

Teaching With Purpose: Student Engagement and Institutional Support as Key Drivers

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Abstract: This study explores how university teachers develop and sustain a positive attitude toward teaching in higher education, emphasizing the role of emotional engagement, professional development, and student interaction. Building on the Positive Attitude Towards Teaching in Higher Education (PATTHE) framework, we employed creative qualitative methods, including keyword elicitation, photo-based prompts, and vignettes, with 39 Croatian university teachers from diverse disciplines and career stages. Findings reveal that teachers' enthusiasm and motivation are closely linked to meaningful relationships with students, personal growth, and institutional recognition of teaching. However, tensions between teaching and research responsibilities, lack of structured support, and administrative burdens often undermine these attitudes. Participants offered critical yet affirming reflections on the PATTHE framework, highlighting areas for its refinement. This study underscores the importance of institutional investment in mentoring, pedagogical training, and recognition systems that center the affective and relational dimensions of teaching in higher education. Although grounded in the Croatian context, the findings reflect challenges and insights relevant to higher education institutions globally.

Keywords: positive attitude toward teaching; higher education; teacher-student interaction; pedagogical development; qualitative research

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Introduction

Despite increased attention to the quality of teaching in higher education, many university teachers continue to face significant challenges in developing and maintaining a positive relationship with their teaching roles. International scholarship emphasizes that effective teaching is not only a matter of technique, but also fundamentally relational, emotional, and grounded in reflective practice (Brookfield, 2015; Felten, 2013). Teachers must balance teaching with research, addressing diverse student needs, managing administrative burdens, and navigating institutional expectations, pressures widely documented across higher education systems (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Kember, 1997). These demands often undermine motivation and professional satisfaction, particularly in contexts where teaching remains undervalued relative to research (Clegg, 2008; Tight, 2016).

A growing body of research highlights that continuous professional development, collegial support, and reflective engagement are essential for strengthening teaching effectiveness and sustaining motivation (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff et al., 2007, 2017; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004). At the same time, studies from diverse higher education contexts suggest that positive teaching attitudes are closely connected to the emotional and identity-related dimensions of academic work (Schutz et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2003). These insights resonate strongly in the Croatian context, where teachers often acquire pedagogical competence through experiential learning and where institutional support for teaching remains uneven (Turk & Ledić, 2016; Miočić & Turk, 2017).

The PATTHE Framework

Building on these insights, our research introduces and further develops the Positive Attitude Toward Teaching in Higher Education (PATTHE) conceptual framework, a model designed to explore and support a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education. The PATTHE framework was originally developed to capture the multidimensional nature of teachers' enthusiasm, motivation, and professional engagement in the university classroom (Miočić et al., 2020). The framework was first validated with an international group of experienced educational developers and has since served as a conceptual tool for examining how educators make sense of their teaching experiences. In this study we build on that foundation by examining how higher education teachers themselves understand and engage with the framework.

PATTHE encompasses four interrelated dimensions:

1. Emotional Dimension

This dimension refers to teachers' affective engagement, joy, enthusiasm, curiosity, and a sense of purpose. Positive emotions often shape how teachers approach their work and contribute to resilience, persistence, and the ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with students. Although relatively understudied in higher education research, emotional engagement is central to sustained motivation and a key component of effective teaching.

2. Professional Development

Teachers with a positive attitude toward teaching demonstrate an ongoing commitment to learning about pedagogy, reflecting on their practice, and sharing experiences with peers. This dimension emphasizes that teaching expertise is developed over time and through intentional learning processes, not assumed simply by virtue of academic expertise.

3. Constructivist Approach to Teaching and Learning

PATTHE highlights the importance of student-centered, inquiry-based, and dialogic pedagogies. Teachers who adopt constructivist principles intentionally build on students' prior knowledge, encourage active engagement, and foster deeper learning through interaction and collaboration.

