

Affect, Alpha Function, and the Very Small: A Reconsideration of Teacher Workload

Adrian M. Downey

Volume 30, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099900ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1099900ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Downey, A. M. (2023). Affect, Alpha Function, and the Very Small: A Reconsideration of Teacher Workload. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 30(1), 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1099900ar>

Article abstract

In this paper, I draw together myriad theoretical and philosophical sources to think through the intensification of emotion amid and emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin with three narratives from my own teaching and learning, which ground the subsequent conversation. I then characterize the current movement in educational theorizing known as the affective turn. The affective turn, I suggest, attunes educational inquiry to small, yet vital, moments of classroom interaction often taken for granted in public education. Toward considering those vital moments in more nuance, I discuss psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion's notion of the alpha function – a nonconscious digestion of emotion we perform for others when they are overwhelmed. When coupled with Nel Noddings' evocation of the ethics of care in education, the alpha function offers an understanding of the hidden emotional labour in teaching. This hidden dimension of the teacher's task, the portion of the job that deals in regulating our own emotions and in helping students make sense of theirs, I suggest, is becoming more difficult amid the affective situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude the paper by gesturing toward a threefold response to be taken up more fully elsewhere: humility before the task of teaching, a reverence for the work of feeling, and a willingness to organize toward a more caring school system.

Affect, Alpha Function, and the Very Small: A Reconsideration of Teacher Workload

ADRIAN M. DOWNEY

Mount Saint Vincent University

In this paper, I draw together myriad theoretical and philosophical sources to think through the intensification of emotion amid and emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin with three narratives from my own teaching and learning, which ground the subsequent conversation. I then characterize the current movement in educational theorizing known as the affective turn. The affective turn, I suggest, attunes educational inquiry to small, yet vital, moments of classroom interaction often taken for granted in public education. Toward considering those vital moments in more nuance, I discuss psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion's notion of the alpha function – a nonconscious digestion of emotion we perform for others when they are overwhelmed. When coupled with Nel Noddings' evocation of the ethics of care in education, the alpha function offers an understanding of the hidden emotional labour in teaching. This hidden dimension of the teacher's task, the portion of the job that deals in regulating our own emotions and in helping students make sense of theirs, I suggest, is becoming more difficult amid the affective situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude the paper by gesturing toward a threefold response to be taken up more fully elsewhere: humility before the task of teaching, a reverence for the work of feeling, and a willingness to organize toward a more caring school system.

Three Stories

Three stories from the past two years of teaching and learning online cut to the fore of my thinking about affect, caring, and emotional labour in teaching. I share them here to ground the subsequent discussion.

Most recently, beginning an undergraduate course amid the Omicron wave, I took a stand on attendance with the students. Attendance would be taken. Should we return to in-person classes, they would be required to physically attend; I would not be offering blended learning as an option. If they missed a class, they should complete a short reflection on the readings for that day. There was some disagreement on this point. They wanted to be able to attend online, even if the classes were in person. I raised the issue of workload; blended learning involves considerable extra work and would take away from the attention I could offer to people in the room. They suggested that they could arrange for other students to bring them into the class on Zoom if they were unable to attend. Eventually, I acquiesced. Later, a student told me that some of their peers thought I was not being accommodating in the situation. I conceded that I didn't approach the conversation in the best way. The rest of the semester occurred online, so the point was moot, but even today I carry the abiding sense that we never recovered from that moment in our relationship as students and teacher.

Before the Omicron wave, I registered for a course in a field of study outside of education. The course had an eclectic mix of students: professionals, graduate students, and professors. Most folks in the class appeared comfortable with the online medium of instruction and navigating the technologies associated with it. Somewhere near the middle of the semester, however, one student who'd had repeated issues logging into the session asked the group for help as they tried to figure out why they couldn't see

everyone. The other students were slow to react. The instructor remained silent. Finally, a student offered some advice. A version of the following conversation ensued:

“Hit ‘see all.’”
 “I don’t see ‘see all.’”
 “Do you see the icon in the top right of your screen?”
 “What sort of icon?”
 “It has many squares.”
 “Oh, I know what you’re talking about, but I don’t see it.”
 A long pause.
 “Well, I’m not sure how to help you.”
 Silence.

At that point, the instructor asked the student to log out and log in again. The instructor then started the class without waiting for the student to return. The whole incident took less than 10 minutes.

Finally, sometime in the first year of teaching online, I offered a course on Indigenous education – a field of study with which I have personal and professional experience. The course, which included engagements with anti-Indigenous racism and settler colonialism, was challenging academically and emotionally, as courses in this field so often are (MacDonald & Markides, 2021). Students worked through a host of readings from the field in consistent, small groups. I then guided them through conversations with questions about the readings for each class. Toward the end of the course, one group called me into their breakout room. They asked me a question about my personal pedagogical practice and its alignment with Indigenous thinking. I answered. They seemed unsatisfied. They then told me everything they felt was wrong with the course. Initially, I attempted to respond, but eventually I thought that in that moment, I might just need to let them vent and accept what they have to say. At the end, I asked if there was anything else. I felt upset, but I kept that to myself and thanked them before moving myself back to the main room to finish the class. Like the previous examples, the class never felt right after that moment.

These three experiences, somewhat altered from the original events such that the anonymity of those involved is maintained, are cuts on my teacher heart. In each occurrence, significant student anxiety was present. In each instance, the teacher was unable, perhaps unwilling, to ease that anxiety. Similar events occur every day in the life of a teacher. Having worked in education for most of my adult life, I have felt them often. But these three moments continue to strike me as different. One element of that difference is the intensity of the anxiety. Even before the pandemic, anxiety was a noteworthy presence in society (Bliss, 2020; Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2017) and in the classroom (Zeidner, 2014), but amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become ubiquitous and intense (Arribathi et al., 2021; Wang, Zhao, & Zhang, 2020). This paper engages anxiety as one manifestation of affect and emotion in education toward a deeper understanding of the ways classrooms are changing in the third millennium.

