

An Exploratory Study of Teachers' Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Strategies in Reducing Teacher Burnout among Selected Government and International Schools in Semenanjung Malaysia

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Abstract

Teacher burnout is defined as prolonged, chronic stress experienced within and beyond the school environment has become a growing challenge in education systems globally, affecting both government and private institutions. In Malaysia, recent statistics indicate a significant exodus of educators, raising concerns about the sustainability of the profession. Burnout adversely impacts teachers' physical health, social-emotional well-being, instructional quality, and student learning outcomes, while also contributing to higher attrition rates and the erosion of school culture. Recognizing teachers as individuals with social and emotional needs has prompted interest in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a potential strategy for managing stress and promoting resilience. This exploratory study examines Malaysian teachers' perceptions of SEL strategies in reducing burnout. Data were collected via an online questionnaire targeting primary and secondary teachers from selected government and international schools in Peninsular Malaysia. Eighty questionnaires were distributed through Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, achieving a 62.5% response rate. The findings highlight teachers' perspectives on how SEL practices can support stress regulation and professional well-being, offering insights into the integration of SEL into teacher support frameworks. This study contributes to the Malaysian educational context by providing evidence-based implications for addressing burnout through holistic, teacher-centred approaches.

Keywords: Teacher Burnout, Social-Emotional Learning, Stress Management, Malaysian Education

Introduction

Burnout employees are often described as the “working wounded,” showing up to work physically but lacking genuine motivation, merely attempting to get through the day without further harm (Stern, 2012; Amri Ahmad, Syed Munir Barakbah, & Ahmad Akram Majdi, 2021). Teacher burnout has emerged as a significant concern in education systems globally, affecting both public and private sectors. It is characterised by sustained physical and emotional exhaustion, reduced professional efficacy, and a sense of detachment from the role (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2020). In Malaysia, the issue has gained urgency following reports by the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) of a shortage exceeding 20,000 teachers in both Peninsular and East Malaysia (New Straits Times, 2023). Once seen as a rural problem, teacher shortages are now prevalent in urban areas, with some schools facing a shortfall of up to 10 teachers at any given time.

The underlying causes of burnout are often grouped into two categories: organisational factors such as excessive administrative duties, unresolved disciplinary issues, and insufficient parental cooperation (Amzat et al., 2021) and social-emotional factors, which involve the erosion of professional identity through a lack of support and persistent stress (Rushton et al., 2023). Burnout not only diminishes instructional quality but also impacts student learning outcomes and increases teacher attrition, further destabilising schools and communities (Chen et al., 2022; Kozina, 2024).

Recent research suggests that sustaining teachers in the profession requires strengthening their professional identity formation, which emphasises self-understanding, resilience, and effective coping mechanisms (Nordin & Samsudin, 2017). Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), originally developed in the 1990s to support students’ emotional and social development, has since been adapted to benefit educators. The CASEL framework identifies five core competencies self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness which together provide a structured approach to stress regulation and professional growth (Baker, 2021).

The connection between SEL and burnout prevention is well established: SEL strategies promote self-regulation, constructive decision-making, and interpersonal effectiveness, which can enhance job satisfaction and reduce stress (Lawrence, 2023; Shipman, 2022). However, while SEL is widely implemented for student development, its application for teacher well-being remains under-researched in the Malaysian context. This study addresses that gap by exploring the perceptions of government and international school teachers in Peninsular Malaysia regarding the role of SEL strategies in mitigating burnout.

Problem Statement

Teacher burnout has become one of the most pressing challenges in education systems worldwide, often manifesting in emotional exhaustion, loss of motivation, and reduced professional efficacy (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2020). Recent reports from Malaysia reveal that nearly one-third of teachers experience high levels of burnout, contributing to widespread attrition and further exacerbating the national shortage of more than 20,000 educators (New Straits Times, 2023). The problem has intensified in the post-pandemic era, where hybrid teaching, increased administrative demands, and heightened behavioural issues among students have placed unprecedented strain on teachers (Smart, 2024).

