

THE EMOTIONS THAT WALK INTO SCHOOL

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REGRESSIVE

It is senior year of high school; a group of students and I are involved in a club called Hope Squad at my high school. This club is based around the continuing issue of teen suicide in our nation.

“Olivia, do we really need to meet in every study hall?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. Allison¹ is our president, and that is what she wants to do.”

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Hurry! We are going to be late for our first study hall meeting!”

“Hello everyone! Thank you for showing up today! My name is Allison, your Hope Squad president. Since today is our first day, I think it would be good to bounce some ideas around. Our club focuses on kindness. So as a big group, let’s throw out some ideas to practice weekly acts of kindness.”

Ideas were thrown around like confetti.

“Let’s hand out candy!”

“Let’s cancel class!”

“Let’s make coffee for the whole school!”

“Let’s hold doors for everyone in the morning!”

“It would be the easiest thing!”

“And the cheapest!”

“And it would be very impactful!”

“Let’s hold doors starting at 7:15 every Monday morning!”

“Okay, how about we start next week?”

“That works for me.”

“Me too!”

“Same!”

“Alright, 7:15 Monday morning! Everyone be there!”

Gosh that is so early. People are going to make fun of us too.

The next Monday quickly rolls around.

“OH

MY

GOSH!”

I am so nervous. This is going to be so embarrassing. People are going to judge me.

The Hope Squad group gathers at the front doors of the school at 7:15 on the dot.

Here we go.

Of course. There is a large group of girls approaching the school.

Here comes Happiness.

They are all walking in sync.

“Who is that?”

“Oh no.”

“It’s Hannah and her posse of popular girls.”

“Of course. They are all decked out in their Victoria Secret Pink sweatshirts, black Lululemon leggings, and tan, fur Ugg boots.”

“Why do they have to be the first ones to come in? Ugh.”

“Olivia, how do you know them?”

“They all are in my fifth period Pre-Calculus class, and they make me so nervous. They are all just sooooo pretty. All of them are too cool for backpacks and lunch boxes, so they just use shopping bags from Lululemon as lunch boxes, and fancy tote bags as backpacks.”

I wonder if they are as put together on the inside as they are on the outside.

No one is perfect. But these girls are really good at faking it.

“I wonder if they are perfect at home too?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think that they are always happy and put together at home like they are at school?”

“I have no idea. All that I know is that I wish I looked that good and had that many friends.”

Wow. Their makeup and hair are perfectly done.

“Hey Olivia!”

“What’s up John?”

“What time do you think they all woke up this morning to get ready?”

“Probably 3:00 in the morning. LOL.”

I should not have said that.

Students who seem to have everything need more support.

Happiness number two is coming in now.

“Is that Kate?”

“It is!! I love Kate!”

“How do you know Kate, Olivia?”

“Oh my gosh we have been best friends since we were in elementary school!”

“That is a long time!”

Her yellow shirt and white skirt make her look as bright as a sunflower.

“What did you get from Starbucks, Kate?”

“The usual! Venti iced white mocha.”

“That sounds so good! Gosh you have your life together! You made time to look cute and get Starbucks?”

“Somehow I did, haha!”

“Well, you look good. I hope that you have a good day!”

“You too! Thank you for holding the door for me!”

“Of course, Kate!”

How can she get any more perfect? She is so sweet.

“I love your Nike sweatshirt Theo!”

“I love your tan sandals, John!”

Of course. She is complimenting people too.

She is just so perfect and easy to love. I want to be like Kate.

Students who seem to always do the right thing need more support.

REGRESSIVE

Here comes Sadness.

“Oh my gosh Olivia. Don’t make eye contact but Tom is walking towards the school.”

“Wait, why can’t I look? He doesn’t care what I do.”

“Wait, do you know what happened?”

“What??!?! Something happened to Tom?”

“On Friday Tom missed the winning shot at the game, making our team lose our chance at going to the state finals.”

“Wow, I did not know that. I guess I don’t keep up with basketball enough. I guess it makes sense as to why he isn’t walking in with his big, popular group of basketball players.”

