



ORIGINAL PAPER

Placing students' emotions at the heart of the learning process, a challenge for teachers

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Abstract:

School is the place where emotions can constitute an obstacle to learning or facilitate it. Feelings of insecurity and even fear are often the cause of failure. It is then a question of trying to control parasite emotions in order to promote a meaningful and more serene learning. This article focuses on students' emotions as processes which, given their cerebral implementations in relation to the systems involved in motivation, attention and memory are at the heart of learning process. Researches suggest that emotional skills are beneficial to both well-being and academic performance. Emotions support attention, working memory, encoding, memory consolidation or processes related to executive control (inhibition). Those cognitive processes are also necessary for academic learning. Emotions therefore accompany the students within the classroom, and may interfere with learning or consolidate it. Research on emotions, their cerebral bases and functions, invite us to question the idea according to which emotions hinder school learning; on the contrary, even if emotions can indeed sometimes affect learning, experimental results suggest that they often facilitate cognitive processes such as attention and memory, which are essential for learning. Moreover, the fact that emotions have an important role in the process of learning suggests that it is important for the student to be able to know, control and use them, in an academic context.

Keywords: *emotions, learning process, motivation, affective communication, instructional strategies.*

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Introduction

A traditional proverb states that „a wise teacher must make learning a daily pleasure”. This adage raises many questions, both on the side of the learner and on the side of the trainer. Can learning be a source of pleasure? What is an emotion in a learning situation? How can the emotional experience be beneficial for academic success? What is its role alongside the motivational engagement of the student in the task? How can the trainer make his teaching interesting? Our emotions occupy a significant place in our daily lives. They mark almost all the significant moments of our lives (birth, professional success, failure, etc.). Moreover, we remember not „objective” events, but events evoking emotions, whether positive or negative. Throughout history, there have been many definitions of emotions and they have emphasized the different aspects of emotion such as its bodily, personal, social and cognitive dimensions. Currently, a so-called multicomponential definition of emotion is often used in cognitive science research. According to this approach (Sander, 2014), emotion is defined as a rapid and transient modification of state in two stages: an initial trigger due to the relevance of an event (real or imagined) leading to a response in several components (peripheral nervous system, tendency to action, motor expression and conscious feeling).

As John Dirkx (2001) suggests, emotions are intrinsically involved, just like cognition, in the learning process. The scientific literature notes that the learning activity is increasingly recognized as an emotionally charged experience (D’Mello & Graesser, 2012). Thus, it is crucial to consider emotions to understand an educational context (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). The work of Reinhard Pekrun and his colleague highlights the importance of emotions directly linked to „context”. These authors suggest that the emotions felt, whatever the academic context, can be considered as part of four large families. The first family of academic emotions refers to the subject studied, the topic emotion. According to the authors, these emotions are linked to the theme addressed by the learner, and refer to an emotion such as anxiety when the learner finds himself in a mathematics course or boredom when studying plastic art. The second family focuses on the social dimension represented by a classroom learning situation: students interact with their peers and teachers, and may feel emotions directly related to this situation (for example pride or shame). The third and fourth families have been studied in more detail in the literature and refer to epistemic and achievement emotions respectively.

If the first refers directly to the cognitive dimension involved in all learning, the second concerns the consequences linked to this learning, such as success or failure. If the learner focuses his attention on the cognitive aspect of a task (for example, a frustration directly related to the possibly unsolvable complexity of a problem), the emotion will be considered epistemic. On the other hand, if it focuses on the activity as such (for example the fact of studying) or on the consequences of this task (for example, a potential failure in an exam), the emotion felt will be categorized as accomplishment (Pekrun & Perry, 2014).

The majority of research has been particularly interested in the impact of epistemic and achievement emotions on various aspects related to learning such as attentional resources, motivations towards learning, strategies and regulations of learning. In general, the results suggest that epistemic emotions with a positive emotional valence such as curiosity induce self-regulated learning, during which the learner resorts to proven learning strategies, for example by attempting to apply strategies used to other similar cases. (Pekrun & Stephens, 2012).

The results concerning negative emotions are more mixed. Indeed, depending on whether the emotion felt is activating or deactivating, it will be linked to different strategies. As Pekrun and Stephens (2012) suggest, activating negative emotions, such as frustration or confusion, can lead to a strong tendency to avoid failure, and induce greater investment in the task. Conversely, deactivating negative emotions, such as boredom, is linked to disinvestment in the task (Pekrun et al., 2010). Research on the emotions of achievement has also highlighted their importance and their link with academic performance.

