

Exploring the Use of Emotion Regulation Strategies to Improve Positive Emotional Well-being among School Teachers in Malaysia

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores into the emotional well-being of Malaysian school teachers, exploring the employment of emotion regulation strategies within and beyond the classroom setting. A purposeful sample of 12 teachers was drawn from primary schools to provide insights into their experiences. In-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the teachers' emotion regulation practices. The findings illuminate a diverse array of emotion regulation strategies utilised by teachers, including prayer, exercise, gardening, and spending quality time with their families. These strategies emerged as effective means to navigate and manage the complex emotional demands associated with their profession. Specifically, these methods were identified as instrumental in stress reduction, contributing to an overall enhancement of the teachers' emotional well-being. Recognising the emotionally taxing nature of the teaching profession, this research underscores the importance of comprehending how teachers regulate their emotions. The insights gained from this study not only shed light on the coping mechanisms employed by teachers but also hold significant implications for their job satisfaction and overall performance. In addressing the emotional dimensions of teaching, this study contributes valuable perspectives that can inform educational policies and support mechanisms aimed at fostering the well-being of educators.

Keywords: Emotions, emotion regulation, primary school, teachers, well-being

Introduction

Mental pressures, including stress, fatigue, depression, and frustration, are on the rise globally, impacting the well-being not only of individuals at home and in the workplace but also in schools (Hagen, Skjelstad & Nayar, 2023; Hasan et al., 2024; Glazzard & Rose, 2020; Ouellette et al., 2018). The increasing focus on mental pressures among teachers has prompted nations, including Malaysia, to reassess their education systems and seek enduring solutions. Among the findings is that our teachers are experiencing high social and emotional pressures. This is a cause for concern, because a positive mental and emotional well-being is essential to sound decision making, thinking, and for teachers to carry out the teaching and learning process in a friendly and effective manner thus producing positive-minded students. The imperative to guide students toward high levels of personal well-being is underscored in both the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Pre-school to Post-

Secondary Education) and Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education). In alignment with these goals, Malaysia places high expectations on school teachers to ensure students receive quality education. Informed by an ethnographic approach in qualitative education research, this study aims to investigate the emotion regulation of teachers in Malaysian schools. Drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews, the research unveils distinctive characteristics exhibited by 12 school teachers and explores influencing factors that can affect their ability to regulate emotions, consequently impacting their social and emotional well-being.

As widely known, teachers are inherently integral to the educational process. Qualified teachers represent a crucial national asset necessitating federal funding and inter-state collaboration, alongside additional measures at the state and local levels (Darling-Hammond & Skyes, 2003). However, reports suggest that approximately 50% of teachers entering the profession leave within the first five years of their career (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Elsayed & Roch, 2023; Räsänen et al., 2020). One of the major reasons for this high turnover is the significant pressure and stress experienced by teachers in schools (Diliberti, Schwartz & Grant, 2021; Heffernan et al., 2022; Morrison, 2019; Will, 2018). This contrasts with the assertion made by French and colleagues in the 1980s who characterised the teaching profession as a low-stress occupation (French et al., 1982). Similar to other professional jobs, teaching is an emotionally demanding profession. The job demands placed on teachers can impact not only their well-being but also their work performance (Admiraal & Røberg, 2023; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Rapid societal changes have led to increased demands, diverse expectations, and complex responsibilities for teachers. They now work in environments that can be detrimental to their well-being (Dreer, 2024; Ortan, Simut & Simut, 2021; Wang et al., 2024). Teachers are not only expected to teach but also to perform administrative tasks, manage challenging parental behaviour (Bricheno, Brown & Lubansky, 2009; Creagh et al., 2023), and cope with advances in technology (Khlaif et al., 2023; Nguyen & Habók, 2024; Tusiime, Johannesen & Gudmundsdottir, 2022). An article published in 2019 indicated that workplace accidents are not solely caused by work safety practices but also by mental health issues (“No workplace is immune to mental disorders”, 2019). Mental health issues in the workplace often result from a combination of factors, including personal work-related issues, the work environment, and organisational factors (“No workplace is immune to mental disorders”, 2019).

