



Emotional Leakage in Everyday School Interactions: A Descriptive Study of Grade VI Students

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Abstract : Hidden emotional struggle is often difficult to identify in school settings because students may present themselves as calm, happy, or socially functional while still experiencing discomfort, stress, or unexpressed emotion. This study examined how small behaviours and body language may reveal hidden emotional struggle in everyday social interaction among peers through the theoretical lens of Paul Ekman's concept of emotional leakage. Using a descriptive quantitative design, data were collected through a seven-item Google Forms questionnaire administered to 20 Grade VI students at Cendekia Harapan School over two days. The survey focused on students' observations of incongruent emotional presentation, their attention to subtle nonverbal cues, their own experiences of hiding emotion, and their views about the mental-health effects of prolonged concealment. The findings showed that 70% of participants had seen someone appear happy while seeming nervous or uncomfortable, 75% reported having hidden their own emotions, and 95% believed that hiding emotions for too long can affect mental health. These findings suggest that students already recognize nonverbal signs of emotional incongruence in daily life. The study contributes a school-based descriptive account of how emotional leakage is perceived by children and argues for emotionally supportive, non-diagnostic approaches to social-emotional learning in primary education.

Keywords : Emotional Leakage; Hidden Emotional Struggle; Nonverbal Communication; Emotion Regulation; Primary School Students.

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INTRODUCTION

School interaction is not only academic. It is also emotional, relational, and interpretive. Students learn in environments where they constantly read the behaviour of peers and teachers, respond to social expectations, and decide which emotions can be shown safely and which must be withheld. In such settings, emotions are not always openly expressed. Students may smile while feeling anxious, stay silent while feeling overwhelmed, or act normally while struggling internally. These everyday moments are familiar in classrooms, yet they often remain undertheorized unless they become severe enough to be framed as a disciplinary or mental-health problem.

This issue matters because childhood and adolescence are important developmental periods for emotion regulation, coping, and psychosocial adjustment (Adynski et al., 2024; Somerville et al., 2024). A substantial body of literature has shown that the ways young people identify, manage, suppress, and communicate emotions are connected to their well-being and to later internalizing or externalizing outcomes (Compas et al., 2017; Gross, 1998; Kökönyei et al., 2024). In school contexts, emotional processes are also associated with social participation, school connectedness, peer relationships, and adjustment (Allen et al., 2024; Meng et al., 2025; Yuen & Wu, 2024). This means that emotional concealment is not a trivial interpersonal habit. It may shape how students relate to others, how supported they feel, and how accurately their needs are perceived.

One influential theoretical entry point into this issue is Paul Ekman's work on facial expression, nonverbal communication, and the idea that emotions may "leak" through involuntary or difficult-to-control signals (Ekman, 1992, 2003; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). In the broad sense used in this article, emotional leakage refers to the possibility that suppressed feeling may still become visible through subtle behaviour, bodily movement, facial tension, tone, or interactional inconsistency. This idea remains compelling because it offers a way to explain why a person who says "I'm fine" may still appear uneasy. In educational settings, such cues may matter because peers and teachers often rely on them when deciding whether someone needs help.

At the same time, contemporary scholarship urges caution. The inference of emotion from facial movement alone is more complex than many popular interpretations assume. Facial configurations are not fixed one-to-one fingerprints of internal emotional states, and context is indispensable when interpreting expression (Barrett et al., 2019). This critique does not make nonverbal behaviour irrelevant. Rather, it reframes it. Small behaviours may provide socially meaningful clues, but they do not function as definitive evidence of inner experience (Carmichael & Mizrahi, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). In practical terms, this distinction is essential in schools. A student's forced smile or avoidance of eye contact should not be treated as proof of hidden distress, but it may still serve as a relational signal that warrants attentive, supportive response.

This study is situated at the intersection of these two positions. It preserves Ekman's concept of emotional leakage as the main theoretical lens while avoiding the overclaim that nonverbal cues provide certain access to hidden emotion. Instead, it asks how students themselves perceive such cues in everyday life. This shift is important because much of the literature on nonverbal emotion has focused on laboratory recognition tasks, adult samples, or theoretical debates about universality and inference. Far fewer school-based studies examine how children interpret emotional incongruence in ordinary interaction and how they connect those observations to their own experiences of hiding emotion.