Another element of difference in these moments was that the online medium of instruction did not easily facilitate the alleviation of student anxiety. That is, I think, the main reason that these events have stuck with me – they went unresolved. I can remember plenty of other experiences in which intense student anxiety was present, and as a teacher – perhaps as a human being – I felt it and was compelled to say or do something to alleviate it. Yet, sitting in my home office, looking at blank squares with names, trying to read students’ voices, I often miss those moments of anxiety, realizing that they occurred only after the fact.¹

¹ The role that the technology played in these stories is a compounding one, but it is also complicated beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, psychoanalysis, upon which I draw later in this paper, has only begun to consider the way that distance technology plays on perceptions of the unconscious (see Scharff, 2013).

These events, their uniqueness within my teaching career, and what they suggest for the teaching profession, are what drive this paper. Here, I am interested in those small moments of emotional labour – moments in which our work is others’ emotion (James, 1989) and the regulation of our own (Hochschild, 1983) – that teachers perform for students daily. I am also interested in how that emotional labour often goes unnoticed by the systems in which teachers work, as well as how the demands for that emotional labour are growing with the intensification of student affect amid, and emerging from, the COVID-19 pandemic.

My interest in these topics leads in several directions, and I see this paper as situated within the polyphonic tradition of educational theorizing – that is, the bringing together of many voices in conversation (Schwarz-Franco, 2020). I begin this essay by discussing the current movement in educational theorizing toward the “affective turn” (Dernikos et al., 2020). My consideration of affect in education evokes an attention to the very small, yet vital, moments of classroom interaction that are too often taken for granted. Toward understanding those small moments, I look to psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion’s (1962b) notion of the alpha function. Often articulated as a sort of “digestion” of unprocessed impulses from a person by another (e.g., Fraley, 2007), the alpha function offers a framework for understanding the complexity of teachers’ everyday emotional labour on a very small level. After offering these theoretical frameworks, I turn to the feminist ethics of care (Held, 2006), and in particular the work of Nel Noddings (2013), to suggest a normalization of teachers’ emotional labour on a larger scale. Finally, I offer some characterization of the increasing demands for care and “digesting” affect amid the myriad socio-environmental crises that mark the current pedagogical moment. Ultimately, in this paper I suggest that teaching is becoming a more difficult task because of the intensification of affect, of which heightened student anxiety is one example. I conclude this paper by gesturing toward a threefold response: humility before the task of teaching, a reverence for the work of feeling, and a willingness to organize toward changing the school system.

Affect and Attunement to the Very Small

A recent book titled *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education* (Dernikos et al., 2020) comprises a collection of works emerging from a pedagogical consideration of affect theory. Ten years earlier, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) attempted the same sort of mapping more broadly. Names such as Brian Massumi (2015), Sara Ahmed (2014), and Lauren Berlant (2011) adorn the pages of both volumes. In the broadest possible sense, affect is a sort of physical precursor to what we experience as emotion, though some challenge the distinction between affect and emotion (Ahmed, 2014). In the following subsections, I will outline affect theory, discuss its manifestations in education, and suggest an analytic scope emergent from a focus on affect.

Affect Theory

Affect theory engages with emotion, but not in the strictly psychological or neurobiological terms in which it has commonly been understood. Nor is affect theory an engagement with Freud and other psychoanalytic thinkers.² Rather, affect theorists consider “how feelings and emotions shape culture and are reflected in literature, popular media, and politics” (Allen, 2021, p. 403). Some affect theorists put emphasis on the history of emotions (e.g., Ahmed, 2014), while others look at affect in conversation with Deleuzian interpretations of Spinoza’s monism (Deleuze, 1988; see also Massumi, 2015). Indeed, Deleuze’s engagement with Spinoza is felt widely in the field (e.g., Harris & Holman Jones, 2021; Massumi, 2015; Wozolek, 2020).

² For an engagement with both psychoanalytic and neurobiological understandings of affect, as well as their meeting points, see the work of Mark Solms (2018; see also Chefetz, 2019).

Spinozian monism in some ways responded to Cartesian duality; rather than separating mind and body as did Descartes, Spinoza said that everything was one – what he called God (Hampshire, 1996). Spinoza’s definition of affect is sometimes described as the capacity to act and be acted upon or to affect and be affected, which was ascribed to *everything* material (Massumi, 2015, 2017). Deleuze (1988) brought Spinoza into the 20th century, and in so doing laid the groundwork for the emergent environmental ethic that disrupted the hierarchical distinctions between humans and non-humans (see Braidotti, 2013, 2019) – if all things are one and all things are agentic, how can the human be separated from anything else? Today, affect theorists inspired by Deleuze and Spinoza are engaged with thinking through the physical impulses that precede, or perhaps are simply other than, the psychologies of emotion (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), as well as what bodies can *do* in a material sense (Braidotti, 2019). Having now described affect theory broadly, I proceed to discuss its manifestations in education.

