

# EMOTION REGULATION DISABILITY AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION CHILDREN: A NARRATIVE SYNTHESIS

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## ABSTRACT

The ability to regulate emotions is important for effective learning amongst students with special educational needs. Poor emotion regulation leads to behavioural problems, such as loneliness, arrogance, aggression, rage and self-harm behaviours, and subsequently, this might contribute to social isolation and less potential to build friendships. In this paper, narrative synthesis was used to explore the causal factors of emotional regulation issues experienced by students with special educational needs and the effects of social emotional problems on these students. The findings from the narrative synthesis indicated that factors leading to emotional regulation issues among students with special educational needs are neurological factors, growth and development factors, peer social rejection factors, parenting factors, and teacher-related factors, while the effects of emotional regulation problems include social problems, behaviour problems, emotion problems, performance employment problems, and cognitive problems. From the narrative synthesis, conceptual frameworks related to the causes and effects of emotional regulation problems amongst students with special educational needs were induced to offer the direction of further investigation on this minimally researched area.

**Keywords:** Emotion Regulation; Disability; Causal Factors; Negative Effects; Special Education Children

## 1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence is fundamental to learning. Goleman (1998) argued that emotional regulation is a master aptitude and guarantee of intellectual intelligence. Goleman's (1998) argument was based on the clinical evidence that when emotional regulation is affected due to brain damage, the functions of intelligence are usually affected as well. This argument is later supported by researchers, such as Boyd, Barnett, Bondrova, Leong and Gomby (2005), who assert that emotional and social intelligence develop simultaneously with children's cognitive development.

Emotional regulation is an ability to assess, cope, manage and express emotions according to the situation to achieve emotional balance (Gross, 2002). According to Gross (2002), emotional regulation happens when there is an antecedent (such as a situation or event) that elicits an emotional response in an individual. This emotional response can provoke an array of other bodily responses, including behavioural, experiential, and physiological responses. For example, during an art class, a tool is broken (antecedent) and this leads to a shock response in a student. This response can very quickly provoke other bodily responses like the student immediately withdrawing his hand from the tool, looking around to see if other people also noticed the incident, and increased heart beats. Gross (1998, 2002) proposed five elements of emotional self-regulation, namely situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation, to refer to the responses during the process of emotional regulation.

Positive emotions can build good relationships, while negative emotions create discomfort while socializing. Emotional management skills and the ability to express feelings according to social situations are very important in maintaining relationships with others (Ratnam, Alias, and Toran, 2018). However, these skills are noticeably lower amongst students with special educational needs (Ratnam, Alias, & Toran, 2018), causing them to experience social-emotional and behavioural challenges (Cavioni, Grazzani & Ornaghi, 2017). These challenges cause students with special education needs to experience poorer social and learning outcomes compared to their typical peers (Bryan, Burstein & Ergul, 2004).

In Malaysia, students with special educational needs consist of students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, physical impairment, multiple disabilities and learning disabilities, such as autism, Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Syndrome and Hyperactivity and Dyslexia (Malaysia Education Development Plan, 2013-2025). According to Abdullah and Omar (2018), students with special educational needs differ from normal children in terms of mental ability, sensory ability, neural, muscular, physical characteristics, social and emotional behaviour, communication ability and various deficiencies. The Education Act (1996) defines students with special educational needs in Malaysia as a category of students with various types of learning difficulties, including visual impairment, hearing, speech, Down Syndrome, autism, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), mental retardation and dyslexia. Later, Special Education Regulations (2013) defines students with special educational needs as those certified by a medical practitioner, optician, audiologist or psychologist as a student with physical disabilities, learning disabilities or any combination of disabilities. Persons with Disabilities Act (Act 685) added that individuals with special needs have long-term disabilities in terms of physical, mental, intellectual and sensory.

Amongst students with special educational needs in Malaysia, many of them experience difficulties or differences in emotional management and control. In regards to this, Ratnam, Alias and Toran (2018) advocate that it is important for multidisciplinary agencies in Malaysia to work together to help these students in terms of social, emotional and behavioral management. The emotion regulation intervention initiative for this group of students aligns with the goals of the Education Development Plan 2013-2025 to provide quality education to all students, including those with special educational needs. To start, it is important that the factors and effects of emotion regulation on students with special educational needs are explored. A better understanding of the causes of emotion regulation problems and the possible effects is critical, which provides the direction to plan evidence-based and contextually suitable interventions for these students.