Previous studies have provided important insights into several areas relevant to this study. Research on emotion regulation has shown that the ways children and adolescents manage, suppress, and communicate emotions are related to coping, psychosocial adjustment, and mental-health outcomes (Compas et al., 2017; Gross, 1998; Kökönyei et al., 2024). Studies on expressive suppression further indicate that hiding emotion may reduce visible expression but does not necessarily remove the emotional experience itself, and may create cognitive, affective, and interpersonal costs over time (Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; Richards & Gross, 2000). In relation to nonverbal communication, Ekman's work suggests that concealed emotion may appear through involuntary or difficult-to-control expressive channels, including facial expression, body movement, tone, and other behavioural cues (Ekman, 1992, 2003; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). However, contemporary scholarship also cautions that facial or bodily cues should not be interpreted as direct, universal, or diagnostic evidence of internal emotional states (Barrett et al., 2019).

Despite these contributions, a specific gap remains in school-based research. Much of the existing literature has focused on general emotion regulation, expressive suppression, facial expression, laboratory-based emotion recognition, or social-emotional learning interventions. Less attention has been given to how primary school students themselves perceive hidden emotion through everyday behaviours in ordinary peer interaction. In particular, limited descriptive evidence is available on how children interpret emotional incongruence, such as when someone appears happy but also seems nervous, uncomfortable, withdrawn, or emotionally strained. This gap is important because children's ability to recognize and interpret emotional cues may influence empathy, peer support, help-seeking, and the development of emotionally safer classroom interaction.

The novelty of this study lies in its cautious application of Ekman's concept of emotional leakage within a primary school context. Rather than treating small behaviours and body language as clinical or diagnostic evidence of hidden emotional struggle, this study understands them as socially meaningful cues that may lead students to notice a possible mismatch between outward

expression and inner feeling. This position allows the study to preserve the relevance of emotional leakage while avoiding the overclaim that students can accurately detect another person's internal emotional state through body language alone. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by offering a school-based descriptive account of how Grade VI students perceive emotional incongruence in everyday interaction.

Accordingly, this study aims to describe how Grade VI students perceive emotional incongruence, how they report their own experiences of hiding emotion, and how these patterns can be interpreted through the theoretical lens of emotional leakage. The study is guided by the following research question: How do small behaviours and body language reveal hidden emotional struggles based on Paul Ekman's theory of emotional leakage?.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative survey design with an exploratory orientation. A quantitative descriptive design was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study was to identify and summarize visible response patterns across a small set of structured questions rather than to test causal relationships or clinical hypotheses. The exploratory orientation was used because the study sought to examine how Grade VI students perceived emotional incongruence and emotion concealment in everyday school interaction, an issue that is often noticed in practice but not easily captured through direct behavioural verification.

The study was conceptually informed by Ekman's work on emotional leakage and nonverbal expression. However, the research did not attempt to identify microexpressions, diagnose psychological conditions, or verify participants' internal emotional states. Instead, it focused on students' perceptions of socially visible signs that they associated with discomfort, nervousness, or concealed emotion. This distinction is important because the data source in this study was self-report rather than behavioural observation.

A brief close-ended questionnaire was considered sufficient for the present study because the research objective was descriptive rather than psychometric. The aim was not to construct a standardized measurement scale, but to obtain an initial school-based picture of how students recognize emotional mismatch, whether they report hiding emotions themselves, and how they interpret the possible consequences of prolonged concealment. For this purpose, a short and accessible instrument was more appropriate than a more complex scale, especially given the age of the participants and the exploratory scope of the study.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at Cendekia Harapan School and involved 20 Grade VI students. The participants formed a small, single-site convenience sample, reflecting the practical scope of the project. Although limited in size, the sample was appropriate for the study because the research focused on everyday peer interaction within a shared school environment rather than on broad statistical generalization.

The participants were not recruited as clinical subjects and were not screened for psychological disorders. Accordingly, the phrase hidden emotional struggle in this article refers to student-perceived internal discomfort, stress, embarrassment, or emotion concealment in ordinary school life, rather than to psychiatric diagnosis or confirmed mental-health disorder. This clarification is necessary to keep the interpretation of the findings educational and non-pathologizing.

Instrument

Data were collected through a researcher-developed Google Forms questionnaire consisting of seven close-ended items. The questionnaire was designed in accessible English so that Grade VI students could understand and respond to the items without requiring complex psychological terminology. The instrument was developed based on the theoretical focus of the study, particularly

Ekman's concept of emotional leakage, which suggests that concealed emotion may still appear through involuntary or difficult-to-control expressive cues, and Gross's theory of emotion regulation, especially the idea that expressive suppression may reduce visible emotional expression without necessarily eliminating the internal emotional experience (Ekman, 1992, 2003; Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Gross, 1998, 2002).

