



Adapting to adversity: Insights into emotional intelligence and coping responses among Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School teachers

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to examine how emotional intelligence affects different coping responses, specifically problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and dysfunctional coping strategies among Malaysian independent Chinese secondary school teachers. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed, involving 995 teachers from Malaysian independent Chinese secondary schools, selected through cluster sampling methods. The research findings indicate a positive correlation between emotional intelligence, problem-focused coping, and emotion-focused coping among Malaysian independent Chinese secondary school teachers. Furthermore, a negative correlation was observed between emotional intelligence and dysfunctional coping. Gender differences are also significant, with female teachers demonstrating higher levels of emotional intelligence compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, female teachers displayed superior problem-focused coping skills relative to male teachers. From a practical standpoint, the research provides recommendations for improving teachers' emotional intelligence skills to facilitate better psychological adaptation, coping strategies, teaching, and job performance within educational settings. The study also acknowledges the importance of school policies and administration in advancing teachers' emotional intelligence skills. Ultimately, emotional intelligence interventions are acknowledged as a beneficial platform for enhancing emotional intelligence skills among teachers.

Keywords: Dysfunctional coping; Emotional intelligence; Emotion-focused coping; Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School teachers; Problem-focused coping

1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) stands as a much-debated topic within the context of contemporary research on intelligence. Unlike conventional forms of intelligence, such as academic prowess, EI can be cultivated through both structured and unstructured life experiences or targeted interventions. Mayer and Salovey (1993) provided a definition of EI, characterising it as the capacity to manage one's own emotions and those of others, to discern between various emotional states, and to leverage emotions as valuable input in guiding one's thoughts and actions. In the contemporary era, EI is increasingly recognised as being more crucial than the traditional intelligence quotient (IQ) measure. EI places greater emphasis on the significance of non-intellectual traits and characteristics in life accomplishments, such as the ability to manage emotions effectively, cope adaptively with challenges, demonstrate empathy, cultivate self-awareness, and adjust adeptly to various situations (Lindberg, 2020).

There is widespread recognition of the importance of teachers' EI in the field of education and teaching. Teachers are often regarded as emotional labourers, adept at managing the demands of teaching and recognising that their professional performance is closely related to both the cognitive and emotional aspects of their work. Therefore, improving teachers' EI may enhance healthy interpersonal relationships, contribute to a stable and supportive classroom environment, facilitate their work engagement, and equip them with resilient strategies for managing challenges and setbacks in educational settings (Valente et al., 2022). Additionally, as Amirian et al. (2023) found, teachers with strong EI capabilities are good at utilising positive coping strategies, which in turn improve their subjective well-being.

The current study assumes that EI is an important skill for teachers, as they can only efficiently handle their tasks when their emotional self-awareness is high. Particularly in the context of Malaysian Independent

Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS) where educators face unique challenges, understanding the interplay between EI and coping responses (CR) is paramount (Tee et al., 2022). As a result, the prevalence of adverse mental health conditions among educators has risen, posing a growing concern. Without proper management, the stress and psychological strain experienced by teachers are likely to undermine their mental well-being (Pau et al., 2022).

2. Problem Statement

In Malaysia, Chinese education maintains a comprehensive framework within both Chinese independent schools and the majority of government schools. With a legacy spanning over two centuries, the global demand for Chinese education has been experiencing a significant surge. In retrospect, Chinese courses were offered not only in Chinese schools but also in national primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions across Malaysia. It should be noted as well that Ngang and See (2013) illustrated in their study that the actual provision of assistance and resources for MICSS teachers remained at a moderate level. The absence of support and assistance from the school could potentially affect a teacher's efficacy and job satisfaction in the workplace.

Workplace stress arises from unforeseen responsibilities and demands that do not align with a teacher's training, competencies, and professional standards. The negative effects of occupational stress can diminish teacher morale and lead to below-average work output. Many teachers conceal their teaching-related pain and stress, quietly enduring emotional difficulties that often go unseen but relentlessly weigh on their mental well-being. Elevated stress levels can result in inadequate teaching practices among educators, adversely affecting their students' academic outcomes. Teachers are often considered emotional workers who must be attuned to the demands of their profession (Yin, 2015). Without effective emotional regulation skills, teachers experiencing significant job-related stress are more prone to developing psychological disorders such as depression. Due to the nature of depression, teachers who suffer from this psychological disorder may impede students' learning and exert pressure on their students and colleagues in the workplace (García-Arroyo & Osca Segovia, 2019; Kongcharoen et al., 2019; Nawaz et al., 2024). Hence, educational institutions are cautioned to consider the implications of teachers' job insecurity, poor EI skills, work-life conflicts, recurrent absences, staff turnover, and various other concerns.

