to understand the emotional experiences of teacher-training students and their relationship to meaningful learning from an interpretive perspective. An exploratory–descriptive design was employed, which is suitable for identifying patterns, meanings, and perceptions expressed by the students regarding their emotions within the educational context.

The study sample consisted of first-, third-, and seventh-semester students in the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education (LEP) and the Bachelor's Degree in Teaching and Learning in Telesecundaria (LEAT) programs at the *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* Rural Teachers' College in Durango, Mexico. The selection of the groups was based on criteria of accessibility and relevance, taking into account different stages of the training process to obtain a broad view of the emotional experience in teacher education.

To collect data, an open-ended questionnaire was used, designed to explore the predominant emotions in the classroom, the factors that trigger them, strategies for emotional self-regulation, and pedagogical activities associated with meaningful learning. This approach yielded rich and detailed descriptions that reflect the participants' subjective perspectives.

The data were analyzed using a thematic coding process, which involved identifying emerging categories related to positive and negative emotions, influential teaching practices, group dynamics, and personal emotional regulation strategies. Subsequently, a triangulation process was conducted between categories, recurring responses, and theoretical frameworks to ensure the study's coherence and interpretive validity.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Understanding the role of emotions in learning processes has become increasingly important in recent decades, particularly thanks to contributions from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and emotional education. Today, it is no longer sufficient to explain learning solely in terms of rational or intellectual factors, as numerous studies have shown that emotions play an active role in how students process, interpret, remember, and make sense of information (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Mora, 2013).

From the perspective of neuroeducation, it has been proposed that learning involves a constant interaction between cognitive, emotional, and social processes. The brain does not process information in a neutral way; rather, it selects, prioritizes, and consolidates what holds emotional value for the individual. In this sense, emotions such as curiosity, enthusiasm, calmness, or interest foster a disposition toward learning, as they activate mechanisms of sustained attention, intrinsic motivation, and memory consolidation. Conversely, emotions such as anxiety, fear, frustration, or stress can hinder concentration and reduce cognitive availability for learning (Sousa, 2014; Mora, 2013).

Along these same lines, Immordino-Yang (2016) argues that emotions not only accompany thought but also structure it. The author argues that decision-making, the interpretation of experiences, and the construction of meaning are deeply intertwined with the affective dimension. This implies that educational processes must consider not only what students learn, but also how they feel while learning, under what emotional conditions they construct knowledge, and what connections they establish with school content.

Drawing on the theory of meaningful learning, Ausubel (1983) argues that learning occurs in a profound way when new information is linked in a substantive and non-arbitrary manner to the student's prior knowledge. Although this approach has been developed primarily from a cognitive perspective, its application in real-world contexts reveals that affective disposition also influences a student's ability to establish meaningful connections between new information and prior knowledge. In other words, meaningful learning does not depend exclusively on the structure of the content, but also on the learner's emotional state, motivation, and subjective experience.

This perspective is complemented by the sociocultural approach, which recognizes that learning does not occur in isolation, but rather through interaction with others, with the context, and with socially constructed meanings. From this perspective, emotions are also part of the shared experience in the classroom and within the school, as they are constructed and expressed based on pedagogical relationships, social interaction, and the school climate. Therefore, meaningful learning can also be understood as an emotionally situated experience.

In the field of emotional education, Bisquerra (2019) argues that the development of emotional competencies is an essential component of holistic education. These competencies include emotional awareness, emotional regulation, autonomy, social competence, and life skills and well-being. In the case of initial teacher education, these skills take on particular importance, given that future teachers must not only manage their own emotions but also develop pedagogical sensitivity to provide emotional support to their future students.

In Latin America, various studies have highlighted the importance of incorporating the socio-emotional dimension into teacher education. Chica-Palma et al. (2020) argue that teacher-training institutions must embrace emotional education as part of their pedagogical responsibility, since students' emotional well-being directly influences their academic performance, their retention in school, and the development of their professional identity. Similarly, Cuevas et al. (2021) showed that teacher education students frequently experience emotions associated with stress, uncertainty, and academic pressure, which highlights the need to strengthen institutional strategies for emotional support.

In the case of rural teacher training colleges, the educational experience takes on unique characteristics. Boarding school life, close-knit living arrangements, community dynamics, institutional discipline, and social commitment—which have historically defined these institutions—create a complex educational environment where emotional experiences are closely intertwined with professional training and the students' identity formation. Recent research on teacher training colleges and teacher subjectivity has indicated that these contexts generate intense experiences of belonging, high expectations, solidarity, adaptation, and resilience, all of which directly influence the educational trajectory of future teachers.