The issue on teachers’ well-being is not new and has garnered increasing attention over the past years (Alves, Lopes & Precioso, 2021; “No workplace is immune to mental disorders”, 2019; Nor Ain, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). For example, a study conducted in 2017 indicated that 2,123 out of 48,258 Malaysian teachers experienced a moderate stress level (Nor Ain, 2018). Studies consistently emphasised that teachers who are emotionally well-functioning tend to be better educators (Dreer, 2024; Morrison, 2019; Will, 2018; Yang, 2016). Despite the acknowledgement that teachers’ social and emotional well-being is crucial for both educators and students, no known approach addresses this issue adequately. Existing studies have suggested that understanding emotion regulation strategies enables individuals to effectively manage their emotions. Emotion regulation, when employed, facilitates the control of emotions, contributing to prosocial goals and encouraging positive social interactions (Sutton & Harper, 2009). However, most studies conducted on emotion regulation in school settings tend to involve samples from Western countries (Beaumont, 2023; Fried, 2011; Greenier, Derakhshan & Fathi, 2021; Sutton & Harper, 2009). Furthermore, most studies have looked at the feelings of teachers rather than attempting to understand the strategies they use to regulate these emotions (Leow, Lee & Leow, 2020). Therefore, our study aims to address these gaps by exploring the strategies used by teachers to regulate their own emotions during and after work. Based on the discussion above, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do school teachers regulate their emotions?

RQ2: How do school teachers describe the strategies they use to regulate their emotions during classroom instruction?

Literature Review

The Changing and Challenging Roles of Teachers in Schools

Teaching, a fulfilling profession centered on nurturing student growth and development (Bricheno, Brown & Lubansky, 2009; Naz & Rashid, 2021; Vestad & Bru, 2024), has become increasingly demanding due to rapid societal changes. The evolving landscape places teachers under greater pressure, with diverse expectations and complex responsibilities (Aydin & Ok, 2022; Day & Qing, 2009; Juvonen & Toom, 2023). Unfortunately, many teachers find themselves in environments hostile to their well-being (Day & Qing, 2009; Dreer, 2024; Ortan, Simut & Simut, 2021). Teacher performance is now marked by a large number of competencies and skills that they have to acquire throughout their professional careers (Molero et al., 2019). Beyond their core role as educators, teachers are now tasked with administrative duties, managing challenging parental behaviour (Bricheno, Brown & Lubansky, 2009; Creagh et al., 2023), and adapting to technological advances (Jomoad et al., 2021; Nguyen & Habók, 2024; Tusiime, Johannesen & Gudmundsdottir, 2022). These workloads are considered time consuming and are among the reasons for teachers to experience burnout and affect their job satisfaction. Additionally, the stringent governmental regulations in the education sector, coupled with ever-changing educational policies and reforms, intensify the challenges faced by teachers (Winefield, et al., 2008).

Amidst increasing job demands and evolving roles, statistics suggest that approximately 50% of teachers choose to leave the profession within their initial five years (Elsayed & Roch, 2023; Ingersoll et al., 2021; Morrison, 2019; Will, 2018). A key driver behind this trend is the significant pressure and stress experienced by teachers in educational settings (Diliberti, Schwartz & Grant, 2021; Heffernan et al., 2022; Morrison, 2019; Will, 2018). Teacher stress is defined as an uncomfortable feeling, negative emotion such as anger, anxiety and pressure which originated from their work (Maslach & Jackson, 1984). The demanding nature of their roles not only impacts teachers' well-being but also influences their overall work performance (Benevene, De Stasio & Fiorilli, 2020). It was previously reported that workplace accidents are not solely attributed to safety practices but are also linked to mental health concerns ("No workplace is immune to mental disorders", 2019). Mental health challenges in the workplace often result from a complex interplay of personal, environmental, and organisational factors ("No workplace is immune to mental disorders", 2019). Thus, a crucial aspect of teachers' competence lies in their capacity to effectively manage their emotions in the classroom in a manner that is conducive to effective teaching (Muelbacher, Haganeuer & Keller, 2022).

Emotions and Its Significance in Teaching

Emotions have always been part of the school context influencing the way teachers teach, and students learn (Frenzel, Daniels & Burić, 2021; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Both teachers and students may experience emotions such as boredom, excitement, and anger, influencing their perceptions and behaviour (Frenzel, Daniels & Burić, 2021; Keller & Becker, 2020; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). According to Mann (1997), people often hide anger when communicating with others followed by anxiety, disappointment, dismay, and boredom. Anger, a potent and intense emotion, is frequently frowned upon when expressed in professional settings (Geddes, Callister & Gibson, 2020).