“Dang. I actually kind of feel bad for him. I can’t imagine feeling the embarrassment that he feels now.”

“Yeah, everyone is giving him a hard time. You shouldn’t feel bad though. Tom has disappointed and hurt you when he got in with the popular crowd.”

“I guess you are right.”

I still can't believe that we used to be such good friends.

Tom walked through the door and passed me without saying a word.

He actually looks lonely for once.

Wait.

Should I ask if he is doing okay?

No, he's too cool for me, I'm too scared.

“I can’t believe that he is dressed in all black. Wearing an off-brand sweatshirt and sweatpants with dirty tennis shoes. That’s so not him.”

“I agree. It’s so weird. He normally is dressed up in his nice Polo shirt, khakis, and Sperry shoes.”

“Tom needs someone to lean on. I guess I’m just not that person.”

“I agree.”

Students who lose their identity need more support.

Here comes Sadness number two.

“It looks like there is something wrong with Sarah.”

“Really? Why do you say that?”

“Well, there is a phone glued to her hand, and she looks white as a ghost.”

“Maybe it’s just an important phone call.”

It's not just an important phone call. There really is something wrong. She never has looked this worried in my composition class.

“What’s wrong with Sarah?”

“Sarah is on a call and looks like she just got some terrible news.”

I won't say anything. I won't interrupt.

But I just want to know out of curiosity.

Sarah is normally so upbeat and happy; she looks like she isn't even here.

“Oh my gosh she’s crying.”

“Guys just give her some space now, and I will check in on her in our composition class.”

Later, I found out that Sarah’s grandmother passed away the night before school.

I. Feel. Sick.

Sarah was so close with her grandma. She always wrote beautiful papers about her. I feel helpless.

Who is going to step up and be there for Sarah?

I have no idea, but someone needs to.

Students who lose a loved one need more support.

REGRESSIVE

Here comes Anger.

“Oh boy, I see Brad and Alicia.”

“Oh no. Are they arguing already?”

“Seems like it.”

“Gosh it’s everyday now, isn’t it?”

“Seems like it. I mean they have been ‘together’ since middle school, but they have broken up so many times that it doesn’t even count anymore.”

“Alicia, why did you cheat on me with Anthony after the game Friday night?”

“Brad, where on earth are you coming up with that nonsense?”

“Gosh. Why are they even together?”

“I have no idea. I think that they should just break up because Brad is going to Ohio University, and Alicia is going to the University of Alabama.

“It will never work. Never. Ever.”

These two make me so mad. Why do they feel the need to stay together?

Brad looks mad and begins to puff his chest out.

“Brad, I did not cheat on you!!!”

Her mascara streams downwwwn her face.

“Olivia, can you imagine being in a relationship like that?”

“No, I really can’t. I feel bad for both of them.”

“Someone needs to say something to them to end things for the better.”

“I agree.”

Students in toxic relationships need more support.***Here comes anger number two.***

“Oh my gosh Anthony looks pissed.”

“Wait, why?”

“He is just walking alone and looks angry as ever.”

“I feel bad for him. He always just keeps to himself and is shy. I wonder why he looks so mad.”

“Someone must have said something in the parking lot. Maybe because he walks to school or something.”

“Gosh that irritates me. The other day I saw someone bully him for wearing the same clothes every day and saying that he smells bad.”

“Did you say something to them?”

“No. No I didn’t. I choked up. I really wish I did.”

“Do you ever wonder what Anthony’s home life is like?”

“I mean I can only imagine. Dang. I want to be friends with Anthony so badly, but he just looks like he doesn’t want anyone to come up to him.”

“I get that. I really do.”

“I mean, he is in my gym class, and he gets docked points every day for not bringing a change of clothes. Isn’t that messed up?”

“Yeah, that sounds illegal!”

“Someone needs to step up and help.”

“Agreed.”

Am I the one to do this? I can’t be.

I don’t know him like that.

This. Is. Messed. Up.

Students who don’t have their basic needs met need more support.

