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TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR EMOTION REGULATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

Mastering emotion regulation is a critical component of personal and academic growth for students with special educational needs, who often experience heightened difficulties with emotional control. Despite the pivotal role of educators in inclusive and special education settings, empirical research on the everyday practices of Malaysian teachers in supporting emotion regulation remains limited. This study investigates the strategies employed by special education teachers to manage emotion regulation among students in Malaysia, addressing the gap between teachers' experience-based knowledge and the lack of structured institutional support. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study captured the lived experiences of four special education teachers from Malaysian primary schools, selected via purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis approach. Five core themes emerged: (1) understanding individual student needs and emotional triggers; (2) fostering trust-based emotional relationships; (3) implementing behavioural and reinforcement strategies; (4) creating supportive environments and safe

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spaces; and (5) utilizing de-escalation and calming techniques. The findings suggest that teachers rely on a multifaceted blend of relational, behavioural, and environmental approaches that are largely adaptive and grounded in practical experience. The study concludes that effective emotion regulation management requires holistic teacher involvement, bolstered by formal professional training and conducive learning environments. These insights offer significant implications for teacher education programs and the development of culturally responsive, inclusive strategies within the Malaysian special education framework.

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Keywords:

Emotional Regulation, Malaysia, Phenomenological Study,
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Introduction

Emotion regulation is a fundamental pillar for the social, emotional, and academic growth of all learners. Emotion regulation (ER) and emotional intelligence (EI) are currently acknowledged as key processes to ensure functional independence, psychological resilience, and social inclusion for students with disabilities (SWD) worldwide (Zainal, 2025). Moreover, research on global trends in teacher education highlights the significance of teacher's emotional competencies and its deep influence on building empathetic and effective learning environments (Mohamed Adnan et al., 2026). But for students with special needs, dealing with anger, anxiety and frustration can often be overwhelming. This may result in behavioral issues, reduced learning engagement, and difficult relationships with peers, ultimately affecting academic progress and classroom dynamics (Jais et al., 2021; Harmalis, 2022). Teachers in inclusive and special education are key to meeting these needs and are educators and facilitators of emotional development.

Proactive and responsive strategies need to be used together to effectively support emotional regulation. Teachers frequently combine plans and supportive contexts with the explicit demonstration of coping skills. Studies show that the emotional intelligence and empathy of a teacher are important factors in their ability to help students regulate themselves (Skura & Świdarska, 2021; Muehlbacher et al., 2022). In addition, although there are evidence-based frameworks such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and cognitive-behavioural approaches, and the literature recommends their implementation, there are difficulties in consistently applying these in real-world classrooms, which are dependent on personal judgement and experience of the teacher (Love et al., 2024).

Empirical studies on this topic in Malaysia are scarce. Based on existing literature, it can be seen that the teachers in Malaysia are aware of the need to regulate their emotions, but they have a moderate level of application of structured strategies, which are mostly experienced-

based (Qi & Nordin, 2023; Md Jais & Low, 2024). Systematic implementation is hindered by the lack of special training, inadequate institutional support, and a dearth of culturally adapted programs (Dewi et al., 2025; Fazzuan et al., 2024). Although these innovative tools, such as batik art therapy, Augmented Reality, and robotics, have been shown to be useful, they are often limited by teacher preparedness and the availability of resources (Jais et al., 2022; Teng & Ali Jinnah, 2021; Sidique et al., 2024).

This study's main concern is the discrepancy between the emotional needs of the learners and the ability of the teacher to respond to them practically in class. Emotions are dysregulated. Many students with special needs have outbursts or are socially withdrawn, negatively impacting their social health and learning. Nevertheless, there are indications that special educators in Malaysia have only moderate knowledge on specific disorders and emotion regulation strategies and is limited to the curriculum.

In addition, most research has either involved clinical interventions or therapeutic models designed by psychologists and/or counsellors (Harmalis, 2022; Sessiani & Syukur, 2021; Qi & Nordin, 2023). Studies on the actual classroom situations in Malaysia are surprisingly sparse when it comes to actual practices teachers use in the day-to-day classroom. Understanding what these "lived experiences" are challenging in designing teacher preparation programs that are feasible and culturally responsive. This study addresses this gap by offering a qualitative examination of the tactics that teachers in actual practice engage in special education. In this regard, the main aim of this study is to look into the approaches teachers take to handle emotional control of students with special needs in Malaysia.