The questionnaire items were organized around four conceptual domains. The first domain concerned students' perception of emotional incongruence in others, such as seeing someone appear happy while also seeming nervous or uncomfortable. This domain was linked to the study's focus on possible mismatch between outward emotional display and perceived internal feeling. The second domain concerned students' attention to subtle nonverbal cues, such as forced smiling, avoiding eye contact, and finger tapping. This domain reflected the theoretical assumption that hidden emotion may become socially visible through small behavioural signs, while still requiring cautious interpretation. The third domain concerned students' own experience of hiding emotion in front of others. This domain was informed by the concept of expressive suppression in emotion regulation. The fourth domain concerned students' beliefs about the possible mental-health effects of prolonged emotional concealment, which was included to connect students' everyday perceptions with broader concerns about emotional well-being.

The questionnaire was not intended to function as a standardized psychometric scale or diagnostic instrument. Therefore, statistical reliability testing, such as Cronbach's alpha, was not conducted. Instead, the instrument was used as a brief descriptive survey to obtain an initial picture of students' perceptions and self-reported experiences. To support content relevance and face clarity, the questionnaire items were aligned with the research question, the four conceptual domains, and the age level of the participants. The wording of the items was kept simple, non-clinical, and non-invasive to reduce misunderstanding and avoid psychological labeling. Table 1 summarizes the conceptual domains represented in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Survey domains and indicators

Domain	Indicator represented in questionnaire	Theoretical basis
Emotional incongruence in others	Seeing someone look happy while appearing nervous or uncomfortable	Emotional leakage and mismatch between outward display and perceived inner feeling
Sensitivity to nonverbal cues	Noticing forced smiles, avoiding eye contact, finger tapping, or related behaviours	Nonverbal cues as possible but non-diagnostic signs of concealed emotion
Personal concealment of emotion	Self-report of having hidden emotions in front of others	Expressive suppression in emotion regulation
Reasons for concealment	Embarrassment, not knowing how to express feelings, lack of trust, and other minor reasons	Emotional expression, relational safety, and communicative difficulty
Perceived consequences	Belief that hiding emotions too long can affect mental health	Links between emotion regulation, suppression, and well-being

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms over two days, from 4 November to 5 November 2025, during students' break time. The use of Google Forms was appropriate to the school context because Grade VI students at Cendekia Harapan School are permitted to bring mobile phones for limited educational purposes when needed. The school also supports technology-based learning activities, so the use of mobile phones to complete a short online questionnaire was consistent with existing school practice.

Before completing the questionnaire, students received a brief explanation about the purpose of the survey, the meaning of the response options, and the fact that there were no right or wrong answers. The researcher provided only technical guidance on how to access and complete the Google Form and did not explain, suggest, or direct students toward particular answers. Students completed

the questionnaire individually using their own mobile phones during the allocated break time. The process was conducted under school supervision, and mobile phone use was limited to completing the questionnaire. Responses were collected anonymously to reduce discomfort, protect students' privacy, and encourage honest answers.

Researcher Bias Mitigation

To minimize researcher bias, the study used a structured close-ended questionnaire with predefined response options, thereby limiting the researcher's role in interpreting open-ended student responses. The researcher's involvement during data collection was restricted to providing technical instructions, without explaining or suggesting expected answers. In addition, the analysis was conducted at the group level using descriptive percentages, so individual responses were not interpreted as evidence of psychological conditions. The findings were therefore treated cautiously as students' perceptions and self-reported experiences, rather than as objective verification of hidden emotional struggle.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively. Each response category was tabulated and converted into percentages to show how frequently each option was selected by the participants. The percentage for each response category was calculated using the following formula:

$$P = \left(\frac{f}{N} \right) \times 100\% \quad (1)$$

In this formula, P refers to the percentage, f refers to the frequency or number of students selecting a particular response category, and N refers to the total number of participants. For example, if 14 out of 20 students selected "yes" for a particular item, the percentage was calculated as $(14 / 20) \times 100\% = 70\%$.

