

# Exploring the Role of Emotional Intelligence in New Teachers' Approaches to Educational Inequality in Low-Resource Schools

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## Abstract

This study, conducted in a low-resource region of western China, examines the role of emotional intelligence in low-resource schools, where socio-economic challenges and limited resources hinder student engagement and academic achievement. Despite extensive research on emotional intelligence, its impact on educational equity in these contexts remains underexplored. Drawing on Goleman's emotional intelligence framework, the study investigates how emotional intelligence shapes teacher-student interactions and emotional support. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with 30 teachers, analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that emotional intelligence significantly enhances teacher-student relationships, emotional support, and student engagement, ultimately improving



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academic outcomes. This research contributes to the literature by extending the application of emotional intelligence to low-resource environments, highlighting its potential relevance in international and cross-cultural educational settings, and underscores the importance of emotional intelligence training for teachers to foster educational equity.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence; educational equity; teacher-student interactions; low-resource schools; new teachers

## Introduction

Educational inequality remains one of the most pressing challenges facing education systems globally (Tubbs Dolan et al. 2022; Waluyo, Min, and Castillo 2022). While much attention has been paid to addressing disparities in resources, infrastructure, and material support, there is an increasing need to recognise the significance of emotional and psychological factors in education. Emotional intelligence (EI)—the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's emotions as well as the emotions of others—has emerged as a key psychological resource for educators (Han and Gao 2023; Klassen et al. 2021). It plays a pivotal role in managing classroom dynamics, fostering positive relationships with students, and supporting inclusive education (Waluyo, Min, and Castillo 2022). In low-resource schools, where challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited access to materials, and socio-economic disparities are prevalent, EI becomes even more critical (Roland, Hughes, and Simmons 2023). It has the potential to bridge gaps created by these challenges, ensuring that all students, irrespective of their background, receive the emotional support necessary for academic success (Nguyen, Chen, and Nguyen 2025).

While substantial research has been conducted on educational inequality, the role of EI in mitigating these inequities, particularly in low-resource settings, remains underexplored (Hossain 2024). Although previous studies have established EI's contribution to teacher effectiveness, particularly in enhancing classroom management and addressing diverse student needs, they often focus on developed countries (Rodriguez, Swain, and Springer 2020). These studies do not adequately address the unique challenges faced by teachers in low-resource schools (Jafari 2024). For example, research demonstrates that EI improves teachers' classroom management skills, but the studies are predominantly situated in high-income countries, neglecting the distinct difficulties that teachers in low-resource settings encounter (Jennings and Greenberg 2009; Nieuwoudt 2020). Furthermore, studies conducted in China have largely focused on factors such as teacher development, socio-economic backgrounds, and infrastructure, with little attention given to the emotional competencies of teachers as a potential tool for promoting educational equity (Corcoran and Tormey 2012). In particular, research in Zhejiang Province has primarily centred on teacher training programmes and school facilities, without exploring how EI could be leveraged to address educational disparities in such low-resource environments (Wang et al. 2024).

This study aims to fill this gap by examining how emotional intelligence influences new teachers' approaches to educational inequality in low-resource schools, specifically in Zhejiang Province, China. By focusing on how new teachers use EI to navigate the emotional and social dynamics in their classrooms, the study seeks to explore the potential of EI as a tool for fostering more equitable learning environments. This research extends the existing literature by establishing a link between EI and educational equity, a connection that has largely been overlooked, and offers a deeper understanding of how emotional intelligence can be utilised to address educational disparities and promote inclusive education.

The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it expands the scope of emotional intelligence research within education by connecting it to educational equity. While prior studies have predominantly emphasised EI's role in improving teacher-student relationships and creating positive classroom environments, they have not sufficiently explored how EI can be harnessed to tackle educational inequities (Moradi, Faghiharam, and Ghasempour 2018). This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how emotional intelligence can be used as a tool to reduce educational disparities, creating an environment where all students have equal opportunities to succeed. Practically, the study underscores the importance of integrating EI training into teacher development programmes, especially for those teaching in low-resource schools. By equipping new teachers with essential emotional intelligence skills, this research offers actionable insights for improving teaching practices and advancing educational equity.

