



The Missing Vocabulary

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This report is based on my direct classroom experience in high school with students between the ages of 14 and 18. It is not intended to be a theoretical treatise, but rather an illustration of what I observe on a daily basis: emotions are there, they are overwhelming, they often have no name, and they struggle to find a legitimate place within the teaching process.

The management of emotions revolves around three key areas that I have observed: peer relationships, the teacher's relationship with the student, and—the most delicate aspect—the student's relationship with the teacher.

1. How Students Experience Their Emotions Today

When a student experiences a positive emotion—a good grade, success in sports, or recognition from their family—the reaction is almost always explosive, but brief.

I've noticed that they place enormous importance on external recognition, especially when it's public. A "good job" said in front of the class is worth more than a good grade in the register. They feel invincible; they need to share their joy immediately, but they do so almost exclusively through their smartphones: an Instagram story, a message in the class group chat. The joy is real, but it's mediated and needs a "like" to be validated.

If the reward isn't seen by others, it seems to lose its value.

The beautiful emotions of adolescence are never "light." They are all-encompassing, absolute, experienced as if for the first time—because, in fact, for them, it is. This is how the boys and girls in my class truly experience them:

- **The emotion of belonging: friendship**

It's perhaps the most powerful positive emotion in this age group. It's about being chosen, being part of the group, being in a chat, being invited.

How do they feel? Invincible. When they're with the right friends, they feel seen, understood, and safe.

How important is it to them? Fundamental. More than family, more than school. A great afternoon with friends is worth more than a 9 in a subject. If this sense of belonging is lost, everything falls apart.

- **The emotion of recognition: pride and gratification**

A good grade, a goal, a compliment from a teacher they respect, a parent who says, "I'm proud of you."

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How do they feel? They light up. But it lasts very briefly if it isn't shared. They need others to see it. And in my opinion, they don't do this out of vanity, but because they're building their identity and need a mirror that says, "You're worth it, too."

How important are these to them? Enormously, but they're extremely fragile. A compliment can keep them going for a week; criticism can wipe them out in an instant. They live in a constant need for validation.

- **The thrill of discovery: wonder and passion**

When they discover something they truly feel is their own: a song, a sport, a video game, a subject, a cause, a love for something.

How do they feel? Finally like themselves. It's the emotion that makes them say, "This is who I am." They're full of energy, they talk fast, they want to know everything.

How much importance do they attach to it? It's the emotion that gives meaning. It's the first antidote to boredom and to that "I don't know what to do" feeling. When they have it, they feel good even if everything else is going wrong.

- **The thrill of love, in all its forms**

First love, crushes, infatuations, but also deep love for a friend or a sibling.

How do they feel? Like they're on a roller coaster. They go from heaven to anxiety in a matter of moments. Teenage love is beautiful because it's idealized, pure, and unselfish. But it's also anxiety-inducing because they don't yet have the tools to handle it.

How important is it to them? Absolutely everything. When they're in love, school, family—everything else takes a back seat. It's not drama; it's neurology: the teenage brain is wired to prioritize emotional bonds.

How do they generally experience it? I've identified the following characteristics:

a) With maximum intensity: there's no such thing as "I'm kind of happy." It's either "I'm overjoyed" or "it's the best thing in the world." Their limbic system is firing on all cylinders, while the prefrontal cortex—which is supposed to regulate it—is still under construction.

b) With an immediate need to share: a wonderful emotion, if it isn't posted, talked about, or shown to the group, is as if it never existed at all. They need external validation to make what they feel inside feel real.

c) With a fear of losing them: precisely because they're so wonderful, they have a constant fear that they'll end. This is also the source of jealousy in friendships, performance anxiety when they're doing well in school, and the fear of disappointing others.

In summary: for us adults, a wonderful emotion is a happy interlude. For a teenager, it's proof that they exist, that they matter, that they have a place in the world. This is no minor detail. It is the building of identity.

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The fate of negative emotions is completely different: disappointment, shame, anxiety, anger, and a sense of inadequacy. A mechanism of rejection kicks in. Negative emotions in adolescence are far more numerous than positive ones, and above all, they are much more silent. They shout out the positive ones; they hide the negative ones.

What are the most common negative emotions I see? It's not just "sadness." It's a much more specific mix:

- Anxiety: "I won't make it," "What if they call me on it?", "What if they don't reply on WhatsApp?" They always feel like they're being tested. It's anxiety about academic, social, and physical performance.
- Shame: fear of being judged, of blushing, of saying something insignificant in front of the class. For them, shame is almost physical—it's public exposure. That's why they'd rather say "I didn't do it" than "I didn't understand it."
- Anger, which is almost always sadness in disguise. They arrive in class already angry—from home, from an argument, from rejection. They can't say, "I was hurt by that"; they say, "Everything's going wrong." Anger is easier to show because it makes them feel strong, while sadness makes them feel vulnerable.
- Disappointment and a sense of inadequacy: "I studied and got a 5," "I thought I was his friend, but he didn't invite me." It's the collapse of expectations. They feel like they're wrong, not good enough.
- Loneliness even when surrounded by others. They may have lots of followers and still feel alone. It's the most common yet least spoken-about negative emotion: "No one really understands me."

How do they deal with these emotions? Almost never by processing them. They deal with them by avoiding them.