The present study posits that male and female teachers may exhibit different CR in educational settings. Based on past research, numerous studies have demonstrated that men and women differ in their problem-solving approaches and in their expression of emotions (Barnová et al., 2024; Nazari & Atai, 2022; Salkovsky et al., 2015). Traditionally, men are perceived as rational, strong, and capable of managing life's challenges, while women are seen as emotional, empathetic, and vulnerable. Essentially, gender stereotypes and unreasonable social norms could negatively impact both men and women. To have a better understanding of how gender stereotypes could potentially impact EI and CR, it is recommended that further investigation be conducted on gender influences on MICSS teachers' experiences, emotions, and behaviours to facilitate empathy, cooperation, and coordination among them.

Overall, the current study posits that teachers' EI skills may serve as a protective factor in mitigating psychological issues and predicting a more adaptive coping style when faced with challenging tasks. Emotional dysregulation, or the inability to handle unpleasant emotions, has lately been identified as a central issue in many psychiatric and emotional disorders. From a psychological standpoint, emotional experiences are associated with nearly all major forms of psychopathology (Mackenzie & Watt, 2012). Essentially, enhancing an individual's emotional capacity to maintain or improve their inner equilibrium after exposure to a threatening environment may serve as an adaptive coping mechanism in life. In accordance with investigations carried out by Sadovyy et al. (2021), it has been substantiated that EI serves as a predictive factor for effective work performance and overall occupational well-being. EI assumes a pivotal role in the comprehension of one's own emotions and those of others, thereby facilitating the adoption of adaptive coping strategies and the cultivation of positive emotional states.

Although EI plays a critical role in educational settings, research on EI and CR among MICSS teachers remains scarce (Tee et al., 2022). To fill this gap, the study will explore the EI and CR of MICSS teachers, aiming to measure their EI levels and CR and propose suggestions to promote MICSS teachers' mental health. Furthermore, investigating gender differences in EI and CR may help explore the unique needs of men and women so that the researchers can introduce more effective policy initiatives and interventions in the future to mitigate the negative influences of gender stereotypes in the Malaysian context and develop strategies for improving EI and CR among MICSS teachers. In general, this study aims to examine EI and CR among MICSS teachers. The research questions are as follows:

- a. What is the influence of EI on CR (problem-focused coping [PFC], emotion-focused coping [EFC], and dysfunctional coping [DC]) among MICSS teachers?
- b. Is there a significant difference in EI between male and female teachers?
- c. Is there a significant difference in coping responses (PFC, EFC, and DC) between male and female teachers?

2.1. Teachers and Mental Health

Teachers play a significant role in individuals' lives, educating people regardless of age, gender, and race. Primary and secondary school teachers play a significant role in encouraging the development of quality education for students by cultivating students' foundational abilities necessary for future academic success (Mérida-López et al., 2017). In Malaysia, teachers are expected to dedicate their time not only to instructional activities such as lesson planning, teaching in school, and homework grading but also to a variety of tasks such as organising extracurricular events, consulting parents, and checking student attendance (Othman, 2019). These heavy workloads and burdensome demands placed upon teachers can subsequently increase their vulnerability to mental health issues (Kidger et al., 2016).

Teachers' mental health can be negatively affected by a range of external and internal factors. External factors refer to personal life pressures that can lead to stress and emotional burnout within educational settings, such as financial issues or interpersonal difficulties (Fang et al., 2023). On the other side of the coin, internal factors may include high workloads, feelings of unfairness, lack of administrative support, unsuitable educational environments and facilities, insufficient staffing, and a shortage of mental wellness training. Poor psychological functioning can have significant repercussions, resulting not only in a weakened immune system but also in high levels of anxiety and depression among teachers (Zamri et al., 2017).