The ability to regulate emotions is crucial in effective teaching (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020). Gross (1998) defined the process of emotion regulation as "the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (p. 275). Two widely studied emotion regulation strategies are emotion suppression (ES) and cognitive reappraisal (CR). Gross (2014) refers emotion suppression as the suppression of outward emotional expression such as "putting a smile on" when feeling anxious or keeping a "poker face" when feeling pleased. This strategy is considered as a response-focused strategy. Cognitive reappraisal on the other hand signifies an endeavour to alter the subjective assessment of a situation eliciting emotions, with the aim of mitigating its emotional impact and facilitating comprehension (Gross, 2014). As an illustration, a person experiencing nervousness before a job interview might engage in self-talk, reframing the event as "an opportunity to gain deeper

insights into the company,” consequently alleviating attenuating their anxiety (Gross, 2014). Individuals employing cognitive reappraisal more frequently may experience heightened confidence in their capacity to manage their emotions, leading to a sense of greater control over their lives (Dryman & Heimberg, 2018).

As previously illustrated, the well-being of teachers has become a prominent issue, gaining increasing attention in recent years (“No workplace is immune to mental disorders”; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, Song, 2022). Numerous studies emphasise the critical role of teacher well-being in shaping the teaching profession, asserting that emotionally healthy teachers contribute significantly to instructional effectiveness (Greenier, Derakhshan & Fathi, 2021; Morrison, 2019; Will, 2018; Yang, 2016). Research consistently underscores the direct correlation between teacher emotional well-being and instructional effectiveness (Bardach, Klassen & Perry, 2022; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Shoshani, 2021). Recognising the interconnectedness of teacher well-being, instructional effectiveness, and student outcomes is crucial for fostering a positive and productive educational environment (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Studies by Greenier, Derakhshan and Fathi (2021) and Sutton (2004) demonstrate that emotionally healthy teachers tend to be more engaging, supportive, and effective in fostering positive student outcomes. Efficient teacher performance is hindered in the presence of stress, impacting not only students’ grades but also their overall satisfaction at school (Frenzel, Daniels & Burić, 2021; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Positive indicators of well-being, including life satisfaction, are predictive of students’ academic achievement (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Day and Gu (2014) highlight that without adequate support for their personal well-being, teachers are unlikely to address the academic, behavioural, and social-emotional needs of their students effectively.

The Rise of Mental Health Issues among Malaysian Teachers

In the context of Malaysia, the teaching profession in the country has witnessed a surge in job demands, with teachers facing diverse responsibilities beyond traditional classroom duties. The Malaysian education system has undergone numerous reforms, introducing changes in curriculum, assessment methods, and teaching methodologies. These reforms, while aimed at enhancing education quality as well as improving the status of teachers (Lee, 2018), have also added pressure on Malaysian teachers. It is reported that more teachers are unhappy and experiencing more mental pressure in the country (Rajaendram, 2019). Former Education Minister, Dr Maszlee Malik reported in 2018 that there is a surge in teachers seeking counselling or mental health treatment from the ministry’s Psychology and Counselling Division between June and December 2018 (Rajaendram, 2019). This was mainly due to unwanted incidences such as their transfer application getting rejected that can jeopardise their own, and their students’ psychological well-being (Rajaendram, 2019).

In a study conducted by Nurul Izzah and colleagues (2010), approximately 72 percent of primary school teachers in Klang Valley experience stress. Primary school teachers experience stress mainly due to the misbehaviour of students and their mental well-being were influenced by their workload (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Nurul Izzah, Zailina, Saidi & Haslinda, 2010). Furthermore, other factors contributing to teachers in Malaysia in feeling stressed include not being appreciated, being overburdened with non-teaching workload, and a lack of funding and equipment in school (Krishnan & Gan, 2022). Similarly, Datuk Satinah Syed Saleh, the former President of the Malaysian Association for Education, previously stated that mental health support and additional teacher training are necessary (Aznan, 2022). She emphasised that the government should prioritise teachers’ well-being and reduce their heavy workload, as these are the core reasons for the worsening mental health among teachers (Aznan, 2022). In addition, neglecting mental health issues among teachers can result in them opting for early retirement within three to four years, which could also adversely affect students (Aznan, 2022).

