

The Heart of Teaching: Can Empathy-Focused CPD Elevate Tutoring?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme centred on empathy-based pedagogy, addressing a critical gap in professional development opportunities for private tutors in Malaysia. Empathy-based pedagogy plays a vital role in fostering academic success and emotional well-being, yet private tutors often lack structured training to address students' social-emotional needs. This research explores how a CPD programme can equip tutors to create supportive learning environments, enhancing both academic and social-emotional outcomes. Conducted as a qualitative case study at a private tutoring centre in Kuala Lumpur, the nine-week CPD programme involved five tutors specialising in English, Mathematics, and Science. The programme included workshops, role-playing activities, and reflective journaling, guided by Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and reflective journals to examine the programme's impact on teaching practices and student engagement. Findings revealed the CPD programme significantly enhanced tutors' ability to build empathetic relationships, promote student engagement, and address holistic learning needs. Tutors reported improved emotional awareness and communication skills, which positively influenced students' academic performance and social-emotional development. While the study's focus on a single tutoring centre limits generalisability, the findings provide valuable insights into implementing SEL-integrated CPD in similar contexts. This research highlights the transformative potential of empathy-based pedagogy and advocates for its integration into CPD frameworks to better prepare tutors for their multifaceted roles.

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1. Introduction

The increasing reliance on private tutoring in Malaysia has introduced unique challenges within the educational landscape, particularly in terms of social-emotional learning (SEL) and professional support for tutors. Malaysia's education system, like many others, places a significant emphasis on academic achievement, driven by high-stakes examinations that often determine students' academic and career pathways (Kenayathulla, 2013). This culture of academic success has intensified demand for private tutoring, especially in urban areas where parents seek supplementary education to support their children's performance in national examinations (Bray et al., 2016). While private tutoring spans primary and secondary education levels and offers a range of services, concerns persist about variability in teaching quality due to the absence of structured professional development for tutors, particularly in empathy and SEL-focused practices (Foong et al., 2018; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

Research underscores the critical role of SEL in enhancing both academic performance and emotional well-being. SEL frameworks, such as those established by CASEL (2020), emphasise five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are foundational to fostering emotionally supportive and academically engaging learning environments. Studies show that students with higher SEL competencies demonstrate improved academic performance, better emotional regulation, and stronger interpersonal skills, highlighting SEL's dual impact on intellectual and social-emotional outcomes (Mahyuddin et al., 2007; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Furthermore, empathy—a key component of SEL—is increasingly recognised as essential for effective teaching, helping tutors understand students' unique needs and fostering positive student-teacher relationships (Goleman, 1995). However, private tutors in Malaysia rarely have access to CPD opportunities that cultivate SEL competencies and empathy-driven teaching strategies, leaving this sector underserved compared to formal school educators (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

The CPD programme designed for this study is grounded in Carl Rogers' Person-Centred Approach (Rogers, 1961) and Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC) framework (2015), both of which are aligned with SEL principles. The programme draws on the foundational theories of Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (1995) and Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), emphasising the importance of empathy, emotional regulation, and collaborative relationships in education. These theoretical underpinnings inform the structure of the CPD programme, which seeks to translate abstract SEL concepts into practical, actionable strategies for private tutors.

The nine-week CPD programme incorporates a blend of theoretical learning and practical application. Key components include weekly online workshops, reflective journaling, and interactive role-playing exercises. The workshops are designed to build tutors' knowledge of SEL and empathy-based pedagogy, focusing on how these principles can be implemented in real-world teaching scenarios. Reflective journaling serves as a longitudinal tool, enabling tutors to document their growth, challenges, and the evolving application of empathy-driven strategies in their classrooms. Role-playing exercises simulate classroom interactions, allowing tutors to practise and refine their empathetic communication skills in a controlled, supportive environment. This multifaceted approach ensures that tutors not only understand the theoretical foundations of SEL and NVC but also develop the practical skills necessary to create emotionally supportive, student-centred learning environments.