2.2. EI and Coping

Substantial research has demonstrated the importance of EI and its positive effects on teachers' teaching efficiency (Hamid et al., 2019). Deficiencies in emotional management could hinder mental functioning and subsequently cause burnout within educational settings (Sáez-Delgado et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). EI is not merely a skill or ability. It is an essential component that influences how well teachers perform. Teachers are more likely to find satisfaction and fulfilment in their work because EI is believed to be positively connected with teachers' well-being and self-confidence (Merida et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2019). Thus, the study assumes that teachers with high EI skills may experience more positive emotions and greater self-efficacy, which in turn helps to improve their communication, classroom management skills, and effective teaching methods in the workplace.

In Malaysia, research by Pau et al. (2022) showed that women experienced burnout related to personal accomplishment more often than men. These findings suggest that CR are vital for maintaining teachers' mental health. This emphasises the need to consider coping strategies and EI in programmes aimed at improving mental well-being in schools (Sáez-Delgado et al., 2023). Another research study about teacher stress and coping found that effective coping can protect against external stress. In contrast, ineffective coping can exacerbate the effects of external stress (Herman et al., 2020). For teachers, those who struggle with coping skills may find it harder to model important social-emotional skills for their students in the classroom (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). These insights highlight the need to promote EI among teachers, as it has far-reaching implications for the mental health of teachers and the academic success of students.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. EI Ability-based Model

More discussion is needed about the definition, measurement, and validity of EI. The ability-based model of EI is currently regarded as the most suitable model for examining pure EI skills (Ahmad et al., 2022; Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). The ability-based model views EI as a specific set of skills that can be measured in an objective way. These skills are connected to both cognitive and emotional functions (Vanuk et al., 2019). There are four main parts to the EI ability-based model, ranging from basic to advanced abilities: (1) perceiving emotions, (2) emotion-facilitated thinking, (3) understanding and analysing emotions, and (4) regulating emotions (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019).

Firstly, perceived emotions refer to the ability to recognise and differentiate between one's own emotions and those of others (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019). This ability includes recognising emotions from a person's body, feelings, and thoughts. It also includes understanding the emotions of others through their voice, facial expressions, words, and actions. The second ability of the EI ability-based model is emotion-facilitated thinking, which includes using emotion to help with thought. This ability focuses on guiding attention to

important events and using emotions to create different ways of thinking to solve problems (Mayer et al., 2016). The third ability is to understand emotions. This helps people be aware of what leads to and stems from their emotions. It also allows them to recognise changes in feelings, such as shifting from anger to contentment. The last ability is the regulation of emotions, also known as managing emotions. This ability helps to monitor emotional responses and evaluate strategies to maintain, reduce, or improve the emotional responses of oneself and others (Mayer et al., 2016).

3.2. Lazarus and Folkman's Psychological Stress

Lazarus and Folkman's Psychological Stress refers to an individual's assessment of the environment as either stressful or non-stressful. This theory defines stress as the relationship between the person and the environment (Bernard et al., 2020). An individual's stress assessment is divided into primary and secondary assessments; primary assessment is mainly used to assess potential harm. It is generally accepted that stressors can be categorised into three types: a) irrelevant, where the environmental stimulus does not affect the individual; b) benign and positive, where the individual perceives the outcome to be positive and elicits pleasurable emotions; and c) stressful, where the individual perceives that the environmental stimulus will bring about harm or loss, a threat, or a challenge. The level of personal stress depends on how much the event's outcome is at stake for the individual; the more the event's outcome is at stake for the individual, the higher the perceived stress. Conversely, the less the event's outcome is at stake for the individual, the less stressful it is perceived (Arbağ et al., 2023).

Secondary assessment is mainly used to assess whether an individual has the capacity to cope with harm (Bernard et al., 2020), and this is the stage where socio-ecological resources and personal resources come into play (Arbağ et al., 2023). Socio-ecological resources refer to the support network that an individual can access, while personal resources refer to physical health, values, expectations, beliefs, ideologies, and economic capacity, among others. Individuals conduct assessments to find available resources to cope with the situation, increase the likelihood of benefit, and either overcome or prevent harm (Arbağ et al., 2023).

Next is Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory, which can be viewed as a strategy aimed at reducing threats and negative emotional responses (Islam et al., 2020). When individuals face stress, they first undergo an appraisal process, which includes both primary and secondary appraisal. Afterwards, they adopt different coping strategies to manage the stress. Once an individual's resources exceed the demands of the stressful situation, they may employ either EFC or PFC.