In this context, studying emotions in teacher education does not merely involve identifying isolated emotional states, but rather understanding how these states relate to pedagogical practices, the institutional climate, forms of coexistence, and opportunities for meaningful learning. Analyzing this relationship is particularly relevant in rural contexts, where teacher education maintains close ties to the social, community, and cultural realities of the regions in which teacher training colleges are located.

Thus, this study situated itself at the intersection of neuroeducation, meaningful learning, and emotional education, with the aim of providing contextualized evidence on how emotions influence the educational processes of rural teacher-training students. This perspective recognized that teaching and learning are profoundly human acts, shaped by emotional experience, pedagogical interaction, and the construction of meaning.

2.2. Sample description

The sample consisted of first-, third-, and seventh-semester students in the LEP and LEAT programs at the *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* Rural Teachers' College during the 2024–2025 academic year. The selection was made using non-probabilistic convenience sampling, focusing on students who voluntarily agreed to participate; an open-ended questionnaire was administered.

In total, there were 50 participants, ranging in age from approximately 18 to 23, from various rural and urban communities in the state of Durango, Mexico, and neighboring regions. This diversity provided a broad representation of emotional and academic experiences within the context of rural teacher training colleges.

The groups included represent different stages of the educational journey:

- First semester: students adjusting to school and campus life.
- Third semester: students with more academic experience and greater involvement in educational activities.
- Seventh semester: teacher education students completing advanced fieldwork with a heavier course load.

Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and the confidentiality of the responses was guaranteed. This group allowed for a meaningful analysis of the predominant emotions in teacher training and their relationship to meaningful learning processes. The study was conducted at the *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* Rural Teachers' College, located in the municipality of Canatlán, in the state of Durango, Mexico. This institution is part of the Rural Teachers' Colleges system, characterized by its boarding school model—an academic and educational structure that combines school hours, community activities, and intensive social interaction among students.

The institution primarily serves young people from various municipalities in Durango, Mexico, and neighboring states, who enroll in the LEP and LEAT programs. Due to its educational model, the Rural Teachers' College serves as a space where academic, community, and socio-emotional processes converge, directly influencing the educational experience of the student teachers. The study was conducted in a context marked by academic demands, complementary educational activities, and challenges inherent to boarding school life, such as adapting to institutional rhythms, communal living, and participation in community tasks. These conditions create a dynamic environment that impacts both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the student body.

Furthermore, teaching practices within the institution are characterized by the promotion of diverse pedagogical approaches, including theoretical classes, practical activities, collaborative projects, and observation

and teaching experiences in schools throughout the region. These elements make the Rural Teachers' College a relevant setting for analyzing the relationship between emotions and meaningful learning, particularly among students preparing to teach in rural, urban, and multigrade settings. The research was conducted during the 2025–2026 school year, a period in which the student community faced various academic and adaptive demands, allowing for the recording of emotions, self-regulation strategies, and authentic perceptions regarding the learning process and educational practice.

2.3. Instruments

To collect data, we used a guide consisting of open-ended questions, specifically designed to explore the emotions students experienced during their educational journey and their relationship to meaningful learning. This instrument allowed us to obtain detailed qualitative responses, encouraging the free expression of perceptions, experiences, and strategies for emotional self-regulation (Table 1).

Table 1

Main dimensions of the guide

Dimension	Description
Predominant emotions in the classroom.	Questions designed to identify the positive and negative emotions students experience during class, as well as their frequency and the circumstances associated with them.
Trigger factors.	Items designed to investigate the specific causes of these emotions, including teaching practices, group dynamics, academic workload, and characteristics of the institutional environment.
Strategies for emotional self-regulation.	Questions designed to identify the personal and collective resources that students use to manage their emotions in academic and boarding school settings.
Educational activities associated with meaningful learning.	Factors that help identify the methodologies, practices, and learning environments that students consider most effective in fostering deep understanding and academic motivation.

The instrument was conceptually validated by reviewing its relevance and clarity based on the theoretical framework of neuroeducation, meaningful learning, and emotional education. Additionally, adjustments were made to ensure that the language was accessible and that the questions allowed for open-ended responses, thereby facilitating the collection of rich and contextualized data.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Analysis of the results

Analysis of the data collected through an open-ended questionnaire administered to first-, third-, and seventh-semester students in the LEP and LEAT programs reveals consistent patterns regarding the role that emotions play in learning processes. The findings showed that the emotional climate of the classroom is a decisive factor in student participation, content comprehension, and the consolidation of meaningful learning.

