

From Affect to Artistry:

Emotional Interference in Singing and the Teacher's Role in Supporting Artistic Resilience and Expression



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September 2025

About

Christa Durand (Cris Walker)

Voice student and performer for over 30 years & multi-instrumentalist

Teacher 15+ years

Teach all styles and ages and abilities

Owner/Director of Music to My Ears, a community music school in
Cotati and Sebastopol California

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I encourage people to create music from a place of authenticity, using music as a medium to share our collective and individual stories and cultivate compassion for one another.

The Justification

Why this research?

- My decision to pursue this study is rooted in both personal and pedagogical experiences with emotional interference in singing.
- My own struggles with strong emotional responses have shaped my vocal development and continue to influence my teaching approach.
- I also experience this in my teaching studio, where many of my students are affected by emotional interference in their singing.



Justification and Context

What are the issues?



- Barlow (2002) – describes how anxiety disorders often manifest physically, including muscle tension, disrupted breathing, and difficulty regulating physiological responses. These same mechanisms directly affect breath support, laryngeal tension, and overall vocal coordination in singers.
- Sapolsky (2004) – explains how chronic stress triggers the body's physiological stress response (elevated cortisol, tension, disrupted immune and nervous system functioning). Prolonged stress can lead to fatigue, tightness in breathing musculature, and difficulty maintaining healthy vocal production.

Justification and Context

What could be done?

- Klickstein (2009) – emphasises that successful musicianship requires integrating mental strategies such as focus, mindset, and self-regulation with technical training. This holistic approach supports both wellness and effective performance.
- Carey and Grant (2015) – show that teachers' own experiences with emotional challenges shape their sensitivity to students' struggles, influencing how they frame lessons and provide support in the studio.



The Intended Impact

Professional Context

- Increase awareness among voice instructors of how affect influences singing, by examining how emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt disrupt breath flow, coordination, and expressivity (Gill, 2016; Helding, 2020).
- Assess current practices through questionnaires, interviews, and reflective tools, to identify how teachers respond to emotional interference and what strategies students find most effective (Carey and Grant, 2015; Klickstein 2009).
- Clarify the boundaries between pedagogy and therapy, exploring whether addressing emotional interference belongs in voice instruction or should prompt referral, and how teachers navigate this balance (Nagel, 1987; Ristad, 1982).



Guiding Research Questions

What I'm seeking to understand

How and how often do strong emotions and embodied affective states impact vocal performance?

To what extent do instructors integrate awareness and strategies for managing these experiences?

What approaches do teachers and students find effective in addressing emotional interference?



Expected Learning Outcomes

What do I hope to gain?

- Deepen my understanding of how emotional states shape singing
- Clarify how to respond ethically and pedagogically to emotional interference
- Identify simple, non-harmful strategies that teachers without therapeutic credentials can use with confidence.
- Become more reflective and curious in my teaching practice, especially in how I interpret vocal challenges.
- Learn from conversations with colleagues and students about what helps, what doesn't, and what's still missing



Ethics and Insider Research

Balancing care for participants with rigorous inquiry

- This study follows UWTSD ethical standards, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the option for interviewees to remain anonymous (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, no date).
- Data security and participant rights are prioritised: information will be stored securely and participants may withdraw at any time with their data erased on request (UK Government, 2018).



- Given the sensitivity of emotional topics, participants will be advised not to share deeply personal or traumatic material; the study is exploratory, not therapeutic (Helding, 2020).
- As an insider researcher, I will use reflexivity to acknowledge how my perspective shapes interpretation, ensuring transparency in the analysis (Finlay, 2002).

Ethics & Insider Research

Ethical Concerns



Main concern: participants' emotional safety while keeping research within pedagogical, not therapeutic, scope.

Informed Consent



Participants fully informed with rights outlined; consent forms ensured voluntary, ethical participation.

Confidentiality & Anonymity



Protected confidentiality through anonymity options, student anonymization, and secure ethical data storage.

Insider Researcher



Insider status offered rapport and insight but risked bias and projected assumptions.

Advantages



Insider status encouraged candid dialogue and provided access to authentic, nuanced insights.

Challenges



Maintained reflexivity with journaling and coding checks to reduce bias and projection.

Methodology and Research Design

Qualitative Approach

Because I was studying how emotions affect singers and how teachers respond, I needed methods that valued context, relationship, and subjective experience.

A constructivist approach recognises that knowledge is co-created between teacher and student (Carey and Grant, 2015), and qualitative tools like interviews and questionnaires capture the nuance of those interactions (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

This emphasis on reflexivity and relational dynamics aligns with work in music pedagogy that highlights the centrality of context and emotional safety in the one-to-one studio (Carey, Harrison and Dwyer, 2019).



Methodology & Research Design

Anonymous questionnaires

To reach a broad group of students and teachers, reduce bias and encourage authentic responses (Nowell et al., 2017), and gather candid reflections (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).



Semi-structured interviews

With teachers and interdisciplinary professionals, to gain deeper insight into the processes and underlying rationales of their strategies (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015; Odendaal, 2019).



Trial lessons

To apply selected approaches in real time with student volunteers and collected their feedback (Kolb, 1984; Nelson, 2013; Carey, Grant and McWilliam, 2018).



Triangulation

Data Collection

Anonymous Questionnaires

- 30 participants: a mix of voice teachers and students
- Diverse ages and backgrounds represented
- Genres included: classical, musical theatre, jazz, and CCM

Recruitment sources:

- NATS (National Association of Teachers of Singing)
- Professional contacts
- Social media groups



Data Collection

Interviews

- 10 participants in total
- 5 voice teachers (some with somatic or therapeutic training)
- 4 interdisciplinary professionals: therapist, yoga/chiropractic teacher, Jin Shin Jyutsu practitioner, acting coach
- 1 conductor integrating mindfulness in music

Description of Participants

All participants chose to be identified by name to have their perspectives recognized



Data Collection

Trial Lessons

Pilot sessions with adult students provided feedback on emotional impact and pedagogical effectiveness.