Affect and Emotion in Education

When localized in education, affect theory attends to the myriad happenings within the classroom that might be termed “atmosphere” – the physical presences that often go unnamed or unnoticed; those senses that are other than what can be consciously known (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). Many teachers have some sense of how affect manifests in education through their intuitive understanding of classroom dynamics or the capacity to feel “the vibe” of a classroom within only a few seconds (e.g., Stewart, 2020). Some engagements with affect theory in the research literature focus on this general classroom dynamic and take the previously described Deleuzian lens toward understanding the ways bodies affect and are affected by one another in classroom spaces (e.g., Hickey-Moody, 2020). Others focus on particular affects, such as shame or fear, and trace their presence or absence for racialized bodies within schools (e.g., Zarabadi, 2020; Zembylas, 2020). Many others suggest that affect itself is a teacher (Dernikos et al., 2020), highlighting the shift away from the teacher as the sole instigator of learning: “Pedagogy, then, is not a vehicle for exchanging information from one being to another; rather, teaching has immanence” (Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 15). In this view, pedagogy is a sort of pervasive co-creation, an ongoing engagement with classroom assemblages toward new ways of seeing the world.

Much of my recent writing has engaged the affective turn, but I have remained eclectic in my approach. Rather than limiting myself to affect under the Deleuzian understanding, I have also drawn on phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and Indigenous theories of emotion and affect – terms I use with intentional ambiguity (see also Ahmed, 2014). For example, several of my previous essays have looked at the fear of not being a good teacher (Downey, 2021a), mourning and grief as heuristics for reading (Downey, 2022a) and curriculum theorizing (Downey, 2022b), and the curriculum emergent from loss (Downey, 2021b). Though conceptually disjointed, these papers share a common analytic focus on emotion and affect. I highlight these papers not to be self-indulgent or self-referential, but to further situate the current paper within the context of an ongoing inquiry and larger conversation about the affective situation of classrooms. Indeed, what I think the relatively new analytic focus on affect offers to educational theorizing, and what I hope this paper and my previous work contribute to, is pedagogical understanding at an increasingly small scale. Below, I offer some further contextualization of what I call “the very small.”

The Very Small

While folks like Massumi (2015, 2017) use affect as a frame for analyzing macro-level political phenomenon, such as the unfortunate prevalence and effectiveness of post-truth politics (Massumi, 2017), affect theory-informed readings of the socio-pedagogical also offer some avenues for

understanding the very small, intersubjective³ interactions manifest in the classroom. My use of the term “very small” throughout this essay is informed by several interconnected paradigms of thought. Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015), for example, draw on Donna Haraway’s (2016) work to think about very small *beings* – ants and earthworms – and how they can teach in the context of early childhood education. When localized to the human, the very small is attuned to nonconscious action. Harris and Holman Jones (2021) illustrate this attention to action, drawing on Erin Manning (2016), who suggests that while an action is usually justified with a conscious logic developed after the fact, the action itself can be thought of as emerging from “a continuous interplay on conscious and nonconscious movement with nonconscious movement playing a vital part, especially as regards movement’s creative potential” (Manning, 2016, p. 18, as quoted in Harris & Holman Jones, 2021, p. 863). Indeed, this position is very much in line with Spinoza, who has been interpreted as suggesting that “a thought, or a state of mind, does not really explain the movement of a body, which can only be adequately explained by physical laws of motion” (Hampshire 1996, p. ix). Manning’s (2016) more current emphasis blends thought and impulse to complicate what constitutes a physical law of motion, but the core idea remains: actions are not *merely* a result of conscious thoughts (see also Bennett, 2020). This micro-subjective realm of analysis – that of considering what goes into an action and what actions *do* – is precisely the scope I consider vital in education.

Education, broadly construed, has too often been concerned with “very big” interactions, and Boni Wozolek’s (2020) discussion of the queer youth suicide proves the point. The school system is bureaucratically and socially large, and in its largeness, it misses small moments. Wozolek (2020) draws attention to “the sound of students breaking” (p. 13) – the moments when a queer student decides to commit suicide, often at least indirectly because of the daily grind of being queer in a heteropatriarchal institution. In my reading, these moments are small – perhaps too small to draw the attention of a teacher or an administrator – but they are clearly significant. Indeed, the terms “microaggression” (Nordmarken, 2014) and “nanoracism” (Mbembe, 2019), which characterize the “minor” events or speech acts that make one feel othered, both suggest a smallness to an event. The magnitude, however, is experienced differently by the subject and the object of the action. To those being called names, bullied, underrepresented by curriculum, or otherwise made to feel inadequate by the institution of schooling and the folks who compose it, these are huge events that live in the nonconscious for years or decades. Yet, for those acting, they are a minor event, a nothing, a null – they barely register as having happened. Toward speaking back to the largeness of the education system, the very small is precisely where philosophical inquiry in education ought to be localized – indeed it is where educational inquiry is already moving through the affective turn (e.g., Zarabadi, 2020).

In this section, I have discussed the current movement toward affect theory in, and outside of, education. I have done so to suggest a necessary pedagogical and analytic attention to the very small. As with the others described above, I see this paper as situated within the affective turn in education, understood in the broadest possible sense. In addition to affect theory, however, my thinking through of the very small moments described in the opening section of this paper, and of student–teacher micro-relations more broadly, is also informed by the epistemologically oriented psychoanalytic thinking of Wilfred Bion.⁴

³ Intersubjectivity is understood differently by psychoanalysts and affect theorists. For affect theorists, the subject, when the term is used at all, is expansive – for some an assemblage of geo-/techo-/biological actors (Braidotti, 2019). Framing the subject in this way disrupts the humanist boundaries between agentic humans and inanimate others, thus suggesting a necessity to rethink who and what is considered under the term “social” (Kuby, 2019; see also Latour, 2005). Psychoanalysts, on the other hand, generally frame intersubjectivity as happenings between humans (Benjamin, 1990), though there are notable exceptions (Boldt, 2020, 2021).

⁴ Though psychoanalysis and affect theory appear at odds in their orientation, there are those who work at the crossroads of the two. In education, Gail Boldt (2020, 2021) draws the relational psychoanalytic writing of Stern (2010) into conversation with the current movement toward affect in education, arriving at a unique formation centring the vitality of the classroom (Boldt, 2021).