3.2. Predominant emotions in the classroom

Students reported a predominance of positive emotions such as happiness, calmness, interest, and enthusiasm, which emerge in situations characterized by supportive environments, clear explanations, and opportunities for active participation. These emotions are associated with: dynamic classes and participatory methodologies; clear teacher explanations with contextualized examples; a supportive and respectful interpersonal environment; and practical or collaborative activities that allow for the application of theory.

This set of conditions fosters an optimal emotional state that enhances attention span, motivation, and conscious memorization—aspects that, according to educational neuroscience, promote meaningful learning. In contrast, emotions such as anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and frustration arose when students faced an overload of activities in a short time frame, unclear instructions, or abrupt changes in course organization; rigid teaching styles or those focused solely on control; and assessment practices perceived as punitive.

The presence of these negative emotions leads to a decline in comprehension, reduced participation, and cognitive blocks, particularly among first-semester students, who are still adjusting to the demands of their initial teacher training.

3.3. Educational activities that promote meaningful learning

The analysis showed that students consistently identify the activities most conducive to deep learning as those that incorporate components:

- Practical activities (experiments, modeling, projects);
- Recreational activities (team-building exercises, educational games);
- Collaborative (teamwork, guided discussions);
- Contextualized (community engagement, situated practices).

These activities foster meaningful connections between academic content and personal and community experiences. Evidence suggests that when teacher candidates are able to relate theory to real-world situations in teaching practice, positive emotions are heightened, understanding is improved, and the level of anxiety associated with schoolwork is reduced.

3.4. Strategies for emotional self-regulation

Participants identified various strategies they used to regulate their emotions during class, including: mindful breathing and active breaks; reorganizing study schedules; seeking support from peers; and reflective writing and dialogue with trusted teachers. These strategies demonstrated that students are developing basic emotional competencies. However, they also highlight the need for greater institutional support for emotional management, such as social-emotional tutoring, psychological counseling, extracurricular wellness activities, and teacher training with a humanistic approach.

The analysis showed that, although students employ individual self-regulation strategies, these prove insufficient when classroom conditions do not foster an environment of safety, clarity, and support.

3.5. Semester trends

The comparison by semester revealed some interesting differences:

- First semester: Increased anxiety and uncertainty regarding adjustment to college life and academic demands.
- Third semester: Balance between positive and negative emotions, with greater mastery of regulation strategies.
- Seventh semester: A predominance of positive emotions related to the experience gained through professional internships and a deeper understanding of teaching.

This suggests that emotional development progresses as students acquire more teaching tools and solidify their identity as educators.

3.6. Relationship between emotions and meaningful learning

An analysis of the results indicates that there is a direct relationship between emotional climate, teaching practices, and meaningful learning processes:

- Positive emotions → greater cognitive openness, motivation, and understanding.
- Negative emotions → blockage, avoidance, and superficial learning.

This confirms the neuroeducational principles that hold that learning is a process inseparable from the emotional dimension.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that emotions play a central role in meaningful learning processes among teacher education students, which is consistent with the extensive body of theory developed in the fields of neuroeducation and cognitive psychology. According to Immordino-Yang (2016), there is no deep learning without emotional engagement, given that emotions activate neurobiological processes that facilitate attention, memory, and decision-making. The results obtained, which showed how positive emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, and calmness enhance understanding and participation, aligned with this perspective, demonstrating that emotionally safe educational environments serve as a catalyst for meaningful learning.

Likewise, students noted that dynamic and context-based teaching practices foster greater emotional and cognitive engagement. This observation aligns with Ausubel's (1983) approach to meaningful learning, in which he argued that students need to anchor new information to prior knowledge structures in order to achieve deep understanding. Practical, collaborative, and context-based activities—reported as the most effective—enable precisely this anchoring by facilitating connections between academic content and real-world experiences.

On the other hand, the presence of negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, and uncertainty in the face of academic overload or unclear instructions is consistent with the findings of Pekrun (2014), who argued that negative academic emotions tend to reduce intrinsic motivation, interfere with working memory, and hinder the executive functions necessary for solving complex tasks. In the case of first-semester students, these effects are more pronounced, which is consistent with research on academic transition and emotional adaptation in higher education.

The study also showed that teacher education students develop emotional self-regulation strategies such as mindful breathing, peer support, and time management. These strategies align with Bisquerra's (2019) proposals on emotional education, who emphasized the importance of strengthening self-awareness and self-regulation skills to create conditions conducive to learning. However, the perception of insufficient institutional support reveals a gap in initial teacher education, as teacher training must explicitly incorporate a socio-emotional approach as part of the training curriculum.