Because the sample was small and the study was not designed to test causal relationships or statistical differences, no inferential statistical analysis was conducted. The use of percentages was considered sufficient to identify visible response patterns in students' perceptions and self-reported experiences. The interpretive analysis was conducted after the descriptive patterns had been presented, by linking the results to Ekman's theory of emotional leakage and to broader research on emotion regulation, expressive suppression, emotion differentiation, and school-based emotional development.

Ethical Considerations

This study observed general ethical principles for low-risk educational research involving elementary school students. Because the participants were Grade VI students, the data collection was conducted under school supervision and was limited to a short, non-invasive educational survey. Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously through Google Forms to protect students' privacy and reduce discomfort in answering questions related to emotional experience. The questionnaire did not collect personally identifiable psychological information and was not intended to assess, diagnose, or label individual students psychologically. Given the sensitivity of the topic, the items were designed to capture general perceptions and self-reported experiences of everyday school interaction. The study therefore treated the data as descriptive group-level information, with interpretation kept at the group level rather than at the individual level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

A total of 20 Grade VI students completed the questionnaire. The results are presented in the order of the study objectives: perceived emotional incongruence in others, attention to subtle

behavioural cues, students' own experience of hiding emotion, reasons for concealment, and beliefs about the consequences of prolonged emotional suppression.

1. Perceived Emotional Incongruence in Others

When asked whether they had seen someone who looked happy but seemed nervous or uncomfortable, 70% of participants answered yes, 20% answered maybe, and 10% answered no. In count terms, this corresponds to 14 students selecting yes, 4 selecting maybe, and 2 selecting no. As presented in Figure 1, the majority of participants reported having observed a discrepancy between outward emotional expression and perceived internal emotional state.

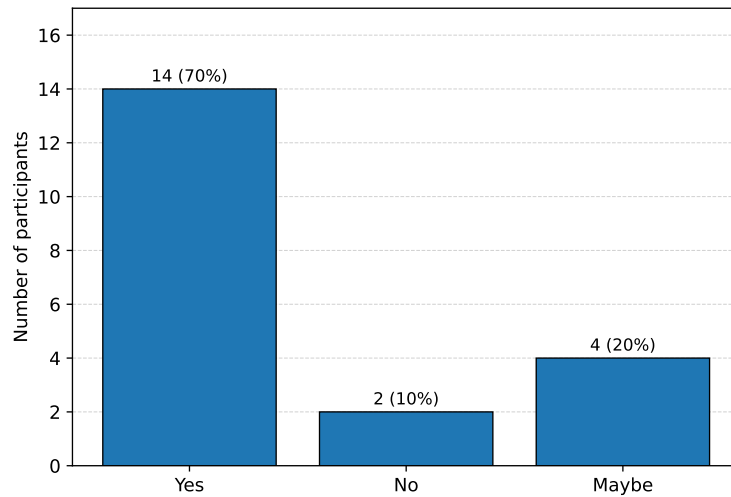


Figure 1. Students who had seen someone appear happy while seeming nervous or uncomfortable

This result indicates that the perception of mismatch between outward appearance and underlying feeling was common in the sample.

2. Attention to Subtle Nonverbal Signs

Participants were also asked how often they noticed small actions that might signal hidden emotional struggle, such as finger tapping, avoiding eye contact, or forced smiling. The response distribution was 5% always, 30% often, 60% rarely, and 5% never. In counts, this equals 1 student selecting always, 6 selecting often, 12 selecting rarely, and 1 selecting never. As shown in Figure 2, most participants reported that they only rarely noticed subtle nonverbal signs, although a smaller proportion indicated more frequent awareness.

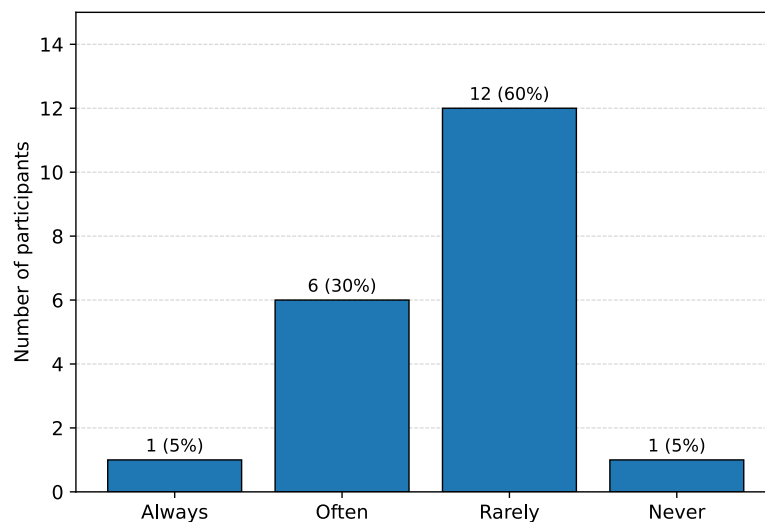


Figure 2. Frequency of noticing signs of hidden emotional struggle in others

The responses show that such behaviours were recognized by most students, although regular attention to them varied.