Conventional solutions such as financial incentives, workload restructuring, and technology integration have shown only temporary effectiveness (Amzat et al., 2021). These interventions often overlook the reality that teachers are not just implementers of policy but individuals with emotional and psychological needs. Without addressing the social-emotional dimensions of teacher well-being, efforts to reduce burnout remain incomplete and unsustainable.

Although Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has gained global attention for promoting student well-being, its application to teacher resilience and professional identity formation remains underexplored, particularly in the Malaysian context (Whalen, 2023; Bouffard, 2023). Existing local studies on burnout predominantly examine structural causes such as workload, policy pressures, and classroom management challenges (Kanwal et al., 2023; James, 2024). However, there is limited empirical research on how teachers themselves perceive SEL strategies as tools for coping with stress and sustaining motivation.

Moreover, the diversity of Malaysian schools presents a unique challenge. Government and international schools operate under distinct cultural and administrative frameworks, yet no comparative research has examined whether teachers across these settings find SEL strategies equally relevant and effective in reducing burnout. With emerging post-pandemic stressors such as digital fatigue, hybrid teaching demands, and shifting student needs, there is a timely need for context-specific evidence on SEL's role in sustaining teacher well-being.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring teachers' perceptions of SEL strategies in reducing burnout across government and international schools in Peninsular Malaysia. By situating teachers' lived experiences at the centre, it contributes fresh insights into how SEL can be systematically integrated into professional development and teacher support frameworks.

Research Objective

This study was designed to examine Malaysian teachers' perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies in reducing burnout within the teaching profession. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. To explore teachers' perceptions of SEL strategies in mitigating teacher burnout.
2. To determine which SEL strategies are most effective in reducing burnout and thereby enhancing teacher retention.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of SEL strategies in mitigating teacher burnout?
2. Which SEL strategies are most relevant to teachers in addressing burnout, and why are these strategies considered useful?
3. What challenges do teachers face in sustaining the use of SEL strategies to prevent burnout?

Literature Review

Teacher burnout has become a critical global issue in education, often associated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional accomplishment

(Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2020). Prolonged exposure to heavy workloads, challenging classroom environments, and inadequate institutional support have been found to exacerbate the problem (Beavis, n.d.). The implications are significant not only for teachers' physical and emotional well-being but also for student learning outcomes and overall school performance. One emerging strategy to address burnout is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), a framework that fosters emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills. While SEL is widely implemented in student curricula, its application for teacher well-being has received less attention, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Causes and Consequences of Teacher Burnout

Teaching is recognised as one of the most demanding professions globally (Beavis, n.d.). Burnout typically develops gradually as job satisfaction declines, manifesting in exhaustion, cynicism, and a perceived lack of accomplishment (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2020; Smart, 2024). Emotional exhaustion is often the most prominent symptom, and it significantly impairs both teacher performance and personal well-being.

Key contributors to burnout include

Heavy workloads: Excessive administrative duties, grading, managing large class sizes, and providing additional student support strain teachers' time and energy (Kanwal et al., 2023; Szabó et al., 2021).

Lack of institutional support: Teachers who receive insufficient guidance, resources, and administrative backing often feel isolated and undervalued (James, 2024; Jacobson, n.d.).

Challenging classroom management: Frequent student misbehaviour increases teacher frustration and reduces instructional time, particularly in multicultural environments such as Malaysia (Kanwal et al., 2023).

The consequences of burnout extend beyond the individual teacher, leading to reduced instructional quality, lower student engagement, and increased teacher absenteeism and attrition (Soto Pam, 2024). In under-resourced schools, this can perpetuate cycles of underachievement, as vacancies are filled by less experienced or unqualified replacements.

SEL Theory and Application

Social-Emotional Learning is defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (Gimbert et al., 2021, p. XX).