4. Integration of Teaching and Research Roles

The framework recognizes that teaching and research are not isolated domains but intersect in ways that enrich both. Positive attitudes toward teaching are supported when teachers are able to draw on their research expertise in the classroom and when institutions recognize the value of linking scholarly and pedagogical work.

Taken together, these dimensions offer a holistic view of what it means to foster and sustain a positive attitude toward teaching. Our study extends this earlier conceptualization by examining how the framework resonates with challenges and is expanded by university teachers from diverse disciplinary and career contexts. This framework aligns with broader pedagogical scholarship emphasizing the emotional, developmental, and constructivist foundations of effective university teaching (Brookfield, 2015; Kember, 1997; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004).

In the initial study, the PATTHE framework resonated strongly with educational developers, many of whom affirmed the value of its holistic and affective perspective. However, the framework had not yet been tested with a broader population of university teachers actively engaged in both teaching and research, nor had it been examined through the lens of creative, qualitative data elicitation methods.

This study addresses that gap by exploring how Croatian university teachers across disciplines and career stages understand and describe a positive attitude towards teaching. Specifically, we ask:

What concepts are found in teachers' narratives of a positive attitude toward teaching?

How do their descriptions relate to institutional and disciplinary contexts?

What similarities and differences emerge when compared with earlier findings from educational developers?

By responding to these questions, we aim to both validate and extend the PATTHE framework, while also contributing practical insights for faculty development initiatives, institutional policy, and future research. The study is grounded in the Croatian context, but its findings resonate with widely documented international challenges in higher education particularly regarding faculty motivation, student engagement, and institutional support. In doing so, we emphasize the pivotal role of teacher-student interaction and advocate for context-sensitive approaches to enhancing teaching in higher education.

Methodology

Research Problem and Questions

Our main research phenomenon is a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education. This work builds on our previous research with educational developers (Miocic et al., 2020) and now extends the focus to university teachers in Croatia. We posed the following research questions: What concepts are found in the teachers' narratives of a positive attitude towards teaching and how do teachers' descriptions relate to the context of the higher education institution? What are the main similarities and differences of the experiences described by higher education

teachers compared to the educational developers? What are the key insights this new analysis can offer about different populations?

Qualitative Research Design

This study is situated within a qualitative, interpretivist research design, which aligns with our aim to understand the meanings teachers ascribe to their teaching experiences within specific institutional and disciplinary contexts. Because attitudes toward teaching are shaped by personal histories, relational dynamics, and broader organizational environments, qualitative inquiry provides an appropriate framework for exploring the depth and complexity of these experiences.

We adopted a creative, multimodal qualitative approach to generate rich and reflective accounts of teaching attitudes. Creative methods are increasingly recognized in higher education research for their capacity to elicit effective, intuitive, and experiential dimensions of academic work that may remain inaccessible through conventional survey or interview formats (Brearley, 2008; Kara, 2015; Mannay, 2016). By incorporating multiple forms of expression, linguistic, visual, narrative, and conceptual, our design allowed participants to articulate their attitudes toward teaching in ways that were personally meaningful and contextually grounded.

Research Method and Data Collection

As in the case of our previous research (Miocic et al., 2020), we used creative qualitative methods administered through an open-ended online questionnaire. The instrument consisted of four tools designed to elicit participants' experiences and concepts related to a positive attitude toward teaching: keywords, photo-based reflection, vignettes, and a response to the PATTHE conceptual framework. This creative approach allowed participants to reflect deeply and express nuanced understandings of their teaching attitudes.

The four elicitation tools served different yet complementary purposes:

1. Keywords captured concepts participants intuitively associate with positive teaching attitudes.
2. A photo-based prompt encouraged participants to translate teaching attitudes into images, metaphors, or emotional atmospheres.

3. Vignettes provided structured scenarios that prompted participants to articulate generalizable assumptions about teaching practice, mentorship, and institutional culture.
4. The conceptual framework reflection invited respondents to evaluate, affirm, or critique the PATTHE model, offering insight into its relevance across diverse teaching contexts.

