Exploring the Zones of Regulation

Supporting students to understand and manage their emotions is a crucial foundation for helping them learn, socialise, and thrive. Emotional regulation - the ability to recognise, respond to, and recover from emotions - is central to both academic success and overall wellbeing. In fact, strengthening emotional regulation is one of the most impactful ways schools can improve student wellbeing, engagement, and learning outcomes. When students can identify how they feel and understand why those emotions are showing up, they build essential skills for resilience, healthy relationships, and sustained academic achievement.

Yet for many children and young people, especially within busy and demanding school environments, staying regulated can be challenging.

The Zones of Regulation, developed by occupational therapist Leah Kuypers, is a widely used wellbeing framework that supports students in recognising, understanding and communicating their emotional states. Implemented across educational, clinical and therapeutic settings worldwide, the Zones framework helps expand emotional literacy and equip students with practical, age-appropriate strategies for effective self-regulation.

Why emotional regulation matters in schools

Prolonged emotional dysregulation can significantly impact a student's life. Research shows that dysregulation can impair cognitive processing (such as memory and attention), reduce engagement, and negatively affect overall wellbeing (Compas et al., 2019; Shields et al., 2020). In the classroom, dysregulated students may appear:

- disconnected or "shut down"
- reactive or easily overwhelmed
- uninterested or disengaged
- behaviourally challenging or impulsive

These behaviours often mask what is happening beneath the surface. When adults respond only to behaviour, the true emotional needs of the child may go unaddressed. When we support students to understand why they are feeling and behaving a certain way, we strengthen their capacity to self-regulate, communicate their needs, and participate fully in learning.

The Zones of Regulation framework provides a simple, structured way for students to identify their internal experience and learn what helps them feel calm, focused and emotionally safe.

What are the Zones of Regulation?

Talking about emotions can be challenging, especially for children and adolescents. Emotions shift quickly, show up differently for everyone, and are often hard to name. The Zones of Regulation simplify these complex experiences into four easy-to-understand colour categories, making emotional awareness more accessible.

Each zone is proactive and serves a distinct purpose. Throughout the day, students may move between several zones or even experience more than one at the same time. The zones also exist on a spectrum - some days emotions feel more intense, and other days they may be mild. Certain zones may feel comfortable, while others are more difficult, depending on a student's window of tolerance.

Learning to recognise these shifts and understand how to work with the emotions in each zone strengthens emotional regulation and supports overall wellbeing. This, in turn, improves cognitive functioning, social connection, and readiness for learning.

Importantly, **the goal isn't to stay in the Green zone all the time**. Instead, it's to notice which zone you're in and understand what you need to support yourself in that moment.

What each zone means & how to support students

The Zones of Regulation groups emotional states into four colour categories. Each zone has a proactive purpose - it gives students language to describe how they feel, helps adults recognise what support may be needed, and promotes understanding rather than judgement. No zone is "good" or "bad"; all zones are normal human experiences.

Blue zone - Low energy, low readiness

- What it means: Sadness, tiredness, boredom, sickness, or feeling "flat."
- Proactive purpose: Signals low energy; helps students recognise when they need rest or gentle support.
- How it may show up: Low motivation, quiet, withdrawn, slumped posture, difficulty concentrating.
- How to support a student: Movement or sensory breaks, connection or check-ins, temporary adjustment of demands, validation of feelings.

Green zone - Calm, regulated, ready to learn

- What it means: Calm, content, focused, ready to learn.
- Proactive purpose: Teaches students to recognise regulated states and build consistency.
- How it may show up: Engaged, attentive, calm body, steady breathing, socially connected.
- How to support a student: Affirm behaviours, encourage reflection, provide learning challenges, model regulation strategies.

Yellow zone - Heightened emotions, increased energy

- What it means: Excitement, worry, silliness, frustration, nervousness.
- Proactive purpose: Early detection of rising energy to prevent escalation.
- How it may show up: Fidgeting, restlessness, difficulty focusing, elevated voice, racing thoughts.
- How to support a student: Co-regulation (breathing, grounding, sensory tools), structured instructions, reduce sensory load, movement breaks, validate emotions.

Red zone - Extremely heightened emotions or crisis state

- What it means: Anger, panic, terror, extreme excitement, overwhelm.
- Proactive purpose: Recognises when emotions exceed the window of tolerance and triggers crisis-safe strategies.
- How it may show up: Yelling, explosive behaviour, fight/flight responses, rapid heartbeat.
- How to support a student: Prioritise safety, reduce environmental demands, calm verbal support, provide space if appropriate, debrief once regulated, avoid consequences during peak.