By grounding the programme in established frameworks like SEL and NVC, this study aims to address the significant gap in professional development opportunities for private tutors in Malaysia. Unlike public school teachers, who benefit from state-sponsored CPD programmes, private tutors operate in a largely unregulated space with limited access to training and resources (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). This absence of structured, empathy-focused CPD not only limits tutors' ability to address students' academic needs but also their social-emotional well-being, which is critical for holistic development. This limitation is at odds with Malaysia's National Education Philosophy, which promotes balanced student development across intellectual, emotional, and social domains (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018).

Through the implementation and evaluation of this CPD programme, the study seeks to contribute to the limited body of research on empathy-based pedagogy in private tutoring. It explores not only the benefits of such a programme but also the practical challenges encountered during implementation, such as resistance to change,

resource constraints, and the need for ongoing support (Wong, 2024). By shedding light on these issues, this research underscores the potential for SEL-focused CPD programmes to transform private tutoring practices in Malaysia, improving educational outcomes and supporting student well-being.

1.1. Research Objectives

The research objectives are to:

- Explore how participation in a CPD programme on empathy-based pedagogy influences the teaching practices and student interactions of private tutors at a tutoring centre in Kuala Lumpur.
- Examine the impact of empathy-based CPD on student engagement
- Examine private tutors' beliefs whether empathy-based strategies enhanced their ability to support students' social-emotional and academic needs.

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study addresses a significant gap in the professional development of private tutors by designing and evaluating a CPD programme focused on empathy-based pedagogy. While formal school teachers often benefit from structured CPD initiatives, private tutors in Malaysia's less-regulated tutoring sector rarely receive such opportunities. This lack of access limits their capacity to address students' social-emotional needs, as their training often emphasises academic content over holistic student development. By targeting private tutors—a group that remains underrepresented in CPD research—this study makes a novel contribution to the discourse on empathy-driven education.

Research has consistently demonstrated the relationship between SEL and improved academic outcomes, emotional intelligence, and student well-being. For instance, SEL frameworks such as CASEL (2020) highlight five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—that are integral to fostering students' emotional and academic growth. Empirical studies confirm that embedding SEL in teaching practices enhances classroom engagement, reduces behavioural issues, and improves academic performance (Mahyuddin et al., 2007; Bozgün & Akın-Kösterelioğlu, 2021). This study builds upon these findings by integrating SEL principles with Nonviolent Communication (NVC) strategies, offering tutors practical tools for developing emotionally supportive and academically enriching learning environments.

What distinguishes this study is its focus on private tutoring—a sector that lacks regulation and standardised CPD frameworks. By examining how empathy-based pedagogy can transform teaching practices, the study bridges a critical gap in the literature, particularly in Malaysia, where private tutoring is increasingly relied upon for academic success. Unlike existing research, this study explicitly links SEL and empathy-based pedagogy to the private tutoring context, addressing the unique challenges faced by tutors and their students.

Additionally, the research draws on established models of SEL, such as CASEL's framework and Carl Rogers' Person-Centred Approach (Rogers, 1961), while integrating recent advances in empathy-based pedagogy and NVC to offer a holistic training programme. This synthesis provides new insights into how empathy-based teaching can simultaneously enhance tutors' professional satisfaction and students' academic and social-emotional outcomes.

By aligning with Malaysia's National Education Philosophy, which promotes the holistic development of students, this study underscores the importance of equipping tutors with the skills to foster both emotional resilience and academic excellence. The findings have the potential to inform future CPD programmes and educational policies, ensuring that empathy-based approaches extend beyond formal schooling into the private tutoring sector, thereby promoting inclusivity and quality education across diverse educational contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Continuous Professional Development (CPD): Enhancing Teaching Quality

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is essential for enhancing the quality of teaching across educational contexts. By engaging in CPD, educators continually refine their skills, remain abreast of innovative teaching methodologies, and address students' diverse needs (Díaz-Maggioli, 2004). In Malaysia, CPD initiatives are primarily directed at public school teachers, leaving private tutors with minimal access to structured professional development, particularly in empathy-based pedagogy. This gap is significant, as empathy-focused teaching can positively influence both academic achievement and social-emotional outcomes (Kenayathulla, 2013; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012).