In conclusion, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring how emotional intelligence influences new teachers' approaches to educational inequality in low-resource schools. The study not only provides theoretical contributions but also offers practical recommendations for teacher training and policy-making, with the potential to influence educational practices in China and other regions facing similar challenges. By highlighting the role of emotional intelligence in promoting educational fairness, this research offers a fresh perspective on how psychological resources can be leveraged to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

## About the Study

### **Educational Inequality in Low-Resource Schools**

Educational inequality in low-resource schools is primarily marked by disparities in access to resources, qualified teachers, and educational opportunities (Downey 2024). These inequalities are especially pronounced in rural areas, where socio-economic factors such as poverty, limited parental support, and lack of access to technology further exacerbate challenges. In Zhejiang Province, rural schools face issues such as overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, and insufficient teaching materials, which significantly impair students' academic progress (Obasuyi, Rasiah, and Chenayah 2020). While much research has focused on the material aspects of

educational inequality, fewer studies have explored the role of emotional and psychological factors in addressing these disparities (Terrin and Triventi 2023).

EI can play a crucial role in mitigating educational inequality. Teachers with high EI are better equipped to manage classroom dynamics, respond to students' emotional needs, and foster positive teacher-student relationships (Gunasekara et al. 2022). For instance, teachers who are able to recognise and regulate their emotions are better positioned to create a supportive classroom environment, even in the face of limited resources (Kitchen et al. 2024). In low-resource settings, where stress levels are higher and emotional challenges are more pronounced, EI can serve as a critical tool in bridging gaps caused by socio-economic disparities (Nguyen, Chen, and Nguyen 2025). Despite the growing recognition of the importance of emotional and psychological factors in education, existing literature has largely overlooked this dimension, focusing instead on material factors such as funding and access to resources (Jafari 2024). This research aims to bridge this gap by exploring how EI can address the emotional and social challenges faced by teachers and students in low-resource settings.

### **Emotional Intelligence in Education**

EI is critical for educators, enabling them to manage their emotions and build supportive relationships with students (McCalen and Johnson 2020). Goleman's (2005) model of EI identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Boyatzis, Goleman, and Rhee 2000). These competencies are particularly essential in low-resource settings, where teachers often face heightened stress, and students are more likely to experience emotional and psychological difficulties (Li and Kim 2024). Research has shown that teachers with high EI are more effective in managing their classrooms, which directly impacts student engagement and learning outcomes (Yuan et al. 2022). However, studies linking EI directly to educational equity—especially in low-resource settings—are scarce (Hadad, Watted, and Blau 2023).

Much of the existing research on EI focuses on urban or well-resourced schools, where teachers are less likely to face the same challenges as those in low-resource settings (Kim, Tong, and Sun 2021). For example, studies by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Brackett et al. (2006) show that emotionally intelligent teachers can improve classroom dynamics and student engagement, but these studies primarily address teacher well-being rather than the role of EI in fostering educational equity. By contrast, this study aims to explore how EI can be applied to reduce educational disparities in rural areas, particularly in Zhejiang Province, where teachers face unique challenges due to a lack of resources and support. Research has shown that rural educators often encounter significant barriers that hinder their ability to implement effective teaching strategies, which can exacerbate educational inequities (Cruz, Firestone, and Rodl 2021). This research will contribute new insights into how EI can be used to improve the educational experience for students in these underserved environments. Understanding how EI can be leveraged in rural education contexts is crucial for

developing targeted interventions that support both teachers and students in overcoming the challenges they face (Shi and Sercombe 2020).

## **Emotional Intelligence and Educational Equity**

Educational equity ensures that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, have equal access to the support and opportunities needed to succeed (Hughes et al. 2023). While much of the research on educational equity has focused on material disparities—such as unequal funding and infrastructure—there is increasing recognition of the role emotional and psychological factors play in fostering an equitable learning environment. Emotional intelligence is essential for creating inclusive, supportive classrooms where all students can thrive (Li 2021). EI enables teachers to recognise and address the emotional needs of their students, providing the social and emotional support that is often lacking in low-resource schools (Sun and Xu 2025).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) research demonstrates that emotional and psychological support improves academic performance and social behaviours (Zins 2004). Programmes that promote EI have been shown to improve students' self-regulation, reduce aggression, and increase academic engagement. These benefits are particularly important for students in low-resource schools, who often face challenges such as poverty and family instability. However, research on EI's role in educational equity is limited, particularly regarding its application in low-resource settings and for new teachers who may lack experience and support. For instance, studies have shown that new teachers in rural areas often struggle to create an emotionally supportive classroom environment due to a lack of training and resources (Ho 2024). This study addresses this gap by exploring how EI can promote educational equity in these contexts, emphasising the need for targeted professional development that incorporates emotional competencies into teacher training.

## **Theoretical Framework: Emotional Intelligence and Educational Equity**

This study is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Goleman's (2005) emotional intelligence theory and the concept of educational equity (Espinoza 2007). Goleman's (2005) model emphasises five core competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, that are vital for fostering positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers with high EI are better equipped to address students' emotional needs, create supportive classroom environments, and manage the challenges of teaching in low-resource settings. These competencies enable teachers to better engage students, even in situations where material resources are scarce.