## **2. Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors of emotion regulation problems among students with special educational needs and the effects of emotion regulation problems via a narrative synthesis method.

## **3. Research Question**

The two research questions to be addressed in this narrative synthesis included:

1. What are the factors of emotion regulation problems among students with special educational needs?
2. What are the effects of emotion regulation problems among students with special educational needs?

## **4. Methodology**

This paper employed the narrative synthesis methodology for reviewing previous studies and multiple data sources (Edwards & Kaimal, 2016; Gruber & Oepen, 2018). For this review, “the factor of emotion regulation” and “the effect of emotion regulation” were used as the search terms. Themes related to these two notions were identified from the papers reviewed.

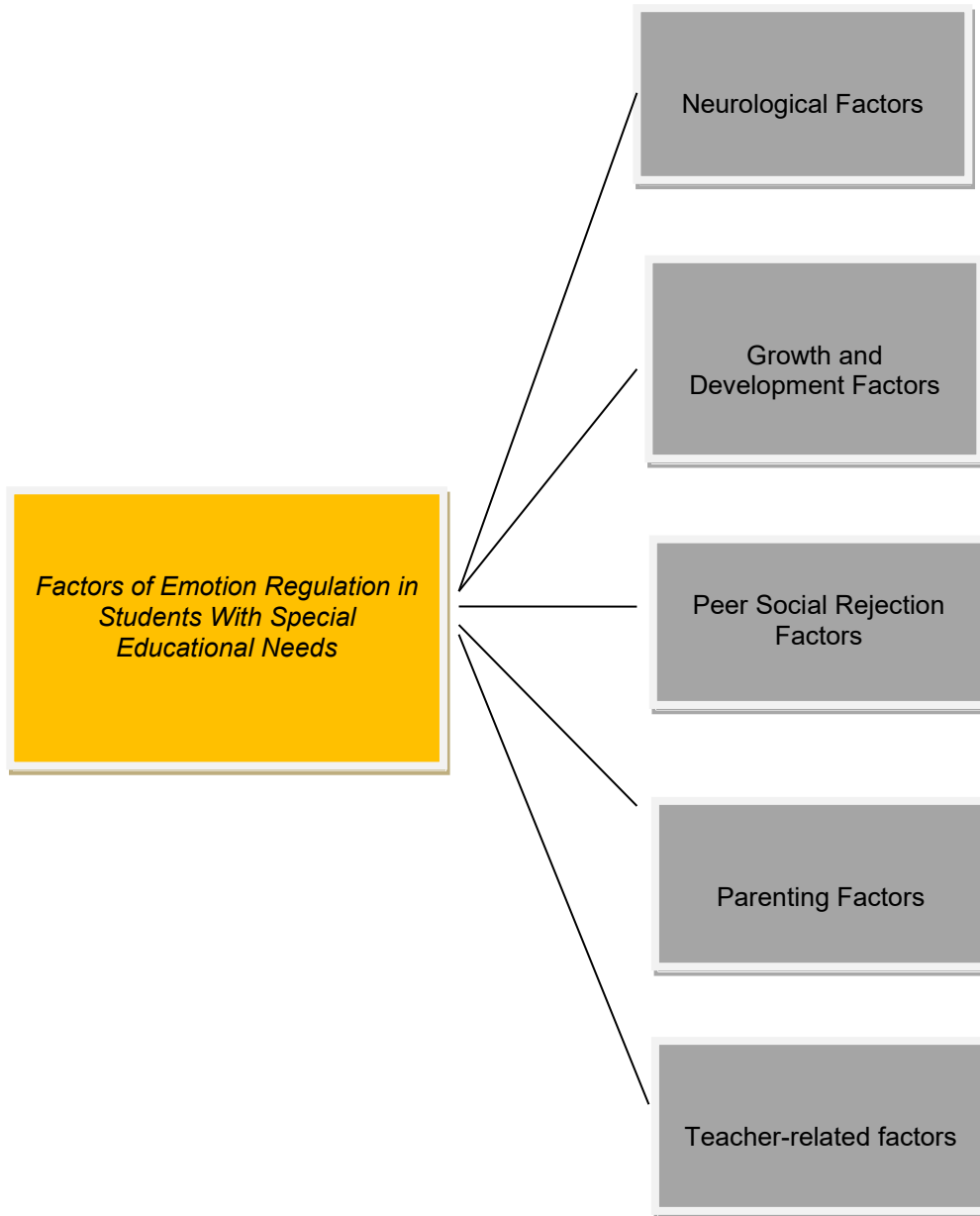
## **5. Results**

From the review, five themes were identified for factors of emotion regulation problems, while another five themes were identified for the effects of emotion regulation problems. These themes are presented in turn below.