Description of Participants

Adult student volunteers from my studio
Provided written and verbal feedback after each session



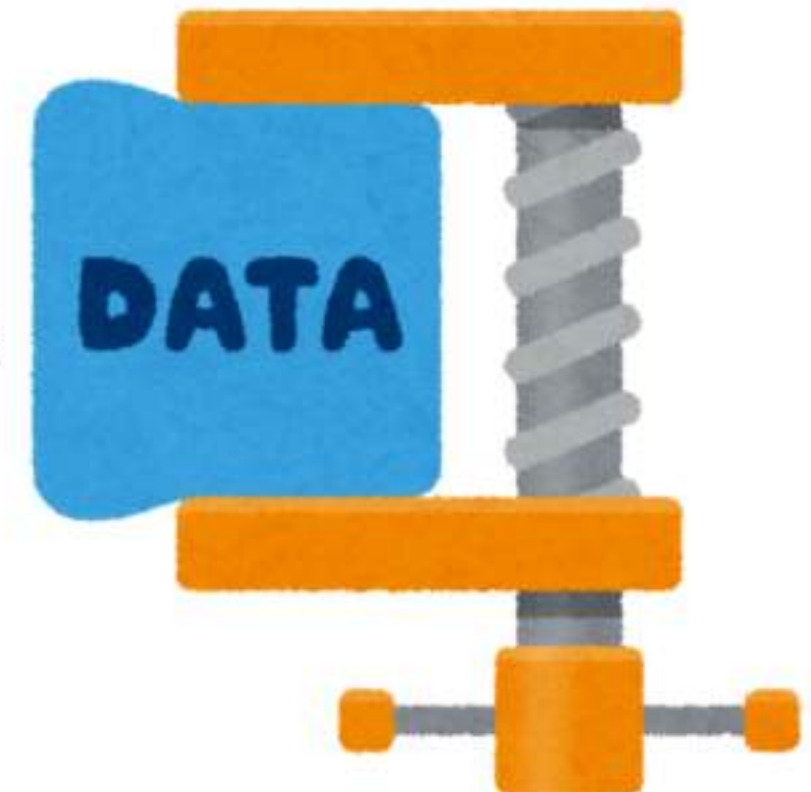
Data Analysis

Mixed Methods Approach

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to code and interpret qualitative data, allowing themes to emerge iteratively while maintaining researcher reflexivity (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Finlay, 2008).

Questionnaire responses were coded using descriptive labels to identify recurring ideas and patterns, supported by first-cycle coding practices (Saldaña, 2016; Charmaz, 2006).

Exploratory statistical analysis of questionnaire data was conducted using JAMOVİ, including frequency counts and Pearson correlations to identify associations between teacher background and use of emotionally responsive strategies (jamovi, no date).



Data Analysis

Mixed Methods Approach

Semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed to explore the processes and rationales behind teachers' and interdisciplinary professionals' strategies, enabling deeper insight into context and meaning (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2018).



Data Analysis

Mixed Methods Approach

Trial lessons with student volunteers were analysed through student reflections (written and verbal), capturing embodied and experiential responses to specific approaches in real time (McNiff, 2013; Buchanan and Ulrich, 2001).



Data Analysis

Mixed Methods Approach

Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout, documenting assumptions, emotional reactions, and interpretive shifts to support transparency and analytic integrity (Finlay, 2008).

Triangulation across methods (questionnaires, interviews, trial lessons, journaling) enhanced trustworthiness and depth by comparing findings from multiple sources (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2022).



Findings

Emotional interference impacts physiological coordination in singing.

- Singing requires both physiological and psychological integration, making it vulnerable to emotional interference (Walker et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2025).
- Strong emotions such as self-doubt and perfectionism can disrupt coordination, while anxiety and depression affect breath and vocal freedom (Helding, 2020; Van den Bogert et al., 2021).
- Affect as an embodied phenomenon directly shapes breath, muscle coordination, and sound in singing (Gill, 2016; Davidson, 2017).

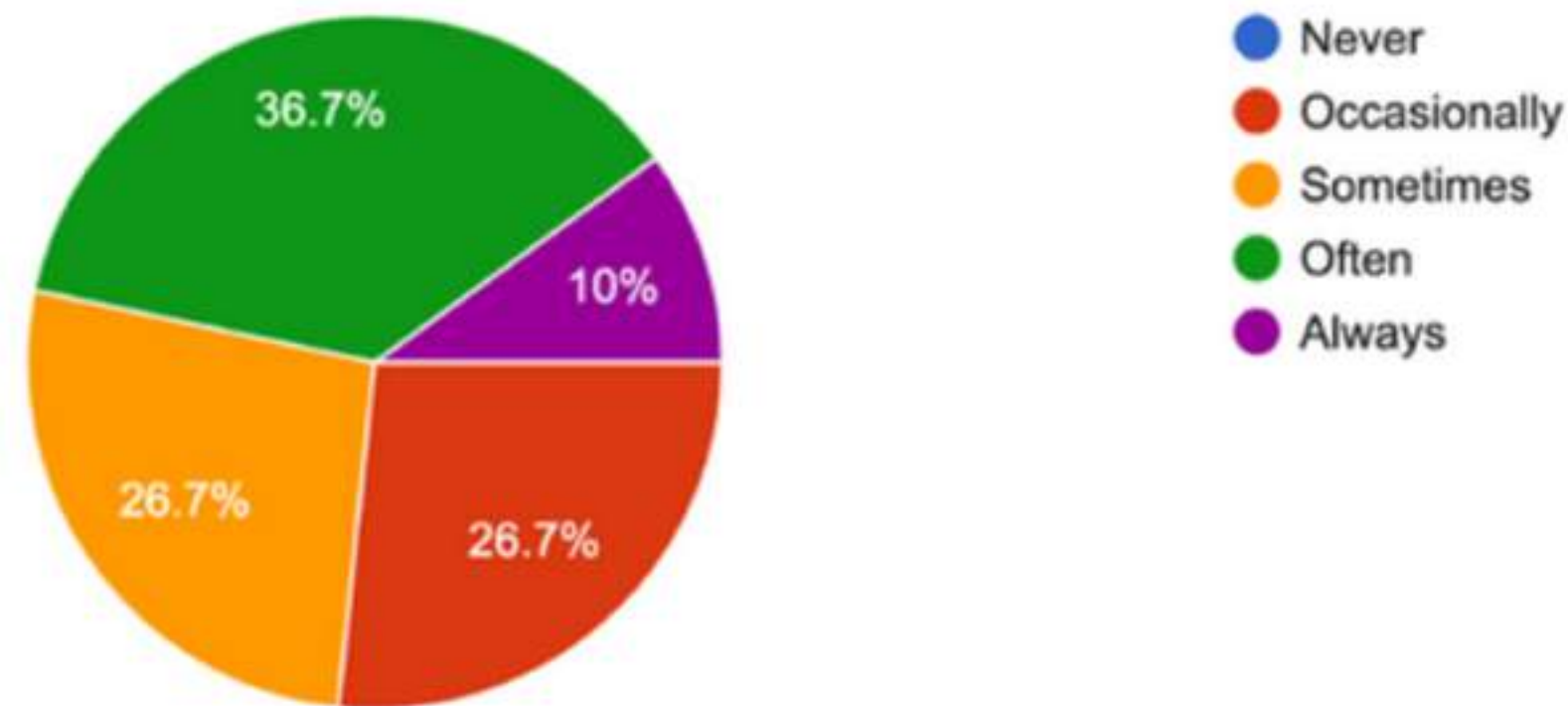


Findings

Emotional interference impacts physiological coordination in singing.