On the one hand, PFC strategies involve directing attention to the source of stress, with the most straightforward approach being to eliminate the stressor. When an individual evaluates the situation and determines that the problem is within their control and they have the ability to address the source of stress, they will use PFC strategies. This includes taking direct action to confront the issue, actively learning new skills or knowledge, and finding solutions to manage the crisis. On the other hand, when an individual encounters a problem that is beyond their control or cannot be resolved, they are more likely to use EFC strategies. These strategies focus on alleviating the negative emotions brought about by stress and prioritising emotional regulation when the problem cannot be solved (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

In addition to problem-focused and EFC strategies, Carver and colleagues (1989) proposed that coping strategies include DC. When stress becomes overwhelming to the point where an individual cannot bear it, they may resort to DC strategies, such as denying the existence of the event or using alcohol or drugs. These dysfunctional strategies only temporarily alleviate the stress but can worsen the situation.

The EI Ability-based Model and Lazarus and Folkman's Psychological Stress model provide a framework for how emotions are processed and regulated, which might affect individuals' CR. Appraising and reacting to stressful events might require teachers to regulate their own emotions and those of others, as well as to accurately interpret nonverbal behaviours such as emotional expressions and body language. Effectively appraising and responding to stressful events often necessitates that teachers regulate both their own emotions and those of others, while also accurately interpreting nonverbal cues such as emotional expressions and body language. This process is crucial for adaptive coping, as outlined in the psychological stress model. The study's findings provide valuable insights into how emotional aspects and CR are interrelated, serving as a foundation for future research in this area.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The present study adopted a cross-sectional design. This method is advantageous because it collects all essential data simultaneously, making it quicker and simpler than longitudinal studies (Creswell, 2002). However, the cross-sectional survey approach poses drawbacks. For instance, when the survey was

distributed via email to selected MICSS teachers, some had yet to respond or return the surveys to date. To mitigate this issue, the researchers collaborated with school authorities, including the United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia (Dong Zong) and the MICSS school principals, to encourage teachers to volunteer and actively participate in the research. Additionally, teachers were assured that their responses would remain anonymous, providing them with a sense of security that their answers would not lead to negative consequences.

4.2. Participants

The current study also employed a survey research approach, where the researcher posed questions to the selected MICSS teachers and systematically recorded or organised their responses to understand their behaviours, opinions, attitudes, or past experiences. To ensure the representativeness of the research, the researchers employed cluster sampling methods based on regions (North Malaysia, Central Malaysia, South Malaysia, East Malaysia, Sarawak, Sabah) and school sizes (large, medium, and small). Out of 63 Chinese independent high schools in Malaysia, a total of 34 schools were selected, and the teachers from these schools were chosen as the participants. The questionnaires were distributed online to the schools between April and August 2023. According to Louangrath (2017), at least 200 samples are required in order to perform accurate statistical analysis. Exceeding this requirement, the study collected a total of 995 MICSS teachers to ensure the sample size was sufficient to be representative of the population.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 995 MICSS teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1
Demographic Variables of Study Participants

<i>Categories</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Genders		
Male	321	32.3
Female	673	67.6
Other	1	0.1
Age		
20-29	171	17.2
30-39	367	36.9
40-49	266	26.7
50-59	145	14.6
60 & above	46	4.6
Marital Status		
Single	486	48.8
Married	481	48.3
Divorced	12	1.2
Separated	2	0.2
Widow/Widower	12	1.2
Others	2	0.2

In the present study, approximately 32.3% of the participants were male, 67.6% female, and only one participant belonged to the category of other (.1%). Among the respondents, 17.2% of them were 20 to 29 years old, 36.9% were 30 to 39, 26.7% of respondents were 40 to 49 years old, and 14.6% were 50 to 59 years old. Only 4.6 % of the participants were in the age range of 60 and above. For marital status, most of the participants were single (48.8%), followed by married (48.3%); a minority of the participants were in the status of divorced and widowed or widower (1.2%). The lowest number of participants were in the status of separated and others (.2%). The distribution of the participants based on their genders, age, and marital status is shown in Table 1.