2.2. Empathy-based Pedagogy: Supportive Learning Environments

Empathy-based pedagogy emphasises the development of strong, supportive relationships between educators and students. Drawing on Carl Rogers' Person-Centred Approach (Rogers, 1961), this pedagogical approach seeks to foster a learning environment where students feel valued, understood, and supported, leading to enhanced engagement and emotional well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Studies demonstrate that empathy-based teaching practices not only promote academic success but also contribute to positive social-emotional development (Mahyuddin et al., 2007). Recent findings by Ilhavenil and Aravindan (2023) underscore the importance of fostering empathy through activities such as role-taking and storytelling. However, they note the need for comprehensive training to equip educators with strategies to develop empathy, especially within culturally diverse classrooms. This aligns with the present study's focus on equipping private tutors with empathy-based CPD to support students' holistic growth.

2.3. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): A Theoretical Foundation

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) provides a foundational framework for empathy-based pedagogy. SEL is a well-recognised educational model that cultivates students' emotional intelligence and social skills through five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These competencies enhance students' ability to manage social interactions, regulate emotions, and make thoughtful choices. Goleman's (1995) research underscores the importance of emotional intelligence alongside cognitive abilities in determining students' academic and personal success, while Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory further affirm the role of social interactions in fostering cognitive and emotional development.

2.4. The Integration of SEL in Educational Practices

The integration of SEL in teaching has shown positive outcomes in both emotional regulation and academic performance. CASEL (2020) emphasises the importance of embedding SEL as a core aspect of instruction, not merely an adjunct, to help students develop essential life skills. Programmes like the Hopeful Mind initiative in Malaysia have illustrated SEL's effectiveness in improving emotional regulation and reducing depressive symptoms among primary school students (Ghazali et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, access to SEL-focused CPD remains limited for private tutors, creating a disparity in training opportunities compared to their public school counterparts (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). This study proposes that SEL-based CPD could significantly enhance private tutoring, enabling tutors to adopt a holistic, student-centred approach.

2.5. Nonviolent Communication (NVC): A Practical Application of SEL

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a communication model by Marshall Rosenberg, provides a practical means of implementing SEL in classrooms through empathy-centred dialogue. NVC advocates for expressing needs and emotions without judgement while practising active listening, which strengthens interpersonal relationships and reduces conflicts (Rosenberg, 2015). Studies show that NVC enhances teacher-student relationships and fosters inclusive learning environments (Nosek et al., 2014). The approach aligns with broader frameworks like Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and design thinking, both of which emphasise empathy and collaborative problem-solving (Nordin et al., 2024). The integration of NVC in empathy-based pedagogy equips students with valuable

communication skills and enhances the effectiveness of SEL programmes by fostering emotional awareness and social harmony (Koopman & Seliga, 2021).

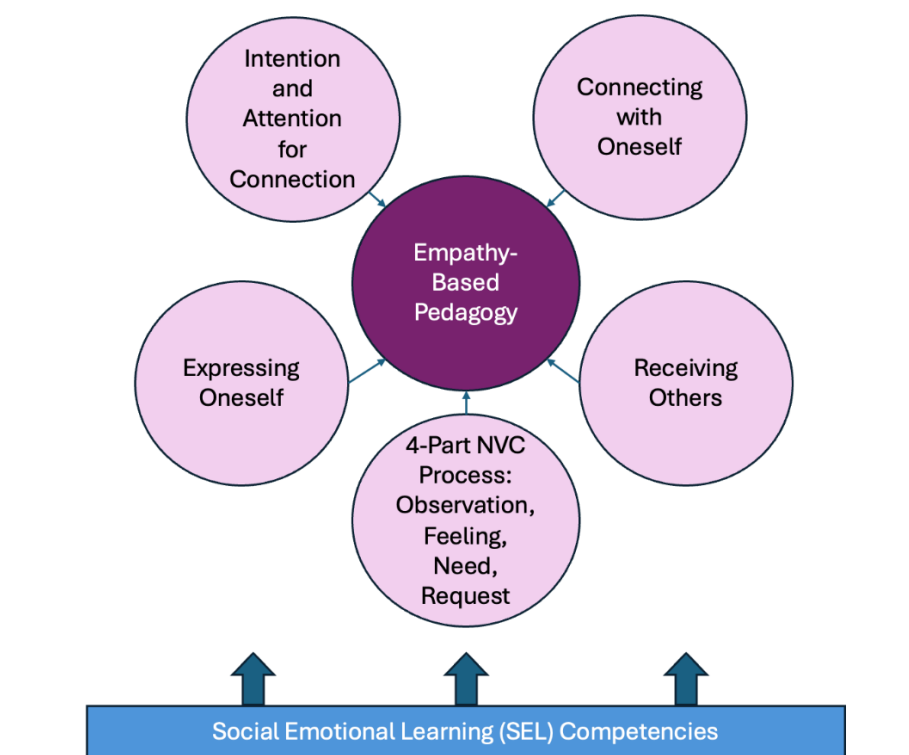
2.6. Conceptual Framework for Empathy-Based Pedagogy