Literature Review

This literature review covers studies in western context, studies in the Malaysian educational context, and studies in Islamic perspectives and identified the key strategies, challenges and theoretical foundations in emotion regulation in educational practice. The review will synthesize the findings to give a solid background to understand teachers approach, and gaps and opportunities for future study to foster emotional and behavioural development among special needs students.

Western Context

In the West, teachers use direct and indirect means of helping students manage their emotions. There are two types of strategies for teaching regulation: direct and indirect. Direct strategies include explicit instruction and modeling of regulation, while indirect strategies include setting up structured routines, making environmental adjustments, and using the teacher's own emotions as a model.

The overall results indicate that SEL programs for students with special educational needs (SEN) tend to have small, but positive effects on social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). They added, however, that outcomes can be variable depending on the context and the characteristics of the participants, and that more good quality, larger-scale studies in inclusive environments are needed. In line with this, Nuske et al. (2023) found that interventions focussed on individual developmental levels and consisting of multiple components (cognitive-behavioural, regulation training, and stakeholder involvement) are most effective.

These frameworks can often be adapted for practical implementation. As noted by Love et al. (2024), although programs such as "The Zones of Regulation" have an impact on enhancing emotional awareness, their implementation often requires adaptations, such as the use of co-regulation strategies, the inclusion of sensory activities, and a simplified visuals approach. Jasni et al. (2025), for instance, concluded that group-based interventions based on cognitive-behavioural therapy are most effective with support from parent education and teacher education, but warned that many of the current studies are not well-designed.

The teacher's personal psychological state is a basic factor in addition to specific programs. Skura and Świdarska (2021) showed that teachers who have a high level of emotional intelligence and social competence have more empathy and adaptability, which are important for effectively supporting learners with SEN. Additionally, Muehlbacher et al. (2022) pointed out that there are more emotional demands in collaborative settings, like team-taught classrooms. In these contexts, teachers use techniques such as cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression and seek each other's support to create a positive classroom environment.

Malaysian Context

Studies on emotion regulation and special educational needs (SEN) is an evolving field in Malaysia with most studies being descriptive and exploratory in nature. Research studies have recently centered on teacher competence, institutional obstacles, and the possibility of new and culturally appropriate interventions.

Teacher Knowledge and Practice

Research has consistently shown that there is a disconnect between teacher awareness and practice. According to Qi and Nordin (2023), teachers' awareness of emotional disturbances is moderate, but they do not have a sufficient understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms or effective intervention methods. In the same vein, Md Jais and Low (2024) found that most of the special education teachers use informal and experience-based approaches instead of a structured and evidence-based approach. This informal adaptation is mostly due to the absence of structured institutional support and systemic barriers exist in the transition to formal primary education (Zahri & Zainal, 2025). One of the common challenges faced by educators is the lack of training and readiness in inclusive practices, along with limited or inconsistently implemented Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and rigid standardized curricula (Zahri & Zainal, 2025). As a result, teachers lack thorough institutional support and must rely on their practical experience to deal with the complicated emotional requirements of students.

Barriers and Holistic Frameworks

Fazzuan et al. (2024) determined the critical strategies and barriers through the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) with experts and educators. They highlight the importance of culturally responsive SEL programs and training. But access to educational tools and a cultural taboo against talking about emotions can prove to be barriers to implementation. Therefore, it is conclusively recommended that a holistic approach is needed with active collaboration among teachers, parents, and policy makers in Malaysian schools to ensure that it is sustainable and inclusive.

Innovative and Culturally Grounded Interventions

Several studies are conducted on technology-supported and culture-based approaches to increase emotional involvement. For example, Jais et al., (2022) stated that batik art therapy is a meaningful culturally based engagement tool if the teacher is given easy-to-access art therapy modules and art therapy formal training. Sidique et al. (2024) reported that humanoid robots can enhance children's engagement, enjoyment, but warned against excessive reliance on them. Additionally, Teng and Ali Jinnah (2021) discovered that AR activities would make abstract emotional concepts more concrete for autistic learners and hence contribute to their motivation and peer interaction.