Have you experienced emotions that have interfered with your vocal development or ability to perform?

30 responses



Durand, 2025 (data collected via Google Forms)

Findings

Emotional interference impacts physiological coordination in singing.

Sample responses from anonymous questionnaire participant on emotional impact in singing

“Strong emotions impact breathing/breath support. That impacts my ability to relax my throat. That tension impacts my tone, particularly in the upper range.”

“Not able to take proper breaths for air. My leg would shake. Not able to sing as strong.”

“I often get shaky and a racing heart before I start singing...”

“Sadness sometimes chokes me up.”

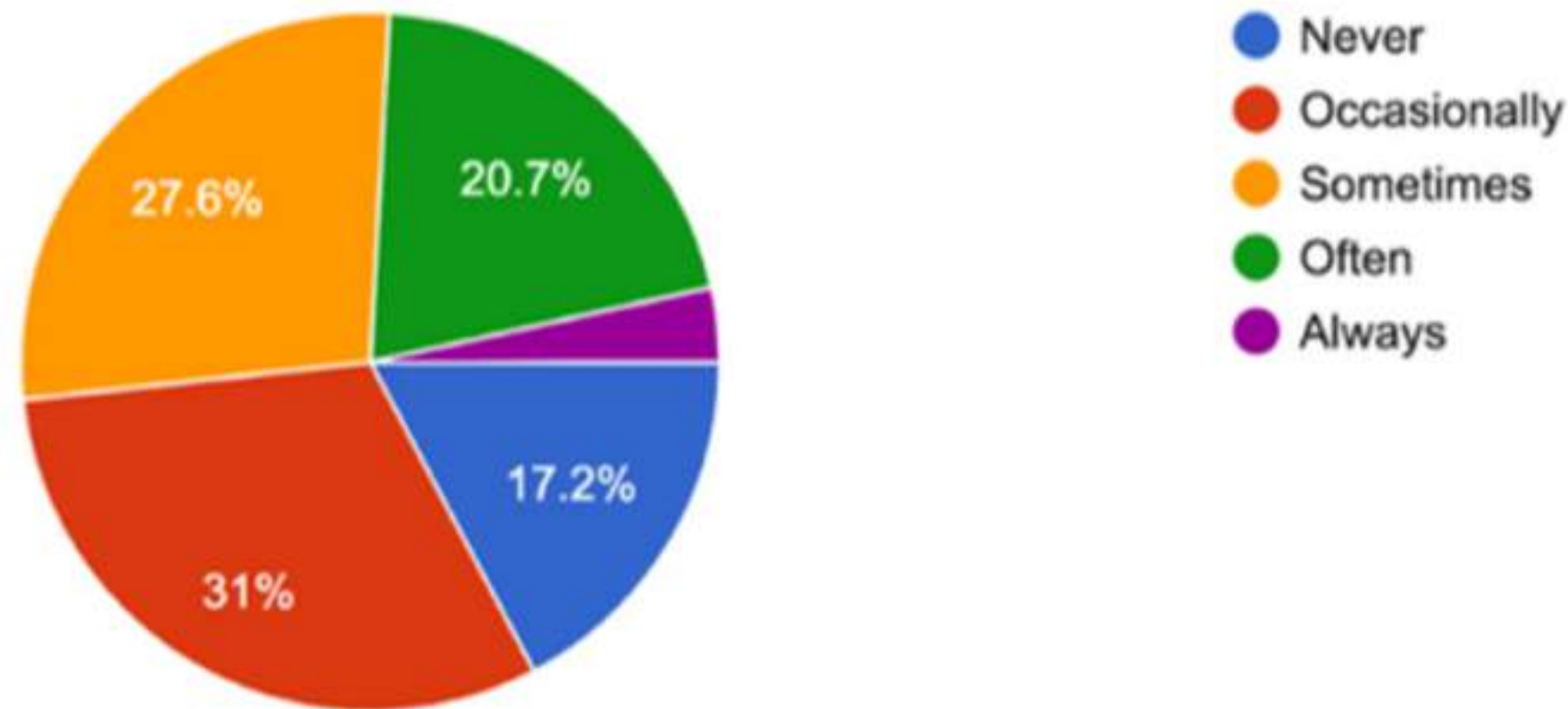
“My chest and throat would tighten; my eyes would tear up; I would gasp involuntarily.”

Findings

Students struggle and need emotional support.

How frequently do emotions interfere with your ability to focus or progress in voice lessons?