Methodology

Over the last several decades, numerous studies have been conducted to gauge teachers’ social and emotional well-being, employing quantitative data collection procedures (Chan et al., 2021;

Fernandez-Berrocal et al., 2017; Kovess-Masféty, Rios-Seidel, Sevilla-Dedieu, 2007; Mehta, Atkins & Frazier, 2013; Ouellette et al., 2018). These procedures, including surveys assessing burnout and pressures, have provided valuable data, contributing to our understanding of teachers' emotions. However, a notable gap exists in the literature, particularly in the context of Malaysian samples, where qualitative studies exploring the nuanced aspects of emotional well-being promotion among teachers are limited. Hence, this study adopts a qualitative inquiry approach to gather in-depth insights into effective emotion regulation strategies.

The participant pool comprises of 12 primary school teachers from two schools in Selangor, selected through purposive sampling. Criteria for selection include a minimum of one year of teaching experience and a willingness to share experiences with emotion regulation (see Table 1). A semi-structured interview protocol is employed to elicit rich and detailed accounts of teachers' experiences with emotion regulation, allowing for in-depth exploration of the strategies they employ. The interviews were also guided by open-ended questions, allowing teachers to freely express their thoughts and reflect on strategies they use to manage their emotions both in, and outside the classroom. Conducted on a one-to-one basis in settings chosen by the teachers, such as cafes, each interview lasted no more than one hour, with field notes taken throughout. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were briefed on the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of their participation. To protect the identity of the participants, their names were replaced with code names such as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3, and schools were identified as either School A or School B (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' background

| Pseudonym | Gender | Marital Status | Years of Teaching | School |
|------------|--------|----------------|-------------------|----------|
| Teacher 1 | F | Married | 13 | School A |
| Teacher 2 | F | Single | 4 | School A |
| Teacher 3 | F | Married | 15 | School A |
| Teacher 4 | M | Single | 5 | School A |
| Teacher 5 | F | Married | 8.5 | School A |
| Teacher 6 | M | Single | 2 | School A |
| Teacher 7 | F | Married | 11 | School B |
| Teacher 8 | M | Married | 8 | School B |
| Teacher 9 | F | Married | 10 | School B |
| Teacher 10 | F | Married | 10 | School B |
| Teacher 11 | F | Married | 12.5 | School B |
| Teacher 12 | M | Single | 3 | School B |

The interview transcripts were thematically analysed. The thematic analysis approach which was developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), is well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data, making it an appropriate method for exploring the diverse emotion regulation strategies employed by primary school teachers. Furthermore, thematic analysis is used to derive codes from unstructured datasets to build meaningful categories (Terry et al., 2017). The researchers used an open coding process that focused on building larger themes and descriptions emerging from the raw data (Terry et al., 2017). Once the patterns and themes were identified, they were then refined into themes that were enough to capture a set of ideas contained in numerous text segments. Thus, the overarching themes and sub-themes within the dataset were identified, connecting codes to form a coherent narrative. The researchers iteratively reviewed and revised the themes to ensure that they accurately represent the participants' experiences.

Table 2. Examples of Open Coding

| | Quotation | Code | Participant No |
|------------------|--|--|----------------|
| Example 1 | <i>I don't feel it's right to be mad at the students when they don't</i> | Participant describing why they manage their | Teacher 8 |

| | | | |
|------------------|--|---|-----------|
| | <i>behave according to the way you want them to. So, basically, what I normally do is just smile and pretend that everything is OK. (Partial statement of the participant)</i> | emotions | |
| Example 2 | <i>Prayer is a source of strength for me. It provides a moment of reflection and helps me gather my thoughts, especially after a challenging class. (Partial statement of the participant)</i> | Preferred emotion regulation strategies | Teacher 3 |

Findings and Discussion

This study demonstrated that emotion regulation is a critical aspect of a teacher's well-being, influencing not only their personal satisfaction but also the quality of their interactions with students in the classroom. Teachers indeed performed emotion regulation strategies to improve their own emotions, and improve their interactions with students. As previously discussed, teaching is an emotionally demanding profession, with educators often facing a myriad of challenges both within and outside the classroom. The findings of this study underscore the importance of emotion regulation strategies in helping Malaysian school teachers navigate the emotional demands of their work, thereby enhancing their overall job satisfaction and performance. The analysis revealed diverse and detailed strategies that shed light on the emotion regulation practices within the Malaysian primary school teaching context. All 12 school teachers participating in the study reported actively engaging in emotion regulation strategies inside and outside of the classroom, and also outside of their work hours to bolster their emotional well-being. These findings are divided into two main themes; regulation motivations and teacher emotion regulation. Each themes are then further divided into several subthemes.

