

Encouraging Teachers to Experience Emodiversity: A Reflective Retelling of a Mental Health Initiative

Preeti Vivek Mishra*

A flawed mental health instructor?

Only the other day, I was told once again that I am an emotional teacher. As most teachers would agree, this hardly merits a mention. What does merit writing about is that I was told this by different stakeholders in education (a student and a colleague), in response to not so unrelated acts of mine (offering a cuppa and a shoulder to cry on to a student who needed both, and breaking down while reminiscing a student's academic ordeal to the said colleague) and with diametrically opposite emotional tones (gratitude, and apprehension mixed with disapproval, respectively). With reminders from a well-meaning but visibly disappointed colleague, that I teach courses on school mental health, I headed back from my office that evening in an addled state.

Flawed who?

Did my breaking down indicate a breaking down of my stress resilience? Or did it instead make me more of a human than teachers are allowed to be in their moments of emotional vulnerability? As the colleague pointed out, would I be more 'in control', more adept at coping if I could experience a 'positive emotion' instead, like, joy at being able to 'help' the student out of her pain?

I have never been able to align myself with the nomenclature of 'positive' and 'negative emotions'. A recent interaction with a group

of 20 K-12 teachers affirmed my belief that framing emotions in the desirable-undesirable binary was ominous for the mental health of teachers. My experiences with teachers have left me convinced that glorification of the teaching profession has added to the emotional misery of teachers by placing grave injunctions with regard to living and experiencing their diverse emotions. We can quote the latest research data on teacher stress and burnout, and continue to scout for reasons in workload issues or disruptive student behaviour (another term, I cannot align with), but till we recognise our teachers as having equal right to experience emodiversity (emotional diversity) I reckon, we will always be far off course.

The naysayers can be assuaged by stressing the differences between perception and expression of an emotion. The skill of accurately perceiving emotions precedes the skills of understanding, analysing and reflectively regulating emotions (Caruso et al., cited in Barlozek, 2013). What we can demand of our teachers is being more adept (for they deal with young minds) at exercising context-specific regulation, which is only one of the four skills integral to being emotionally adept/intelligent. What we cannot do is put them on pedestals from where mere acknowledgement of some emotions induces guilt, leaving them incapacitated and foreclosed to experiencing diversity of emotions within themselves!

* Department of Education, University of Delhi, India, Email - preetimishraa@gmail.com

Emotions: The positive, negative and the imperative of it!

The terms 'positive and negative emotions' are ubiquitous in literature on emotions, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, educational attainment, etc. (Barrett, 2013). Despite the normalisation of these terms, the distinction is neither foolproof (Green, 1992), nor advisable when understanding the relationship between an individual's emotional ecosystem and mental health (Quoidbach, 2014). To elaborate, psychologists and philosophers try to differentiate positive emotions from negative ones by employing cognitive (intentionality), behavioural (behavioural tendencies), and experiential criteria (felt qualities). Green (1992) sufficiently illustrates the arbitrariness of these criteria by showing that adoption of different criteria can actually give us different classification for the same emotion, say anger or fear.

Again, with reference to mental health, Quoidbach et al. (2014, p.2057) have shown that people who experience 'emodiversity – the variety and relative abundance of emotions', have lower vulnerability to depression, fewer doctor consultations per year, and fewer medical costs compared to those who do not. Noticeably, negative emodiversity or the variety and relative abundance of negative emotions yields the same results as positive emodiversity even after being controlled for age, gender, etc.

Where does all this lead us as people concerned about our teachers' mental health? I propose that it leads us to tell our teachers that experiencing emodiversity is good for them, and to tell them emphatically that emotional intelligence – the ever trusted ally in our pursuit of mental health – comprises effective regulation of all emotions, and denial of none (Salovey & Sluyter, 2001)

Teachers and emodiversity: A retelling

The workshop with K-12 teachers reaffirmed the need for it beyond doubt. These

teachers, all between 24 to 30 years of age and teaching middle and secondary school students from well-resourced, reputed urban private schools, reported a shared sense of loss of a young-blooded utopia they once had as fresh graduates from their respective teacher training institutes. Another shared experience was the disillusionment with the discursive construction of teaching as a humane profession and teachers as ever capable ambassadors of the exalting standards of humanist conduct. Saddened I was at the state of things, but surprised I was not!