29 responses



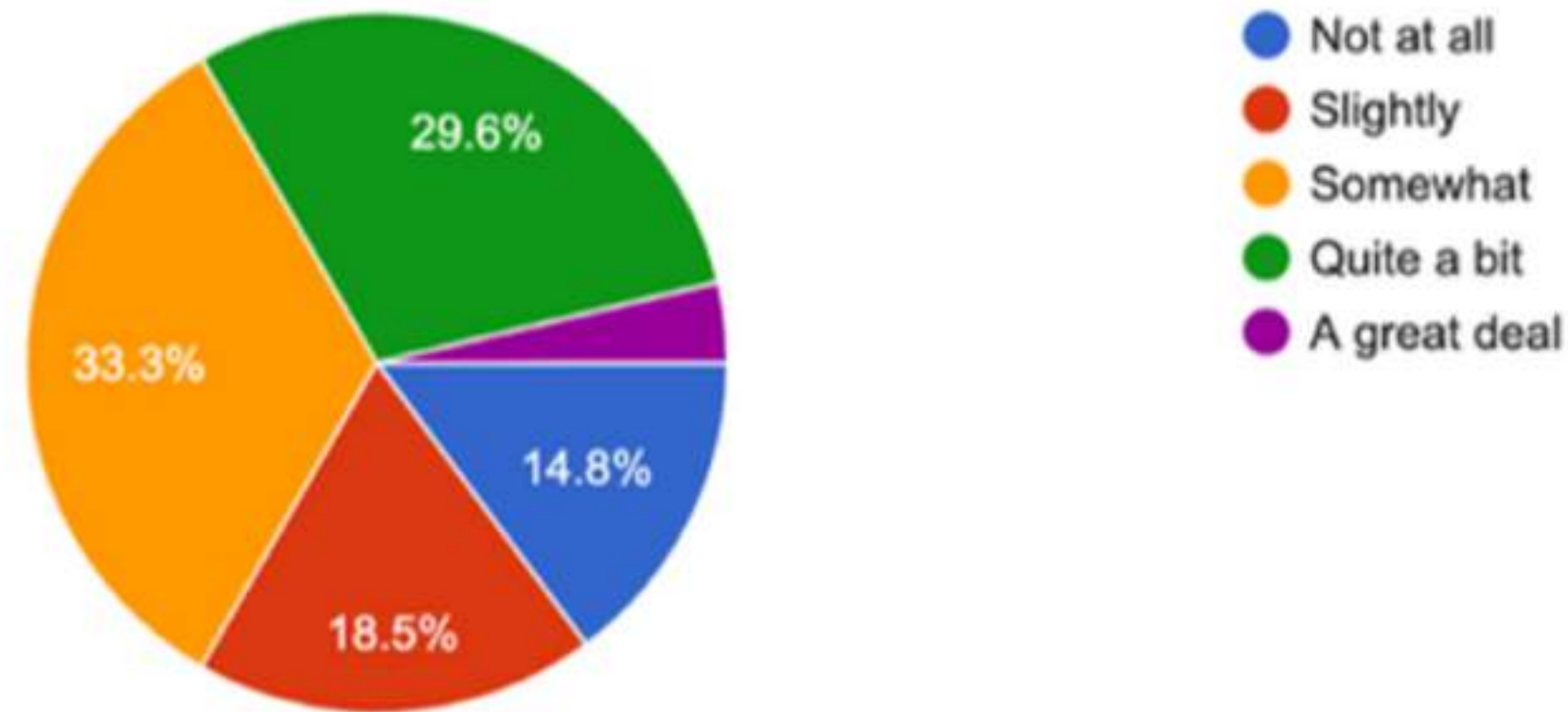
Durand, 2025 (data collected via Google Forms)

Findings

Students struggle and need emotional support.

To what extent have your voice teachers acknowledged or addressed emotional challenges in lessons?

27 responses



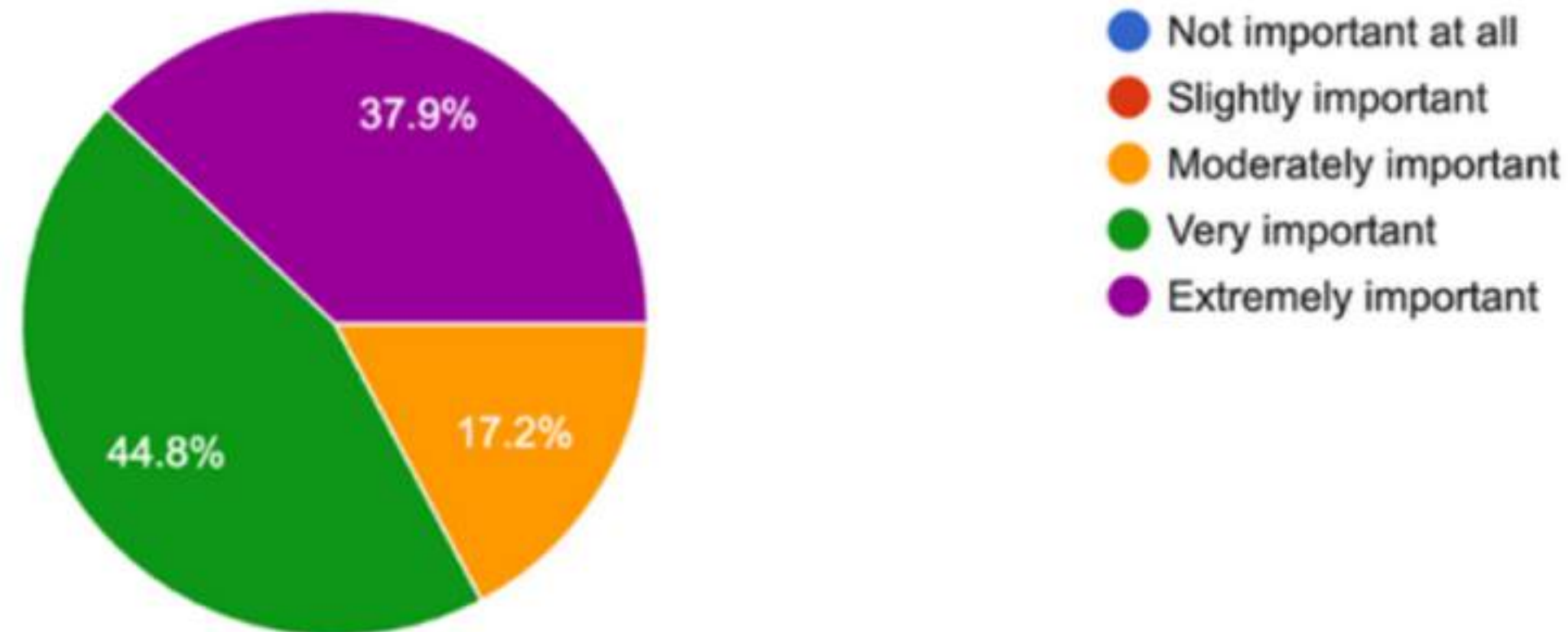
Durand, 2025 (data collected via Google Forms)

Findings

Students struggle and need emotional support.

How important is it to you that voice teachers acknowledge and help manage emotional challenges in lessons?