Educational equity stresses the importance of providing all students with equal access to opportunities and support (Espinoza 2007). EI aligns with this concept by helping teachers meet the emotional and academic needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, teachers with strong EI are better able to recognise when a student is struggling emotionally and provide the support needed to help them succeed

academically (Zhao and Song 2021). By combining these two frameworks, this study explores how EI can be used to foster inclusive and equitable educational environments, particularly in low-resource schools.

## Methodology

### Research Design

A multiple-case study design was employed to explore the role of EI in promoting educational equity among new teachers in low-resource schools in Zhejiang Province, a southeastern region of China. This design allows for an in-depth examination of individual cases within their unique school contexts, enabling a deeper understanding of how EI manifests in classroom practices. It is particularly appropriate because it facilitates comparison between different teachers' experiences and practices, which can reveal common patterns and unique variations across different educational settings (Flyvbjerg 2011). By focusing on teachers in low-resource schools, the study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which EI can influence teaching strategies and the ability to foster educational equity, particularly in challenging environments.

### Participants

The participants for this study were 30 new teachers, defined as having three or fewer years of teaching experience (Fantilli and McDougall 2009), from low-resource schools in Zhejiang Province. These teachers were selected through purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: (1) current employment in schools identified by local education authorities as under-resourced; (2) teaching of core academic subjects (Chinese, Mathematics, English, Science); (3) professional interest in or prior exposure to emotional intelligence practices; and (4) willingness to engage in sustained participation across interviews and classroom observations. The sample includes teachers from a mix of rural, suburban, and urban schools to ensure a diverse range of experiences across different types of low-resource settings. The participants were also selected based on their interest in emotional intelligence and its potential impact on addressing educational inequities in their classrooms. Table 1 outlines the demographic details of the participants, which include their gender, age, education level, and the type of school they work in.

**Table 1:** Participants information

Category	Group/Range	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	15
	Female	15
Age Range	23–25	10
	26–32	10
Education Level	Master's Degree	16
	Bachelor's Degree	14
Teaching Subject	Mathematics	9
	English	7
	Science	7
	Chinese	7
Years of Experience	1–2 years	18
	3 years	12
School Type	Rural	10
	Suburban	10
	Urban	10
Teaching Level	Primary School	5
	Secondary School	15
	High School	10

Participants span a range of age groups, from 23 to 32 years, with diverse educational backgrounds including both bachelor's and master's degrees. They also represent various school types, ensuring that the study captures a range of experiences across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. These participants were selected to provide rich, varied insights into how emotional intelligence is applied in diverse educational settings, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of its role in promoting educational equity.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through three methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews, lasting 45–60 minutes each, were conducted with 30 participants. These interviews explored their understanding of emotional intelligence, its application in classroom management, and its role in promoting educational equity in low-resource schools. An interview protocol was followed to ensure consistency across all sessions.

Classroom observations were conducted over a three-month period, with each participant observed in their classrooms at least three times for approximately 40–50 minutes per session. These observations focused on moments such as managing student emotions, addressing classroom conflicts, and fostering positive teacher-student

relationships. An observation protocol guided these sessions to ensure structured and consistent data collection.

Document analysis was performed on teaching materials, lesson plans, and reflective journals to further explore how emotional intelligence was integrated into teachers' daily practices.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. All data were anonymised to protect participants' privacy. Ethical protocols were adhered to throughout the study.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data collected from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (Clarke and Braun 2017). The process began with familiarisation with the interview transcripts, which were read multiple times to identify emerging patterns and recurring themes related to emotional intelligence and educational equity.

Open coding was applied to break down the data into smaller segments, which were then assigned initial codes based on participants' statements. For example, one participant said:

I often find myself in situations where students are upset, and I have to remain calm to help them regain control of their emotions before we can move forward with the lesson.

This was coded as "emotional regulation" and "teacher-student relationship". Similar statements were grouped under various themes such as "classroom management", "student engagement", and "emotional support". Examples of coding can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Example of coding

Participant	Quote	Code(s)	Theme
P1	“I often find myself in situations where students are upset, and I have to remain calm to help them regain control of their emotions before we can move forward with the lesson.”	Emotional regulation, Teacher-student relationship	Teacher-Student Interactions
P5	“We don’t have enough resources in the classroom, and sometimes I feel helpless when I can’t provide students with the materials they need.”	Lack of resources, Inequity	Challenges in Low-Resource Environments
P12	“It’s hard to keep students motivated when they don’t feel supported, and many of them have difficult home lives.”	Student motivation, Lack of support	Emotional Challenges and Motivation
P8	“I try to make lessons engaging, but without enough resources, it’s a constant struggle to maintain students’ interest.”	Resource constraints, Engagement	Barriers to Educational Equity

After open coding, these initial codes were refined into broader themes, such as “Teacher-Student Interactions” and “Challenges in Low-Resource Environments”. To ensure reliability and consistency, data triangulation was conducted by comparing interview, observation, and document sources. Additionally, member checking was used to validate interpretations with participants, and intercoder reliability was assessed through peer-debriefing sessions. An audit trail was maintained to document each stage of the analysis, enhancing the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings.