The conceptual framework below (see Figure 1) visually represents the integration of empathy-based pedagogy within the CPD programme for private tutors. At its centre is empathy-based pedagogy, surrounded by the four key elements of Nonviolent Communication (NVC): intention and attention for connection, connecting with oneself, receiving others, and expressing oneself. These NVC components facilitate the practical application of SEL competencies, which form the foundational layer of the framework, supporting both emotional and academic growth.

This visual representation highlights how NVC enables tutors to operationalise SEL competencies in their teaching practices, fostering an empathetic, supportive learning environment. By embedding these competencies within the CPD framework, tutors are equipped with the necessary tools to enhance student engagement, well-being, and academic success.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Empathy-Based Pedagogy in Private Tutoring



2.7. Barriers and Gaps in Malaysia's Private Tutoring Sector

Private tutors in Malaysia face significant barriers in accessing structured CPD opportunities that address both academic and emotional aspects of learning. Unlike public school teachers who benefit from state-sponsored professional development, private tutors often operate in an unregulated sector with limited resources and training (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). This lack of CPD is particularly concerning in areas like SEL and NVC, which are critical for fostering holistic student development. Tutors are often left to focus solely on academic performance, neglecting the social-emotional aspects that are equally vital for students' success (Kenayathulla, 2013). The absence

of empathy-focused CPD initiatives perpetuates this challenge, limiting tutors' ability to create supportive, student-centred environments.

These barriers are compounded by tutors' diverse educational backgrounds and teaching contexts, making it challenging to adopt standardised professional development models. Research indicates that without targeted CPD, educators struggle to integrate SEL principles effectively, resulting in missed opportunities to enhance student engagement and emotional well-being (Mahyuddin et al., 2007). This gap underscores the need for tailored CPD programmes that address the unique challenges of private tutoring while aligning with broader educational frameworks like SEL and NVC.

2.8. Addressing the Gap: Integrating SEL into CPD for Private Tutors

This study seeks to address these challenges by proposing a CPD framework for private tutors that integrates SEL and empathy-based pedagogy. By focusing on strategies that enhance emotional awareness, empathetic communication, and supportive classroom dynamics, this CPD programme aims to contribute to both academic success and social-emotional well-being. This integration aligns with Malaysia's National Education Philosophy, which advocates for a balanced development of intellectual, emotional, and social skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). In addition to practical teaching strategies, the framework emphasises reflective practice, enabling tutors to adapt empathy-based techniques to diverse student needs. Addressing this gap in the literature, this study highlights the necessity of providing private tutors with the tools needed to foster well-rounded development in students.

2.9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature underscores the importance of empathy-based pedagogy, SEL, and NVC as core components of effective teaching practices. Despite well-established benefits, the implementation of these approaches in Malaysia's private tutoring sector remains limited. This review highlights the need for targeted CPD that can bridge the gap in professional development, ensuring that private tutors are equipped to support students' holistic development. Such initiatives would not only improve the quality of private tutoring but also ensure that all students receive the social-emotional support necessary for academic and personal growth.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the impact of a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme centred on empathy-based pedagogy for private tutors at a tutoring centre in Kuala Lumpur. The case study design was chosen for its ability to explore complex educational phenomena within authentic contexts, offering nuanced insights into the tutors' experiences and their responses to the CPD programme (Yin, 2018). A Straussian approach to grounded theory was incorporated to provide a systematic framework for data analysis and support theory development based on emergent patterns (Halaweh et al., 2008; Heath & Cowley, 2004).