Positive and negative emotions

If the results do not show any impact of the emotional content of the text on the emotional state of the students, they do reveal an effect of the emotional content of the text on the performance: the students presented more errors when they were confronted to emotional texts (of positive or negative valence) compared to neutral texts, and all the more so for positive texts. These results were replicated by Michaël Fartoukh and Lucile Chanquoy (2016) suggesting a negative effect of emotional content on students' spelling performance. Tornare and colleagues (2016) suggest that an induction of joy can impact performance, but it depends on the task. In particular, these authors showed that joy was linked to better performance in a grammatical task, but not in text comprehension or dictation. Related to the above, Pekrun et al. (2010) showed that positive emotions were linked to positive outcomes in terms of academic achievement. Pekrun suggests that the positive impact of positive accomplishment emotions is directly linked to the fact that they increase the interest and effort put into the task as well as the quality and regulation of metacognitive strategies of learning.

These positive and activating emotions promote the use of cognitive strategies that are more beneficial for learning. They promote both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They promote self-regulation of learning. They are linked to a greater effort provided as well as greater attentional resources allocated to the task.

In contrast, negative emotions, and in particular disabling ones, are linked to a decrease in student achievement and ability to learn. Indeed, research suggests that this impact is caused by a decrease in motivation, interest and effort in processing information as well as to attention problems. Activating negative emotions can be linked to a renewed metacognitive commitment as well as to an increase in extrinsic motivation to invest in the task. The link between emotions of achievement and academic success is mediated by motivational and cognitive processes (Putwain, Sander & Larkin, 2013).

Another aspect of research on the importance of emotions in the school context has focused on the emotional content as identified or included in various educational materials and the impact of the latter on emotions, and secondly on the learnings. Research suggests that the emotional content of educational materials, even when enjoyable, does not necessarily facilitate comprehension or the acquisition of spelling skills in a dictation context. Indeed, the results reveal that the more pleasant the content, the more the performance is altered. Tornare and his colleagues (2016) show that this result is due to the fact that the emotions induced reduce the attentional resources that would normally be dedicated to the task (for example to understand the text, or find the spelling of a word). If the elements presented so far highlight the individual functions of emotions (such as the impact of emotions for the individual himself), the learning context implies a dyadic relationship between student and teacher. Emotions emerging in this context thus have a communication function (Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman,

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Krauth-Gruber, Ric, 2005). Indeed, the communication of an emotion to others allows the sender to convey to the recipient his understanding of the situation and to induce an emotion in him so that he modifies his behavior or the type of reaction expected, depending on the context.

As suggested by Perkon and his colleagues (2010), the emotions emanating from teachers and students will also have reciprocal influences on each other. For example, a teacher showing enthusiasm when introducing a new topic to his students can induce enthusiasm in them as well. Similarly, if the teacher sees that his students are enthusiastic about a subject he is teaching, he may also feel enthusiasm. Thus, the importance of understanding the emotions of his students appears crucial for the teacher who can confer on them a diagnostic value (Boekaerts, 1996): indeed they can be the reflection of the cognitions of the learners but also of their commitment. These elements, based on the principle of emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993), clearly highlight the interactional and emotional stakes involved in school and more generally in academic training. The literature has highlighted the importance of emotions in the learner in a learning context. If these can emanate from different aspects of the learning situation (for example, the situation, such as an exam situation, the cognitive dimension of the learning content or the relationship with the pairs), their impact is on different components of learning, such as motivation, regulation of learning or attention.

The importance of students' emotions in the classroom

Current models therefore suggest that emotions and cognitive functions act together and diffusely, with a cerebral base highly distributed within neural networks. In this perspective, emotions support attention, working memory, encoding, memory consolidation or even processes related to executive control (e.g. inhibition). These cognitive processes are also necessary for school learning. Emotions therefore accompany students in the classroom, and can interact with learning. Frequently, at school, students experience intense emotions that need to be both identified and understood in order to be able to be managed in such a way as to promote school learning and maintain positive relationships with the teacher and peers. Undoubtedly, effective emotional regulation is an essential prerequisite for adaptive functioning. Becoming progressively „emotionally competent” therefore constitutes one of the major challenges of the first levels of schooling. It is not always easy for the teacher to manage very different profiles of emotional skills (Raver, 2002) for several reasons, in particular: the lack of knowledge and tools to assess and develop these skills in pupils, conceptions relating to the „teacher's job” (e.g. is it the role of the teacher to „educate”, „to teach” emotions?). We believe that it is possible to improve children's emotional competences by supporting them indirectly through the development of teachers' emotional competences and/or by directly challenging them through the labeling of emotions, emotional conversations and pretend play.