It is often said that education and psychoanalysis are somewhat at odds (e.g., Britzman, 2021; Morris, 2016). Part of this tension is surely the fact that Freud himself saw psychoanalysis as an “after education” – something to be undertaken to deal with the repressions that can arise through education (Britzman, 2021; see also Downey, 2022c). Like many others, such as Britzman (2021) and Boldt (2020), however, I think that psychoanalysis has something unique to offer education, especially amid the affective turn. Specifically, with the attunement of the affective turn in mind, psychoanalysis offers an avenue for understanding the very small, nonconscious, intersubjective interactions within classrooms. Among those who have considered the minute relations between human beings, Bion is distinct. Indeed, he is virtually unknown in educational thinking⁵ and is something of an enigma in psychoanalysis as well (Bleandonu, 1994), albeit an influential one (Mintz, 2016). There is, however, a wisdom in Bion’s thinking that offers an understanding of those very small moments between teachers and students that are vital to the success of education. In the following section, I introduce Bion biographically and intellectually toward elucidating his notion of the “alpha function” and its relevance to the current discussion.

Bion

Bion is perhaps best known as a Kleinian object relation’s theorist within the field of psychoanalysis (Mitchell & Black, 2016). Outside psychoanalysis, however, he is more frequently known for his writing on groups (e.g., Bion, 1952). Though neither description defines him completely, both are accurate. After beginning his career working on group psychology, Bion remained devoted to Klein throughout her life, but after her death in 1960, Bion’s thinking took on a uniqueness, and at least one commentator has referred to this transition as leading to a “Bionian” quality in his thinking (Bleandonu, 1994).

This Bionian thinking emerged in what is known as his “epistemological period” (Bleandonu, 1994). During this period, Bion was concerned with knowledge – not knowledge in the way that philosophers have defined the term (e.g., justified true belief), but knowledge as a characteristic of object (human) relations. Bion posited that there were three basic characteristics of human relations: hate, love, and knowledge. While Freud and Klein had dealt with love and hate in the forms of the libidinal and death drives (to a certain extent respectively, but not exclusively so), Bion focused the later part of his career on knowledge (Bleandonu, 1994).

The central proposition from which Bion’s epistemological writing emerges can be succinctly stated as such: “Thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts” (Bion, 1962b, p. 306). Thinking in this way creates something akin to distance between the thought and the thinker; more succinctly, “One thinks about frustration to modify it and contain it” (Britzman, 2007, p. 9). Here, it is possible to see the influence of what has been called Kant’s Copernican Revolution (Schwarz-Franco, 2020; Stumpf, 1993). While a full accounting of Kantian epistemology is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that Kant, who was writing in the juncture between empiricism and rationalism, hypothesised that “it is the objects that conform to the operations of the mind, and not the other way around” (Stumpf, 1993, p. 307), or that “the mind brings something to the objects it experiences” (p. 307). Unlike Hume before him, Kant framed the mind as doing something to the objects it encounters (Schwarz-Franco, 2020; Stumpf, 1993). Thinking, for Bion, was a coping mechanism for thoughts, which can be considered objects⁶ the mind encounters. Thinking is what is brought to the objects of the mind, thoughts, which emerge from our relations with others. While Bion clearly read Kant, and some even name him a neo-Kantian (Bleandonu, 1994), Kant’s influence is felt much more readily in Bion’s later writing on the

⁵ Two exceptions, as noted below, include Britzman (2007) and Mintz (2016).

⁶ The term “object” can be taken in many ways. Bion himself maintained the usage of Freud, Klein, and others, who considered the object as the recipient of a drive (usually another person). Stumpf (1993), who is quoted above and writes for a lay audience, uses the term “object” in a more ordinary sense to refer to “things.” In this paragraph, my use follows that of Stumpf, though when talking about object relations, I follow the use of Bion.

notion of “O,” which represented an unattainable truth. The focus in this paper, however, is on the “smallest” level of Bion’s psychoanalytic framework, and as such Kant’s influence is worth only a short explication.⁷

Below the level of thought and thinking lies Bion’s concept of the alpha function. Bion’s idea of the alpha function emerged from his treatment of dreams (Bleandonu, 1994). He saw dreams as functioning digestively – that they took all the bits of information from waking hours and attempted to make sense of them, assimilating them into knowledge and being. Bion (Bion & Bion, 1992) suggested that the alpha function was a way of performing this “digestion” in waking hours. Bion gave the term “beta elements” to that which is digested through the alpha function. Beta elements are the most basic bodily and psychological reactions we encounter within ourselves.⁸ Beta elements are transformed into more manageable alpha elements by way of the alpha function, which can be seen as a sort of nonconscious precursor to the process of thinking described above. The elements and processes are all not only nonconscious, but well below the level of observable phenomena. Bion, thus, separates beta and alpha elements from the rest of his framework of psychoanalytic thinking for that very reason – they are unobservable, and thus their existence is only a theoretical hypothesis on the part of Bion. Beta elements, alpha function, and alpha elements, however, present a way of thinking about the “very small,” as evoked earlier in this essay.