3.1. Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse and detailed perspectives on the CPD programme (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The sample comprised five private tutors and the principal of A+ Tutoring Centre (pseudonym). This selection included representatives from English, Mathematics, and Science—core subject areas commonly emphasised in Malaysian private tutoring. The tutors' teaching experience ranged from 2 to 15 years, ensuring a balanced mix of junior and senior educators.

The selection aimed to include at least one senior and one junior tutor for each subject, enabling an exploration of how empathy-based pedagogy influenced teaching practices across different levels of expertise. However, only five tutors were selected, as one participant taught both Mathematics and Science, reducing the need for additional representation. This streamlined the participant group while maintaining the intended diversity in teaching contexts and experience levels.

Including subject-specific perspectives allowed the study to explore the nuances of empathy-based pedagogy in various teaching contexts. For instance, English tutors provided insights into how empathy supports language comprehension and student expression. In contrast, Mathematics and Science tutors offered perspectives on applying empathetic strategies in more logical, structured disciplines. The varied teaching experience further enriched the findings, capturing how novice and experienced tutors approached the integration of empathy-based pedagogy. This diversity was crucial for comprehensively understanding the CPD programme's impact across different educational disciplines and professional backgrounds.

3.2. Materials

The study utilised three primary data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and reflective journals. These methods were selected to capture the multi-faceted impact of the CPD programme on empathy-based pedagogy (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with tutors and the principal to explore their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the CPD programme. The interviews were designed to capture both baseline perspectives (pre-programme) and changes following programme completion (post-programme). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and included questions about teaching philosophies, challenges, and perceived impacts of empathy-based pedagogy on student engagement and relationships (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Other than that, participant observations during tutoring sessions provided contextual, real-time data on how tutors implemented empathy-based strategies. Each tutor was observed twice, with detailed field notes documenting verbal and non-verbal interactions, teacher-student dynamics, and empathetic teaching practices (Yin, 2018). These observations allowed for triangulation with self-reported data from interviews and journals.

Tutors also maintained weekly reflective journals throughout the nine-week CPD programme. These journals offered longitudinal insights into their evolving teaching practices, challenges, and personal growth in integrating empathy-based pedagogy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Tutors were encouraged to reflect on specific instances of student engagement, emotional awareness, and the effectiveness of strategies introduced during CPD sessions.

To ensure reliability, the interview protocol and observation checklist were piloted with educators outside the tutoring centre. Feedback from this pilot testing was used to refine interview questions for clarity and relevance, ensuring that the data collection instruments captured accurate and meaningful information about the tutors' experiences.

3.3. Procedure

Data collection was conducted over the nine-week CPD programme in four structured stages (Table 3.1). This sequence facilitated a comprehensive examination of the tutors' professional growth and the programme's impact.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Process

Stage	Data Collection Method	Description
Stage 1	Semi-Structured Interviews (Pre-Programme)	Conducted with tutors and the principal to establish baseline understanding and expectations of empathy-based pedagogy.
Stage 2	Participant Observations	Each tutor was observed twice during tutoring sessions to document real-time application of empathy-based pedagogy.
Stage 3	Reflective Journals	Tutors maintained weekly journals to record their personal reflections and professional growth throughout the CPD programme.
Stage 4	Semi-Structured Interviews (Post-Programme)	Follow-up interviews were conducted to capture changes in tutors' perceptions and teaching practices after completing the CPD programme.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, guided by the principles of grounded theory, was used to analyse the data. The process involved three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the initial phase of "open coding", data from interviews, observations, and journals were systematically reviewed, and key phrases or recurring concepts were identified. Examples of initial codes included "emotional awareness," "engagement strategies," and "relationship building."

These initial codes were grouped into broader categories in the second phase (axial coding) based on relationships and recurring patterns. Categories included "impact on student engagement," "challenges in implementation," and "professional growth."

In the final phase (selective coding), overarching themes emerged, synthesising the data into key insights about the influence of empathy-based pedagogy. Core themes included "transformation in teaching practices," "fostering student emotional well-being," and "barriers to implementation."