Teaching is in itself a real emotional enterprise. Hargreaves (2000) emphasizes the emotional nature of the teacher's work. This involves the emotions of the teacher, the understanding of the emotions of the students in the relationships he establishes and teaching as an object of learning emotions. However, before being able to effectively develop the emotional skills of the student, it is for the teacher to be able to develop his own emotional skills, in particular to leave room for emotions, to prevent them from parasitizing learning, listening to emotions with empathy or mastering any emotional

contagion (that is to say, succeeding in keeping calm and moving towards understanding the thoughts of others without being overwhelmed by their emotions).

Moreover, studies have revealed emotional contagion, both for unpleasant emotions (fear, anger) and for pleasant emotions (joy, interest). For example, research by Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) found that self-reported burnout by teachers was linked to difficulties in regulating their students' stress measured by the variability in the rate of cortisol. With this in mind, it is essential that the teacher can, first of all, become aware of his own emotional skills, by examining in particular his personal way of expressing his emotions in class as well as the strategies he mobilizes to regulate them. This awareness can be fostered by asking different questions such as: do I express emotions in class? Am I allowed to do this and how? Are the strategies I use to regulate my emotions appropriate and functional? It is also necessary for him to be able to analyze his reactions to the expression of pupils' emotions in class: are the emotions expressed by the pupils welcomed with kindness? Are they verbally mediated? Conversations? Are they minimized, ridiculed, ignored?

Both teachers and parents manage the emotional climate in which students will learn about their emotions. The adult as well as the peers in class will play the role of external regulator (by providing help, support) so that the students can gradually learn to self-regulate (necessary passage from hetero-regulation to self-regulation). Teachers who are unaware of their own emotions most often ignore students' emotions, tend to use punishment, provide little comfort to those who express negative emotions, hardly notice students' positive emotions, such as joy.

Qualities of an emotionally competent teacher

In the same way, teachers who present a higher level of socio-emotional skills establish more positive interpersonal relationships with their students, testify to more effective classroom management by making more skilful use of emotional expressions and verbal support to foster enthusiasm, enjoyment of learning and to manage student behavior.

Create a positive emotional climate, recognize and work on one's own emotions and those of the students, demonstrate an ability to listen to the expectations and interests of all students, develop awareness of one's strengths and needs, its values, and also being attentive to one's own bodily sensations would constitute the essential qualities of a teacher who would be emotionally competent (Ergur, 2009).

Teachers can try on a daily basis in the classroom to develop their own emotional skills. Regulating emotions involves in particular the cognitive evaluation of an event. Appropriate strategies can be learned such as: focus on planning and on the positive (e.g. thinking about the steps to take and how to handle the negative event, thinking about happy and pleasant things instead of thinking about the negative event). Accepting and positively reassessing a situation (e.g. finding an adaptive or positive meaning to the event in terms of personal development); put into perspective (e.g. relativize the seriousness of the event by asking yourself „Will I think about it again next week? And in a year?“)

Regulating emotions in the teaching profession also involves successfully expressing (e.g. expressing an emotion in the right way, with the right intensity, at the right time, to the right person) one's own emotions and listening carefully to those of others. Verbalizing feelings can be particularly tricky, and using certain methods of communication can help a great deal.

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In classroom teachers should describe the situation in a factual way, without judgment: saying „there are people waiting...” rather than „you always want to go ahead of everyone”; express their own feelings by using the pronoun „I” and avoiding the „you”; explain the needs that are not being met in this situation: saying „I feel upset because I wanted to...” rather than „you are terrible”; propose a concrete solution (or ask the interlocutor how he suggests to solve the problem): saying „next time I would like you to...” rather than „make an effort from now on”.

The stress at school

In general, the literature on stress in the workplace education covers several phenomena related to the school and the learning situation. The causes of tension are multiple and can be caused by many factors: physiological, pedagogical, socio-psychological, such as, among others, relationships with the teacher, peer judgment, demands of parents or even various daily hassles in various fields which can affect learning: school, family, peers, future, etc. According to most research, school stress influences the three variables of the educational environment in a fairly equal way: the emotional adaptation of the pupils, their behavior and their academic performance. These variables are articulated within the school environment, and their interactions concern all the actors of the educational community: students, teachers, educators, but also parents. Overall research shows that academic progress is often affected by school stress and by the pressure that students put themselves in relation to the results or the anxiety they perceive in their parents, their educators and even their peers.

The student-teacher relationship or student-student (interpersonal conflicts, harassment, etc.) can create stress for students. Nevertheless, the pressure perceived by students from teachers is one of the most important causes of school stress compared to other types of pressure coming from parents or peers. Other major causes, revealed by all the studies, are stress in the face of performance pressure and problems related to learning. There are several categories of sources of stress in adolescents: those predictable and avoidable (drug use, delinquency), those unforeseeable and unavoidable (illnesses) and those foreseeable and unavoidable (controls and evaluations). Failure to cope with one or more sources of stress from these categories cause the individual to experience emotional symptoms such as, respectively, anxiety, depression or anger. Family issues are a very big source of tension that can interfere with the work of the child at school, as well as with regard to social problems.