At the best of times, we (humans) have no problem performing the alpha function for ourselves, but when we are overwhelmed by our beta elements (when we are too full), which can happen from positive or negative sensation, we must rely on the (m)other⁹ to help us. The infant is the prototypical example of this. When the baby becomes too stimulated, too overwhelmed, or too frustrated, they project themselves and their beta elements onto the mother. Klein called this projective identification, which can be defined as the splitting off of “parts of the self that are felt to be too negative or hateful” (Mintz, 2016, p. 283) and the subsequent projection of those parts onto another person. While Bion maintained that terminology, he elaborated the process using the alpha function. Mintz (2016) summarizes the distinction: “for Klein, this [projective identification] was a defensive mechanism, but Bion reframed it as a normal process of communication from the baby to the mother, in which the mother can process the baby’s unformed anxieties with her free-floating benign attention” (p. 283). Once the child projects onto the mother, the mother then performs the alpha function for the child – she “digests” that which has overwhelmed the child – then delivers the overwhelming beta elements back to the child in the form of now-digested alpha elements. Though complicated through unusual terminology, the process is intuitive and automatic. A baby feels uncomfortable and overwhelmed. They look to their mother for help or reassurance. The mother automatically offers a smile or some other physical/emotional marker of acceptance and reassurance. The baby feels better.

The alpha function is not limited to the infant–mother relationship. Indeed, the digestive interaction described by Bion as the alpha function occurs in many relationships – between partners, between friends, between analysts and analysands, and, most relevant to the current discussion, between students and teachers (T. Toneatto, personal communications, Nov. 25, 2021). Though the alpha function can engage overwhelming emotion of any sort, anxiety proves the illustrative case in education. In the student–teacher relationship, we can see anxiety as emerging from the frustration, uncertainty, and emotional ambivalence necessary for learning in Bion’s estimation, in which “learning may be understood as learning

⁷ For a more comprehensive review see Mancia, Longhin, and Mancia’s (2000) paper on the topic.

⁸ Though perhaps conflating and confusing philosophies, I have taken to thinking of beta elements as “affections” in the Deleuzian sense of the word – they are the itch or scratch that is unnamable, imperceptible, and comes before nameable emotion or conscious knowing (Dernikos et al., 2020; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

⁹ The term “mother” is used here for consistency with psychoanalytic thought. The term can essentially be taken to refer to an “other,” and, in the case of young children, a primary care giver of any gender. A full accounting of the issue of gender in psychoanalytic thought is beyond the scope of this paper (see Chodorow, 2004; Saketopoulou, 2020).

from emotional experience ... tolerance of the unknown and the unknowable” (Britzman, 2007, p. 9). Learning requires uncertainty, but if that uncertainty is overwhelming and anxiety inducing, some help must be offered. The teacher, at the best of times, can offer this help.

With this understanding of the alpha function and its everyday uses, the failure to transform (or modulate; see Massumi, 2015) student affect in the opening narratives becomes clear. In the first story, students felt anxious about a course policy. They voiced their anxiety and rather than receiving a “digestive” reassurance from the instructor, they were met with probing questions and contentious dialogue. In the second instance, the student felt anxious (or perhaps lonely) about being unable to see everyone in the class, and the lack of (digestive) response from the instructor and peers left the anxiety to linger, fester, grow, and perhaps ultimately overwhelm. The final example shows a less anxious moment of alpha function failure. The students felt annoyed, angry, and frustrated with the direction of a course, and perhaps the feelings it provoked in them. The students then unloaded these feelings onto the instructor. Overwhelmed, the instructor was unable to digest what was being brought forward by the students, leaving all parties further frustrated and distraught.

In this description of the alpha function, I see something about teaching that I have often struggled to put into words. Before reading Bion or affect theory, I thought of it this way: I have taught at every level from kindergarten to graduate school. I have taught on three continents, and I have taught nearly every subject area. The commonality I see in all these classroom situations is that students all want to know that everything will be okay. Their concerns may shift radically as they grow, but the emotions they bring to the teacher *feel* similar – there is fear, frustration, sadness, and joy, and as I suggest below there has recently been more and more anxiety. In all those moments, my reading of Bion would suggest that students are looking for the teacher to share in what they feel and to help them understand their feelings. Affect theory adds the idea that these feelings are always passing between bodies, whether we are attuned to them or not. We might think of this as offering reassurance or helping students manage their emotions, but in doing so we miss the very small dynamics at play. Indeed, to casually dismiss the teacher’s work with students’ emotions as “regulation” is to gloss over the nuances of teaching that make the job so difficult and so beautiful. Having here shown the complexity at work in the very small, intersubjective dynamics of the classroom, I now discuss two frameworks for understanding the larger manifestations of the affective work of teaching.

The Ethics of Care and Emotional Labour

Noddings’ (2013) evocation of the feminist ethics of care in education offers an avenue through which to understand the work described by the alpha function on a larger, conscious scale. Simply put, for Noddings, everyone falls into one of two categories: one caring or one cared for. The teacher inherently falls into the category of one caring (Noddings, 2013). Some who write about Noddings’ ethic of care call it a sort of “natural care” emergent from the experience of being cared for, the prime example of which is the mother’s care for their child (Flinders, 2001). In addition to arguing that teachers have a moral duty to care for their students, Noddings (2013) also suggests that teachers serve as a model through which the moral development of students takes place – a development that for Noddings must occur alongside intellectual development. Early critics of Noddings’ evocation of care pointed to its perceived lack of practicality within the systems of schooling, and as highlighted above and below, it certainly is not always easy to show care in ways that it will be received because of systemic and social issues that transcend the scope of the classroom (e.g., COVID or standardization). In response, Noddings noted “our alternative is to change the structure of schools and teaching so that caring can flourish, and the hope is that by doing this we may attain both a higher level of cognitive achievement and a more caring, ethical society” (Noddings, 2007, p. 375). As elaborated above and below, nearly four decades since the original formation of that argument, it resonates louder than ever.