Research Gaps

The findings show that there are gaps and limitations in the current literature, highlighting a disparity in theory and practice in special education. Much of the western research is systematic with an intervention focus on CBT and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks with an emphasis on quantitative data and short-term effectiveness. But cultural norms play an important role in shaping, regulating, and perceiving emotional expression in social interactions (Zainal, 2025). Hence, emotional interventions and support strategies need to be integrated with culturally and contextually sensitive frameworks, which are congruent with local values, instead of only relying on western frameworks to ensure sustainable outcomes (Zainal, 2025). Through exploring teachers daily lived experience and practical strategies, research can provide a better understanding for teacher training programmes and for creating truly inclusive and emotionally responsive education environments in Malaysia.

Much of the literature to date in the Malaysian context is still descriptive and exploratory in nature, exploring teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and readiness, with little evaluation of what teachers actually do in the classroom and the impact of their work on students. The key issues that most of the local studies have pointed out are the lack of training, experience-based strategies, and institutional policy support (Qi & Nordin, 2023; Md Jais & Low, 2024; Dewi et al., 2025). There are also some innovative approaches that are grounded in cultural values, such as batik art therapy, augmented reality (AR) and robotics, which are starting to become available, but with low empirical support and research, making it difficult to expand their use. (Jais et al., 2022; Teng, Kie & Ali Jinnah, 2021; Sidique et al., 2024).

Finally, the literature highlights the need for context-sensitive, methodologically sound research that will bring together the cultural, religious and practical realities of Malaysian classrooms. A need exists to go beyond awareness and perception and adopt evidence-based and sustainable practices. The research will provide insights into the practical issues and experiences of teachers, which can help to develop more effective teacher training programs and create more inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments in Malaysia.

There are considerable differences between the literature from the West and from Malaysia which have been reviewed. Studies in the West tend to focus on the quantitative assessment of cognitive-behavioural and SEL models, and neglect to consider the experience and sustainability for teachers. On the other hand, research on Malaysian education is still at a very exploratory stage with emphasis on perception and readiness, instead of the actual classroom.

Islamic Perspective

In Islam, it is highly recommended to control their emotions, and the expression of uncontrolled anger is forbidden by all means. This is based on the hadiths in which the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Do not get angry" so many times. Good emotional control is regarded as a prerequisite for a good life in this world and the afterlife. Thus, Islamic education must create humans with high emotional intelligence, which has the ability to suppress anger and be patient, and practice forgiveness as mentioned in the Qur'an (Ali 'Imran 3:134).

Islam considers the role of a teacher as a murabbi, an educator who guides the intellectual, spiritual and emotional potential of a student while in the context of nurturing emotional regulation, the role of the teacher is that of an educator who guides the emotional potential of a student. The emphasis was made by Al-Ghazali that the murabbi should be compassionate, empathetic and kind, and refrain from using harsh language and sarcasm. This role would also be extended to special education because Islam teaches that justice, respect and compassion must be extended to all human beings in a way that is free of discrimination or ridicule (Surat Al-Hujurat 49:11).

Islamic pedagogy offers several methods to develop emotional intelligence:

- ***Uswah hasanah***: Teachers provide a "good example" for students to emulate.
- ***Ta'wīd***: Habituation through consistent practice, such as patience and apologizing.
- ***Mau'izah***: Providing advice to foster positive emotions.
- ***Ta'dīb***: Moderate, restorative discipline rather than harsh physical punishment.

Moreover, Sangadah et al. (2025) determined that special needs education had three fundamental principles, namely first, every child is born in a state of pure nature (*fitrah*), second, education is founded on mercy (*rahmah*), third, fairness (*adl*) is found in the education of children with special needs based on their individual needs. The spirit of Islam is inclusiveness and non-discrimination, as is seen with companions such as Abdullah bin Ummi Maktum, who was blind. In conclusion, Islamic teachings offer a holistic framework that can guide educators in developing emotionally balanced students with noble attributes.