PROGRESSIVE

The students who walk into my future classroom are going to come with their own different emotions and states of being. It may be sadness, anger, or even happiness. Or it may be a mix of those things. All I can think of as a future teacher is that I want to provide a safe space for all these emotions and states of being that students walk into my classroom with. I want to have ready-to-go resources for students dealing with depression, break ups, grief, and confused feelings.

Having practical tools that are easily accessible is what I want for my future students. Some of these tools will be a calm down corner, utilizing a self-regulatory tool like the zones of regulation, a wall of resources, and flexible seating. Thompson states that “Many students enter the classroom facing challenges, such as adverse childhood experiences (ACES) or trauma, which affect their ability to self-regulate and thus learn in the classroom” (Thompson, 2021, p. 4). If a student is feeling overwhelmed, stressed, angry, or just needs some time to themselves, a calm down corner would be the perfect place for them. A calm down corner has comfy seats, stuffed animals, books, and different self-regulatory tools. It is a place for students who need to walk away from the big group, and they can return to class when they are ready. When a student is in the calm down corner, the other students must respect that they need to take some time to be alone. I just want my students to feel loved, seen, and heard. This means not only having good intentions as a teacher, but also providing students with different resources and outlets to self-regulate. Overall, an open line of communication between the student and the teacher is crucial.

I also want to be able to teach young kids that every emotion is valid; it is just important that we can identify our emotions and use our strategies to cope with them. A great tool for this is the zones of regulation, where students can identify if they are in the red, green, yellow, or blue zone when entering the classroom. Some emotions that fall into the red zone can be mad and angry. Emotions that fall under the green zone can be happy and calm. Some emotions that fall into the yellow zone can be frustrated and worried. Some emotions that fall into the blue zone can be sad and sick. The zones of regulation can be utilized as a daily check-in where the teacher guides the class into identifying the specific zone that they are in. Students also can share with others about how they are feeling if they are comfortable so that everyone can learn that it is okay to open yourself up to your peers and be vulnerable. Mutter (2016) explains that,

using a cognitive behavioral approach, the Zones curriculum aims to teach students a variety of skills that will lead to appropriate self-regulation. These skills include: recognizing a range of emotions, understanding the emotions they are feeling and being able to identify what zone they are in, reading others’ facial expressions and understanding what others are feeling, and gaining perspective about how others see and react to their emotions. (p. 8)

Utilizing these check-ins as the teacher is crucial in making sure that the kids’ basic needs are met before we dive into the curriculum for the day. I really want check-in time to be a time for people to share and be there for each other. Kindness can and needs to be taught.

ANALYTICAL

In college, I see the same thing that I saw in high school. Getting older doesn't make your feelings go away. It may even be that it highlights your feelings.

Life gets confusing. College is challenging. Becoming your own person outside of your childhood is tough.

I see my friends and I see random students and professors come into class frustrated, angry, sad, happy, excited.

I see it all. And you know what? It is all valid. College is hard for both students and professors. As preservice teachers it is crucial that we learn about identifying our own feelings, and how we need to first address them before we try to dive into our work.

The pretending and the facades in college last about the first month of class. Then they start to wear off, and the real feelings show. The tears flow more easily. The yawns become a bit louder, and the wrinkle lines grow a little bit bigger.

The emotions are always there. But it makes a difference when college students are proactive about it and face them head on. I had a professor last semester who had our class practice using the zones of regulation as class check ins. It was honestly really nice. This is the image that this professor used every day that we had class:

The Zones of Regulation

Blue Zone	Green Zone	Yellow Zone	Red Zone
sad	happy	frustrated	mad/angry
tired	calm	worried	terrified
sick	feeling ok	silly/wiggly	yelling/hitting
tired	focused	excited	elated
	ready to learn	loss of some control	out of control

Note. Wilson (2014)

Though it seems silly, using this tool as a check-in with our inner emotions was very beneficial, even for a group of 20-year-old students. Sometimes it was surface level, and we all just said that we were in green. But other times we were honest and had open conversations about our struggles as students and pre-service teachers—the struggles of trying to balance school, work, and a social life.

It brought humanity into the classroom. It made us slow down and realize that we are all just trying to survive. Seeing a college professor use this tool has been really beneficial for me in my learning process as well.