Attempts to systematize teaching miss the difficulty of individual relationships. Indeed, part of the difficulty of teaching is the continual testing and evaluating of what is moral, ethical, or just in a given situation, and, in that, moral experience matters (Held, 2006). Schwarz-Franco (2020), in writing on the necessity of polyphony – the valuing of and holding space for multiple voices – in the classroom, suggests “any moment in the work of a teacher is exactly the opposite of a theory: it is unique, specific, and personal, and simultaneously, it is rich with endless relevant details that are necessarily present in class” (Schwarz-Franco, 2020, p. 96). As teachers continually test their moral frameworks and theories against the everyday realities of the classroom, they change their ideas and opinions to accommodate what they see. Feminist ethicists of care (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013), then, seek a moral framework of the actual, not the theoretical. In that way, the feminist ethics of care in teaching are all about the intersubjective relations within classrooms and the teacher’s careful navigation of them. For Noddings, care is “a state of being in relation, characterized by receptivity, relatedness and engrossment” (Flinders, 2001, p. 211). In my reading, Bion’s concept of the alpha function drives down into the word “receptivity” above, offering a potential understanding of what it means on a very small scale to be receptive to another.

A recent pedagogical anecdote may elucidate the connection between Bion and Noddings. In my first year Foundations of Education course, I often teach about the ethics of care. My point in evoking that literature with B.Ed. students is to move them from being passionate about their subject areas to passionate about students. I also want to highlight that the way they show care is not necessarily how their students will receive it (Forrest, 2009). When I most recently taught this section of the course, I pushed one step further, asking how we might care for someone who is experiencing trauma outside of the school setting. A long silence ensued, and I thought, “yes, that’s quite right” – silence not as inaction, but silence as the sound of experiencing an ethical weight, silence as receptivity.

In the psychoanalytic tradition of which Bion was a part, there is a history of holding space for folks to speak their traumatic truths without judgement. Depending on the orientation of the analyst, there may or may not be interventions on the patient’s narration, but in general, the patient is given to the task of free association. Someone explained it to me once as providing “the space to think it” (M. Posadas, personal communications, Jan. 13, 2022), where “it” can be literally anything, but usually something that is unthinkable in the outside world.

The alpha function described by Bion lives in that tradition, and in that it depicts a radical receptivity to whatever the student brings to the classroom. In addition to the conscious moral struggles of the everyday, then, part of our care for students is to be open and receptive to those feelings that are too much for them, even at the risk that they are too much for us. The risk of failing in that responsibility for care is, as suggested above through the evocation of Wozolek’s (2020) discussion of queer youth suicide, a matter of life and death.

This is the work of teaching. A far cry from the patriarchal discourse of “glorified babysitters” common under neoliberal policy frameworks, this work can be thought of sociologically, and thus, on a larger-still scale, as emotional labour. While often used to refer to “enhancing, faking, and/or suppressing emotions to modify one’s emotional expressions” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 121), emotional labour can be more broadly defined as “the labour involved in dealing with other peoples’ feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions” (James, 1989, p. 15). Here, I would suggest that emotional labour, for teachers, is not just an intrapsychic process of regulating our own emotions, but also an intersubjective process of helping students make sense of their emotions, one described minutely by Bion’s alpha function. The value society puts on this emotional labour is “hidden as the value of the routine management of emotion” (James, 1989, p. 28). In other words, dealing with student emotion, as well as our own emotions as teachers, is an assumed part of the teacher’s role. Whether our own fear (Downey, 2021a), sadness (Downey, 2022c), or grief (Downey, 2022b), or students’ affective resistance to learning difficult knowledge (Airton, 2020; Boler, 1999) or generalized state of anxiety, described below, there is no shortage of emotion to be digested in teaching. Yet, nowhere on job descriptions for teachers is emotional labour listed. It is simply assumed that teachers will enact an ethic of care toward their students and correspondingly help them understand their emotions, no matter how intense they

may be. Moreover, teachers are generally tacitly expected to maintain an outwardly calm and positive demeanour in front of students, even in the face of their own overwhelming emotions. The assumed and hidden nature of emotional labour in teaching – which can be thought of as an extension of patriarchal devaluing of women’s work (Spencer, 1997) – leads to a systemic, and indeed societal, undervaluing of emotional labour relative to other, measurable outcomes of teacher performance, such as test scores. Put differently, the very small, yet vital, work of teachers is systemically and societally hidden by and in favour of the largeness of the education system. Because emotional labour is often taken for granted, the complexity, rigour, and difficulty of the task goes unnoticed and uncompensated. Despite not being seen as such, however, emotional labour is *work*, and the collective unwillingness and inability to recognize it as such, among other factors (e.g., Giroux, 2013), has resulted in a systemic undervaluing of what teachers do. A consideration of the way emotional labour is demanded from BIPOC through the expectation that one remain calm in the face of racism or take on the burden of White tears (Saad, 2020) within the school system further illustrates the inequity embedded in keeping emotional labour hidden. The analytic movement toward the very small described above, then, becomes a vital intervention on a school system that increasingly ignores what it ought to consider: affect and emotion.

In summation, much of the teacher’s work – particularly that which, at differing scales, can be thought of as the alpha function, the ethics of care, or emotional labour – goes unseen and uncompensated. Teachers ought to be better compensated and more fully supported in their work. That I take that position will be a shock to no one, but this is particularly relevant in the current moment. Below, I will suggest that the teacher’s task is becoming more difficult, not *only* because of the insidious influence of neoliberalism on curriculum (Kumar, 2019) and conditions of teacher work (Giroux, 2013; Rogers, 2018), but also because the emotions students are bringing to the classroom are becoming more and more intense. The unseen portion of teachers’ workloads – the emotional labour; the digestion of students’ affect – is becoming more difficult, and so long as that part of teachers’ work remains unseen, they/we will continue to be systemically undervalued.