Theoretical Framework

The Emotional Regulation Process Model of James Gross (1998), a basic model of emotional monitoring, appraisal and response modification, serves as the guiding principle for this study. The model is based on differentiating between strategies that are antecedent focused, which aim to prevent escalation of emotions in the first place, and those that are response focused, which aim to manage emotional responses after they occur.

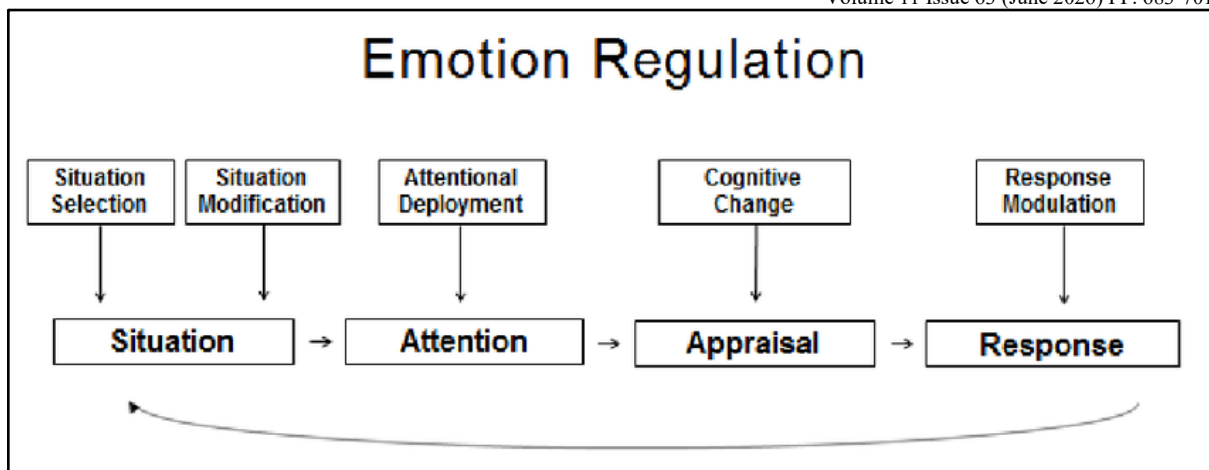


Figure 1: Emotional Regulation Process Model

The model provides five specific strategies based on when within the emotional process. The first four are antecedent-based, that is, situation selection, which is avoiding some triggers before the emotional escalation starts, and so on. This is followed by situation modification, which is changing aspects of the environment to make emotional management more manageable and attentional deployment, which is redirecting attention away from the triggers to engaging in calming activities. Also, cognitive change is reappraisal or modification of thinking patterns in order to reduce emotional reaction to the situation. Lastly, response modulation is response oriented. This is done after the emotional response has begun and involves how to cope with the resulting physical and psychological reactions.

With the use of this model, the study can be able to classify teachers' practical responses, for example, the factors that will trigger and the techniques that will be used in de-escalating into a structured theoretical framework. Finally, Gross's model offers a solid base for this research and makes a direct link between psychological theory and the daily practice of adaptation among Malaysian special education teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used for this study because of its focus on studying teachers lived experiences and to gain a deep understanding of how they perceive the concept of emotional stability in special education. This design is especially helpful when it comes to studying first-hand experiences such as personal views and emotions (Alordiah et al., 2023). Qualitative research, on the other hand, aims to provide insights into the 'why' and 'how' of a phenomenon, to gain deeper meaning that can be difficult to articulate in numerical terms (Leko et al., 2021). It can be used to investigate ideas that have not been well researched, to interpret complex human behaviours and to suggest solutions to promote well-being. This research was carried out in selected primary schools in Malaysia that have special education programmes with four subjects selected for the semi-structured interview.

Participants and Setting

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, in which participants who were most relevant to the research objectives were selected. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which the study participants are intentionally selected because they have certain characteristics that are relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). By using this technique, the researcher is able to concentrate on the individuals that hold the most relevant knowledge, experience, or characteristics that can be used to gather relevant and meaningful data (Tajik et al., 2025). Therefore, purposive sampling is the most appropriate sampling method in this study since it is used to select the subjects who have particular knowledge and experience of emotional regulation strategy for special needs students. This knowledge and experience thus enabled the collection of rich and relevant data as supported by Palinkas et al. (2015). Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria as shown in Table 1 were used to guide the selection.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the Participants

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Teachers are currently teaching students with special needs in Malaysian primary schools.	Lack of direct involvement with special needs students.
Minimum of three years of experience in special education.	Fewer than three years of professional experience in this field.
Direct responsibility for students' social, emotional, and behavioural development.	Unavailability or unwillingness to participate.
Willingness to provide informed consent.	