I feel seen when we are provided with tools to identify our emotions before we start to learn.

I feel heard when my professors validate my feelings and talk with me when I am comfortable.

I feel cared for when I am provided with practical resources to address any struggles that I am going through.

Every student needs a teacher who is going to make them feel seen, heard, and cared for.

Things would go very differently for the students that I mentioned from my high school if teachers truly made them feel this way.

Would Hannah and her friends know that it is okay to not seem beautiful and rich all of the time?

Would Kate know that her grades don't define her, and she doesn't have to be perfect?

Would Tom know that he is not defined by basketball, and he is not alone?

Would Sarah know that she has a support system to help her grieve the loss of her grandmother?

Would Brad and Alicia feel that it is best for them to end their toxic relationship?

Would Anthony know that he is cared for and will get resources at school?

I can't guarantee that all of these people's situations would be any better for them if they had teachers who cared and loved them, but I can say that what I am learning in my college classes is that, as teachers, we are called to care about and love our students. And sometimes this love and care might not seem to change a whole lot, but what it can change is so worth it. Because of this change, our efforts should never fade away.

I wonder if my approach to education would be different if I experienced these tools and resources at a young age?

Would I set healthy boundaries with school? Would I value education over grades?

I don't know.

All I do know is that I am going to take every opportunity to fully learn and understand the tools and resources that I am taught during my time at Miami. This is where the difference starts.

It starts at Miami University.

In McGuffey Hall.

Spending countless hours learning.

To change my approach to education.

SYNTHETICAL

So here is the deal. We are all human. It's a crazy thing. I know. But just sit on that for a minute.

We.

Are.

All.

Human.

We all have our baggage. Our facades that we put up at first. Our fears that we hide. And school is a keeper of all of those things whether we want to admit it or not.

Every student has their own baggage, and every student needs more support.

Though Hannah and her friends have parents with money, they still go through hard things. Money can only cover so much. The clothes and perfume are all a coverup. The teachers need to provide a space for Hannah and her friends to dive deeper and identify how they are doing on the inside.

A student like Hannah would benefit from a daily zones of regulation check-in.

Hannah and her friends may seem to have everything that they could ever want, but they also need to learn to identify their emotions by recognizing what zone they are in. This will overall help them process through any hard or tough feelings that they may feel. It will also provide them with a safe space and time to not always look like they have it all together.

Though Kate seems to be the perfect student who has it all together. She really doesn't. All of the teachers love Kate for her smarts, but do they really know her beyond that? Kate's so easy to love that maybe she felt like she could never be anything short of perfection. I mean she is smart. Funny. Talented. Hard-working. The teachers never have to go out of their way for her. But maybe they should. The teachers need to provide a space for Kate to stop her busy life and identify how she is truly doing on the inside.

A student like Kate would also benefit from a daily zones of regulation check-in.

Kate may seem to have everything together and be the perfect student, but she also needs to learn to identify her emotions by recognizing what zone she is in. This will overall help Kate process through any authentic feelings beyond perfection that she may feel. It will also provide her with a safe space and time to be a human who has struggles and needs a break.

Though Tom normally is the popular basketball star of the school, he is human too. He is not always going to score the winning point, and that is okay. The teachers need to provide a space for Tom to feel welcomed and accepted when no one else in the school makes him feel that way.

A student like Tom would benefit from a daily zones of regulation check-in.

Tom is so used to being the popular basketball star that everyone loves, but he's not so popular anymore, and teachers need to provide a safe space for him to feel welcomed and like he still belongs. Within this space, it would be healthy for Tom to learn how to identify his emotions by recognizing what zone he is in. This will overall help Tom process through every sense of sadness, disappointment, and anger that he may be feeling. It will also provide him with a safe space and time to be a human who has struggles and needs a break.

Though Sarah is viewed as this great student that is sweet and writes beautifully, she experiences hard things too. The loss of her grandmother was so devastating and crushing. The teachers need to provide a space for Sarah to feel comforted and have outlets for her to process through her feelings.

A student like Sarah would benefit from some silent time in a calm down corner.