Together, these modalities created a layered dataset that captured both personal narratives and broader cultural expectations surrounding university teaching.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

All qualitative responses were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the data, then generated initial codes inductively. Codes were grouped into themes aligned with the research questions and PATTHE dimensions. Coding and interpretation were conducted collaboratively by the research team, with regular discussions to refine emerging insights and ensure consistency.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, we employed several strategies. First, we triangulated participants' perspectives across the four creative tasks, which allowed us to identify recurring patterns and reduce the risk of overinterpreting isolated responses. Second, multiple coders independently reviewed segments of the data and discussed interpretive differences until consensus was achieved. Third, the iterative movement between raw data, codes, and themes supported analytic rigor. Although member checking was not feasible due to the anonymous design, the combined use of multiple data sources and collaborative analysis strengthened the dependability of the findings.

Sample and Procedures

The sample consisted of 39 university teachers from the University of Rijeka, recruited through snowball sampling. The sample included 27 women and 12 men, representing a wide range of academic ranks and disciplines. Participants engaged with the online instrument in September and October 2022. Snowball sampling was chosen to reach highly motivated individuals presumed to hold strong views on teaching. Participants were assured of anonymity and ethical considerations were addressed.

Sample Characteristics and Limitations

The study participants reflect a strong affinity for teaching and demonstrated a wide range of experiences and perspectives. While snowball sampling allowed us to reach a targeted group likely to provide rich insights into the PATTHE framework, it also limits generalizability. The sample may not reflect the broader population of university teachers, and those who chose to participate were likely those already invested in teaching. Nevertheless, the diversity in age, rank, and disciplinary background adds depth to the findings. Although rooted in a national context, the themes that emerged, emotional engagement, the influence of student interaction, and institutional constraints, are likely to resonate with faculty experiences in other higher education systems.

Research results

In this section, we present findings thematically across four core domains: emotional experiences in teaching, the role of student interaction, institutional influences, and participants' reflections on the PATTHE conceptual framework. In analyzing the research results we addressed each data collection technique separately. In the analysis of key words, we examined the discourse participants use when describing positive attitudes towards teaching at both personal and institutional levels. In the analysis of photo descriptions, we addressed their reflections on positive attitudes towards teaching in everyday contexts, while in analyzing the responses to vignette scenarios, we explored generalized responses to specific situations in the teaching process to understand what their intuitive reactive understanding suggest is crucial to the development of attitudes towards teaching. With our research questions in mind which explore what concepts are present in the teachers' narratives of a positive attitude towards teaching and how teachers' descriptions of positive attitude towards teaching relate to higher education context, we present our analyses here in a thematic manner.

Emotional Journeys in Teaching: From Anxiety to Enthusiasm

Our participants' first experiences of teaching were often particularly intense and included feelings of stress, anxiety, insecurity, self-criticism, tension, excitement, motivation, and enthusiasm. Although all participants agree that they enjoy teaching, there are differences in the intensity of their expressed experiences of teaching, ranging from low intensity, for example "I enjoy teaching and I like it

more and more each year" (2-W-MC-NS); to significantly higher intensity, for example "Even in high school, I knew that's what I wanted to be (a teacher). When I close the classroom door behind me - that's my world, that's where I'm at home and I feel great." (1-W-LC-NS).

The vignettes employed in the study assumed that participants would respond based on personal or perceived experiences. In general, participants anticipate Matea's first class with apprehension. They envision her being anxious and unsure, fearing that her authority will be questioned and that she will be overwhelmed with preparation which will potentially be affecting her doctoral studies. They anticipate nervousness, organizational challenges, and poor student engagement. Many believe Matea will draw from student experiences, emulate supportive professors, or continue her training to improve. Despite the expectation that Matea will grow in confidence and competence over time, some have doubts about the effectiveness of her lectures for students.