Regulation Motivations

Thematic analysis identified several reasons why teachers regulate their own, and others' emotions, including motivations rooted in religion and culture.

Subtheme: Religion and Cultural Motivations

The first subtheme within the regulation motivations theme is religion and cultural motivations. The findings underscored the influence of Malaysian cultural norms and Islamic faith on teachers' emotional expression within the classroom setting. All participants in this study identify as Malay and practice the Islamic religion. Among them, majority highlighted the importance of maintaining a composed and respectful demeanor in the classroom, aligning with cultural and religion expectations. The participants shared narratives highlighting how cultural and Islamic values act as guiding principles in their approach to emotional expression within the education context. Specifically, virtues such as patience, compassion, and humility, are integral to maintaining a harmonious classroom environment. For example, Teacher 1 felt that the culture and religion that she upholds helps balance her emotions between positive and negative emotions. In her own words:

In Islam and even in the Malay culture, there's an emphasis on respect. Even if I'm feeling stressed, externally, I have to show that I am calm. I think I was a little less patient during the first couple of years teaching but after a while, I became better with

managing my emotions and yes, my religion and culture does kind of helps balance them. (Teacher 1)

Another participant (Teacher 3) who felt similarly explained:

As a primary school teacher in what you could say mainly within the Malay-Muslim community, I see that managing my emotions as not only a responsibility as a teacher but also a spiritual journey guided by Islamic teachings.

Teacher 11 had also spoken about the teaching of Islam and had indicated that managing emotions is part of the teaching of the religion and that fostering a harmonious learning environment is rooted in the Malay cultural values. She also added in both the Malay and English language:

Dalam Islam, amalan berbudi bahasa ni diletakkan pada kedudukan tinggi [In Islam, the virtuous practice of language is placed in a high position]. We have to choose the right words before we speak, and we need to treat people well regardless of age, religion, and race.

These findings are similar to what had been found in past studies. For instance, in a study conducted by Vishkin, Bigman and Tamir (2014), they indicated that religion can impact various stages of emotion regulation, encompassing the establishment of emotional objectives and affecting both intrinsic and extrinsic emotion regulation. For instance, religion shapes preferred emotional states by defining emotional goals that encompass sentiments such as awe, gratitude, joy, guilt, and hatred, aligning them with its core values. Also, they found that religious beliefs shape internal aspects of emotion regulation, spanning self-regulatory abilities, convictions regarding the adaptability of emotions, and the adoption of particular emotion regulation tactics (Vishkin, Bigman & Tamir, 2014). Another study undertaken by Mahmoodi, Sadeghi and Omid (2017) revealed that individuals with a more robust spiritual inclination demonstrated enhanced abilities in emotion regulation.

Subtheme: Student Engagement

In addition to the significant influences of religion and culture on teachers' motivations to regulate emotions, another subtheme that had emerged during the data analysis is student engagement. Numerous teachers had expressed the importance of fostering student engagement in the classroom as a means to enhance learning outcomes and create a positive classroom environment. The emphasis on student engagement stems from the recognition that actively involving students in the learning process not only facilitates academic achievement but also contributes to the cultivation of a positive and conducive classroom atmosphere. The teachers believe that when their students are actively engaged in the classroom, they are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter and retain knowledge over the long term. The teachers also aim to reduce instances of boredom or disengagement which could otherwise lead to negative emotional responses from both the students and teachers. Throughout the interviews, teachers provided insights into how their own emotions influenced their approach to fostering student engagement. One teacher remarked:

When my students are actively involved in class activities, I feel more motivated and enthusiastic about teaching and manage any negative emotions that may arise during the day. (Teacher 4)

Another teacher highlighted the importance of maintaining a positive demeanour, stating, "When I feel frustrated or overwhelmed, I remind myself that my emotions can impact how engaged my students are. So, I try to stay positive and enthusiastic to keep them interested." Furthermore, teachers acknowledged the need to regulate their emotions, particularly when dealing with challenging situations or students. One teacher explained:

Sometimes, I have to consciously switch my emotions, especially when dealing with challenging children. I know that maintaining a calm image is important to keep my students engaged and focus. When I am calm, they become calm too. (Teacher 5)

Teacher 12 also emphasised the impact of her mood on the classroom atmosphere, stating:

To be honest, I noticed that my mood does affect the classroom atmosphere. So, even on tough days, I make the effort to create a positive environment to encourage student engagement.