Though Sarah isn't necessarily angry and worked up, she would benefit from a calm down corner because she needs to be given the opportunity to take time to process her feelings. Within the calm down corner there would be soft pillows, comforting books, fidgets, and so much more. Having this time to be silent and absorb the news of losing her grandmother would be helpful in Sarah's grieving process. The last thing that Sarah needs is a bunch of people asking her questions and coming up to her. When someone

is in the calm down corner, it would be a class rule that the students and teachers let the student be alone until they are ready to return to the big group in class.

Though Brad and Alicia seem to just be your average annoying on-again/off-again couple, they are more than that. There is something going on that goes deeper than what their relationship shows people. Relationships are hard at any age, both romantic relationships and friendships. The teachers need to provide a space for Brad and Alicia to feel like they can dive deeper and work through their individual struggles.

Students like Brad and Alicia would benefit from an opportunity to take some time in a calm down corner.

Brad and Alicia are always angry with each other, which results in them both being on edge. Whether students are going through relationship drama or just need a space to calm down, a calm down corner is a great outlet to take a breath and process the heightened emotions that they are feeling. Though Brad and Alicia are high school students, they too could benefit from a more mature calm down corner where they can take a minute to sit and then return to class when they feel comfortable.

Though Anthony seems like a student who is poor and doesn't have the resources to live comfortably, he is more than that. Teachers not only need to provide Anthony with resources that will help meet his basic needs, but they also need to provide him a space where he can feel comforted and like he can work through the many different emotions that he feels.

A student like Anthony would benefit from a teacher who prioritizes students' needs according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Anthony needs his teacher to step in and make sure that he has safe transportation when getting to school, clean clothes to wear every day, and food to nourish his body. Not only does Anthony need these lower-level needs, but he also needs to feel love and safety. A teacher who prioritizes all of these needs and is consistent with them will lead Anthony to reach the highest level of self-actualization after a period of time. It is all about building trust, and students like Anthony need a trustworthy adult in their lives, and that can be the teacher.

School needs to be a safe space for all of these vignettes.

No matter what emotion or state of being that the students walk into school with, they all need more support.

Hard things don't go away when that bell rings. There were so many teachers who should have and did not help the many emotions that walked through the doors that one Monday my senior year. That needs to change.

This is the reason why I want to teach. I want to teach young kids that we are all human, and we must treat each other with kindness. Everyone feels every emotion, and the cool thing is that we can work together to support each other and face these emotions head on. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains the idea that, as humans, we need to feel loved, safe, and like we belong somewhere before we reach our full potential of self-actualization. Students need a space to be able to feel any emotion and be provided with outlets and resources for those emotions. Students should never have to pretend like they are always happy, or not get the resources when they are struggling with different issues featured in my regressive moments. McLeod (2018) explains that

every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower-level needs. Life experiences, including divorce and loss of a job, may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of the hierarchy. (p. 3)

It is our job as teachers to make sure that we meet and provide the resources for students' basic and psychological needs so that they can reach their self-fulfillment needs.

The classroom is where this needs to start.

My goal as a future classroom teacher is to make sure that my students feel loved, safe, and like they belong by giving them the resources and strategies that I have learned at Miami University. I have gone through and seen my peers go through many highs and lows throughout high school and in college. I know that I will see my future students go through many highs and lows as well. Wishing for my future classroom to be rainbows and butterflies is like wishing for rain in a desert. It's really not likely. Throughout the regressive moments that featured happiness, sadness, and anger, I want to say that the teachers in these situations really did care about their students. They have a heart for kids, just like I have a heart for kids. Having a heart and good intentions only go so far. Just like these high school students' situations showed, teachers need to be prepared. Teachers need to be prepared for happiness, sadness, and anger. Teaching is about both the heart and knowledge.

Teachers need to be prepared. Educated. Loving. These are all so important.

Using practical teaching strategies like calm down corners, zones of regulation, and resources to meet students' basic needs are vital in a student's education.

It's all about practical love.

Sounds simple, but it takes education, training, time, and patience. I will strive for this every day in my future classroom.

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Endnotes

¹ A pseudonym. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my classmates.