3. Personal Experience of Hiding Emotion

When asked whether they had ever tried to hide their emotions in front of others, 75% of participants answered yes. In count terms, 15 out of 20 students reported personal experience with emotional concealment. This result suggests that the concealment of emotion was not only something students observed in others, but also something many reported doing themselves.

4. Reasons for Hiding Emotion

Participants who reported hiding emotions also identified their reasons for concealment. The two most frequently selected reasons were feeling embarrassed (30%) and not knowing how to express feelings (30%). A further 20% selected lack of trust in others as a reason for not sharing their emotions. The remaining responses were distributed across several minor reasons, each representing 5% of the sample.

In count terms, embarrassment was selected by 6 students, difficulty in expressing feelings by 6 students, and limited trust by 4 students. The remaining 4 students selected other low-frequency reasons. As illustrated in Figure 3, emotional concealment among students is primarily associated with internal barriers, particularly emotional discomfort and limited expressive ability, rather than external factors alone.

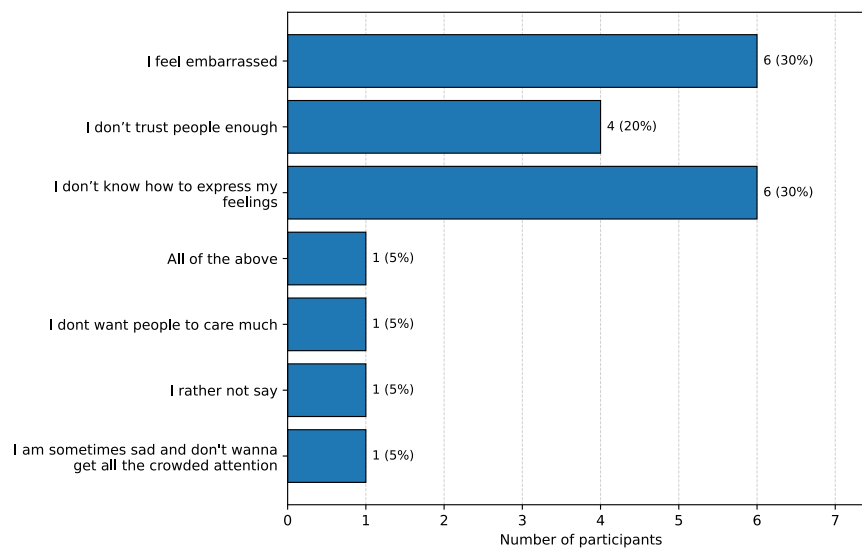


Figure 3. Students who had hidden emotions and their main reasons for doing so

5. Perceived Consequences of Long-Term Emotional Concealment

Participants were asked whether hiding emotions for too long could affect mental health. The results were highly concentrated, with 95% answering yes and 5% answering maybe. No participant selected no. In count terms, 19 students answered yes and 1 answered maybe. As shown in Figure 4, there was a strong consensus among participants that prolonged emotional concealment may have negative effects on mental health.

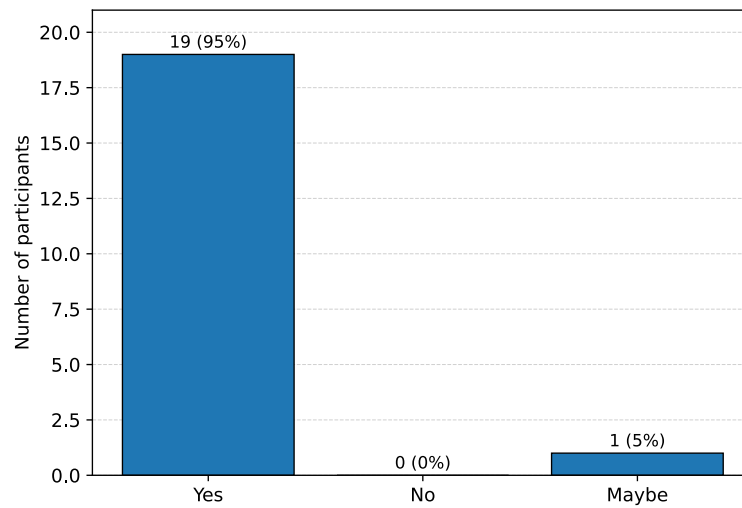


Figure 4. Students’ beliefs about whether prolonged emotional concealment can affect mental health