The Blue Zone Low Energy Zone	**The Green Zone** Optimal Functioning Zone	**The Yellow Zone** High Energy Zone	**The Red Zone** Non-Functioning Zone
Emotions: Sad bored, tired, depressed, sick, unmotivated, disappointed, lonely	**Emotions:** Happy, calm, motivated, proud, positive, open, content, cheerful, patient	**Emotions:** Excited, nervous, frustrated, embarrassed, impatient, giddy	**Emotions:** Anger, rage, panic, terror, elated, devastated, grief, out of control
Behaviors: Withdrawn, quiet, disengaged, sluggish, unmotivated, flat, low	**Behaviors:** Engaged, attentive & communicative, cooperative, productive, emotionally regulated	**Behaviors:** Agitated, distracted, silliness/giggles, impulsive, unable to listen/keeps interrupting	**Behaviors:** Fight, flight or freeze, emotional outbursts, physical aggression, unable to communicate, emotionally dysregulated, reactive
Regulation Techniques: Try taking a movement or rest break depending on your needs, using sensory tools to engage your brain-body connection, doing something engaging e.g. listening to an upbeat song or playing a game.	**Regulation Techniques:** Try practicing positive self-talk or a gratitude exercise, doing some mindfulness, using this time for your most energy consuming tasks or connecting with others socially.	**Regulation Techniques:** Try mindful breathing or grounding exercises, taking a break from any stimulating environments, engaging in a physical activity to redirect energy (shake it out) or using sensory tools to focus.	**Regulation Techniques:** Try taking a break from any stimulating environments or triggering situations, channeling your feelings into something productive, using sensory tools to reconnect your brain-body connection.

From understanding the zones to classroom implementation

Understanding the Zones of Regulation is the first step in supporting student wellbeing. Knowing what each zone represents, the proactive purpose of each, and how to recognise signs in students gives teachers and support staff a shared language for emotional states. This understanding is foundational for practical classroom strategies.

By moving from knowledge to action, educators can implement the Zones in ways that are seamless and supportive. For example, once a student identifies they are in the Yellow zone, teachers can apply targeted interventions such as breathing exercises, movement breaks, or structured support to help them return to their Green zone. Likewise, recognising students in the Blue zone allows teachers to provide low-energy or restorative activities that recharge focus and engagement.

This bridge between emotional awareness and classroom strategies ensures that interventions are proactive rather than reactive, supporting both individual student regulation and a calmer, more focused learning environment for all.

How teachers can implement the zones in the classroom

1. Explicit teaching and discussion
Use posters, worksheets, examples and stories to explain each zone.
2. Quick, accessible check-ins
Instead of “How are you feeling?” ask:
“What zone are you in right now?”
3. Modelling emotion regulation
Narrate your own strategies.
“I’m feeling Yellow - excited but a bit wriggly and unsettled in my body. I’m going to take a breath so I can focus.”
4. Structured transition routines
Short calming or movement breaks help reset after lunch or high-energy activities.
5. Using the Zones for support planning
Identify triggers, early signs and personalised regulation tools for students needing extra support.
6. Creating a regulation-friendly classroom
Calm corners, sensory tools, predictable routines and regular check-ins help students re-enter their window of tolerance.

Komodo’s wellbeing platform strengthens emotional literacy, resilience, and regulation skills across whole-school communities. By giving students and staff tools to track wellbeing and providing actionable insights, schools can recognise when students are drifting out of their optimal learning zone and provide timely support. This helps students return to their Green Zone more consistently, improving engagement, learning outcomes, and long-term wellbeing.

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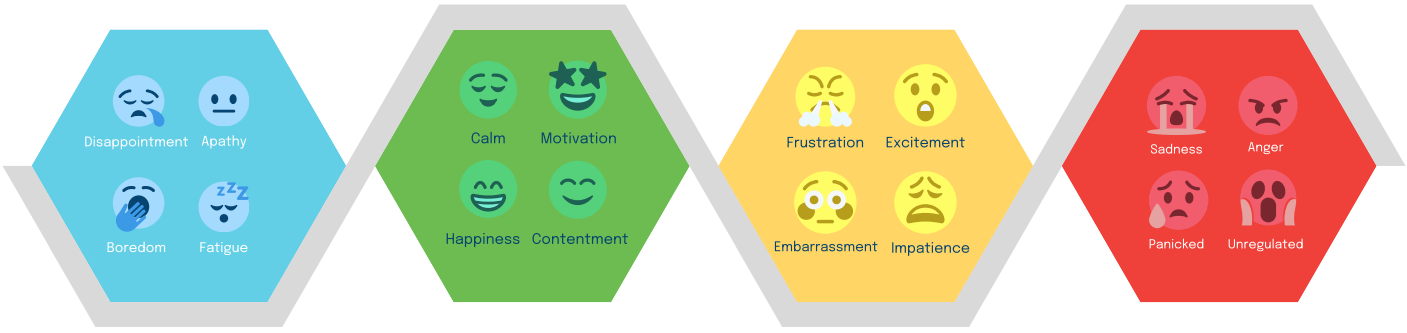
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