The CASEL framework identifies five core competencies (CASEL, 2019):

1. Self-awareness – recognising one's emotions, thoughts, and their influence on behaviour.
2. Self-management – regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in various situations.
3. Social awareness – understanding others' perspectives and empathising with them.
4. Relationship skills – building and maintaining healthy relationships.
5. Responsible decision-making – making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behaviour.

While SEL was initially developed for student development, it has increasingly been applied to teacher professional growth (Lawrence, 2023). When embedded in school culture, SEL can improve teacher-student relationships, reduce classroom management challenges, and foster positive, collaborative environments (Shipman, 2022).

Impact of SEL Competencies on Teacher Well-Being and Burnout

Research indicates that SEL skills contribute to a healthier, more supportive workplace culture (Bouffard, 2023). Teachers trained in SEL are better able to recognise their own emotions, manage stress, and cultivate empathy towards students, reducing emotional exhaustion (Whalen, 2023; Zakrzewski, 2023). These competencies also enhance resilience, allowing teachers to respond constructively to challenging behaviours and high workload demands (Katz, 2020).

Past Studies on SEL and Teacher Burnout

Greenberg (2023) highlights SEL as a foundational approach to promoting well-being in both educational and workplace contexts. Whalen's study on the Rethink Ed SEL framework found measurable reductions in burnout levels among teachers, with higher SEL engagement correlating with fewer burnout symptoms. Similarly, Fan (2021) notes that teachers with SEL skills are better equipped to manage stress, which can improve student performance and reduce blame-shifting among stakeholders.

Methodology

This exploratory study adopted a quantitative research design, employing a structured questionnaire to collect data from primary and secondary school teachers in Peninsular Malaysia. A quantitative approach was selected for its capacity to:

1. Identify patterns in human behaviour (in this case, teacher responses) (Bhandari, 2022).
2. Facilitate predictions regarding the relationship between SEL strategies and burnout.
3. Allow analysis across a broad and diverse respondent pool.

The instrument, administered via Google Forms, included closed-ended items using a five-point Likert scale. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Respondents were assured that their data would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes.

Population and Sampling

The population comprised teachers from selected government and international schools in Peninsular Malaysia. The sample was drawn using non-probability purposive sampling, targeting teachers with at least one year of teaching experience. This method was appropriate for exploratory research, enabling the selection of participants most relevant to the study objectives (Majid, 2018).

A total of 80 questionnaires were distributed via Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and the university's email system. Fifty completed questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 62.5%. The study's focus on both government and international school teachers allowed for diverse perspectives on SEL implementation and its impact on burnout.

Sample Size and Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual teacher. This level of analysis was selected to capture personal perceptions and experiences with SEL strategies.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of six sections:

Section A: Demographic profile.

Section B–F: Items assessing perceptions of teacher burnout and the use of specific SEL strategies (self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making).

Items were presented in both Bahasa Malaysia and English to accommodate linguistic preferences. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”) was employed. Care was taken to avoid leading questions.

Statistics												
		Age	Gender	Marital Status	Number of Children	Highest Education Level	Employment Status	Personal Income	Years in the teaching profession	Employed at	Teaching Hours	Subjects
N	Valid	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.92	1.82	1.54	1.50	3.00	1.82	2.74	3.18	2.42	1.90	1.66
Median		3.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.00	1.00
Mode		3	2	1	1	3	2	2	1	3	1	1
Std. Deviation		1.209	.388	.838	.814	.782	.388	1.084	1.826	.992	1.035	.895
Variance		1.463	.151	.702	.663	.612	.151	1.176	3.334	.983	1.071	.800
Minimum		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum		5	2	5	3	5	2	5	6	4	4	4

Results

This section presents the findings from the survey of teachers in selected government and international schools in Peninsular Malaysia, focusing on their perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies in reducing burnout. Analyses included demographic profiling, normality testing, reliability assessment, and correlation analysis.