4.3. Data Collection

The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSREI) is widely used to assess individuals' EI. The questionnaire emulates the EI model by Salovey and Mayer to measure EI (Gignac et al., 2005). The study used the adapted Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (A-SEIS), adapted by Ahmad et al. (2022), as a reference. Specifically, the scale consists of 34 items, with a maximum score of 170 and a minimum score of 34.

The Brief COPE scale includes three main coping strategies: PFC strategies, which comprise three dimensions (planning, active coping, and instrumental support); EFC strategies, which include five

dimensions (religion, humour, emotional social support, positive reframing, and acceptance): and DC strategies, which encompass six dimensions (denial, self-blame, venting, behavioural disengagement, substance use, and self-distraction). The scale consists of 28 items in total (García et al., 2018).

This research project was initiated at the request of Dong Zong to examine MICSS teachers' EI and CR. Dong Zong, established on 22 August 1954, functions as the principal institution representing 13 Chinese School Management Board Associations and the Association of Chinese School Management Boards and Teachers (United Chinese School Committees' Association of Malaysia, n.d.). Its vision is to lead in the sustainable development of Chinese education in Malaysia. As this is a collaborative project proposed by Dong Zong, all the research materials, including the informed consent form, instruments, and research proposal were reviewed by Dong Zong research members prior to the data collection. Upon approval, the questionnaires were emailed to 34 randomly selected schools. With the support of the MICSS school principals, all MICSS teachers were encouraged to participate in the survey. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, as no personal identifying information were requested and collected.

4.4. Data Analysis

After the data collection, the data were imported into IBM SPSS and screened for missing responses and outliers before conducting the data analysis. For the statistical analysis, the researchers used the correlation, multiple regression analysis, and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine the research objectives. To examine the relationship between EI and CR, a Pearson correlation was conducted as it is suitable for continuous variables and meets the required assumptions of linearity and normality (Schober et al., 2018). Multiple regression analysis was then employed for analysing the correlation between EI and three CR, including PFC, EFC, and DC. This statistical analysis enables the determination of the relationships between two or more variables and supports predictions derived from those observed patterns (Kaya Uyanık & Güler, 2013). Subsequently, an Independent Samples t- test was used to examine the gender differences in EI. Lastly, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine gender differences in PFC, EFC and DC. MANOVA allows simultaneous examination of multiple dependent variables and can assess interaction effects among independent variables (Plaue, 2023).

5. Findings

This section demonstrates the findings of the study. Descriptive analyses were first conducted to understand the EI levels among participants, as shown in the distribution in Table 2.

Table 2
Participants' levels of EI in the A-SEIS

No	Levels of EI	Ranges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Excellent	160 and above	5	0.50
2	Good	140-159	253	25.43
3	Above Average	115-139	718	72.16
4	Average	84-114	19	1.91
5	Below Average	60-83	0	.00
6	Low	36-59	0	.00
7	Very Low	Below 35	0	.00

The EI levels of respondents in the study can be categorised into seven (7) levels, consisting of excellent, good, above average, average, below average, low, and very low. Table 2 shows that the majority of the participants scored "above average" (72.16%); 253 participants achieved "good" in the EI test (25.43%), followed by average (1.9%) with 19 participants in this range. In contrast, only five (5) participants scored "excellent" (.5%) in the EI assessment. Therefore, based on Table 2, the researchers concluded that there is still room for MICSS teachers to improve their EI skills.

Subsequently, Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the strength and direction of the associations between EI and the three type of CR. The results are showed in Table 3. In reference to Table 3, there is a moderate positive correlation between EI and PFC ($r = .373$, $p < .05$) and EI and EFC ($r = .320$, $p < .05$). A weak negative correlation between EI and DC was found in the analysis ($r = -.168$, $p < .05$).

Table 3
Correlation between EI and PFC, EFC, and DC

		Total EI	Total PFC	Total EFC	Total DC
Total EI	Pearson	1	.373	.320	-.168
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	995	995	995	995

Note. EI= Emotional intelligence; PFC= Problem-focused coping; EFC= Emotion-focused coping; DC= Dysfunctional coping

Following this, multiple regression analysis was employed to determine whether EI significantly predicted participants' use of PFC, EFC, and DC. This analysis also helped to identify the extend to which each CR dimension contributed to the variance in EI. The findings are summarised in the Table 4.