These insights align with previous research findings highlighting the importance of emotion regulation in effective teaching. Numerous studies have pointed out that regulating emotions is crucial for creating a supportive and engaging learning environment (e.g., Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007).

Subtheme: Professional Satisfaction

Professional satisfaction also emerged as a significant subtheme in understanding why primary school teachers often regulate their emotions. The findings revealed that a majority of teachers expressed a strong sense of duty and commitment to their profession as motivating factors for managing their emotions effectively. This professional satisfaction was rooted in the belief that emotion regulation is integral to fulfilling their role as teachers or educators and maintaining a positive classroom environment conducive to student learning. Several teachers articulated their belief in the inherent responsibility they bear to create a safe and nurturing environment for their students. They emphasised the importance of emotional management in achieving this goal, viewing it as a fundamental aspect of their professional commitment as a teacher. In their own words:

As a teacher, I see it as my duty to create a safe environment for my students. So, you mentioned about managing emotions, yes I think it is essential I achieve that. (Teacher 12)

Teaching is more than just a job to me. It's more of a calling! [laughs] Part of being a dedicated teacher is being able to handle rough and tough situations with ease for the sake of students' well-being. (Teacher 2)

This sentiment underscores the deeply ingrained sense of purpose and dedication that motivates teachers to regulate their emotions effectively. Furthermore, many teachers drew upon personal experiences and familial influences to underscore their understanding of the significance of emotional resilience in the teaching profession. For instance, one of the participants reflected on the legacy of teaching within her family. She noted:

When I entered this profession, I knew it would require being resilient emotionally. My late mother was a teacher and my aunt and grandfather was a teacher. You could say that I was surrounded by teachers when I grew up. Becoming a teacher is all about setting an example for my students like how you set an example to your children. Even if at times it's difficult, you just have to be professional and know what is OK and not OK. (Teacher 9)

Based on Teacher 9's response, it is evident that despite the inherent challenges that the teacher may face, the familial connection imbued her with a commitment to model emotional resilience and professionalism for her students. Additionally, one of the teachers highlighted the importance of maintaining professionalism and refraining from succumbing to negative emotions, even in challenging situations. He remarked:

I don't feel it's right to be mad at the students when they don't behave according to the way you want them to. So, basically, what I normally do is just smile and pretend that everything is OK. As a teacher, you just don't do that. (Teacher 8)

These findings demonstrate the teachers' dedication to upholding professional standards and their conscious effort to display positive emotions for the benefit of their students' learning experiences. Such behaviours align closely with the expectations placed upon teachers within the educational context as mentioned previously, emphasising the importance of maintaining and nurturing classroom environment conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Teacher Emotion Regulation

The thematic analysis revealed a variety of strategies performed by the teachers to regulate their own emotions. These strategies or techniques employed by the teachers within the classroom environment and beyond, were intended to manage their emotions effectively, and enhancing their ability to maintain composure and foster a positive learning environment. One prominent subtheme that emerged from the data is the implementation of in-class coping mechanisms.

Subtheme: In-class Coping Mechanisms

Within the dynamic context of the classroom, the majority of school teachers described employing various strategies to navigate and regulate their emotions amidst the inherent challenges of working with primary school children, typically aged between 7 to 12 years old. Recognising the unique demands of teaching young children, the teachers articulated the expectation for constant engagement and cheerful behaviour from their students.

It's not easy to teach small children. Do you have small children? I'm sure you know what it's like. They have short attention span especially those who just started primary school. Older ones like 11 and 12 years old are normally easier to handle. But I'm not complaining. I'm just telling you the difference. So it means that the way you need to handle your emotions is different too. (Teacher 11)

This sentiment underscores the inherent complexities of managing emotions in a primary school setting, where students' short attention spans and varying developmental stages present distinct challenges for the teachers. To effectively cope with these challenges, teachers shared insights into their personal coping strategies, which included techniques such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and mindfulness exercises. These practices were instrumental in helping teachers regain focus, maintaining composure, and respond effectively to challenging situations in the classroom. For instance, Teacher 5 remarked:

When I feel overwhelmed, I take a deep breath and count to five silently. It helps me regain my focus and stay calm during challenging moments in the classroom.