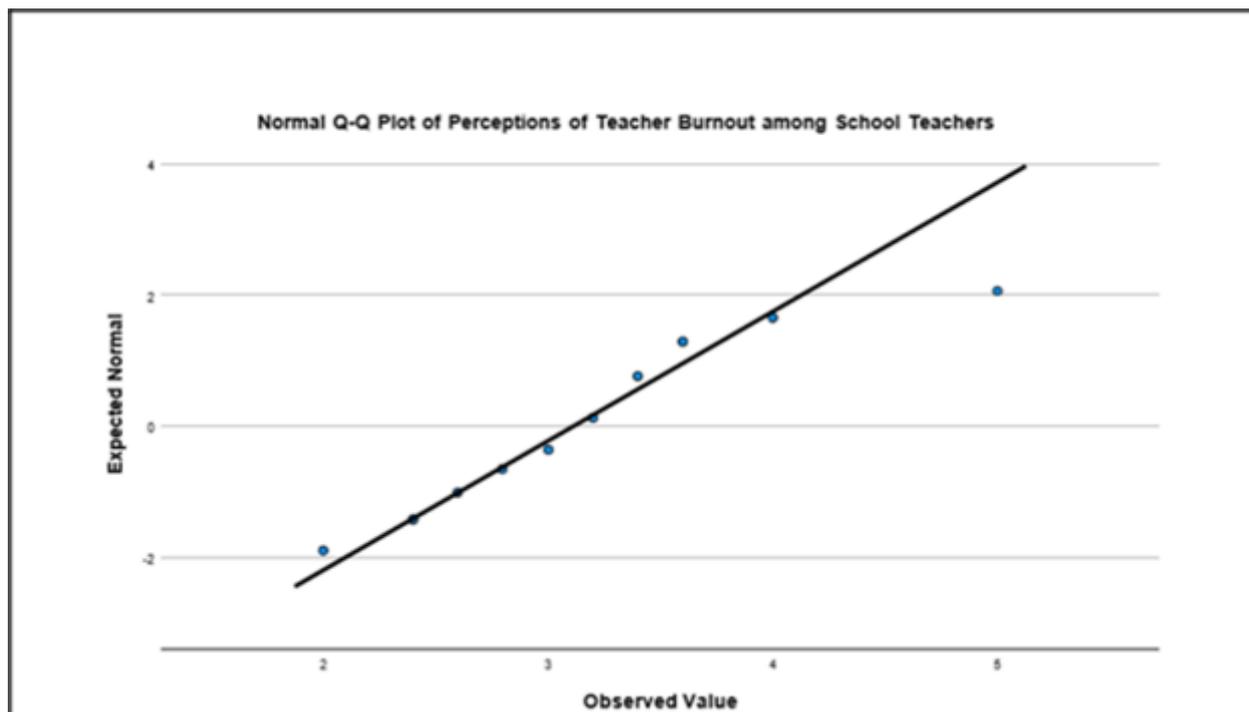
Demographic Analysis

The demographic profile of respondents provides context for interpreting the findings. Table 1 summarises the statistical characteristics, including age, gender, marital status, education level, employment status, income, teaching experience, school type, teaching hours, and number of subjects taught.

Table 1

Demographic Analysis of Respondents

The majority of respondents in this study were aged between 30 and 34 years ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.21$), with 82% being female and 60% single. Most (82%) held a Bachelor’s degree and were employed full-time, with the largest income group earning between RM1,501 and RM3,000 per month. Teaching experience was most commonly in the range of 1–2 years (30%), and the highest proportion (42%) taught in secondary government schools. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported teaching less than 20 hours per week, while a majority (56%) taught only one subject.



Normality Analysis

A normality test was conducted to determine whether the data followed a normal distribution. Figure 1 shows that data points were closely aligned with the reference line, indicating a normal distribution.