29 responses



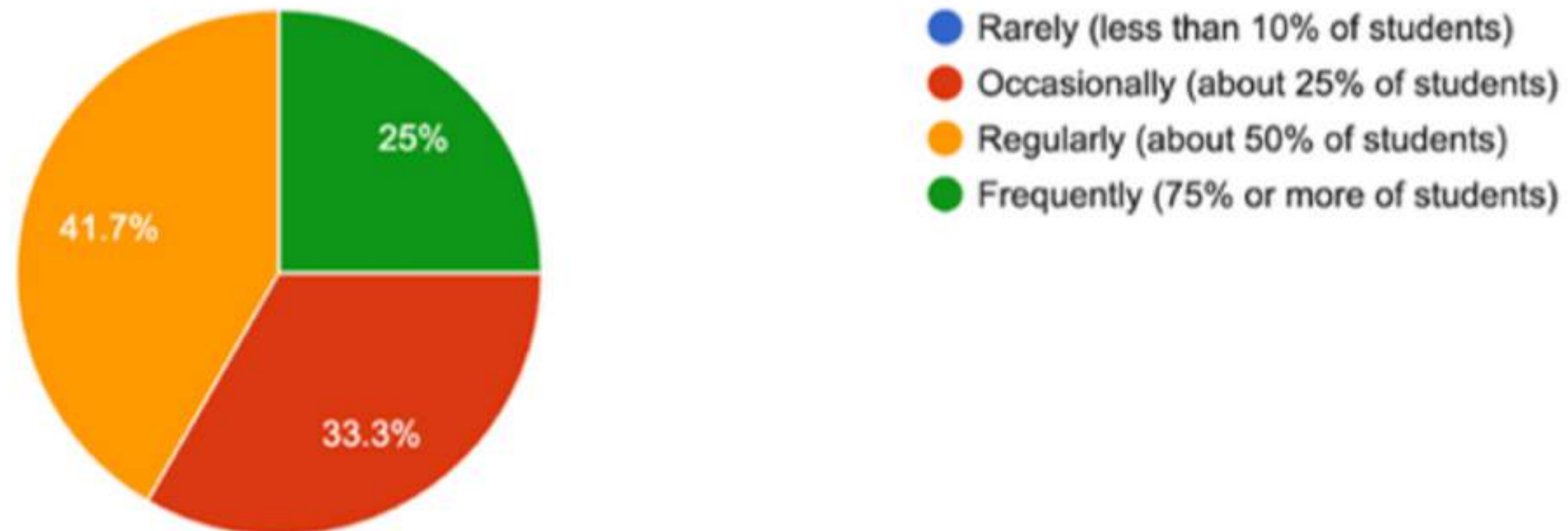
Durand, 2025 (data collected via Google Forms)

Findings

Students struggle and need emotional support.

How often to you encounter students struggling with emotional challenges in your studio?

12 responses



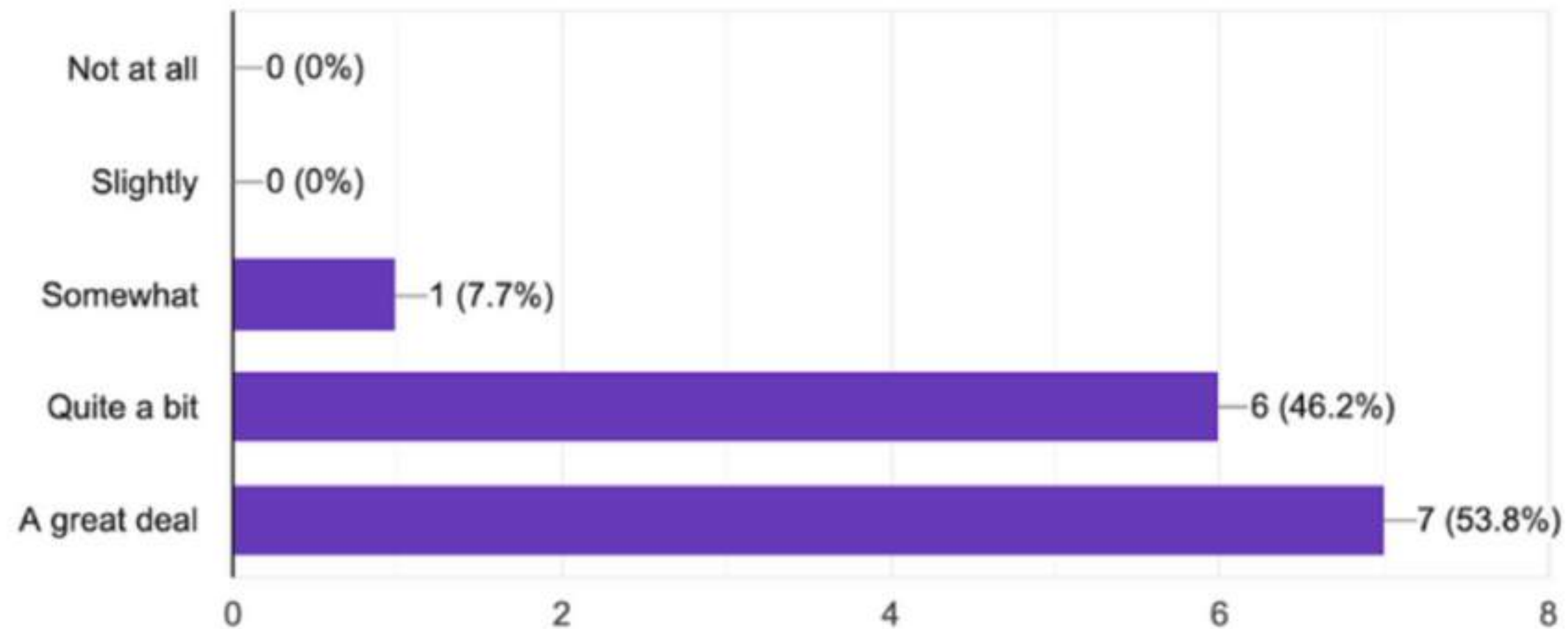
Durand, 2025 (data collected via Google Forms)

Findings

Effective teachers are actively seeking and applying supportive strategies.

To what extent do you consider emotions when working with students in your studio?