Being a constant embodiment of holier than thou would have its consequences, I reckoned. Teachers are repeatedly reminded of being inspirations, role models, generation shapers and all things supra normal. Indeed, an honourable pedestal to be put on. This workshop reminded us that pedestals like these can impose unrealistic injunctions on our emotional lives; that these injunctions have a way of making one pay with things simple, beautiful, and carefree. So, too with these teachers, all of whom had graduated from the most reputed teacher training institutes of the country in question. Looked up to by society, school administration, parents and students alike, to be woven out of an enviable moral-emotional fabric, these teachers had begun to wilt and wither under the expectations to be more than human all the time! One of the major casualties they reported in this unrealistic search for perfection was emodiversity (Quoidbach et al., 2014)

As a run-up to the workshop, these teachers were requested to complete an online 'pre-workshop' questionnaire designed to arrive at their self-reported emodiversity profiles. The questions were designed to identify the spectrum of emotions experienced by the teachers routinely, occasionally and rarely. In addition, it sought to profile emotions on the basis of the ease or difficulty of accepting each of these emotions to oneself, and to others, respectively. The data from this online questionnaire was kept anonymous,

collated, and used as a discussion resource in the workshop.

The findings were menacingly simple and ominous for mental health. Negative emodiversity had taken a brutal beating. What we know of the benefits of having a rich, authentic, and complex emotional life (Barrett, 2013) was reeling under the debris of the twin discursive constructions of teachers as emulation-worthy and teachers as infallible, where fallibility is partly defined as experiencing a 'negative' emotion. To share an indicative list of states/emotions that the participants found difficult to acknowledge to others were anger, fear, guilt, boredom, pity, jealousy, frustration and domination. More telling was the existence of an equally large number of emotions/states they found difficult to acknowledge to themselves vis-a-vis hatred, guilt, jealousy, frustration, fear and helplessness. The so-called positive emotions were celebrated as trusted aides in building lasting interpersonal rapport and thus were reported to have no barrier to acknowledgement.

When the face-to-face workshop was conducted, this pre-workshop data was shared with the participating teachers. A series of focus questions were projected alongside to brainstorm on the nature of emotions, teachers and emotions, desirability and undesirability of some or other emotions in educational settings, and reflections on the very constructs of positive-negative/desirable-undesirable/empowering-disempowering emotions.

A retrospective reflection on the discussions that ensued generated a series of insights on what works when one is looking to address the emotions in question with a view to promote the mental health of teachers.

Understanding the physiological genesis of emotions can be liberating

All teachers barring a couple who had prior rigorous training in psychology did not seem versed with the physiology of emotions. The group reported heaving a sigh of relief when

presented with quotes, such as "Emotions are unbidden, they happen to us" or "Emotions can have a very fast onset, beginning so quickly that they can happen before one is aware that they have begun" (Eckman, 1999, p.54), which stressed the biological genesis and function of emotions. The realisation that emotions had a phylogenetic function allowed these teachers a perspective wherein all emotions were seen as natural, universal and adaptive. Once this perspective was gained, these teachers became capable of questioning the labelling of emotions as either positive or negative. It is imperative that teachers challenge these value ascriptions and create a cognitive climate conducive to the subsequent perception and acknowledgement of an emotion.