The final sample comprised of four special education teachers in Kuala Lumpur, Sabah, and Selangor. The one-on-one interviews were done on Google Meet for flexibility and privacy so that teachers could share their experiences without disturbing their professional responsibilities.

Research Instrument

The main instrument utilized was a semi-structured interview guide to examine teacher's strategies and experiences. A semi-structured interview is the most appropriate approach to deepen and enrich the data regarding teachers' strategies for dealing with emotional regulation (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Based on the supporting sources of Mashuri et al., (2022) semi-structured interviews are open-ended interviews that allow the subject to speak in detail and personally, and the researchers can follow up the subject's answers so that they can be deepened and expanded. Furthermore, the interview guide enables researchers to maintain focus on the relevant topics while not stifling the progress of the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The guide included 10 open-ended questions about demographics, identification of emotional regulation challenges, factors that influenced selection of strategy and perceptions of effectiveness (see Table 2).

Table 2: List of Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
To explore the strategies used by teachers in managing emotional regulation among students with special needs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe some of the common emotional regulation challenges you observe among your students with special needs during classroom activities or transitions? 2. What specific strategies or techniques do you usually use to help these students manage their emotions in the classroom? 3. What factors guide your decision when choosing which strategy to use for a student experiencing emotional difficulty? 4. Can you share an example of a time when your strategy worked effectively in helping a student regulate their emotions? 5. Can you also describe a time when a strategy you used didn't work as expected? What do you think influenced that outcome? 6. Do you use any proactive strategies to prevent emotional outbursts or help students stay calm before challenges occur? 7. How do you adapt or modify your strategies to suit different students' needs or emotional triggers? 8. What factors, such as classroom environment, collaboration with other staff, or school policies, affect how well your strategies work? 9. How do you evaluate whether a strategy is helping a student improve their emotional regulation over time? 10. What support or resources would help you use these emotional regulation strategies more effectively?

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection was done using in-depth and semi-structured interviews with four selected special education teachers using purposive sampling to gain in-depth understanding of what teachers do. In January 2026, one-on-one interviews were held with the participants after obtaining informed consent, which were recorded and transcribed. Emotional triggers, specific strategies and adaptive approaches used in Malaysian classrooms were explored in the interview protocol.

Thematic analysis was used, following six stages of the analytic process (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to determine core patterns. At least two researchers independently coded the transcripts to ensure reliability and to minimize bias. This was an iterative process which included constant comparison and grouping codes into categories that ultimately became five major themes. All analytical decisions were made and recorded on the data audit trail to ensure rigor, and member checking was used to check the accuracy of the findings in relation to the participants lived experiences.

Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

The study was conducted with utmost ethical considerations, ensuring the safety and privacy of the participants. All participants were provided with a full information sheet prior to data collection and informed consent forms signed. There was no compulsion to participate and the right to withdraw without penalty was guaranteed. Pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality, and data were kept in password protected electronic files. The interview

questions were carefully designed to reduce psychological risk and institutional consent was obtained before the study began.

The researchers used strategies to establish trustworthiness based on the framework by Stahl and King (2020). Credibility was attained by investigator triangulation and data triangulation with the participation of four investigators and participants with different backgrounds. Member checking was used to ensure that the interpretations were true to the intentions of the participants' meanings. To minimize the bias in the coding process, dependability was established through peer debriefing. Transferability was achieved in detail by describing the research context and method, and confirmability was achieved in peer checks to keep the findings within the context of data.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the results of the thematic analysis of 4 interviews with teachers who have experience in teaching special needs students. The analysis was focused on the identification of teachers' strategies to manage the emotional regulation of the students. Five themes were identified from the data that highlighted the key strategies teachers use to address the emotional needs of pupils. Themes provide insights into teachers' understanding of emotional challenges, into what they do in the classroom and into how they respond to the emotional difficulties of their special needs students.