By employing these strategies, the study ensured that the findings were both valid and reliable, providing robust insights into the role of emotional intelligence in fostering educational equity in low-resource schools.

## Results

The results of the data analysis are presented, focusing on key themes and patterns identified from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings are organised around four major themes: Emotional Intelligence in Teaching Practices, Teacher-Student Interactions, Challenges in Low-Resource Environments, and Emotional Support and Educational Equity.

### Emotional Intelligence in Teaching Practices

EI was identified as a critical factor influencing teaching practices, particularly in managing classroom dynamics and fostering supportive relationships with students. Teachers consistently highlighted how EI, including emotional regulation, empathy, and self-awareness, helped them navigate the challenges of teaching in low-resource

schools. These emotional competencies were especially vital in building trust with students and managing emotionally charged classroom situations, often exacerbated by socio-economic challenges faced by the students.

For example, Participant 3 explained how emotional regulation was essential when handling classroom disruptions:

One day, a student became upset during a lesson because they didn't understand the material. I noticed their frustration and remained calm. I approached them and said, "Let's take a moment to breathe, and we'll go over the problem together." Remaining calm and showing that I understood their feelings helped them settle down and refocus on the lesson.

Participant 16 provided another example of how empathy played a central role in classroom management:

A few weeks ago, a student was visibly upset because of family issues. I could see they were not focused, so I pulled them aside and asked if they wanted to talk. I didn't push them to share, but I let them know I was there for them. Afterward, their behaviour improved and they re-engaged with the class. This emotional connection helped them feel supported, and they were more open to participating.

These examples illustrate how emotional intelligence can be applied in real classroom situations, allowing teachers to effectively manage student emotions and maintain engagement.

Another important aspect of EI noted by participants was its role in creating a positive teacher-student relationship. Participant 20 discussed how fostering emotional safety helped her students feel more confident and engaged:

I encourage my students to express how they are feeling. For instance, when I notice a student is quiet or distracted, I ask if they want to talk about it. This makes them feel heard and understood. When students feel emotionally safe in my class, they're more willing to engage and participate in the lessons.

In addition to fostering positive relationships, teachers emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence in overcoming the barriers posed by limited resources. Participant 8 shared an example of how emotional regulation helped manage a challenging classroom environment:

In my classroom, there are often more students than available desks, and the space is cramped. It's easy for tensions to rise, especially during group work. But if I stay calm and redirect the students with patience and understanding, I'm able to keep things under control. When things get chaotic, I take a moment to address the students' emotions and bring everyone back to focus.

This example highlights how emotional intelligence not only supports classroom management but also helps to create a calm and organised atmosphere despite physical constraints.

Finally, Participant 5 discussed how empathy and emotional support could enhance students' motivation in a resource-limited environment:

Sometimes, the lack of materials like textbooks or technology can make it hard to engage students. But I try to focus on their emotional needs first. I acknowledge how difficult it can be when students don't have the same resources as others, and I reassure them that we can still learn and succeed together. I often say, "We might not have the latest materials, but we can still make this lesson work. You are all capable." This emotional support has helped keep students motivated.

These quotations demonstrate that emotional intelligence is integral to creating a supportive, inclusive classroom, particularly in low-resource schools where external challenges can impact both student behaviour and motivation. Teachers used emotional intelligence to build relationships, manage emotional challenges, and engage students, highlighting its critical role in fostering educational equity.

### **Teacher-Student Interactions**

Teacher-student interactions were a central theme in this study, with participants consistently describing how EI facilitated positive relationships and effective classroom management. Teachers emphasised how EI helped them recognise and respond to students' emotional needs, foster trust, and create a supportive environment, especially in low-resource schools where students often face emotional and academic challenges. These interactions were particularly vital for maintaining student engagement and managing classroom behaviour, which in turn contributed to educational equity.