This result shows that nearly all participants perceived prolonged concealment of emotion as potentially harmful.

6. Summary of Descriptive Findings

The main findings of the questionnaire are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of questionnaire findings

Item focus	Main result	Percentage	Count
Seeing someone look happy but seem nervous or uncomfortable	Yes	70%	14
Noticing subtle signs such as finger tapping or forced smiling	Rarely	60%	12
Noticing subtle signs such as finger tapping or forced smiling	Often	30%	6
Having hidden one’s own emotions in front of others	Yes	75%	15
Main reason for hiding emotions	Embarrassment	30%	6
Main reason for hiding emotions	Not knowing how to express feelings	30%	6
Main reason for hiding emotions	Not trusting people enough	20%	4
Belief that hiding emotions too long affects mental health	Yes	95%	19

Taken together, the results show that participants commonly recognized emotional incongruence in others, frequently reported hiding emotions themselves, and overwhelmingly believed that prolonged concealment could have negative mental-health consequences.

Discussion

The descriptive findings show that emotional incongruence and emotional concealment were familiar experiences among the Grade VI students in this study. Specifically, 70% of participants reported that they had seen someone appear happy while seeming nervous or uncomfortable, 75% reported that they had hidden their own emotions in front of others, and 95% believed that hiding emotions for too long can affect mental health. These results answer the research question by showing that small behaviours and body language may reveal hidden emotional struggle not as direct proof of another person’s inner state, but as socially perceived cues that lead students to notice possible mismatch between outward expression and inner feeling. The discussion below links these findings to Ekman’s concept of emotional leakage, broader theories of emotion regulation, and previous research on emotional development and school-based social-emotional support.

1. Emotional Incongruence as Perceived Emotional Leakage

The finding that 70% of participants had seen someone look happy while also seeming nervous or uncomfortable indicates that most students were familiar with emotional incongruence in everyday interaction. This result is central to the research problem because the study aimed to understand how students perceive hidden emotional struggle through small behaviours and body language. In this context, emotional incongruence refers to a situation in which a person's outward emotional display does not appear fully consistent with their perceived internal condition.

This finding supports the broad theoretical idea behind Ekman's concept of emotional leakage. Ekman's work suggests that emotions may sometimes appear through expressive channels that are difficult to control completely, such as facial expression, bodily movement, tone, or interactional inconsistency (Ekman, 1992, 2003; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). The present data are consistent with this idea because many students reported noticing cases in which outward expression and perceived inner feeling did not seem fully aligned.

However, the finding should be interpreted cautiously. The data do not show that students can accurately detect hidden emotion or identify another person's precise emotional state. Rather, the data show that students perceive possible emotional mismatch. This interpretation is consistent with Barrett et al. (2019), who caution that facial and bodily cues should not be treated as direct, universal, or context-free evidence of internal emotion. Therefore, the present finding agrees with Ekman's general idea that emotion may leak through behaviour, but it also agrees with contemporary caution that such cues should be understood as interpretive signals rather than diagnostic facts.

2. Subtle Nonverbal Signs Are Recognized Unevenly

The result that 60% of students reported rarely noticing subtle signs such as forced smiling, avoiding eye contact, or finger tapping adds an important nuance to the study. Although most students had observed emotional incongruence in general, their attention to specific nonverbal signs was not equally strong. Only 5% reported always noticing such signs and 30% reported often noticing them. This suggests that subtle behavioural cues may be recognizable to students, but they are not always noticed consistently.

This finding helps answer why such patterns appeared in the data. Grade VI students may be able to sense that something is emotionally "off" in peer interaction, but they may not always have the vocabulary, attention, or interpretive framework needed to identify specific behaviours as emotionally meaningful. This is consistent with research on emotion differentiation, which shows that the ability to identify and describe emotions with nuance develops over time and is related to emotional functioning (Lennarz et al., 2018; Nook, 2021; Nook et al., 2018).