13 responses

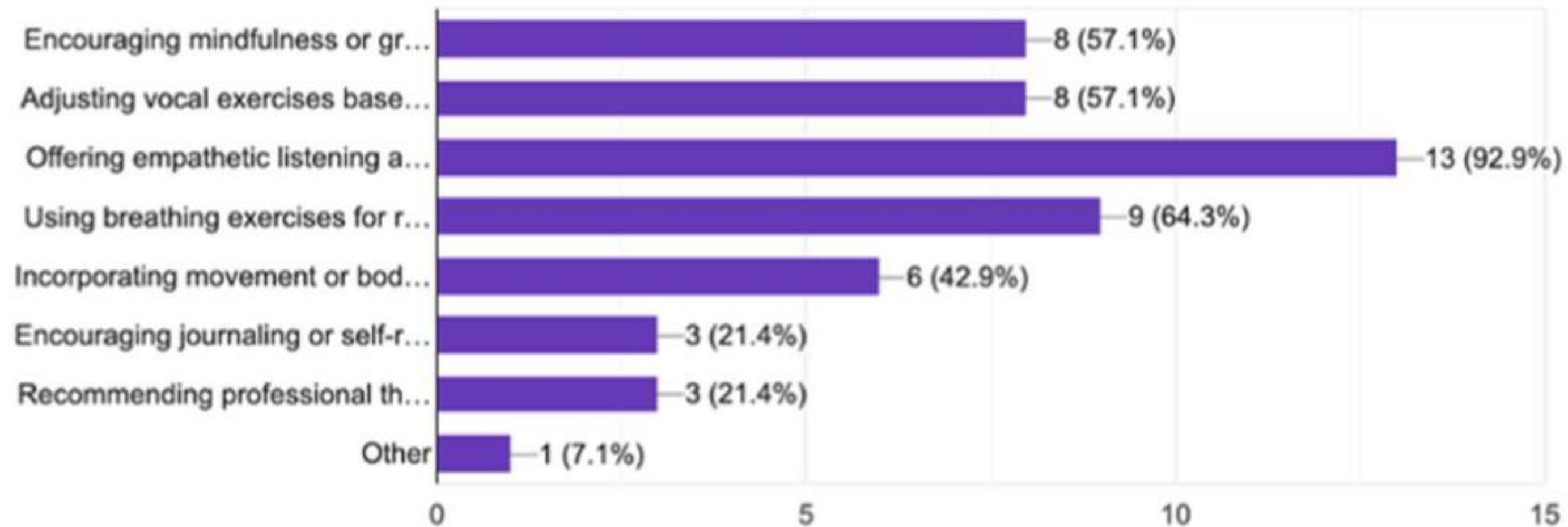


Findings

Effective teachers are actively seeking and applying supportive strategies.

Which of the following strategies do you currently use to help students navigate emotional challenges?

14 responses

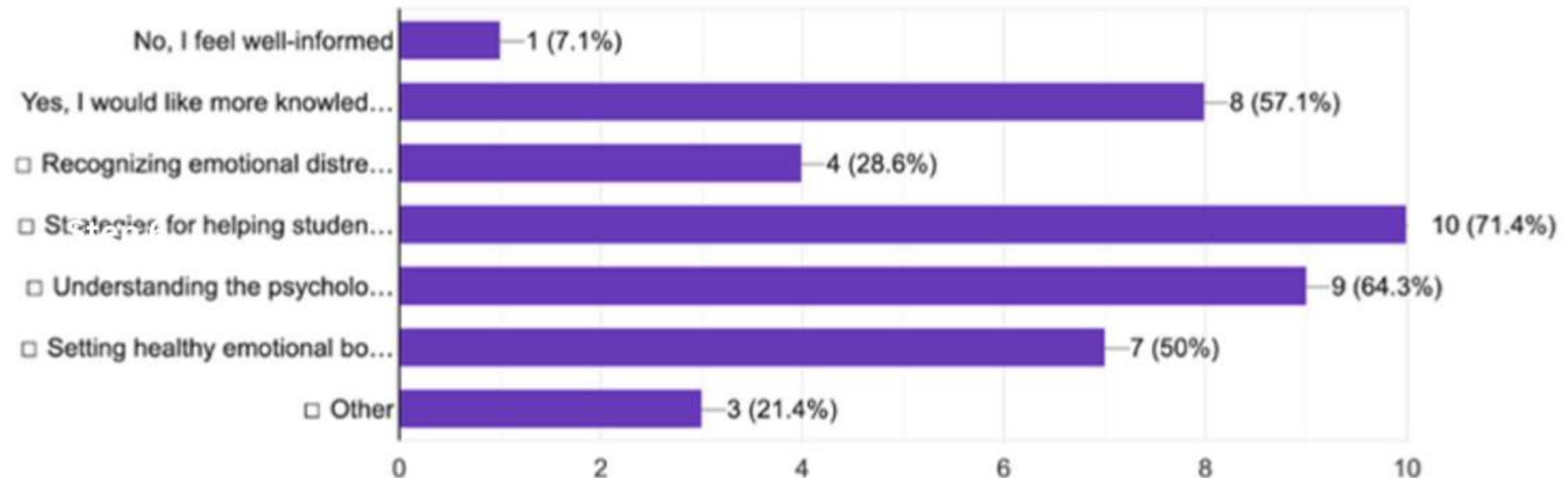


Findings

Effective teachers are actively seeking and applying supportive strategies.

Are there areas related to emotional well-being in vocal instruction that you wish you understood better?