For example, Participant 7 described how empathy and emotional awareness enabled him to address a student's emotional distress in a way that fostered trust and motivation:

One of my students was really upset during class because of a family situation. I could see she wasn't focusing, so I gently asked her if she was okay. I made it clear I understood her frustration and suggested we take a short break. After the break, she returned to the lesson with more focus and better engagement. I think she just needed to know I cared, and that moment helped her emotionally re-engage with the class.

In this example, the teacher's empathetic response not only helped the student feel understood but also re-engaged her in the learning process, demonstrating how EI can directly impact student behaviour and participation.

Participant 10 shared a similar experience, where acknowledging and addressing emotional cues in the classroom fostered trust and openness, improving student engagement:

I always try to notice when a student is struggling emotionally, and I give them space to express it if they need to. Last week, I noticed a student was visibly anxious before a test. I asked her if she wanted to talk about it, and we spent a few minutes discussing her concerns. After that, she seemed more relaxed and performed better in the test. It's all about building trust so that students know they can come to you when they need support.

By taking the time to address the emotional needs of the student, this teacher used EI to help reduce anxiety and foster a sense of security, which contributed to the student's academic performance, showcasing the role of EI in overcoming emotional barriers to learning.

Participant 4 emphasised how emotional regulation helped manage a conflict in the classroom, highlighting the role of EI in maintaining order and resolving issues constructively:

There was an incident where two students started arguing over a project, and the tension was affecting the whole class. I stayed calm and asked them both to explain their perspectives without interruption. I then guided them towards a solution by focusing on understanding each other's feelings and finding common ground. This approach helped resolve the issue without escalating it and kept the classroom environment calm.

This example illustrates how emotional regulation allowed the teacher to manage a potentially disruptive situation and maintain a productive learning environment. The ability to de-escalate conflict and model emotional regulation for students reinforces the importance of EI in classroom management.

Finally, Participant 14 discussed how emotional intelligence helped build a positive and emotionally safe learning environment, which contributed to better student engagement and motivation, particularly in a low-resource setting:

In my classroom, I make sure to create an environment where students feel emotionally supported. I tell them regularly that even though we may not have the best resources, they can always count on my support. I emphasise that their feelings matter and that we can always find solutions together. I think this approach has helped my students trust me more, and they seem more willing to engage in class discussions.

By promoting emotional safety and providing support, the teacher fostered an environment where students felt more comfortable participating, regardless of the resource constraints. This demonstrates how EI can help bridge gaps in student engagement and motivation, particularly in challenging educational contexts.

### **Challenges in Low-Resource Environments**

Teachers in low-resource schools consistently reported significant challenges that hindered their ability to implement effective teaching practices. These challenges

included overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and the emotional and socio-economic difficulties faced by many students. Despite these obstacles, EI emerged as a vital tool that helped teachers address both classroom management and students' emotional needs, contributing to more equitable learning environments.

For example, Participant 5 shared how emotional intelligence allowed her to engage with individual students in an overcrowded classroom:

We have too many students in one classroom, and it's difficult to give them the attention they need. However, by using emotional intelligence, I try to make each student feel seen. I ask them questions, check in with them emotionally, and make sure they know they are valued. This emotional connection helps them stay engaged, even when there aren't enough materials or space.

This response highlights how emotional intelligence helped the teacher navigate the challenges of overcrowding, ensuring that students remained engaged and felt valued despite the lack of physical resources. By focusing on emotional support, teachers can maintain student motivation and participation, which is crucial in low-resource settings.

Similarly, Participant 12 described how emotional intelligence helped overcome the impact of insufficient materials on student engagement:

In a classroom with limited resources, sometimes I have to get creative. I use whatever materials I have, but I also focus on the emotional needs of my students. I might not have enough books for everyone, but I try to motivate them by telling them that we can still succeed together, even without the best resources. That emotional support helps them feel more positive about learning, even in tough conditions.

In this instance, emotional intelligence was not only applied to foster motivation but also to build resilience in students, showing how emotional support can mitigate the challenges posed by material scarcity and encourage a growth mindset in students.

Participant 14 discussed the emotional toll of teaching in a low-resource school and the necessity of self-regulation to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere:

Teaching in a low-resource school can be very stressful. There's a lot of pressure to deliver results with little support. But I've learned that if I don't manage my emotions and stress levels, it can affect the entire class. I take moments for myself to reflect and calm down before I engage with the students. This emotional regulation helps me stay positive and effective, even when things aren't going well.

This quote emphasises how emotional regulation is essential not only for maintaining teachers' own well-being but also for ensuring that they can provide a steady, supportive presence in the classroom. Managing their own emotional responses enables teachers to be more effective in supporting students, which is crucial in environments with high stress and limited resources.