Theme 1: Understanding Individual Student Needs and Emotional Triggers

One high-profile theme emerging from the data is the need for teachers to be aware of students' individual characteristics and their specific needs and emotional triggers. Participants noted that the diagnosis and sensitivity of students with special needs varies greatly from one student to another, and that the strategies used to manage their emotions should be tailored to the individual student and not a "one size fits all" approach.

"We need to know them... what they like, what they don't like... understand their special needs, what type of disabilities they have so that we can apply an appropriate approach." (P2)

"If I know my students well and understand their categories, I can already know how to manage them." (P1)

"Every child has different triggers... I consider their diagnosis, emotional triggers and previous reactions." (P4)

These findings suggest that educators consider emotion regulation a student-focused process in which emotional difficulties are seen as a symptom of a child's state as opposed to a behavioral problem. Teachers can recognise triggers and behaviour, which helps them to prepare for potential areas of difficulty and react accordingly.

This individualized approach to assessment is in line with the recommendations of Nuske et al. (2023) that interventions should be based on individual developmental stages and emotional profiles. This study shows that Malaysian teachers, as highlighted by Qi and Nordin (2023), and Md Jais and Low (2024), may have limited knowledge about formal frameworks but make

up for that by being familiar with them and observing them. This theme is, in theory, related to the antecedent focused strategies of situation selection and situation modification, as teachers try to avoid escalation by changing the environment or predicting triggers (Gross, 1998). These findings, therefore, suggest the applicability of Gross' model for professional development in special education classrooms, where teachers' experiences fill the void.

Theme 2: Building Trust and Emotional Relationships

This theme highlights the critical importance of trust and positive relationships in helping students to manage their emotions. Participants pointed out that having an emotional connection means that pupils feel safe, valued and understood, and that this helps them to be calm and follow instructions.

“When students feel loved and trust the teacher, they are more likely to listen and their emotions are easier to control.” (P2)

“Sometimes you just have to hold them and talk nicely to them... and then they will eventually listen and stop crying.” (P3)

“Sometimes, just sitting beside them and talking calmly is more effective than any technique.” (P4)

The results point to the essential relational nature of emotion regulation, which is to be empathized with and patiently handled by the teacher and not simply through formal process. Trust is like a ground of stability which enables anxiety to diminish and emotional outbursts to decrease, creating a sense of safety.

The current study is in line with the results obtained by Skura and Świdarska (2021) who found that the emotional intelligence and empathy of a teacher is an important factor affecting their effectiveness in supporting pupils with special needs. This is in line with Muehlbacher et al. (2022) who stated that emotion regulation is managed relationally via supportive communication. Recent research studies also support the teaching practice of the teachers in this study in terms of their use of empathy and connections. Building strong therapeutic relationships helps to regulate affects and establish emotional trust, and teachers and caregivers are the key people who can serve as valuable emotional mentors for students who have disabilities (Zainal, 2025). Further, the emotional intelligence (EI) of the teacher is directly related to enhancing students' engagement and emotional support (Mohamed Adnan et al., 2026). Moreover, at the Islamic level, this theme is in line with the concept of compassion (rahmah) and patience (sabr) as the core of the role of a teacher as a murabbi as recommended by Al-Ghazali (Nor, 2021; Ramlee; 2021).

Theme 3: Behavioural and Reinforcement Strategies

This theme focuses on the use of behavior procedures for emotion management of students with special needs. Teachers indicated that they used other methods of reinforcement including rewards, praise and structured activities to encourage positive behaviour and emotional stability.

“I also use rewards such as blind box capybara... they can stay focused longer and be calmer.” (P2)

“I give candy or stickers... they feel encouraged to try again and engage with the lesson.” (P3)

“For ADHD... I’ll ask them to walk 10 rounds. They will sit down quietly when they’re tired.” (P1)

“If it gets worse... I will punish them by asking them to stand up for a little while.” (P3)

The results show that there is a dependence on positive and negative behavioural strategies. Positive reinforcement, including stickers and praise, is more frequently used to motivate students and physical movement is strategically used to alleviate excess energy through movement of hyperactive students. The use of traditional discipline practices, such as standing as a punishment, does however show that teachers are still faced with the practical problems of managing a class and providing emotional support.