Learning to step in with mindfulness is a practicable skill

The above mentioned point about physiology and phylogeny is an admirable trope to ensure teachers do not crucify themselves for slightest deviation from injunctory emotional protocols. Yet, the same when overstressed and not supplemented with the rationale for practicing regulation of 'all' emotions, can lead to any initial gains made towards emotional management and mental health being lost. While the automaticity of basic emotions is being stressed on one hand, the journey from physiological arousal, to perception, acknowledgement analysis and regulation of emotions must be well charted and shared too. Teachers must sense that it is in this journey that the truest possibilities of leading emotionally complex and variegated life emerge. Teachers must be encouraged to claim their emotional ecosystems. They need encouragement to own their emotions by accurately perceiving, truthfully acknowledging and dispassionately analysing them. Having done so, emotional regulation should be easier to practice. Making teachers believe that emotional intelligence is practicable, frees them from the clutches of both natural determinism and socio-culturally constructed inhibitory emotional protocols.

Trust teachers to reappropriate positive and negative for themselves, because it depends!

A consensus that emerged from the workshop was that our emotional ecosystems were unique. We experience emotions differently, our thresholds differ, the relative effects of the same emotion, and expressions differ too. An activity, we found useful was to get these teachers to develop personal-emotional profiles on the basis of what individual emotions did to and for them, what they wanted to continue and what they did not. This resulted in several instances of reappropriation of positive-negative labels. To illustrate, a couple of teachers reported that they were not angry enough and wanted to change that for they reckoned some degree of anger was required to change an inequitable or unjust educational context. Another teacher rued her eternal optimism and opined that some degree of sadness may augur well for her while relating to students as they shared particularly hopeless life situations with her. Increasingly, the teachers came to the conclusion that there were no universal parameters for labelling emotions as positive or negative. Emotions per se are neither. We concluded that openness to the entire range of emotions available to us could be a useful ally in our becoming more relatable, effective, approachable and humane teachers. By the end of the workshop, a phrase that almost became a slogan for the group when recapitulating the issues of desirability/ undesirability and so forth for any emotion was 'It depends...'

Introduce and involve teachers in picturing emodiversity

At the outset, I found that the research-backed conceptualisation of emodiversity – positive, negative and global – remains a useful tool to allay several apprehensions around the 'negative' emotions for those who are yet to warm up to the possibility of looking at emotions in non-binary terms. Whereas more research is awaited to

precisely explain how emodiversity works. It seems worthwhile to brainstorm on possible hypotheses for the same with teachers. The explanations may vary – emodiversity may imply a sign of a self-aware and authentic life; how authentic life as well as self-awareness is instrumental to a subjective sense of well-being; or that emodiversity allows for a diffusion of excessive dominance of specific emotions in one's emotional ecosystem, and so forth (Quoidbach et al., 2014). Yet, the very process of discussing a novel concept threadbare is bound to make the concept familiar to the discussants. Our experience in the workshop was even more encouraging. We found discussions resulted in more than familiarisation. Due to the very personal import of emotions, any discussions around it were implicitly relevant for the participating teachers. Accordingly, the engagement, ownership and identification were easier to achieve. I found it particularly useful to bring in specific research evidence while building the case for emodiversity. Once the concept found resonance with the teachers, the suggestions around creating an emodiversity ethos in educational settings too can be expected to flow freely.

Epilogue

Humans are fragile and complex. How often have we, as mental health professionals and teachers, witnessed the immense psychological costs of disallowing this fragility to express itself in all its vulnerability and complexity to attain its manifestation. So many of our individual and collective mental health failures have stemmed from a false and forced sense of courage, invulnerability, perfection, and certainty. Unfortunately, our ideal teacher is precisely an embodiment of these very fictions.

As a teacher and a mental health instructor, if there is an area where I take being a role model seriously, it is modelling emodiversity for students. Let our teachers not wilt and wither under exalting standards unbecoming of fragile and complex humans. In the same vein, let us not model for our

children a fictional world where anger, fear, insecurity and so forth don't exist. Let us rather model for them how to embrace each emotion, value it for its function, and learn to harness each emotion for what it can add to our beings. For, till we encourage our

teachers to try it out themselves, they will rarely know that one hearty sob with one's students is just as therapeutic, liberating and warming as one hearty laugh with them. I, for one, can vouch for it from memories of an addled evening!

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