COVID-19 and its Affective Residue

It is my contention in this paper that the obligation to care – to perform emotional labour, defined as engaging with emotions, possibly and particularly as manifested at a very small level in Bion’s description of the alpha function, on behalf of our students – is becoming more difficult amid the precarity of socio-environmental collapse (Saul, 2021), the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris & Holman Jones, 2021), and the anxiety-inducing exhaustion of late-stage capitalism (Braidotti, 2019; LaDuke, 2020). In this section, I will elaborate my reasoning for that contention. To do so, I will draw on heightened student anxiety as an example of a more generalized phenomenon of intensifying affect.

Before the pandemic, the Institute for Precarious Consciousness (2017) published an article that thoughtfully articulated the links between anxiety and the current moment of capitalism. Titled “We Are All Very Anxious,” the article suggests that anxiety is the defining affect of our time (see also Bennett, 2020).¹⁰ Where previous generations had been primarily afflicted by boredom and the need for survival, capitalism, industrialization, and technology eventually solved those problems for the privileged. In the affluent West, there are machines to help us cope with our boredom and to help us feed ourselves and our families – however inequitable access to those machines might be. The article suggests that we have yet to build a machine capable of dealing with our anxieties. We are, thus, all very anxious. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2007, 2013) is well known for making a similar critique of liquid modernity – that the transition from solid to liquid forms of modernity (from industrial to post-industrial or neoliberal capitalism) evokes and provokes anxiety (see also Bliss, 2020). This anxiety manifests in education in

¹⁰ Stress is, of course, also a noteworthy and interrelated affective presence (see Hoyt et al., 2021), but one that lies outside the scope of the current discussion.

myriad forms: grade entitlement, test and assignment anxiety, social anxiety, and fear of failure, to name a few. The teacher of the third millennium must navigate this complex wave of emotion with students before they can ever get to the work of teaching content.

The Fridays for Future movement suggests a larger, existential source of anxiety for young people – the climate crisis. Roger Saul’s (2021) recent paper eloquently outlines the issue. There is, within our lifetime and certainly that of our students, an increasing likelihood of climate change resulting in dystopian societal collapse. Saul (2021) points to the Cape Town water crisis as an example, and one need only look so far as the increased incidence of extreme weather events in North America over the past decade to see further evidence. At some point, it is likely that climate change will make the lives we know unlivable, and human beings will be forced to adapt. Saul’s (2021) argument is that the project of schooling precludes meaningful discussions of these dystopian realities – what has been called elsewhere the “sticky” positivity of schools (Downey, 2022c; see also Ahmed, 2014). Schools are tied up with the myth of meritocracy, and a host of other social narratives, to the extent that anything that challenges those myths is often absented from school discourse. In this way, the school system at best enacts a sort of “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011) – “the emotion felt through attachments to relationships that ‘exist when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant 2011, 1)” (Allen, 2021, p. 404) – and at worst a “violent indifference” (Wozolek, 2020, p. 22). Saul points out that the likelihood of dystopian climate change is a serious existential threat for young people. The Fridays for Future movement, however, is not about anxiety as much as organization. Indeed, it is a prime example of the feminist slogan “don’t agonize, organize!” (Flo Kennedy, 1971, as quoted in Braidotti, 2022, p. 1). Yet, not all students organize. Many agonize, and when they do, it is often teachers who are left to help digest the existential anxiety of being alive in a changing world. Moreover, they must do so within a system that fails to acknowledge the very threats to their futures about which they are anxious (Saul, 2021).

The two previous examples highlight the anxiety of the pre-pandemic socio-pedagogical moment. These anxieties still exist today, but the presence seems ghostly when compared to the larger existential threat created by the pandemic itself. The three narratives I shared at the beginning of the paper all took place during the pandemic, albeit in different waves. The initial move to online learning created a great deal of anxiety for students (Wang, Zhao, & Zhang, 2020). That same anxiety was present in my first narrative, as the students were forced back online by the Omicron wave and uncertainty clouded the future of the semester. Online learning can be incredibly stressful for students who are unfamiliar with the technologies at work (St Clair, 2015). Such was the case in the second narrative I presented. Technologies aside, the pandemic itself is a huge source of anxiety for students (Arribathi et al., 2021; Wang, Zhao, & Zhang, 2020).¹¹ The third narrative that began this paper combined several feelings, including anger and frustrating emergent from the Indigenous content and challenge to settler privilege within the course (MacDonald & Markides, 2021) and the anxiety around the pandemic itself. Fatigue was also a factor: “it [COVID-19] is a time of fatigue. Zoom fatigue. Scarcity fatigue. Press [conference] fatigue” (Harris & Holman Jones, 2021, p. 867). Unlike exhaustion in the face of liquid modernity, however, “this fatigue buzzes; it’s full of movement” (Harris & Holman Jones, 2021, p. 867). That buzzing, I think, is anxiety – a working knowledge of the fragility and precarity of life.

Anxiety, then, has become prevalent and intense in the current educational moment (Bliss, 2020). Anxiety can be thought of as a generalized distress about the future, and there is a significant variation possible in the intensity of that distress (Brenner, 1982). Anxiety, however, can also be thought of as a useful emotion. Specifically, some have noted that anxiety is a necessary component of subject formation (Verhaeghe, 2004). In other words, we need some anxiety to define ourselves in relation to others. Indeed, Bion himself posited learning as deeply related to the capacity to hold uncertainty and discomfort (Bion, 1962a, see also Britzman, 2007; Mintz, 2016). More broadly, emotions are not, nor have they ever been, a problem to be managed or regulated except in extreme cases. Emotions are, and need to be, felt –

¹¹ One study, however, noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, elementary students experienced anxiety that was “within normal limits” (Anggraeni, Alpiari, & Kodariah, 2021, abstract).

anxiety included. Emotions are educative if we are willing to listen to and stay with them (Downey, 2021b, 2022c); as above, affect is a teacher. Psychoanalysts, affect theorists, and caring teachers alike know this well. Indeed, unconsciously teachers dutifully perform the alpha function for their students, showing them that everything will be okay, caring for them in ways that no one else might, and helping them understand their emotions through distance from them. But even the most empathetic and caring teacher sometimes becomes overburdened by student affect, and if the above existential, social, and pedagogical examples of heightened anxiety are any indication – and I maintain they are – student affect is intensifying, and teachers are left to navigate that complexity in a school system that is not equipped to deal with *anything* so intense.