These practices map to the behavioural elements of interventions identified by Nuske et al. (2023) and Jasni et al. (2025) which highlight reinforcement to enhance outcomes. Likewise, Fazzuan et al. (2024) and Jais et al. (2022) found reinforcement and creative activities as important considerations in the Malaysian context. Yet, the results of this study show that despite ideal theoretical models and the Islamic principles of ta'dib, some teachers take on punitive measures because of insufficient resources or training. This disconnect signifies a tension between good practice which would tend to discourage coercion because of its potential harmful effects on the psychologic order of the classroom, and the reality of the classroom which makes coercion necessary.

Theme 4: Creating Supportive Environments and Safe Spaces

This theme focuses on how the physical and social context of the classroom can profoundly affect learning students' emotion regulation. The teachers recognized that the environment, the level of noise, routines, spatial arrangements etc. directly affect the emotional state of the student. As such, they have created supportive environments, including "calm corners", to help create security and lessen distress.

“We have a calm corner in the classroom. When students feel overwhelmed, they are allowed to go there.”(P4)

“When learning objectives are achieved earlier... I let students play blocks, puzzles or Lego... this helps them avoid too much pressure.” (P2)

“The class becomes like a gallery of your art... the new autistic student was so happy to look at the class.” (P3)

The findings in this article indicate that emotion regulation is as much an environmental process as an individual process. Familiar and fun environments decrease sensory overload and stress, and make pupils more comfortable. These findings strongly support Gross (1998)'s model of situation modification, in which the emotional response is managed by strategically changing the situation. Additionally, the teachers' approach of selecting individual triggers and setting

up "calm corners" is directly supported by recent literature (Zahri & Zainal, 2025). Students, especially those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), have difficulty processing sensory input, being either hyper or hypo sensitive to stimuli in the classroom and need flexibility and predictability to not have a meltdown or anxious response.

This is in line with Love et al., (2024) who indicated that teacher adaptations include sensory friendly spaces. Teachers in this study used physical and social changes to increase engagement, while Teng and Ali Jinnah (2021) and Sidique et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of digital changes such as AR and robots in engagement. While this is a testament to the practical limitations of public schools in Malaysia when it comes to using top-of-the-range technologies, it also shows that careful and thoughtful environmental design can help achieve effective emotional support.

Theme 5: De-escalation and Calming Strategies

The final theme is the reactive strategies teachers use when reacting to emotional outbursts and trying to prevent them from getting out of hand. Participants reported using de-escalation strategies to help students calm down when they are feeling overloaded and that de-escalation strategies are more important than academic goals for immediate safety and emotional stabilization.

"I encourage them to slowly take a deep breath... inhale... exhale." (P2)

"When the student is in a state of rage, we hold them so that they cannot move." (P1)

"Sometimes I will hug her and say, no, no, it's okay... then she will calm down." (P3)

"If the student is already very emotional, I will not insist on learning. When emotions are high, academic work can wait." (P4)

These findings highlight that teachers first focus on emotional safety over academic goals during a crisis, and they use de-escalation strategies like deep breathing, breaks, or allowing students to process their emotions. These practices reflect the response modulation pathway of Gross' (1998) intervention model, which comes after the initial emotional response has started, and comply with Nuske et al.'s (2023) multi-component model of crisis management. Moreover, these methods reflect the Islamic principles which focus on the control of temper and stability as key qualities. The reported use of physical restraint, however, while potentially being used as a means of ensuring immediate safety, is contrary to Western guidelines in terms of ethics and also Islamic principles of avoiding harm, leading to significant professional concerns of the potential trauma and a lack of training in non-restrictive crisis management. Finally, this theme implies that the effective practice with emotional regulation in SED involves being flexible, patient and handling crises on the spot without following a set pattern of instruction.