The analysis of the key words describing a personal positive attitude towards higher education teaching revealed that significant number of participants emphasize joy as the key word and highlighted happiness, sense of achievement and satisfaction. The most frequently mentioned keywords that participants associate with a positive attitude towards teaching include enthusiasm and curiosity, as well as approachability, openness, excellence, and flexibility. With the keywords they wrote, research participants associate a positive attitude towards teaching with learning and improvement. In addition to learning and improvement, the emphasis is on a willingness to change (both in oneself and in teaching approaches), reflexivity in the sense of being able to rethink and revise one's approach, and a desire to expand and improve one's skills.

The Central Role of Student Interaction

The majority of participants define their attitude towards teaching through their relationship with students. They express appreciation for student engagement, emphasize availability, and concern for well-being, and highlight continuous learning from students. They convey enthusiasm, enjoyment of collaboration, and motivation when students show interest. However, a notable number also emphasize that lack of student interest significantly diminishes motivation for teaching, e.g. "I do not like students who show no interest in class activities and try to achieve the required score with minimal effort" (5-W-LC-TS); "Teaching excites

me when I have an interested group of students.” (8-W-LC-TS). Such attitudes are somewhat more pronounced among experienced female teachers in higher positions, regardless of their academic field. Despite the instances where teachers talk about discouraging interactions with students, the underlying theme suggests that students typically occupy a central role in shaping attitudes towards teaching.

In the vignettes, participants emphasize the importance of the initial dynamic between Matea, an inexperienced teacher, and her students, which is particularly evident in the first vignette. This interaction can lead to a motivated teacher being accepted by the students, which further increases their enthusiasm for teaching. If, on the other hand, a teacher fails to gain acceptance from students, it may lead to frustration and disengagement from teaching.

Among the keywords associated with personal perceptions of teaching, there are also those that portray students as agents associated with the perception of a positive attitude towards teaching in higher education. It is worth noting that the keywords in this category are regularly more complex and often include descriptions of respect and appreciation for students, trust in them and belief in their positive attributes. Keywords related to enjoyment are described as the joy of working with young people or the joy of seeing them progress.

The responses to the question about a photograph showing positive attitude towards teaching provide us with similar insights from a different perspective. Regardless of whether they approach the description of the photograph, provide a description of the atmosphere or emotions, or use only concise statements/key words, the participants' comments can be summarized with the following key words: joy, interaction, cooperation, equality, commitment, unconcern, interest, cheerfulness, teamwork, support, openness, trust, engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and activity. One participant writes:

“Students with a smile on their face because they do not feel fear (fear blocks the desire to learn), eyes wide open showing their interest in what they are listening to, students constantly asking questions to the teacher, engaging in discussions and actively working on assigned activities while constantly asking questions to the teacher. The teacher is at eye level with the students and does not sit isolated behind the lectern, but is in the middle of the students, showing his closeness to them.” (26-M-MC-SS).

Institutional and Organizational Conditions

While not as prominent as the issue of student disinterest, one demotivating aspect

evident in the teaching experiences described by the research participants is the criticism of many organizational and administrative tasks that interfere with the teaching activities. There are also operational problems in the organization of teaching. Participants offered several examples of operational problems such as (a) too many students enrolled in the course; (b) classes not well distributed within the department; and (c) limited freedom to modify and change the curriculum.

Students also appear as keywords, however, the key words linking teachers and students are less emotional and refer more to the principles of student-centered learning. For example, they emphasize student involvement, encouraging collaboration between teachers and students in curriculum development, putting students at the center of the teaching process, etc. The most frequently mentioned keyword is teacher training, and it comes in different variations such as encouraging teachers to improve, organizing continuous support for teachers in teaching, investing in teacher training, supporting the teachers, etc. Participants emphasize monitoring the quality of teaching, modernizing study programs, ensuring the necessary conditions, and providing advisory support for students and teachers. Repeated keyword is also organization concretized in flexibility (e.g., in the division of courses/exams in terms of schedule), carefully designed timetables of classes, ensuring communication with students and monitoring student workload through exams. The other broader categories contain keywords that can be described as teachers' needs to ensure appropriate conditions for teaching and recognition of teaching as an important activity which points to institutional measures but also provides insights into the challenges of a positive attitude towards teaching. The keywords emphasize rewarding successful teachers (both tangibly and intangibly), promoting good teaching examples, and advocating for more equitable evaluation of teaching as part of the overall career progression.