NVivo software facilitated the organisation and retrieval of coded data, enabling efficient cross-referencing of findings across multiple data sources. Emerging themes were validated through triangulation, comparing insights from interviews, observations, and journals. For instance, reports of enhanced student engagement in interviews were corroborated with observational data showing increased student participation during sessions.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored to uphold confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before the commencement of data collection, ensuring that the study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research in educational settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

This study explores how participation in a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme focused on empathy-based pedagogy influences the teaching practices of private tutors in Kuala Lumpur. It also examines how tutors perceive the outcomes of student engagement and interactions. The analysis of interview data, observational field notes, and journal entries revealed several key themes that reflect the integration of empathy-based strategies into the tutor's practice and their impact on students.

4.1 Influence of Empathy-Based Pedagogy on Teaching Practices

Participation in the CPD programme led to notable shifts in the tutor's teaching methods, with significant changes observed in communication, student-centred learning, and reinforcement techniques. These changes were captured through interviews, observations, and journal reflections, which provided diverse perspectives and anecdotal evidence illustrating the implementation and impact on both tutors and students.

4.1.1. Empathy in Communication and Teaching

The integration of empathy-based communication was one of the most significant changes noted in the tutor's practice. Central to this shift was the use of active listening, seeking consent, and emotional validation. Tutor A explained, *"Before the CPD programme, I would correct students directly, but now I ask, 'Would you like some help with this?' It makes them more open to receiving feedback."* She elaborated on the difference this change made,

noting, *"I've realised that students are more receptive when they have a say in the process. They don't feel like they're being talked down to."*

This was also evident in observations where Tutor E frequently invited student input before providing guidance. During a lesson, she asked, *"How about you try this way instead?"*—a question that allowed the student to explore solutions independently. One student shared, *"It feels good to try it myself first, and if I can't do it, I know she's there to help me without making me feel bad."*

Emotional validation was another key aspect of the tutor's practice. As Tutor C reflected, *"I've learned that saying something as simple as, 'I see you're feeling frustrated; do you want to take a break?' can make a huge difference. They calm down faster and are willing to continue after that."* This approach was corroborated by student feedback, with one student saying, *"I feel like my feelings matter when she listens like that."*

4.1.2. Building Trust and Autonomy in Students

Promoting student autonomy was another key outcome of the CPD programme. Tutor B described how she shifted from a directive teaching style to one that encouraged students to take greater control of their learning. She stated, *"Before, I used to plan every detail and tell them what to do. Now, I find myself saying, 'What would you like to focus on today?' or 'Do you want to try this on your own first?'"*

This change was evident during observed sessions where students were allowed to decide on their lesson focus and participate in scheduling discussions. Tutor E remarked, *"It empowers them to feel more in charge of their learning, and I notice they're more committed when it's their choice."* This sentiment was echoed by a student who said, *"When I get to choose, I pay more attention because it feels like my decision."*

Tutor D also observed that these practices fostered trust in the classroom. *"They trust me more now because they see that I trust them to make decisions. It's not just about following instructions; it's about them taking part in their learning journey."* This mutual respect contributed to an environment where students felt more responsible and invested in their progress.

4.1.3. Positive Reinforcement and Student Confidence

The CPD programme reinforced the importance of positive reinforcement, which became central to the tutor's approach. Tutor B explained, *"I used to say 'Good job' when they got answers right, but now I focus more on praising the effort. I tell them things like, 'I'm proud of how hard you're working on this.' It makes a big difference."*

This approach was also reflected in classroom observations where Tutor A regularly acknowledged students' perseverance. After a student corrected a pronunciation exercise, the tutor said, *"Great effort! You're getting better each time."* This specific praise encouraged the student to continue participating with enthusiasm. One student commented, *"When she praises how I try, not just the answer, I feel more confident to keep going even if I make mistakes."*

Tutor D also highlighted the importance of making students feel safe enough to take risks. *"I always tell them, 'Mistakes are part of learning, and you're doing great just by trying.' It's like a weight lifts off their shoulders, and I see them relax."* This approach created a less judgmental environment, encouraging students to participate without the fear of failure.