In more recent works, school stress can be defined as a state of stress chronic in students who have set themselves unattainable goals, at a given moment in their schooling with regard to their abilities, or whose perception of the expectations that their entourage, especially the parents, exceeds their capacities. Some researchers studying the problem of school stress have introduced the term „school burnout” (Meylan et al., 2015), a phenomenon initially studied in adults and referring to professional burnout.

Meylan et al. (2015) postulate that this phenomenon is due to the increase in performance and success requirements that characterizes the evolution of modern liberal societies. According to this work, these requirements test the „narcissistic resources” of the individual and lead to the stress that generates the suffering of children and adolescents at school. Thus, school burnout corresponds, for these authors, to a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism and inadequacy towards school: emotional exhaustion in the face of demands for school with chronic fatigue linked to an overload of school work; from cynicism to towards the school, such as a loss of interest and an inability for

the students to give meaning to their education; a feeling of inadequacy which results in a lack of accomplishment in school work and in the school in general. Even during a short knowledge test, in class, when the teacher announces that it is going to be graded, the students show a considerable increase in stress. Grading is therefore a stress factor for students. And even if the link between the presence, continuous or occasional, of this evaluation stress and performance is difficult to establish, however, the student performance on difficult tasks during a graded test was found lower than the unscored test. Furthermore, limiting the response time is a strong stress factor during knowledge checks and evaluations done in class. This stress factor turns out to be even stronger than that caused by the rating.

In ordinary classroom situations, during regular activity, the strongest increased emotional reactivities have been observed in interaction situations of the teacher with his class. When the teacher approaches the student for a short written evaluation by making a comment to him, or even to check whether he has understood the instructions, the student manifests periods of stress and this reactivity can prevent him from focussing on the task at hand. Moreover, it has been observed that the class reacts emotionally in a very strong way to the words of the teacher who, trying to mobilize the students to do the written test well, insists on the importance of the results. We also found that students show more stress reactions towards the end of the test (when there is little time left), and this stress increases significantly when the teacher announces the remaining time out loud. This research reveals that, in line with the importance of taking into account factors likely to cause students to experience evaluation stress (response time limited, grading, etc.), the role of the teacher-student relationship should not be underestimated, because the figure of the teacher, his posture, the image he sends back, his gestures, his words strongly influence the emotional balance of students. Stress is not so easy to detect. To renew their pedagogical posture, teachers can collect information on the student's activity. An approach that must be based on what he does (his written records), on what he says (his verbalizations) and on his behavior. From this set of data, the teacher, if trained, will be able to know if the student is stressed.

In addition, to limit stress or even create virtuous links between positive emotions and learning, teachers can play on the notion of pleasure. It is more a question of mobilizing the curiosity of the student than of engaging him in „gamification” activities.” Pleasure can come from arousing intellectual curiosity about a given topic. In this context, the student wants to formulate or discover the right answers. Since this situation brings the student into a process of cognitive pleasure, it is ideal for pushing him to mobilize knowledge. In teaching situations, teachers regulate the learning activities of their students. Within this general framework, they may be led to diagnose the effects, positive or negative, due to emotions. However, it often happens that these emotions produce a positive effect, even when it comes to so-called negative emotions such as stress.

Stress thus plays a role of stimulator in learning, but in some cases causing negative effects of blocking cognition. Another consequence of stress: the effect of cognitive overload which, in a school situation, results in the mobilization of very old knowledge. This is a very negative effect because prior knowledge, which is easier to access, is not enough to produce the right answers when faced with a given problem. More generally, research shows that negative emotional systems manage to inhibit cognitive processes such as attention, concentration, reasoning skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, valuing emotions (rather than rejecting or disapproving them) allows teachers to develop their emotional skills as well as those of their students, through learning and the classroom climate. Conversations support students in their zone of proximal development and engage them in a higher level of reasoning and problem solving than when they are alone. The same goes for conversations about emotions. Talking about emotion should include conversations about: specific emotions (such as fear, anger, sadness, joy); description of the causes and consequences of emotions; asking questions about these emotions. Understanding emotions also comes into play in social behavior, especially in cooperation with classmates to perform a school activity or resolve a conflict, in the ability to regulate inappropriate behavior related to intense emotions both pleasant and disagreeable and pro-social behaviors. These social skills help in part to explain that students who understand well their emotions are also more popular with their peers and teachers. Although there is no clear definition of the concept of stress in the educational literature school, this phenomenon includes in a broad sense the negative affective states that can occur among students at school.

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