In the responses to the vignettes, participants predominantly attribute responsibility for the thematic and didactic preparation of the lesson content to the young teacher. Furthermore, their responses do not suggest that there is support, refuge, or advice for young teachers at an institutional level. Instead, the situation seems to be characterized by young teachers relying entirely on themselves and their ability to cope with the situation at hand. When asked who they turn to for advice, colleagues, assistants, or slightly older colleagues are overwhelmingly mentioned first, regardless of the subject area and age of our participants. They give comfort and advice on how to deal with this situation, with the more

experienced colleagues saying that it gets easier with time. The second person Matea confides in, according to the participants, is her mentor, if she is close to them (as some say), or another older, more experienced person she is close to.

Reflections on the PATTHE Framework

The participants in the study almost completely agree that the proposed conceptual framework corresponds to their personal experiences with a positive attitude towards teaching. Among the participants who commented on the concept, three groups of comments can be distinguished. The first group includes the comments that confirm the conceptual framework and provide additional arguments or emphasize the importance of certain dimensions, e.g. emphasizing a constructivist approach to teaching: "It's not just about the subject matter (...), it's important to connect the subject matter with the previously learned material from other courses as well as with examples from everyday life" (5-W-LC-TS); or, emphasizing the emotional dimension: "The teacher must be the one who brings positive energy, play and fun into the relationship, who encourages students to make an effort and who ignites the spark of interest in them" (12-W-EC-SS).

In the second group, there are comments that partly criticize the presented concept (e.g., by pointing out that they do not entirely agree with certain characteristics of the dimensions of a positive attitude towards teaching). This becomes clear, for example, in the following description: "I do not completely agree. This implies that students are not passive recipients of knowledge and information ...In my experience so far, this 'passive' way of conveying information also seems to be a good way ..." (25-W-EC-SS); some participants suggest expanding the concept to include other important topics such as academic integrity or the relationship to students with disabilities as crucial elements. Some criticize the focus of the dimensions of a positive attitude on direct teaching (direct interaction with students) and suggest that the understanding of a positive attitude to teaching should include a broader view on teaching and the circumstances in which it is developed and implemented. The third group of comments includes statements from the participants who affirm the proposed conceptual framework but see it as an ideal (goal, vision) to strive for, e.g. "The concept corresponds to my attitude towards teaching, and I should certainly strive to realize it as much as possible" (13-M-MC-H). Some also add that the reality is very different from the concept described and it is therefore a challenge to achieve this goal, e.g. "I completely agree with this idea, but the teaching process in practice is far from the presented ideal. (23-W-LC-H); So, I agree with everything that was mentioned—that's how it

should be. But we are all just people with certain characters, and we often have to deal with other things, not just teaching” (33-M-EC-TS).

Discussion

Emotional and Motivational Dimensions of Teaching

This study underscores the importance of emotions in shaping a positive attitude toward teaching. Our findings echo international literature showing that teachers’ emotions, identity formation, and sense of competence are deeply intertwined with classroom experiences (Schutz et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2003). Teachers described a wide range of emotional experiences, stress, anxiety, self-criticism, excitement, and joy, particularly during their early teaching years. Consistent with prior research, these emotional trajectories strongly influenced how teachers approached their teaching roles and how they made meaning of their work (Brookfield, 2015; Felten, 2013).

The Centrality of Student Engagement

Across data sources, student interaction emerged as the most significant factor influencing teachers’ attitudes toward teaching. This finding resonates with studies emphasizing the centrality of student engagement and reciprocal classroom dynamics in supporting teacher motivation (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Participants frequently emphasized how student interest, engagement, and responsiveness enhance their commitment and satisfaction, while a lack of student engagement emerged as a demotivating factor, an emotional pattern consistent with prior work on teacher enthusiasm and student-centered pedagogy (Kember, 1997; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004).