Finally, Participant 3 discussed how EI helped him address the emotional challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, which often interfered with their academic performance:

Many of my students come from difficult home situations, and they often bring that emotional baggage to the classroom. It's hard to keep them focused on learning when they're dealing with so much outside of school. But I make it a point to be there for them emotionally. I try to be patient, listen to them when they need to talk, and offer support. This approach makes a big difference in their willingness to engage with the lesson.

By demonstrating patience and empathy, the teacher was able to address the emotional needs of students, which in turn helped improve their engagement and academic performance. This shows how EI plays a pivotal role in ensuring educational equity by addressing not just academic needs but also emotional well-being.

These examples illustrate how emotional intelligence helps teachers navigate the complexities of teaching in low-resource environments. Despite challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and students' emotional difficulties, emotional intelligence allows teachers to create emotionally supportive environments where students feel valued, understood, and motivated. This approach fosters educational equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, can thrive in the classroom.

### **Emotional Support and Educational Equity**

EI was consistently identified as a crucial tool for providing emotional support to students in low-resource schools. Teachers emphasised that by recognising and addressing students' emotional needs, they were able to create more equitable learning environments where students felt valued and supported. This emotional support was particularly important for students who faced socio-economic challenges, helping them overcome barriers to academic success and fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging.

For instance, Participant 17 shared how emotional intelligence contributed to student motivation in a class with many socio-economic challenges:

Many of my students come from homes where they don't get much emotional support. Some feel neglected or overlooked. I always try to let them know that I care about them, not just their grades. I listen to their concerns and make sure they know they are important. This emotional support is essential for them to feel confident enough to succeed in class.

This response illustrates how emotional intelligence can build student confidence and foster a sense of belonging, which are essential for academic engagement, particularly in disadvantaged contexts. It highlights the importance of providing students with emotional support to level the playing field in classrooms where students often feel marginalised.

Participant 19 also discussed how EI helped her respond to student anxiety in a classroom with limited resources:

In our school, many students struggle with the pressures of living in poverty. They often come to class feeling stressed or anxious. I make it a point to acknowledge their feelings and let them know they don't have to hide their emotions. I tell them, "It's okay to feel upset, but we will work through it together." I believe this emotional validation helps them focus on learning.

In this instance, emotional validation was key to reducing anxiety, showing how EI can address emotional barriers to learning, allowing students to focus better on academic tasks. This approach directly contributes to educational equity by making sure that emotional needs are addressed before academic work begins.

Participant 22 explained how emotional intelligence created an emotionally safe space for students to engage more effectively:

Some students come to class with a lot of baggage—whether it's from family problems or the pressures of school. I try to ease their anxiety by making the classroom a place where they feel safe. When I see students are anxious, I pause the lesson and check in with them, asking if they want to talk about it. Once they feel heard, they're more willing to engage in the lesson.

This response emphasises how emotional intelligence facilitates inclusivity by allowing students to express their emotions, ultimately leading to greater engagement. It highlights how creating a supportive, emotionally safe space encourages students to participate and thrive, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may face additional emotional burdens.

Finally, Participant 6 reflected on how emotional intelligence contributed to fostering equity in a diverse classroom:

I've learned that to promote equity in the classroom, I need to ensure every student feels emotionally safe. I make it a point to give extra attention to students who might be struggling emotionally. I talk to them about their challenges and let them know that they're not alone. I believe that once students feel emotionally supported, they're more likely to thrive academically.

This example underscores the role of emotional support in ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities. By addressing the emotional needs of students, this teacher was able to create an inclusive classroom where every student, regardless of their emotional struggles or background, received the support necessary to succeed academically.

These examples demonstrate that emotional intelligence plays a critical role in providing emotional support to students, particularly in low-resource environments. Teachers who apply EI can create emotionally supportive learning environments,

enabling students to feel valued, engaged, and empowered to succeed academically. This approach contributes to educational equity by ensuring that all students, especially those facing socio-economic and emotional challenges, receive the necessary support to thrive. By addressing emotional needs, teachers help level the playing field and foster an inclusive classroom culture, essential for promoting academic success for all students.

## Discussion

The discussion interprets the study's findings within the context of EI and educational equity, focusing on how EI helps teachers manage challenges in low-resource settings, foster positive interactions, and provide emotional support. It connects these insights to theoretical frameworks and explores their implications for educational practice.

### **The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Teacher-Student Interactions**

The findings align with existing literature that emphasises the critical role of EI in fostering positive teacher-student relationships, which are essential for academic success. EI allows teachers to manage classroom behaviour, resolve conflicts, and create a supportive learning environment. Teachers with high EI demonstrate the ability to regulate emotions, respond empathetically, and build trust, which is particularly vital in environments marked by socio-economic adversity (Gunasekara et al. 2022).