This simple yet effective technique highlights the power of intentional breathing exercises in promoting emotion regulation and enhancing teacher well-being. Moreover, several teachers emphasised the integration of mindfulness activities into their daily routines, both for themselves and their students as a means of promoting relaxation and focus. These findings align with a study conducted by Muharrani, Lubis and Hardjo (2024), which found that Air Traffic Controller (ATC) officers who practice mindfulness are able to regulate their emotions and achieve a balance in work and life. Additionally, the current study found that creating designated "cool-down" corners within the classroom provided a dedicated space for students and teachers alike to step away from heightened emotions and engage in calming activities. As one teacher elaborated:

Having a designated cool-down corner in the classroom where students and I can take a moment to step away and collect ourselves has been really beneficial. It allows us the chance to address any emotions before they become worst. (Teacher 9)

Another teacher who responded similarly described:

It's not fancy corner or anything. The corner in my class is actually a reading corner so there's a chair and a few books. So when you identify students who are feeling frustrated, you just ask them to head to the corner. They don't treat it like a punishment. But it does make them feel a bit more better. I sit there too sometimes but before I go there, I will ask students to draw anything they want on a piece of papers. That gives me a few minutes to feel calm. (Teacher 7)

These approaches not only facilitate emotion regulation but also foster a supportive and empathetic classroom environment, where students feel empowered to manage their emotions constructively. Furthermore, the adaptive nature of these coping mechanisms underscored by the flexible utilisation of existing classroom resources, such as repurposing a reading corner into a calming space. By leveraging familiar classroom elements and incorporating creative activities like drawing, teachers were able to effectively de-escalate tension and promote emotional well-being among students and themselves alike.

Subtheme: Religious Coping

The findings also revealed that most of the participating teachers emphasised the incorporation of Islamic practices as effective strategies for emotion regulation in their professional lives. Specifically, they highlighted the profound impact of prayer and reflection in finding emotional balance both during and after work hours amidst the demands and stresses inherent in their roles as a teacher. Through prayer and moments of introspection, they reported experiencing a sense of inner peace and clarity, enabling them to navigate challenging situations with resilience and composure. The importance of prayer as a source of strength and guidance was underscored by several teachers, who described it as a pivotal aspect of their daily routine. For instance, one teacher explained:

Prayer is a source of strength for me. It provides a moment of reflection and helps me gather my thoughts, especially after a challenging class. (Teacher 3)

This sentiment was echoed by Teacher 4, who highlighted the importance of taking brief moments of reflection before each class. In his own words:

Before each class, I'll just sit down in the teacher's room for a few minutes. It doesn't take long for me to feel calm. About 15 to 30 minutes would even do. Just a moment for me to breathe and prepare to enter the next class. I'll recite some prayers then enter the class. (Teacher 4)

These pauses highlighted by the teacher were instrumental in fostering a sense of calmness and readiness to engage with students effectively. Teacher 7 and Teacher 8 also contributed to the discussion:

I need to do that [pray]. Cause every class and every student I handle is different. Some need more attention, some need me to be more playful, some may need me to use more energy to handle their playful behaviours. (Teacher 7)

Praying isn't just wajib [a must] for me and those who are Islam. It helps make me feel peaceful and face whatever challenges that comes my way with ease. (Teacher 8)

Subtheme: Physical Wellness

The incorporation of activities related to physical wellness emerged as one of the subthemes among the primary school teachers participating in this study. A significant number of participants reported integrating exercise into their daily routines as a means of improving their emotional well-being. Common activities mentioned included jogging, yoga, and attending fitness classes, all of which were described as effective stress-relief measures. One teacher (Teacher 6) highlighted the role of exercise in reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of well-being, stating, "I often do some exercise like jogging after work that's if I teach during the morning school session, or over the weekend. It does help reduce my anxiety and help me feel good." Another teacher responded:

I sometimes join fitness classes at the gym near my house. It does help improve my emotions when needed. (Teacher 1)

Furthermore, gardening emerged as another noteworthy activity embraced by some of the participants. Although only two teachers specifically mentioned gardening, both expressed the profound impact it had on their emotional state. They described gardening as a calm and fulfilling activity that provided them with a sense of tranquility and accomplishment. Teacher 3 had said:

Gardening has always been my coping mechanism. Watering my plants and seeing them grow makes me calm and happy.