This result also refines the emotional leakage framework in the school context. Emotional leakage should not be understood as something that is always visible or always recognized by observers. A cue may appear, but students may not notice it. A behaviour may be visible, but students may not know how to interpret it. Thus, the present finding partly differs from simplified assumptions that hidden emotion can be easily read through body language. Instead, it suggests that emotional awareness among primary school students is present but still developing, uneven, and dependent on context, language, and social guidance.

3. Emotional Concealment as a Common Student Experience

The finding that 75% of participants had hidden their own emotions in front of others shows that emotional concealment was not only something students observed in peers, but also something many had personally experienced. This finding is important because it connects the research problem to students' own school lives. Hidden emotion was not merely an abstract concept; it was part of ordinary peer interaction and self-presentation.

This pattern can be understood through Gross's theory of emotion regulation, particularly the concept of expressive suppression. Expressive suppression refers to attempts to reduce or inhibit

visible emotional expression after an emotion has already been activated (Gross, 1998, 2002). Previous studies suggest that suppression may reduce outward expression but does not necessarily reduce the internal emotional experience. It may also create cognitive, affective, and interpersonal costs over time (Gross, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; Richards & Gross, 2000).

The present finding is consistent with this body of research because many students reported engaging in emotional concealment. However, the finding also adds a school-based developmental perspective. Among primary-aged students, hiding emotion may not only reflect self-control. It may also reflect uncertainty, embarrassment, lack of expressive vocabulary, or limited relational safety. Therefore, emotional concealment in this study should be understood as both a regulatory behaviour and a relational experience shaped by the school environment.

4. Reasons for Hiding Emotion: Embarrassment, Expression Difficulty, and Trust

The reasons students gave for hiding emotion further explain the findings. The two most frequent reasons were embarrassment and not knowing how to express feelings, each selected by 30% of participants. Another 20% selected lack of trust in others. These data show that emotional concealment was related not only to internal emotional control, but also to communication difficulty and relational safety.

The finding that 30% of students hid emotions because they did not know how to express feelings is consistent with research on emotion knowledge and emotion differentiation. Children's ability to understand, name, and communicate emotions has been linked to school adjustment, peer acceptance, and emotional functioning (Lennarz et al., 2018; Nook, 2021; Voltmer & von Salisch, 2017). When students lack emotional vocabulary or confidence in explaining what they feel, concealment may become a more likely response.

The finding that 20% of students hid emotions because they did not trust others also highlights the importance of the relational climate of school. Emotional regulation is not only an individual skill; it is influenced by whether students feel safe, accepted, and supported. Previous research has linked school connectedness and supportive school relationships with psychological well-being and adjustment (Allen et al., 2024; Yuen & Wu, 2024; Zhao & Zhao, 2015). Although this study did not directly measure school connectedness, the presence of trust as a reason for emotional concealment suggests that relational safety may shape whether students feel able to express emotional difficulty.

This finding strengthens the educational relevance of the study. If students hide emotions because they feel embarrassed, lack emotional language, or do not trust others, then schools should not only teach students to notice emotional cues. Schools should also create classroom routines that make emotional expression safer, more respectful, and less stigmatizing.

5. Mental-Health Meaning and the Need for Interpretive Caution

The finding that 95% of participants believed hiding emotions for too long can affect mental health shows that students strongly associated prolonged emotional concealment with psychological burden. This result is consistent with broader literature linking maladaptive emotion regulation and habitual suppression with lower well-being, depressive symptoms, and psychosocial difficulties (Compas et al., 2017; Gross & John, 2003; Kökönyei et al., 2024; Wylie et al., 2025).

At the same time, this result should not be overinterpreted. The data do not show that the participants themselves experienced mental-health problems. The finding only shows that students believed long-term emotional concealment could be harmful. This distinction is important because the study was not designed as a clinical assessment and did not diagnose individual students. In this sense, the finding agrees with previous research that prolonged suppression may be problematic, but the present study contributes a more cautious school-based interpretation: students already understand that hiding emotions indefinitely may become burdensome, even though their responses should be read as perceptions rather than clinical evidence.