Organizational and Institutional Influences

While student engagement plays a central role in shaping teaching attitudes, institutional conditions were also identified as influential. Participants pointed to administrative burdens, inadequate mentoring, and rigid course structures as barriers to maintaining a positive attitude toward teaching. Particularly for novice teachers, the absence of institutional support, formal training, and clear guidance exacerbated feelings of uncertainty and stress. Teachers reported relying on peers and informal networks rather than structured mentoring programs. These organizational challenges illustrate the tension between the ideal of teaching excellence and the realities of institutional constraints, a concern echoed in European policy documents (European Commission, 2013, 2017). Although focused

on Croatia, these concerns reflect structural conditions seen in higher education systems worldwide, where teaching excellence is promoted rhetorically but often undervalued in practice. These institutional constraints mirror findings in international literature on how academic cultures, departmental norms, and workload structures shape teachers' capacity to sustain positive teaching attitudes (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Clegg, 2008).

Critical Reflections on the PATTHE Concept

Feedback on the PATTHE conceptual framework was largely affirmative, but several participants offered constructive critiques. Some questioned whether the model sufficiently accounts for the complexities of academic work, particularly in disciplines where research is prioritized over teaching. Others suggested the model should be expanded to include themes such as inclusivity, integrity, and the broader institutional climate. Several respondents also described the PATTHE concept as aspirational, something to strive toward rather than a current reality. These insights suggest the need for continued refinement and contextual adaptation of the framework, particularly when applied across diverse academic environments.

Implications for Practice

The findings point to several actionable strategies for enhancing positive attitudes toward teaching in higher education:

- Institutional support: Mentoring programs, reduced administrative workload, and recognition of teaching in career advancement can foster a more supportive environment for educators.
- Professional development: Faculty development initiatives should emphasize student-centered pedagogy, emotional resilience, and peer collaboration.
- Student engagement: Educational developers and institutions should recognize students as key contributors to a positive teaching environment and integrate this awareness into training and evaluation processes.

Although our findings are rooted in a specific national context, the implications may be relevant to institutions internationally that aim to cultivate supportive teaching environments and foster faculty motivation.

Transferability and Relevance to an International Audience

Although this study was conducted within the Croatian higher education system, several themes resonate widely across international contexts. The emotional dimensions of teaching, the central role of student engagement, and the challenges of balancing teaching with research responsibilities are well documented in global Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Similarly, institutional barriers such as administrative workload, limited mentoring, and uneven recognition of teaching are challenges faced by faculty in many higher education systems. These commonalities suggest that the PATTHE framework, and the experiences shared by participants, can inform discussions about faculty motivation and teaching enhancement in diverse institutional environments. By situating the findings within broader SoTL literature and European and global policy dialogues, we aim to contribute insights that extend beyond national boundaries and support cross-context learning about how institutions can foster more supportive teaching cultures.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study was conducted with a non-random sample of Croatian university teachers who self-selected into the study, many of whom already held a positive view of teaching. While the richness of qualitative data provides deep insights, the findings may not generalize to all academic contexts. Future research should explore these themes across national settings and institutional types, using mixed methods and longitudinal designs to better capture changes over time and across career stages.

Conclusion

This research sheds light on the lived experiences of higher education teachers who maintain a positive attitude toward teaching, emphasizing the central role of student-teacher interaction, emotional engagement, and institutional conditions. The findings support the validity of the PATTHE framework while suggesting areas for its further development. To cultivate a culture of effective and meaningful teaching in higher education, institutions must recognize the dynamic, context-dependent nature of enthusiasm and motivation. By acknowledging the emotional labor of teaching and providing structural support, universities can help sustain teachers' commitment to creating enriching educational experiences for their students. While rooted in the Croatian context, these findings reflect widely shared challenges and aspirations in global higher education systems, underscoring the

value of international dialogue on supporting faculty well-being and teaching excellence.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.