What to Do

Bion was a unique thinker, and his notion of the alpha function is not a normative psychoanalytic view. His thinking was indeed Bionian, and few practicing analysts claim that label. Many today favour an eclectic but functional mix of psychoanalytic theories (Usher, 2013). What Bion offers in this conversation is a mechanism through which to understand and name the everyday emotional labour teachers enact for students at a nonconscious level. It also offers a way of seeing the breakdowns in very small interactions, such as those described in the beginning of this paper.

The affective turn in education is in many ways about the sorts of very small, nonconscious moments that make up the classroom. In attuning ourselves to those moments, the classroom always exceeds us as teachers (Downey, 2022a). It is humbling to see the complexity of affect at work in the classroom, especially when we move beyond human intersubjectivity and begin to see the subject as an agentic assemblage of actors, many of whom were once seen as inanimate objects (Braidotti, 2019). Posthumanisms aside and saved for future inquiries, there is ample complexity within human interactions to warrant myriad theoretical approaches to understanding them.

Attuning ourselves to the very small is of vital importance, as is creating conditions in which teachers can do the sort of emotional labour described above. In Wozolek's (2020) discussion of queer youth suicide, she highlights how the failure to be seen and heard often results in the breaking of students: "The sensation of feeling out of control as created by a lack of care and deep listening on the part of their peers, teachers, and administrators often results in the break" (p. 25). For students facing the stark realities of the school-to-prison pipeline (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005) or the school-to-coffin pipeline (Wozolek, Wootton, & Demlow, 2017), the teacher's capacity to attend to student affect may literally be the difference between life and death (Wozolek, 2020). Amid the chaotic uncertainty of a global pandemic and myriad other socio-environmental crises, a reprioritization seems in order – a reprioritizing of teacher's moral obligations to care and a systemic shift toward creating conditions conducive to that care (see also Noddings, 2013).

Here, I have evoked the psychoanalytic thought of Bion to think through the very small, nonconscious emotional labour teachers perform daily for their students, and to seek ways of understanding my own failures to do so, as well as those I have witnessed as a student. I have situated Bion's thinking in relationship with the current movement in education toward "the affective turn" (Dernikos et al., 2020). Bion is certainly engaged with affect, but not in the Spinozian/Deleuzian sense. Both framings of affect are worth study and both offer insight into the minutia of seemingly banal classroom interactions. Some of those interactions can be thought of on a larger scale as manifestations of the ethics of care – an ethical imperative in teaching that is societally undervalued and often unseen. The ethics of care as well as attention (conscious or otherwise) to affect can be thought of sociologically as emotional labour, whether directed at ourselves or at another. A societal history and present social reality of heteropatriarchal, settler-colonial, and White supremacist power relations has ensured that emotional labour is unseen and undervalued, both within the teaching profession and outside of it. Within the current socio-environmental moment of global pandemics, liquid modernity, and climate crisis, there

is much about which to be affected, and anxiety becomes pervasive, obvious, and intense. The expected norms of emotional labour, thus, become harder to achieve – there is more and more to digest and amid neoliberal regimes of teacher accountability, standardized curricula, and high stakes testing, less time to do it (Giroux, 2013; Kumar, 2019; Rogers, 2018; Rose & Whitty, 2010).

All of this, I have suggested, means that teaching is becoming a more difficult task. There is no easy solution to pervasive anxiety and distress; there is no educational panacea because education is a microcosm of society (MacDoanald, 1995), and society is (at least primarily) a human endeavour. We will always be magnificently limited by our humanness. What I purpose in response to the above is threefold, and each deserves to be taken up more fully elsewhere. First, we need a humility before our task as teachers and corresponding recognition that what occurs within our classrooms exceeds us and always will. Second, as suggested above, we must work toward a paradigm of feeling and understanding emotions rather than the regulation and management of them – a paradigmatic shift toward reverence for the work of feeling rather than the cures for symptoms. In my view, Bion’s alpha function is one manifestation of a paradigm of feeling and understanding together. Finally, also as suggested above, now is a moment not *just* to agonize, but to organize. Teachers deserve to be compensated for the hidden emotional labour they enact daily. It is incumbent on us as teachers, then, to make clear to those who have never taught (and some who have) the complexity and the beauty of the work we do. My hope in writing this paper is that the analytic focus on the very small may help some folks see that complexity and build a deeper appreciation for the work teachers do and the ways that work is becoming more difficult amid the tribulations of the last few years.

Acknowledgments

As Dr. Alan Sears said to me once, “I have many single-authored papers, but none have been written alone.” I am indebted here to my interlockers, many of whom are cited above. Particular gratitude is extended to Christine Wu and Drs. Michelle Forrest and Linda Wheeldon. Dr. Wheldon passed away in November 2022. I only met her a few times, but, in each meeting, I was touched by the generous rigour of her thinking. I remember her fondly and remain indebted to her for helping shape this paper.

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About the Author

Adrian M. Downey is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. He can be reached at Adrian.Downey@msvu.ca.