Finally, when comparing differences between semesters, it was observed that advanced students demonstrated greater emotional stability and a more mature approach to academic demands. In this regard, the development of a teaching identity is progressively strengthened through experience, reflection, and situated practice. The emotional maturity observed in seventh-semester students can be interpreted as an indicator of progress in the consolidation of this professional identity.

Taken together, the theoretical discussion and empirical findings of this study reaffirm that emotional education and active teaching practices cannot be considered peripheral elements, but rather essential components for achieving meaningful learning in teacher education. Integrating the emotional dimension in an intentional and systematic manner is a necessary commitment for teacher-training institutions, particularly in teacher-training contexts such as the *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* Rural Normal School, where boarding school life requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both well-being and academic development.

4.1. Teaching recommendations

Based on the study's findings and the reviewed theoretical framework, the following pedagogical recommendations are proposed to strengthen emotional well-being, self-regulation, and meaningful learning in initial teacher education.

4.1.1. Incorporating social-emotional learning as a cross-cutting theme in teacher education curricula

According to Bisquerra (2019), it is essential to incorporate educational opportunities that enable students to identify, express, and manage their emotions. The establishment of ongoing workshops, social-emotional support sessions, and dialogue circles will foster emotional self-awareness and help reduce anxiety and academic stress.

4.1.2. Creating emotionally safe learning environments

The results showed that teachers' attitudes, clear instructions, and group cohesion directly influence students' emotions. It is recommended to promote teaching practices that are empathetic, communicative, and based on respect, as well as to establish classroom rules focused on cooperation and mutual support.

4.1.3. Implement active learning methods that promote meaningful learning

In line with Ausubel (1983), it is recommended to prioritize methodologies such as project-based learning, cooperative learning, case studies, simulations, and contextualized practical activities. These methodologies boost motivation, help anchor content to real-world experiences, and foster a deep understanding.

4.1.4. Adjust the academic workload and improve instructional organization

The anxiety and stress observed among students are linked to excessive workloads and poorly structured classes. It is recommended that schools coordinate homework assignments, establish clear schedules, space out assessments, and clearly outline grading criteria from the start of the school year.

4.1.5. Train teachers in neuroeducation and emotional regulation

Teacher professional development should incorporate knowledge about brain function, attention, memory, motivation, and emotional regulation. Authors such as Immordino-Yang (2016) and Mora (2013) emphasize that understanding how the brain learns enables the design of more effective and student-centered teaching strategies.

4.1.6. Promoting strategies for emotional self-regulation in the classroom

It is recommended to incorporate brief exercises in mindful breathing, active breaks, positive visualization, or mindfulness exercises at the beginning or end of classes. These practices not only promote emotional well-being but also enhance concentration and foster a positive school environment.

4.1.7. Strengthen institutional support

The students expressed the need for formal spaces dedicated to emotional well-being. In this regard, it is proposed that:

- Academic and emotional support programs.
- Accessible psychological care.
- Extracurricular activities that promote well-being.

4.1.8. To encourage teachers to reflect on their emotional practices

Teachers need to reflect on how their actions, language, and attitudes shape the emotional climate of the classroom. Opportunities for professional reflection, self-assessment, and peer feedback can help improve daily teaching practices.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that emotions are a fundamental component of meaningful learning processes among pre-service teachers. The evidence obtained showed that learning cannot be understood solely from a

cognitive perspective, as the emotional dimension directly influences attention, motivation, comprehension, participation, and the construction of meaning.

It was found that positive emotions such as calmness, enthusiasm, happiness, and interest foster environments conducive to learning, especially when combined with dynamic teaching practices, clear explanations, supportive relationships, and context-based activities. These conditions help students establish stronger connections between academic content and their educational experiences, thereby reinforcing meaningful learning.

In contrast, negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, frustration, and uncertainty arise in situations involving academic overload, a lack of pedagogical clarity, rigid teaching methods, or limited opportunities for support. These emotions tend to hinder concentration, reduce the willingness to learn, and lead to less positive educational experiences, particularly among students in the early stages of their teacher-training program.

The study also revealed that students develop emotional self-regulation strategies to cope with the academic and personal demands of their education; however, these strategies are limited if they are not accompanied by stronger institutional support. In this regard, it becomes necessary for teacher training colleges to explicitly integrate social-emotional learning as part of teacher education, not only to promote student well-being but also to strengthen their professional identity and future teaching practice.

Finally, it is concluded that initial teacher education should be viewed as a comprehensive process that integrates the cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of learning. In contexts such as the *J. Guadalupe Aguilera* Rural Teacher Training College, where academic demands, community life, and professional commitment converge, addressing the emotional dimension of the student body is an indispensable prerequisite for training teachers who are more reflective, sensitive, empathetic, and capable of creating humanized educational environments.

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