The other participant (Teacher 10) elaborated on the therapeutic nature of gardening. She described:

Tanam pokok [planting] can be therapeutic. When the flowers bloom and you see the vegies grow, you feel like you accomplished something in life. (Teacher 10)

The findings show the profound impact of physical activities such as exercise and gardening on their emotional well-being. These activities serve not only stress-relief measures but also as avenues for relaxation, fulfilment, and personal growth. The therapeutic benefits of engaging in physical wellness activities are evident in the participants' responses, highlighting the importance of incorporating such practices in the daily lives of primary school teachers to support their overall health and resilience.

Subtheme: Family balance

Another prominent subtheme that emerged from the thematic analysis was the importance of finding the right family balance among primary school teachers. Majority of the teachers who participated in this study were married with children, and they stressed on the important role that spending quality time with their families played in improving their emotions and capacity to cope with the demands of their profession. Engaging in activities and prioritising family time emerged as crucial strategies for effectively managing emotions amidst the challenges of teaching. Family interactions allow them to feel emotionally supported and a sense of belonging. It also helps them unwind and recharge after emotionally demanding workdays. For instance Teacher 3 indicated:

Spending quality time with my family is my anchor. It helps me feel rejuvenated and helps me face each day at school with a positive mindset.

Another participant humorously remarked:

When I feel overwhelmed at work, I know I can find peace in the arms of my family. Except when my children misbehave [laughs]. Just kidding. (Teacher 10)

Several teachers highlighted the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities but emphasised the profound impact of investing time in their loved ones on their professional well-being:

My family provides me with the support and encouragement I need to navigate the emotional rollercoaster of teaching. They are my rock. (Teacher 2)

Balancing work and family is challenging, but I've learned that investing time in my loved ones ultimately makes me a better teacher. When you are fair to your family in terms of being able to spend enough time with them, you will feel better. (Teacher 11)

Additionally, one of the participants emphasised on the importance of establishing boundaries between work and family to safeguard one's emotional health:

I think it's important to create boundaries between work and family time. It's not easy cause sometimes you have to answer parents' questions, reply to other related work texts. But if you are able to master this, it will help improve what you mentioned – emotional well-being. Creating these boundaries allows me to recharge and be fully present with my students when I'm at school. (Teacher 5)

The findings show the important role of family support and dedicated quality time with in fostering emotional resilience and well-being among primary school teachers. Participants regarded prioritising family as an effective emotion regulation strategy within the teaching profession.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides insights into the emotion regulation strategies that Malaysian primary school teachers employ both within and outside of their work hours. Understanding these strategies is essential for fostering a more positive teaching environment and supporting the well-being of teachers, particularly in light of the emotionally demanding nature of their profession. Recognising the cultural and individual nuances of these strategies is critical for ensuring the mental and emotional health of teachers in Malaysia. Fostering a conducive work environment and promoting work-life balance are key steps in ensuring the mental and emotional health of teachers, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes for students.

The findings suggest that school teachers employ a multifaceted approach to emotion regulation, encompassing both in-class and out-of-class strategies. The integration of reflective practices, leisure activities, social support, coping mechanisms, and holistic approaches highlights the complexity of emotion regulation in the context of teaching. These findings have implications for teacher training programs, emphasising the importance of equipping teachers with a diverse set of tools to navigate the emotional demands of their profession. Additionally, recognising the interconnectedness of in-class and out-of-class strategies can inform the development of comprehensive support systems aimed at enhancing the emotional wellbeing of school teachers. Future research could explore the long-term impact of these emotion regulation practices on teacher satisfaction, retention rates, and overall mental health.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that educational authorities in Malaysia implement systematic measures to support primary school teachers in managing their emotions effectively. This includes providing structured emotional support programs tailored to the unique challenges faced by teachers in the Malaysian educational context. Additionally, further research is suggested to comprehensively examine emotion regulation strategies among all primary school teachers under the purview of the Ministry of Education (MOE), aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of emotional exhaustion on teacher performance and overall well-being.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. The study concept and design were developed by Author 1, who also conducted the fieldwork and prepared the literature review. Author 2 contributed to refining the literature review, drafting the research methodology, and interpreting the findings. Authors 3, 4, and 5 worked collaboratively on participant recruitment, data collection, and reviewing and polishing the manuscript.

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