To sum up, the results show that teachers employ various methods in regulating students' emotions with SEND. These include knowledge of individual student's emotional needs, trust building, reinforcement, supportive environments and calming techniques. The strategies are mostly experiential and adaptive, which is consistent with the overall complexity and

uncertainty of emotional regulation in special education settings. Thus, emotional regulation is not only a behavioural problem but also a relational, environmental and emotional process for which teachers should be involved in a holistic way.

Overall Contribution

Compared with the previous literature, the findings of this study show that teachers' interventions in emotional regulation are mostly similar to those in the literature and international studies. It adds however to the discussion by bringing to the fore teachers' experience in the Malaysian context in which strategies are informal, experience-based and shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. This study shows that emotional regulation in Malaysian classrooms is mostly relational, adaptive, and contextually based, which is unlike many studies that emphasize on structured intervention or the technology tools. This aligns to the identified research gap which is the lack of exploration of teachers' everyday practices particularly in inclusive settings in Malaysia. The results indicate that emotional regulation is a relational, cultural and ethical process as well as a psychological and behavioural process among students with special needs overall, which adds to the existing literature. This means that a greater emphasis needs to be placed on more holistic teacher training sessions, incorporating psychological theory, classroom strategies, and culturally based values.

Conclusion

This study examined the strategies of teachers in Malaysia in handling emotion regulation of students with special needs. A qualitative, phenomenological method was used to provide a comprehensive view of educators lived experience and practical knowledge in dealing with the emotional climate of the special education classroom. The results highlight that emotion regulation is not solely an issue of behavior, but a complex process influenced by relational, environmental and emotional factors. Teachers are not only teachers but also a crucial emotional support system who needs to be patient towards emotional actions and provide differentiated intervention to address the underlying needs. Overall, this study highlights the importance of encouraging proper emotional control for students' academic performance and overall development.

Implications

The results have important implications for the special education field in Malaysia in terms of pedagogical competence and professional development. Skills to manage emotions are identified as one of the key factors in positive behaviour, emotional stability and engagement of students at primary school, and there is a need for strategies which are more suitable to the development of the students. All of those insights form an essential basis for developing systematic training plans with a special focus on the emotional and behavioural management of pupils with special needs. In addition, the study underscores the need to establish enabling and inclusive environments from the institutional point of view, with the provision of therapy rooms, suitable teaching materials and adapted curricula. Through such institutional support, students will have the opportunity to learn in a safe, conducive and productive learning environment, which will lead to improved academic performance and enhanced literature in the field.

Limitations of the Study

However, it should be noted that this study has a number of limitations that need to be considered in order to balance the findings. This study was based on only self-reported interview data from the teachers' point of view. This method could be affected by recall bias as participants may wish to portray their strategies of choice in a more favorable light. Other experts, parents or students themselves would have been helpful in providing other perspectives that would have allowed for a more holistic understanding of emotion regulation management. Moreover, the study lacked actual observation of the classroom to objectively measure the effectiveness of the strategies reported. Because emotional outbursts were unpredictable and because of issues of emotional safety of students, such observations were omitted.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should be conducted with a larger and more diverse group of special education teachers from different types of schools to enhance the generalizability of the results and strengthen the existing evidence base. A more in-depth and complete picture of emotional support systems would be gained by using multiple sources of information, such as special education professionals, parents, and students. Future research should consider direct classroom observations or video-recorded sessions for more objective verification that reported strategies are effective, if ethically appropriate, and may be best conducted in the context of routine activities to reduce student stress. Further, longitudinal research is suggested that will explore the enduring effects of these strategies on students' continued emotional, social and academic outcomes as well as teacher professional adaptation over time.

It is recommended that a whole-school approach is implemented, with focus on both academic learning and emotional well-being for immediate improvement. Measurable emotion regulation goals must be explicitly stated in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) so as to facilitate systematic monitoring of the student's emotional development. Support for educators may include access to necessary resources including special "calm-down areas," sensory and visual aids and continuous professional development. Teachers are encouraged to move towards proactive teaching and make use of emotional awareness and coping skills as explicit teaching, in addition to using calming techniques as a reactive response. In addition, collaborative ecosystems are critical, with frequent communication between educators and families to ensure consistency in emotional supports both at school and home. Students with complex emotional needs may require the special expertise of community-based professionals such as psychologists and counsellors to provide the professional coaching and early intervention that is required.

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