Figure 1

Normal Q-Q Plot of Perceptions of Teacher Burnout Among School Teachers

The objective of a normality test is to find out when an item data set has been collected among a group which has a regular distribution. In general, it is carried out to make sure if the findings of the study contain a normal distribution (Editage, 2023). As per the observations in Figure 1, data spots happen to be within close range to the vertical line. This result reveals the normal distribution of data from the collection.

Reliability Analysis

Table 2

Perceptions of Teacher Burnout Among School Teachers

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.493	13

The table above is the scale for perceptions of teacher burnout among school teachers. The number of items used for this section is 13. Value of reliability shown is 0.493 which is low as the usual score should be more than 0.7.

Table 3

Strategy of Self-Awareness in Reducing Teacher Burnout

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.637	7

The table above is the scale for impact of the social-emotional learning (SEL) strategy of self-awareness on reducing teacher burnout. The number of items used in this section is 7. The value of reliability for self-awareness is 0.637 which is moderate but still less and not recommended.

Table 4

Strategy of Self-Management in Reducing Teacher Burnout

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.601	5

The table above is the scale for impact of the social-emotional learning (SEL) strategy of self-management on reducing teacher burnout. The number of items is 5. The reliability score is 0.601, which is moderate yet only 0.7 and above is acceptable.

Table 5

Strategy of Responsible Decision Making in Reducing Teacher Burnout

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.194	5

The table above shows reliability scores for impact of the social emotional learning (SEL) strategy of responsible decision-making on reducing teacher burnout. The number of items are 5, and the reliability score is 0.194. The reliability score of 0.194 is very low as the acceptable score is (>0.7)

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine relationships between teacher burnout perceptions and the three SEL strategies. All correlations were significant at $p < .05$, indicating that self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making were each significantly associated with teacher burnout perceptions.

Table 6 summarises the correlation matrix for the variables.

Correlations					
		Perceptions of Teacher Burnout	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Responsible Decision Making
Perceptions of Teacher Burnout	Pearson Correlation	1	.513**	.283*	.345*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	.046	.014
	N	50	50	50	50
Self-Awareness	Pearson Correlation	.513**	1	.471**	.617**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	50	50	50	50
Self-Management	Pearson Correlation	.283*	.471**	1	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.046	<.001		.002
	N	50	50	50	50
Responsible Decision Making	Pearson Correlation	.345*	.617**	.429**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	<.001	.002	
	N	50	50	50	50

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Summary of Findings

Based on the results, the researchers summed up that the respondents generally did not perceive themselves as highly stressed, as indicated by the low reliability score for the burnout construct. Among the SEL strategies examined, self-awareness and self-management emerged as the most frequently applied, with teachers viewing them as both relevant and sustainable in daily practice. Responsible decision-making, while significantly correlated with burnout perceptions, was often regarded as an inherent aspect of teachers' professional responsibilities rather than a distinct SEL strategy, which may explain its lower reported use. Overall, the significant correlations between all three SEL strategies and burnout perceptions underscore SEL's vital role in managing teacher stress and supporting overall well-being.

Conclusion

This study explored Malaysian teachers' perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies in reducing burnout, focusing on self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Findings indicate that while respondents did not perceive themselves as highly stressed, SEL strategies particularly self-awareness and self-management were widely recognised as relevant and beneficial in daily teaching practice. Responsible decision-making, though significantly correlated with burnout, was often viewed as part of teachers' inherent professional responsibilities rather than a distinct SEL practice. The results underscore SEL's potential in fostering resilience, enhancing emotional regulation, and sustaining teacher well-being, which in turn can improve retention and instructional quality. Importantly, this study highlights the need for policy makers and school leaders to integrate SEL into teacher professional development frameworks, ensuring that educators

receive systematic, ongoing support to manage stress effectively. By addressing burnout through a proactive, teacher-centred SEL approach, Malaysia can work towards building a more resilient, motivated, and committed teaching workforce.

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