Table 4
Regression Coefficients for EI in Predicting CR among Participants

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	116.597	1.985		58.734	<.001
PFC	.845	.120	.258	7.014	<.001
EFC	.547	.084	.253	6.553	<.001
DC	-.556	.056	-.297	-9.983	<.001

Note. R= .477; R²= .227; Adj.R²=.225; F (3, 991) =97.255, $p < .001$; PFC= Problem-focused coping; EFC= Emotion-focused coping; DC= Dysfunctional coping

As presented in Table 4, multiple regression analysis was utilised to examine if the EI significantly predicted respondents' CR, including PFC, EFC, and DC. The results of the regression indicated the two predictors explained 22.7% of the variance ($R^2=.227$, $F(3,991)=97.255$, $p < .001$). It was found that EI significantly predicted PFC ($\beta = .258$, $p < .001$), EFC ($\beta = .253$, $p < .001$), as well as DC ($\beta = -.297$, $p < .001$).

To examine whether male and female teachers differed in EI, an Independent Samples t-test was conducted. The results of the analysis are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5
T-test Results Comparing Males and Females on EI

Variable	n	M	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Male	321	132.4798	9.85	-2.310	992	.021	-2.31
Female	673	133.9673	9.32				

On average, females scored higher on EI ($M=133.9673$, $SD= 9.32$) than males ($M=132.4798$, $SD=9.85$). Based on Table 5, the differences were significant, $t(994)= -2.310$ $p < .021$. As for the effect size, d was -2.31 , and the researchers concluded that there is a small effect.

Finally, to investigate potential gender differences across the three coping response dimensions simultaneously, a MANOVA was conducted. The results and the follow-up univariate tests are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) analysis of CR among genders

	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	p	η^2p
Pillai's Trace	.013	2.103	6.000	1982.000	.050	.006
Wilks' Lambda	.987	2.102 ^b	6.000	1980.000	.050	.006
Hotelling's Trace	.013	2.100	6.000	1978.000	.050	.006
Roy's Largest Root	.009	2.944 ^c	3.000	991.000	.032	.009

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed to examine if there were differences between genders on PFC, EFC and DC. Table 6 demonstrated a statistically significant difference between genders on CR where Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.987$, $F(6, 1980) = 2.102$, $p = .050$, $\eta^2p = .006$. The result showed that genders accounted for approximately 0.6% of the variance in the CR.

Based on the results presented in Table 7, there were significant interaction effects of genders on problem-focused coping, $F(2, 995)=3.532$, $p=.030$, $\eta^2p =.007$. The effect of genders on PFC was small. However, no significant interaction effect was found for EFC and DC.

Table 7
Effects of Genders on the EFC, PFC, and DC

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2p
Gender	EFC	76.625	2	38.312	1.986	.138	.004
	PFC	59.484	2	29.742	3.532	.030	.007
	DC	30.707	2	15.354	.594	.552	.001

Note. PFC= Problem-focused coping; EFC= Emotion-focused coping; DC= Dysfunctional coping

6. Discussion

The present study indicates a moderate positive correlation between EI and PFC, a finding that is broadly similar to previous research, and the results confirm that EI is associated with PFC strategy styles (Siddiqui & Soomro, 2019). Past literature suggests it might be due to the fact that people with high EI are more likely to use PFC to enhance positive emotions and outcomes (Delhom et al., 2018). Moreover, the study also found a moderate positive correlation between EI and EFC. This result is consistent with Torres Montañez et al. (2023), who reported that people with higher EI are more inclined to use effective emotion regulation and problem-solving strategies to deal with difficulties. Emotionally oriented coping, such as acceptance, humour as a means of reducing stress, and seeking emotional support, allows for enhanced self-regulation and overcoming difficulties. Therefore, teachers with high EI might be better positioned to deal with stressful life events by using both PFC and EFC strategies.

Additionally, a weak negative correlation between EI and DC strategies was observed, which is consistent with past research findings (Dy Ching Bing Agsaoay et al., 2022). Based on Folkman & Lazarus's coping styles theory, PFC strategies and EFC strategies are probably used simultaneously if the individual's coping resources exceed the environmental demands and DC strategies are usually used when the individual's coping resources do not meet the environmental demands (Arbağ et al., 2023). In other words, people do not employ DC when their coping resources are sufficient. When MICSS teachers' coping resources are sufficient to cope with the stressful situation at hand, the less frequently the DC is used.