However, the results highlight the unique role EI plays in low-resource environments. While previous research has shown that EI enhances teacher-student interactions in various educational contexts (Jennings and Greenberg 2009), the current findings suggest that in low-resource schools, EI is not merely an additional tool but a compensatory mechanism. Teachers in these environments often contend with overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and students dealing with significant emotional challenges. In these contexts, EI becomes indispensable for maintaining classroom order, providing emotional support, and ensuring student engagement despite resource limitations.

Research by Gunasekara et al. (2022) similarly found that EI contributes to positive teacher-student interactions in resource-rich schools. However, in these settings, EI was primarily seen as enhancing classroom management and academic outcomes. In contrast, this study shows that in low-resource schools, EI plays a foundational role in creating an emotionally safe and supportive classroom environment, compensating for the absence of physical resources and institutional support. This difference in findings is largely due to the research context: Teachers in well-resourced schools often have access to professional development and institutional support, while teachers in low-resource schools must rely more heavily on EI to bridge the gaps created by systemic challenges.

A key insight from this research is that teachers rely on EI not only to connect with students but also to protect their own emotional well-being. This reliance on EI underscores the need for further research into its impact on teacher resilience and emotional well-being, particularly in high-stress environments.

The findings emphasise the importance of integrating EI into teacher training and professional development, especially in low-resource schools. Policymakers should prioritise EI as a core component of teacher preparation to help educators manage classroom dynamics and address students' emotional needs. Additionally, institutional support is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of EI. Policies that promote EI alongside addressing issues such as inadequate funding and teacher burnout will foster a supportive environment for both teachers and students, ultimately improving both academic and emotional outcomes.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Educational Equity**

In low-resource schools, EI plays a critical role in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of students. Teachers with high EI are better equipped to manage classroom dynamics, build trust with students, and provide emotional support in challenging environments (Nguyen, Chen, and Nguyen 2025). This study finds that EI is not just an additional tool but a compensatory mechanism in these settings. Teachers facing overcrowded classrooms and limited resources rely heavily on their emotional intelligence to maintain classroom order, support student engagement, and ensure emotional well-being despite external socio-economic challenges.

EI enables teachers to recognise and address students' emotional needs, such as anxiety and family difficulties, which can otherwise hinder their ability to focus on learning. In low-resource environments, where students often face external stressors such as poverty, EI is essential for creating a classroom culture that promotes student engagement and academic success. Teachers who effectively use EI create safe and supportive spaces where students feel valued, allowing them to focus on academic work despite the emotional challenges they face.

These findings align with previous research, which highlights EI's role in creating inclusive classrooms (Gunasekara et al. 2022; Nguyen, Chen, and Nguyen 2025). However, this study extends the literature by emphasising the foundational role of EI in low-resource settings, where it compensates for the lack of material resources. Unlike in resource-rich schools, where teachers may rely on external support, EI in low-resource schools is crucial for bridging the gaps created by limited resources and external challenges.

While EI plays a significant role in promoting educational equity, it cannot fully address the systemic issues in low-resource schools. Structural issues such as inadequate funding, insufficient training, and lack of mental health resources continue to limit what teachers can achieve. Nevertheless, EI remains a vital tool in helping teachers foster an

emotionally supportive environment that enables students to overcome both emotional and academic barriers.

### **Challenges in Low-Resource Environments**

Teachers in low-resource schools face significant challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching materials, and students' emotional and socio-economic difficulties. These challenges align with previous research that identifies such barriers as major obstacles to effective teaching (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). EI serves as a crucial compensatory tool, enabling teachers to manage classroom dynamics, maintain emotional balance, and support students despite these resource constraints (Singer 2024).

EI was essential for teachers to address emotional and behavioural challenges in these environments. Teachers' ability to regulate their own emotions and empathise with students helped them maintain a calm, supportive classroom atmosphere. This aligns with Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) emphasis on self-regulation in preventing burnout and ensuring effective classroom management. In overcrowded classrooms with limited resources, EI becomes indispensable for fostering an emotionally supportive environment, which is crucial for keeping students engaged.

Students in these environments often face external stressors, such as poverty, family instability, and trauma. EI enables teachers to recognise and address these emotional needs, creating safe spaces for students to engage with academic content. This finding supports Zins (2004), who argues that EI is crucial for students' social-emotional development, a key factor for academic success. Teachers in low-resource schools rely on EI not only to manage behaviour but also to help students overcome emotional barriers to learning.