14 responses

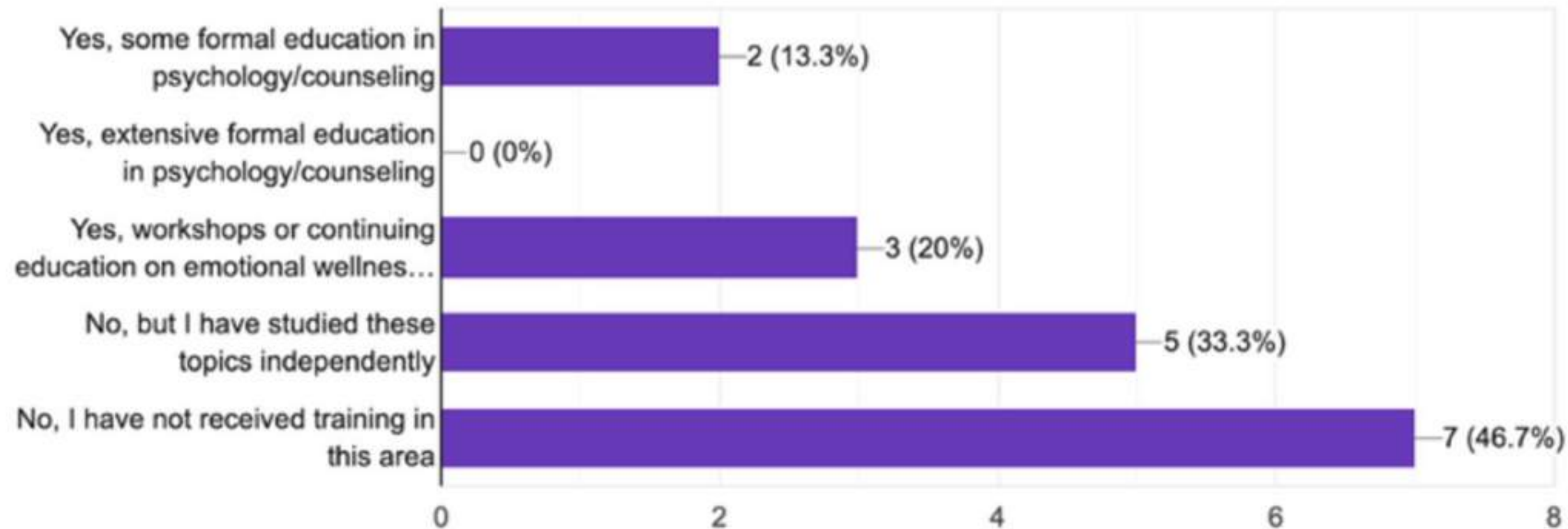


Findings

Effective teachers are actively seeking and applying supportive strategies.

Have you received training in psychology, counseling, or emotional wellness techniques? (Select all that apply.)

15 responses



Findings

Non-therapeutic modalities can be integrated safely and effectively

Clear boundaries:

- Stay within scope: Voice teachers can use tools like breath work, mindfulness, or body awareness as pedagogical supports, not as therapy (Moniz, 2025).
- No diagnosis or treatment: Trauma-informed practice emphasizes regulation and safety, but clinical treatment must be left to qualified professionals (SAMHSA, 2014).
- Transparency with students: Strategies should be presented as optional, supportive practices, not as psychological interventions (Moniz, 2025; SAMHSA, 2014).



Findings

Non-therapeutic modalities can be integrated safely and effectively

Student autonomy: Practices such as self-applied movement, mindfulness, or imagery allow singers to engage at their own pace, preserving choice and agency (Conable & Conable, 2000; Paparo, 2022).

“If I’ve got a very nervous performer in front of me, maybe the first thing I can do is just get them to tie their shoes. There’s nothing more healing. Or why don’t you get everything out of your purse and let’s lay them out by size...when they get busy, whether they’re physically busy or creatively imaginatively busy, they stop trying to sing.”

~Amanda McTigue, Acting Coach (Interviewee)



“Place the tongue on the roof of the mouth... inhale for four, hold for seven, then exhale for eight.”

~Joe Persinger, PhD, Singer
(Interviewee)

Findings

Non-therapeutic modalities can be integrated safely and effectively

Non-invasive: Modalities focus on awareness and gentle exploration rather than physical manipulation or high-stakes performance tasks, reducing risk of overwhelm (Feldenkrais, 1977; Gelb, 2013).

“When the energy’s flowing, the breath follows. When the breath is there, the energy flows and follows... the voice doesn’t have to work so hard.”

~Deborah Myers, Acupressure Specialist
(Interviewee)



“Most of the students’ inner voices are telling them you’re not good enough... to start to notice that voice and be aware they have a choice not to believe it.”

~Alexander Kahn, PhD, Musician,
Conductor (Interviewee)

Findings

Non-therapeutic modalities can be integrated safely and effectively

Supportive context: By centering safety, presence, and play, teachers create environments where students feel acknowledged, which minimizes pressure and fosters experimentation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008).

“How can I ground someone else if I can’t do that for myself?”

~ Susan Witt-Butler, Voice Teacher (Interviewee)



“So much of a singer’s life is micromanaged and regulated and play gives them a say and removes the fear of being wrong. So be silly with them.”

~ Heidi Moss Erickson, Voice Teacher (Interviewee)

Findings

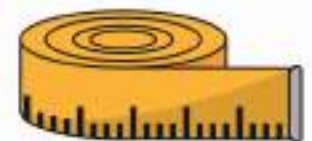
A flexible, student-responsive approach is essential.

No single strategy works for all singers

Effectiveness depends on matching tools to each student's needs
(Davidson, 2017; McPherson et al., 2019).

Students valued different supports: mindfulness, empathetic listening, breathing, movement, or journaling (Appendix E responses to questionnaires)(Durand, 2025).

"The awareness it brought me about my body has been helping me mentally explore how stress affects my singing." Student (Appendix O responses to trial lessons)(Durand, 2025)



Findings

A flexible, student-responsive approach is essential.

Flexibility is key

Teachers use a “toolbox” approach, adapting in real time to foster safety and agency
(Tomlinson, 2014; Rogers, 1961)

*“We have to have a huge toolbox...
and it’s knowing when to shift if it’s
not working.”*

~ Heidi Moss Erickson, Voice
Teacher (Interviewee)



*“For the others, I might say: while
you’re singing, can you walk around
there? Can you just count all of the
pencils in the room?”*

~ Amanda McTigue, Acting Coach
(Interviewee)

Findings

A flexible, student-responsive approach is essential.

Student feedback confirms variety

Pilot lessons showed each student benefited from different modalities (Appendix O).

Feldenkrais → calm and awareness

Mindfulness → calming for some, distracting for others

Body Mapping → grounding for some, harder for others

“Honestly they all have a purpose... The bigger the toolbox, the more different problems can be fixed.” ~Student (Appendix O responses to trial lessons)(Durand, 2025)



Findings

Access and awareness remain barriers.

Absent in training: None of the interviewed teachers had formal education on emotional regulation in singing (Appendix I).

Knowledge gap: Students in sample lessons had never encountered somatic or mindfulness tools, despite strong research backing (Appendix O).

Access issue: Literature exists (e.g., Conable & Conable, 2000; Gelb, 2013; Feldenkrais, 1977) but remains locked in academic formats, limiting uptake by teachers (Odendaal, 2019).

Independent study > formal degrees: Survey data showed teachers with workshops or informal study used strategies more confidently than those with BA/MA training (Appendix F).

Translation needed: *“Bringing it down to the level of the end user is what I feel is missing...the bridge between the scientists and the people that have to get out there and sing.” ~John Henny (Henny, Irene & Harris, 2019).*



Conclusions

Emotional Support is Essential

acknowledging and supporting students emotionally is not optional; it is essential for effective and ethical voice teaching.