### **5.1 Factors of Emotion Regulation Problems among Students with Special Educational Needs**

Five factors that may cause emotional regulation problems among students with special educational needs include neurological factors, growth and developmental factors, peer social exclusion factors, parenting factors, and teacher-related factors. These five factors are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Factors of Emotion Regulation in Students with Special Educational Needs



The first factor identified is the neurological factor, which is related to the differences in brain functions experienced by students with special educational needs, such as those with autism and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These neurological differences cause them to experience emotional and behavioral problems. As reported by Daulay (2017), Carlson (2011), Stefanatos & Baron (2011), individuals with autism might experience neurological differences in the structure and biochemistry of the brain at the locations of the frontal cortex, temporal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala, functions closely related to the planning and execution of communication and social skills. At the same time, differences in neurological functions in the cerebellum, cerebellum cortex and limbic brain, functions closely

related to the planning and execution of behaviour, attention, movement and emotional regulation, are also noticed among individuals with autism (Daulay, 2017; Wahad, 2015).

The second factor is the growth and development factor. Ghafar & Jahaya (2006) stated that students with special educational needs are labelled as special due to the developmental differences between them and typical-developing peers. In regards to this, students with special educational needs were found to experience delay or disorder in their development. Developmental delay and disorder is a common factor causing them to experience delay and disorder in emotion regulation.

The third factor is social rejection from normal peers. For example, aggressive children are reported to have no friends, resulting in psychological problems (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010). In schools, students with good behaviour are more easily accepted by others. On the other hand, those with emotional regulation problems, particularly those who tend to exhibit problematic behaviour, make it difficult for others to accept them in social interactions (Jamil, 2010; Benedict et al., 2007).

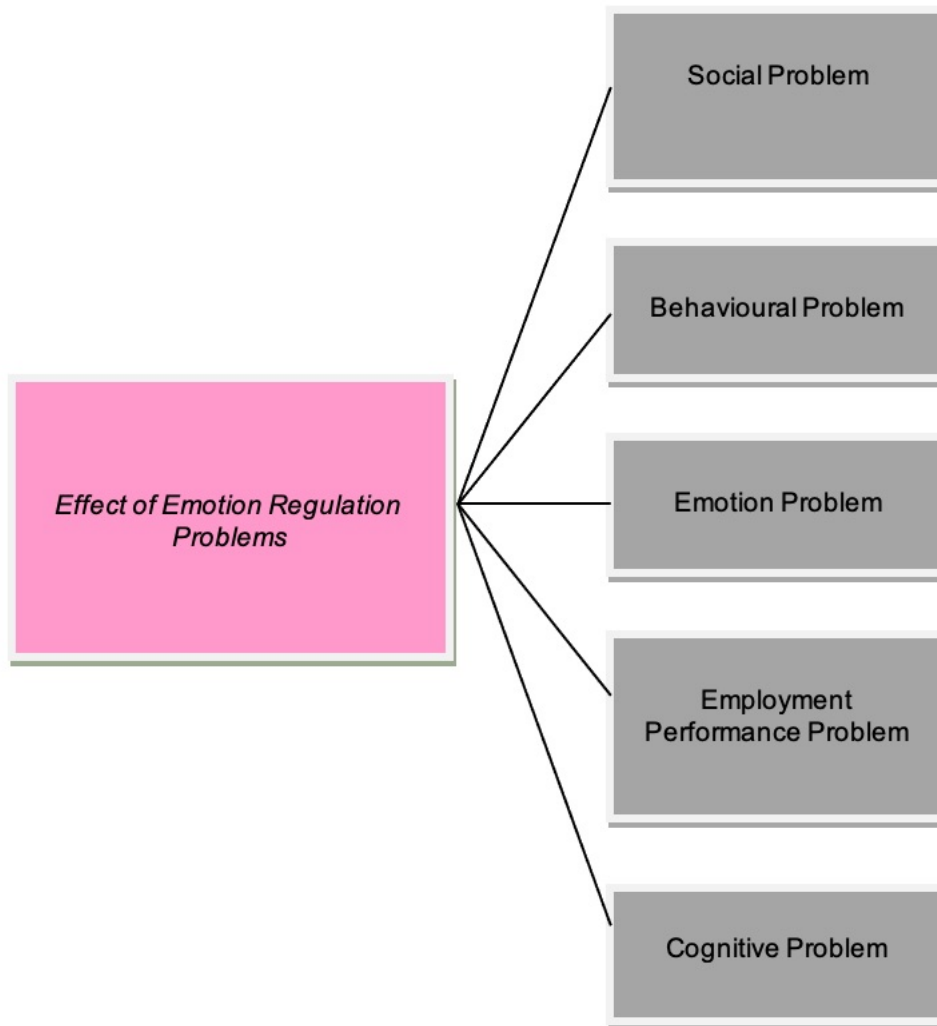
The fourth factor is the parenting factor because the child's socio-emotional development is often influenced by the parents (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Parents are the people closest to the child, and their behaviours and the ways they interact with the child can impact the development of the child's social, adaptive, communication and behavioural skills (Nasir & Mansor, 2019; Toran, 2017; Nazmin, 2017; Aizan, Jamiah & Noremy, 2016). Pertaining to this, Sulaiman (2013) highlighted that emotion regulation issues could be closely related to family problems.