The study also indicates that there were statistically significant differences in EI between male and female teachers, with female teachers scoring slightly higher than male teachers on average. Several studies have found that gender differences do exist in EI (Ain et al., 2021; Megías-Robles et al., 2024). For CR, significant statistical differences were found between male and female teachers in PFC, while no significant differences were observed in EFC and DC. This study suggests that females are more inclined to adopt PFC than males. Research by Salkovsky et al. (2015) and Nazari and Atai (2022) also found significant differences in coping strategies between male and female teachers, with female teachers more willing to engage in workplace communication and collaborative problem-solving, possibly due to differences in self-efficacy between male and female teachers (Thornberg et al., 2023). However, the average scores for EI and PFC between different genders were not substantially different. With societal progress, traditional gender roles have become more flexible, and emotional expression and coping styles are no longer rigidly defined by gender. This may explain the minimal differences observed. Further analysis and research are warranted to explore whether EI and coping strategies are associated with teachers' age, marital status, and workload.

Teachers' emotions experiences are essential in determining the classroom's interactive climate and quality of instructional delivery. If a teacher feels unhappy and unmotivated, these emotions can easily be reflected in their behaviours. Not only will teaching efficiency decline, but students can also easily detect and feel the negative emotions expressed through a teachers' behaviours (Tarman & Filiz, 2023). For example, when a teacher frequently exhibits negative emotions such as irritability, poor attitude, disengagement, and frustration in the classroom, these emotions can threaten students' sense of psychological safety. Students may feel insecure due to their teacher's emotional instability and are more likely to develop anxiety and stress, hesitate to participate in classroom activities or discussions, and fear punishment or criticism. Over time, it could affect students' learning process and overall experience in school.

Conversely, teachers with high emotional sensitivity and EI have been proved to perform better than those who do not possess these qualities (Jimenez, 2020; Kuswanto et al., 2023). They are more likely to recognise the significance of emotional control, responsiveness, ego control, and maintaining of high self-esteem as critical components for optimising professional performance. Empathy, a fundamental component of EI that involves the ability to understand others' emotions, may play an important role in maintaining effective teacher-student relationships within educational settings. As mentioned by Adade et al. (2024), empathy facilitates positive relationships in many areas of life through active listening, acknowledging

others' feelings, and showing concern for a person's situation. Empathy appears to serve as a powerful facilitating factor for both teachers and students. An empathic tendency enables teachers to understand their students' perspectives as if they were their own, allowing them to assist their students and respond to their needs effectively. This creates a safe and inclusive environment for students, where students may feel supported, respected, and understood by teachers throughout the learning process (Mori, 2023). In summary, being emotional competency is important in educational settings. The findings of the present study suggests that teachers with high EI may adopt effective coping strategies in their teaching and manage their emotions appropriately when facing stressful situations.

7. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted solely within Chinese independent secondary schools in Malaysia, which might limit the generalizability of the findings to other groups of Chinese Malaysian teachers. However, this study can be considered foundational research, providing a basis for applying the findings to a broader population. The researchers recommend that future studies be conducted within a more comprehensive range of teacher groups across Malaysia.

The second limitation is the need for a better understanding of the applicability of the revised and translated measurement tools across different age groups. Therefore, the researchers suggest further investigation into the suitability of these tools, and recommend extending the research beyond MICSS teachers such as to include other sectors (government or private) in future research. The third limitation concerns the use of a cross-sectional study design; although this design allows for the quick collection of data, it offers limited insights into how to enhance teachers' EI. The researchers recommend incorporating EI training and related interventions in future studies to improve the comprehensiveness of the research. Finally, future studies should consider external resources such as age and weekly working hours in the statistical analysis to better explore the conditions and needs of the target population.

8. Conclusion

This study confirms a moderate positive correlation between EI and PFC among teachers in MICSS. The significance of this study lies in providing a research foundation for further evaluation of the issues and needs of teachers in these schools, encouraging schools to reconsider their approaches. Additionally, the study offers new directions for EI intervention programmes aimed at helping teachers develop healthier emotional management and coping strategies.

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