While EI plays a key role in addressing emotional needs, it cannot resolve the systemic challenges faced by low-resource schools. Structural issues such as inadequate funding, lack of institutional support, and insufficient teacher training continue to hinder the ability of teachers to provide optimal educational experiences. EI acts as a vital compensatory mechanism, but without broader structural reforms, its impact is limited.

In resource-rich schools, EI may enhance existing teaching practices, but in low-resource settings, it becomes essential for creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers in these settings often face numerous challenges that hinder their ability to support students academically, making EI critical in ensuring that students feel valued and emotionally supported despite these challenges (Jennings and Greenberg 2009).

## **Emotional Support and Educational Equity**

In low-resource schools, EI serves as a crucial tool for addressing students' emotional and psychological needs, facilitating their academic engagement despite external challenges such as poverty, trauma, and family instability. Teachers with high EI create emotionally supportive environments where students feel valued, which is particularly important in resource-constrained settings where emotional distress can impede academic focus.

These findings align with existing literature that underscores the importance of EI in fostering inclusive classrooms (Nguyen, Chen, and Nguyen 2025). However, this study extends the literature by showing that in low-resource schools, EI is not just a supplementary tool for managing classroom dynamics, but a compensatory mechanism essential for overcoming resource limitations. Teachers in these schools rely heavily on EI to provide emotional support and maintain classroom order, addressing the socio-emotional challenges students face due to their backgrounds.

While EI is vital for promoting educational equity, it cannot resolve the broader systemic issues in low-resource schools, such as inadequate funding and insufficient professional development. Structural reforms are needed to complement the impact of EI. Without institutional support, the full potential of EI to foster equitable learning environments cannot be realised. This limitation highlights the need for policies that integrate EI training into teacher development programmes and address the systemic barriers that hinder effective teaching in low-resource settings.

Furthermore, this study's findings suggest that EI also plays a critical role in improving teacher well-being and retention. Teachers with high EI are better equipped to handle the stress and complexities of low-resource environments, thus reducing burnout and enhancing job satisfaction. This is particularly important in settings with high turnover rates, where emotional resilience is crucial for maintaining consistent support for students.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence is an essential component for promoting educational equity in low-resource schools, enabling teachers to support students emotionally and academically. However, its effectiveness depends on broader systemic changes that ensure adequate resources and professional development. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of EI on student outcomes and teacher effectiveness, particularly in diverse educational contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This research explores the role of EI in low-resource schools, emphasising its importance in enhancing teacher-student interactions, fostering educational equity, and overcoming the challenges posed by limited resources. The findings show that EI is essential for teachers to recognise and respond to students' emotional needs, build

positive relationships, and create a supportive learning environment. In low-resource settings, where socio-economic barriers hinder student engagement, EI allows teachers to provide the emotional support needed to bridge these gaps and ensure academic success for all students, regardless of background.

The theoretical contribution of this study extends Goleman's (2005) EI model by illustrating its compensatory role in low-resource environments. While existing research has primarily focused on EI in resource-rich settings, this study demonstrates its foundational significance in environments with limited resources. By compensating for the lack of physical and institutional support, EI plays a key role in fostering more inclusive, emotionally supportive classrooms, thereby enhancing student learning outcomes. The practical implications are critical for educational practice and policy. Policymakers and educational leaders should prioritise EI training in teacher development programmes, particularly in low-resource schools. Equipping teachers with EI competencies can help them manage emotional and behavioural challenges, improve student engagement, and create a positive classroom environment. Additionally, systemic reforms, including increased funding for teacher training, SEL programmes, and institutional support, are necessary to fully leverage EI in promoting educational equity.

Despite the valuable insights provided, limitations must be acknowledged. The small, geographically limited sample may affect the generalisability of the findings, and reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias. Future research should explore larger, more diverse samples across regions and incorporate student perspectives to gain a fuller understanding of EI's impact. Moreover, the study focuses predominantly on teacher perspectives. Including student voices in future research would provide a more balanced and holistic view of how EI impacts classroom dynamics and learning outcomes. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of EI on student outcomes would also provide valuable insights into the sustainability of EI training.

In conclusion, this research highlights the vital role of emotional intelligence in fostering educational equity in low-resource schools. By enabling teachers to address students' emotional needs and create supportive learning environments, EI significantly contributes to both emotional and academic success. While EI is not a substitute for systemic solutions, it functions as a powerful compensatory mechanism—a human-centred response to institutional limitations. To fully realise EI's potential, its implementation must be accompanied by broader systemic reforms, including teacher training support, school-based SEL programmes, and equitable funding strategies. Only through such integrated efforts can emotional intelligence help level the educational playing field for all students.

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