The fifth factor is the teacher-related factor. Currently, most teachers do not attend enough training about strategies to facilitate emotion regulation in students. The majority of teachers only acquire the related skills through their experience, collaborating with teachers and school administrators (Amran, Majid & Ali, 2019). As students with special educational needs are more at risk for emotional regulation problems, special education teachers can be more vulnerable to stress and easily dissatisfied with their jobs than mainstream teachers (Koenen et al., 2017). The teaching and learning process, including those related to classroom management and emotion regulation, is closely dependent on the competence and skills of teachers (Idris, 2010).

## **5.2 Effect of Regulation Emotion Problems among Students with Special Educational Needs**

Five effects of emotional regulation problems among students with special educational needs include social, behavioral, emotion, employment performance and cognitive development. These five effects are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Effect of Emotion Regulation Problems in Students with Special Educational Needs



The first effect identified is the social problem. Children with special needs may experience poorer interpersonal relationships. Reed et al. (2011) reported fewer than 20% of students with special educational needs were able to build friendships, Litvack et al. (2011) found that one-third of the participants in their study who had high achievement in the classroom stated that they did not interact much with peers with disabilities. Besides that, Ladd & Troop-Gordon (2010) found that aggressive children were more likely to be unfriendly and isolated by their peers. Khoo & Alias (2015) added that the difficulty of building social interaction with the surrounding community could cause students with special educational needs to experience social isolation problems. The rejection from their peers and friendlessness can have damaging consequences on the psychosocial development of students with special educational needs. De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert (2012) also explained that poor social skills in students with special

educational needs can lead to loneliness, lack of friends, and putting them at risk of being potential victims of bullying.

The second effect is the behavioural problem. Ahmad & Hanifah (2015) found that problematic behaviours and emotional imbalances can disturb daily activities, such as the learning process in school. Adeli (2002) found that 80% of students with special needs experience behavioural problems, such as aggressiveness, social negativity, and self-management problems, which are closely associated with emotional problems.

The third effect is the emotion problem. Students with special needs face deficits in emotion regulation or the process of appropriately modifying emotions in response to stressful stimuli. Therefore, a low level of this skill may result in emotion problems (Mazefsky et al., 2013).

The fourth effect is performance employment problems. Past studies found that many graduates from special education do not show good performance in employment, social participation in the community, independent living after post-secondary education due to the challenges associated with the development of social, communication and adaptive skills (Chen et al., 2018).

The fifth effect is cognitive problems. Goleman (1998) reported that the ability to assess, cope, manage and express emotions according to the situation is the prerequisite condition of intellectual intelligence. He also argues that intellectual intelligence may be affected if part of the brain is damaged due to a defect in the functioning of emotional regulation.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the factors of emotion regulation problems among students with special educational needs may include neurological factors, growth and developmental factors, peer social exclusion factors, parenting factors, and teacher-related factors, while the effects of poor emotion regulation may include negative impacts on social, behavioural, emotion, performance employment and cognitive development. From this narrative synthesis, it is hoped that the conceptual frameworks offered can provide a direction for further investigation in this area.

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