Research–Practice Gap Persists

there is still a gap between available research and what is being applied in day-to-day pedagogy



Teachers Recognize and Experiment

Teachers are already aware of this reality, and many are experimenting with supportive approaches

Emotional Interference is Universal

This study confirms that emotional interference is a universal and embodied experience for singers

Emotional Impact on Technique

Strong emotions consistently disrupt breath, muscle coordination, focus, and expressive freedom.

Implications for the Field

Call for Resources and Training

They offer evidence that teachers want to engage with this work but need resources, training, and ethical frameworks.

Bridging Scholarship and Practice

They draw attention to a systemic gap: relevant scholarship exists, but much of it remains in academic silos and is not easily accessible to the average teacher.



Emotions and Technique

emotional awareness is not separate from technique but intertwined with vocal function.

Validated Pedagogical Strategies

They validate the strategies many teachers are already using, showing that non-therapeutic modalities such as mindfulness, movement, and breath work can be safely integrated into lessons.

Recommendations

For practitioners:

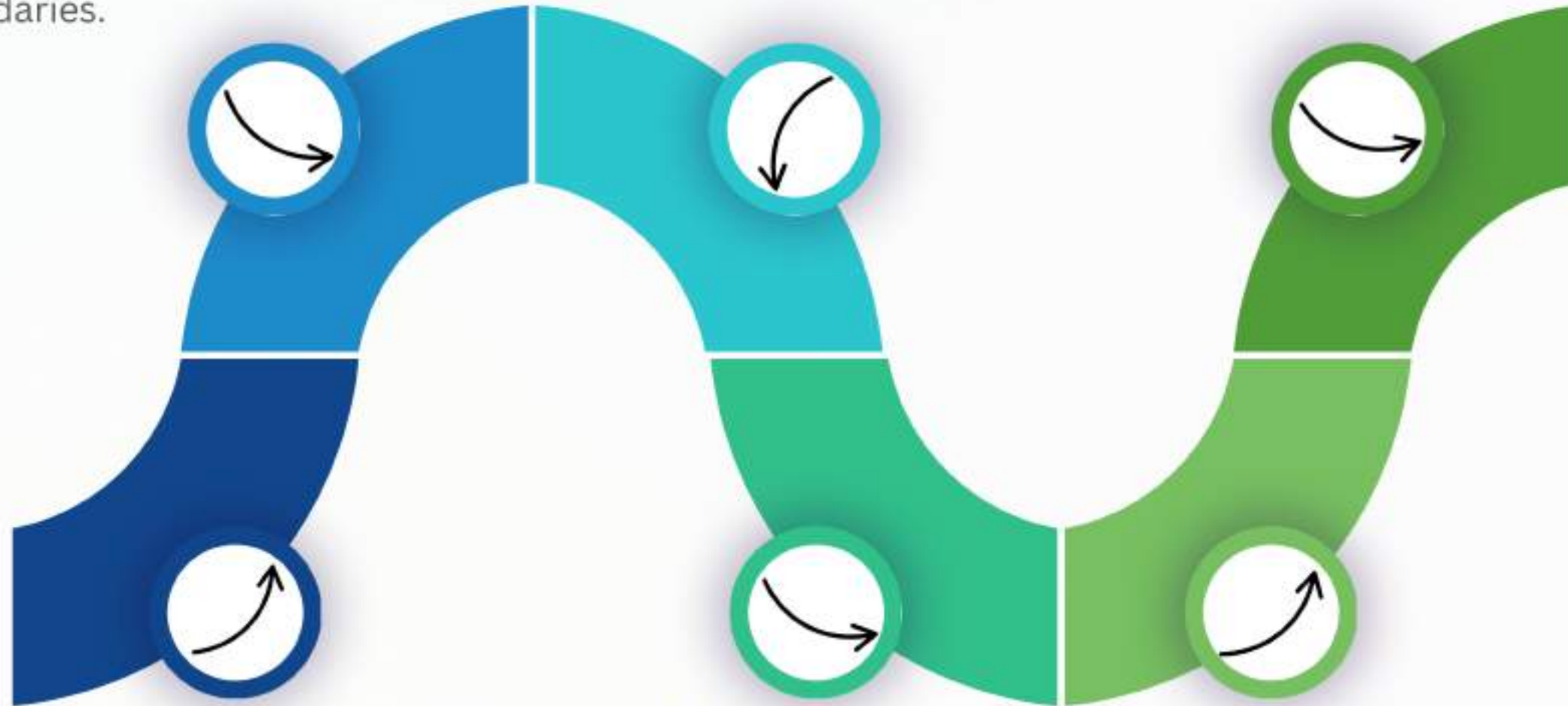
...but always with clarity of role and ethical boundaries.

For educators and training programs

Integrate emotional awareness, somatic practices, and trauma-informed pedagogy into formal curricula for voice teachers.

For researchers:

Focus on bridging the gap between theory and practice by producing work that is readable, shareable, and implementable in the studio.



For practitioners:

Incorporate simple, non-therapeutic tools such as grounding, breath awareness, and movement-based explorations into lessons,

For practitioners:

Flexibility and responsiveness should guide their use.

For educators and training programs

Provide resources that translate research into accessible, practical tools.

Considerations

Potential Influences on Findings

Small participant pool: diverse but not representative of all singers and teachers.

Insider researcher bias: interpretations shaped by my experiences, mitigated through reflexivity.

Trial lesson constraints: limited number of students and short timeframe.

While the findings are not intended to be broadly generalizable, they provide rich, context-specific insights that may be transferable to other teaching and learning situations where emotional factors intersect with singing pedagogy (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2006).



Future Directions

Building on This Study

- Expand participant pool: include more diverse singers and teachers for wider perspectives (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).
- Balance insider perspective: add external reviewers or co-researchers to support reflexivity (Finlay, 2002; Flick, 2022).
- Extend trial lessons: run over longer periods with more student volunteers (McNiff, 2013; Burnard, 2006).
- Strengthen transferability: broaden scope while keeping depth and context (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).



Reflection on Learning & Professional Development

Developing as a teacher and researcher

Strengthened my research skills and teaching through emotionally aware pedagogy.

Gained skills in research, management, and presentation while integrating emotional awareness.

Deepened my professional identity by uniting technical skill with student well-being.

Enhanced my teaching practice and commitment to bridging research with pedagogy.



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