I've identified some flight strategies, all the same in every class:

- Ironical minimization: "I don't care." It's the most commonly used phrase to cover up a wound. If they say they don't care at all, it's precisely because they do care.
- Escape into the phone: headphones on even without music, endless scrolling on TikTok, phone under the desk. It's not rudeness—it's anesthesia. Scrolling keeps the mind from thinking.
- Physical symptoms: stomachaches, headaches on test days, nervous hunger or a complete loss of appetite, chronic fatigue. The body says what the mouth can't. Many panic attacks before tests stem from these negative emotions.
- Outward acting out: disrupting class, laughing excessively and inappropriately, provoking a classmate, talking back. It's a way of saying "I'm not feeling well" without having to say it. They'd rather get a disciplinary note than have to admit, "I'm not feeling well today."

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- Isolation: they shut themselves off. It's no longer "I'm going to my room." It's "I'll go offline, I won't answer, I'll disappear." And they hope someone will notice and come looking for them.

Can they process these feelings on their own? No. And not because they aren't intelligent, but because they lack two fundamental things:

- Emotional vocabulary: They can't distinguish between "I'm anxious" and "I'm angry." They just say "I feel bad" or "I'm stressed." If you haven't identified the emotion, you can't process it.
- The prefrontal cortex: the teenage brain is wired to feel intensely, not to regulate. They need an adult to act as an "external regulator."

On their own, they get stuck in a loop: bad emotion -> shame about feeling it -> I hide it -> I feel lonelier -> an even worse emotion.

Do they ask teachers for help? Never directly.

No student walks into class and says, "Teacher, I had an anxiety attack yesterday." They ask for help through indirect signals, almost like a code:

- they stay in class after school for a pointless question about homework
- they send you an email or a WhatsApp message at 11:00 p.m. about something that could have waited
- they get disproportionately upset over a passing grade, because that "6" isn't just a grade—it's confirmation that "I'm worthless"

They'll only come to the teacher if they sense three conditions are met: that you won't judge them, that you won't immediately tell their parents or colleagues, and that you won't use that confidence to give them a grade or a reprimand.

When these conditions are met, then yes, in one-on-one meetings—away from the classroom stage—they open up. And there, they tell you everything. They even cry. Because finally, someone isn't asking them to do well, but is asking how they're doing.

The problem today isn't that kids don't experience negative emotions. It's that they don't have a safe space where they can express them without feeling like there's something wrong with them.

In student-to-student relationships, emotion is a double-edged sword. There's a very strong sense of solidarity during happy times, but there's also a terrible fear of judgment. That's why negative emotions aren't shared among peers—out of fear of appearing weak. The dynamic is: "If I show that I'm feeling bad, they'll make fun of me." The risk is creating a vicious cycle of pretense.

2. Current Tools and Personal Approaches in the Classroom and During Counseling Sessions



As a school, what tools do we have today? There are several tools: a psychological counseling service, emotional education programs, civics classes, and school-wide communications about bullying and well-being. The risk is that not all students perceive these as important opportunities. In practice, students view these interventions as “just more time spent talking.” The only tool that really works is our daily relationship with them.

Personally, I had to change my approach. I realized I couldn’t expect them to express their emotions on command in front of 25 people.

In the classroom, I’ve witnessed situations of total emotional freeze on several occasions. I remember a student who received a low grade after working very hard: she remained impassive, saying “okay,” but her hands were shaking and her eyes were teary. When questioned in front of everyone, she denied everything. The classroom is a stage, and no one wants to show their vulnerability there. In one-on-one conversations, however, it’s a different story. When I talk to them one-on-one—during break or at the end of class—with a simple phrase like, “You seemed a little down today. Is everything okay?”—the wall comes crashing down. That’s when they’re able to open up. I’ve had students who told me about panic attacks before tests, family arguments, and heartbreaks that seem minor to us adults but are all-consuming for them.

I’ve learned that teacher-student dynamics require, first and foremost, the teacher’s ability to regulate their own emotions: if I walk into the classroom feeling nervous, the class picks up on it immediately. And the student-teacher dynamic can only work if the student senses that the teacher won’t judge them and won’t use that emotion against them in terms of grades or reprimands.

My attempts—very simple ones—have been:

- The 5-minute emotional check-in: At the start of class, I ask, “How are you feeling on a scale of 1 to 10?” No need to explain why. This helps validate that it’s okay to feel bad even at school.
- The emotions journal: An anonymous notebook where they can write a single line about how they felt during the lesson.
- Validating Mistakes: When I make a mistake on the board, I point it out. “I’m tired today and I made a mistake—it happens.” This demonstrates that even adults deal with negative emotions.

3. How I Envision a Course on “Emotional Competence” and the Current Situation

The current situation for young people is one of a great hunger for self-expression combined with a severe lack of emotional vocabulary. They know how to use all the filters on TikTok, but they can’t distinguish between frustration and disappointment. They are hyper-connected yet hypo-communicative on a deep level.

If I could envision a curricular course on “Emotional Competence,” I wouldn’t picture it as just another theoretical subject. I would envision it as a hands-on workshop, without numerical grades, co-led by a teacher and a psychologist, featuring:

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- emotional vocabulary training: learning to name what one is feeling through real-life examples, films, and role-playing
- peer conflict management: simulations of student-to-student arguments using nonviolent communication techniques
- student-teacher relationship management: spaces where a student can tell the teacher, "When you scold me in front of everyone, I feel embarrassed," without fear of retaliation, and where the teacher can say, "When you don't look at me while I'm explaining, I feel demotivated."

In conclusion, it seems that today students are expected to manage emotions like adults using tools that aren't always adequate. The task of the school and of us educators is not to become therapists, but to become emotionally reliable adults. A student won't remember the definition of emotional competence, but will forever remember the teacher who noticed they were struggling without them having to say so.