This caution is especially important in primary education. Not every quiet behaviour, forced smile, or avoidance of eye contact should be treated as proof of hidden emotional struggle. Students may withhold emotions for many reasons, including privacy, shyness, cultural habit, fatigue, or temporary discomfort. Therefore, the educational implication is not that teachers or peers should try to detect hidden emotion with certainty. Rather, small behaviours and body language should be treated as possible signals that may invite supportive, respectful, and non-judgmental inquiry.

6. Educational Implications

The findings have several implications for school practice. First, because many students recognized emotional incongruence, schools can develop this awareness through age-appropriate social-emotional learning. Previous meta-analyses have shown that school-based social-emotional learning can support students' emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). In relation to the present study, social-emotional learning may help students distinguish between noticing possible emotional difficulty and making premature judgments about others.

Second, because embarrassment and difficulty expressing feelings were common reasons for concealment, schools should strengthen students' emotional vocabulary and communication skills. This can be done through simple classroom practices such as emotional check-ins, reflective writing, literature-based emotion discussion, and teacher modelling of respectful emotional language. These practices do not require students to disclose private experiences. Rather, they provide safe opportunities for students to name, understand, and communicate emotions appropriately.

Third, because lack of trust was also reported as a reason for hiding emotion, teachers and schools need to build relational safety. Students may be more willing to express emotional difficulty when they believe their feelings will be received with care rather than judgment. Teachers therefore need interpretive discipline: they may notice behavioural change or emotional incongruence, but their response should be based on gentle inquiry, support, and referral when needed, not on immediate labeling.

7. Theoretical Contribution

The theoretical contribution of this study is to apply emotional leakage cautiously in a primary school context. The findings suggest that emotional leakage in school should not be understood as the accurate detection of hidden inner states. Instead, it is better understood as socially perceived mismatch between outward emotional display and accompanying behavioural cues. This interpretation preserves the relevance of Ekman's theory while aligning with contemporary caution about inferring emotion too confidently from facial or bodily behaviour.

In this sense, the study contributes to the literature by shifting the discussion from emotional detection to emotional interpretation. It shows that Grade VI students can notice emotional incongruence in everyday interaction, but their interpretation of such cues remains developing and should be supported by emotional education, relational safety, and careful adult guidance.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample was small and limited to 20 Grade VI students from one school. The questionnaire was researcher-developed and used for descriptive purposes, not as a standardized psychometric scale. The data were based on self-report, so students' perceptions of hidden emotion were not verified through observation, interview, or multi-informant comparison. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as an initial school-based descriptive account rather than as broadly generalizable evidence.

Future research could involve larger and more diverse samples, include qualitative interviews or classroom observations, and examine how teacher support, school connectedness, or social-emotional learning programs influence students' ability to recognize and respond to emotional incongruence. Future studies should also continue to distinguish between awareness and certainty. The educational value of this topic lies not in teaching children to diagnose hidden emotion, but in helping them respond to emotional ambiguity with empathy, care, and appropriate help-seeking.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how small behaviours and body language may reveal hidden emotional struggle in everyday school interaction through the theoretical lens of emotional leakage. Based on the descriptive findings, emotional incongruence appears to be a recognizable part of students' everyday social experience. Most Grade VI students reported having seen someone appear outwardly happy while also seeming nervous or uncomfortable, most had personally hidden their own emotions in front of others, and nearly all believed that hiding emotions for too long could affect mental health.

These findings answer the research question by showing that small behaviours and body language may reveal hidden emotional struggle as socially meaningful cues rather than as direct proof of another person's inner emotional state. In this study, emotional leakage is best understood as perceived mismatch between outward expression and possible inner feeling. This interpretation supports the relevance of Ekman's concept of emotional leakage, while also emphasizing that such cues should be interpreted cautiously, contextually, and non-diagnostically.

The study concludes that hidden emotion in primary school should be understood as an educational and relational issue, not merely as an individual psychological condition. Students' tendency to hide emotion was associated with embarrassment, difficulty expressing feelings, and lack of trust. Therefore, schools should provide emotionally supportive routines that help students name feelings, communicate discomfort appropriately, respond empathetically to peers, and seek help from trusted adults when needed. Teachers should also respond to possible emotional incongruence through supportive inquiry rather than immediate labeling or assumption.

This study is limited by its small single-site sample, descriptive survey design, and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, include qualitative interviews or classroom observations, and examine how school connectedness, teacher support, and social-emotional learning programs influence students' ability to recognize and respond to emotional incongruence. Future studies should also maintain a careful distinction between noticing possible emotional cues and claiming certainty about another person's internal emotional state.

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