4.2 Perceptions of Outcomes for Student Engagement and Interactions

The tutors reported significant improvements in student engagement and interactions, attributing these changes to the empathy-based strategies she applied. The data suggests that these strategies not only enhanced participation but also strengthened the quality of student-tutor relationships.

4.2.1. Enhanced Student Engagement

Empathy-based strategies such as emotional validation and active listening were pivotal in boosting student engagement. Tutor E noted, *“When I acknowledge their feelings and listen, they’re more willing to participate. If a student says they’re distracted, I ask, ‘What would help you focus?’ It invites them to think and be part of the solution.”*

Observational data confirmed this increase in engagement. During a lesson on English pronunciation, Tutor C invited students to share their challenges and discuss solutions before guiding them. This reflective approach resulted in more active participation, as seen when a student eagerly corrected themselves and then sought further practice. The tutor reflected, *“I’ve seen students who used to just sit quietly now participating because they know they’re being heard.”*

One student expressed, *“I like that she asks what I think or how I feel. It makes me want to be part of the class and speak up.”* Such feedback underscores how empathy-based communication can foster a more open and participatory classroom environment.

4.2.2. Improved Student Confidence and Interaction

Tutor C observed noticeable improvements in student confidence and their willingness to engage. She stated, *“Students who were once hesitant are now more willing to ask questions and share answers. They feel safer expressing themselves because they know I’m here to support them.”*

In one classroom session, Tutor B asked, *“Would you like some help with this?”* The student, who had previously avoided seeking assistance, responded positively and engaged with the task more confidently. This type of interaction reinforced trust and improved the student-tutor relationship. The tutor noted, *“The connection feels stronger now. It’s not just about academic help—it’s about trust. They know I’m here to guide, not just correct.”*

A student highlighted this impact, saying, *“I feel more confident because even if I get it wrong, I know she’ll help me understand without making me feel embarrassed.”* This shift in dynamics fostered a respectful and supportive learning environment that encouraged interaction and participation.

4.2.3. Overcoming Challenges in Student Engagement

Despite the overall positive outcomes, the tutors acknowledged facing challenges, particularly when students resisted engagement or feedback. Tutor D explained, *“Sometimes students need time to process before they’re ready to hear feedback. I’ve learned to give them space and revisit the issue when they’re ready.”*

This approach was also observed when Tutor B allowed a student time before re-engaging with a gentle, *“Would you like to go over this now or later?”* The student eventually sought help, indicating that patience and adaptability are critical for successful empathy-based pedagogy. The tutor shared, *“It’s not always easy, but giving them the choice shows them that their comfort matters, and they respond better in the long run.”*

4.2.3. Conclusion

The findings indicate that participation in the CPD programme had a transformative impact on the tutor’s teaching practices, especially in applying empathy-based strategies to communication, student autonomy, and positive reinforcement. Evidence from interviews, observations, and student feedback illustrates that these practices improved student engagement, boosted confidence, and fostered more positive interactions. The flexibility required to navigate challenges further emphasises the comprehensive benefits of empathy-based pedagogy, which supports academic and emotional development alike.

These results underscore the importance of structured CPD programmes for private tutors, as they offer effective strategies for incorporating empathy into teaching. This can significantly enhance student participation and create educational environments conducive to holistic growth.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme focused on empathy-based pedagogy influences the teaching practices of private tutors in Kuala Lumpur and how tutors perceive its impact on student engagement and interactions. The findings provide insights into how empathy-based strategies, grounded in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Nonviolent Communication (NVC), can transform teaching practices and contribute to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes. These findings align with and extend existing literature, highlighting the role of CPD in enhancing educational quality, particularly within the private tutoring sector.

5.1.1. Influence of Empathy-Based Pedagogy on Teaching Practices

The findings demonstrate that the CPD programme significantly influenced the tutors' teaching practices, particularly in fostering communication, student autonomy, and the use of positive reinforcement. The tutors' adoption of empathy-based communication techniques, such as active listening and emotional validation, supports research on the effectiveness of NVC in creating supportive learning environments (Rosenberg, 2015). By incorporating these strategies, the tutors were able to better understand and respond to students' emotional needs, cultivating a classroom atmosphere conducive to engagement and trust. This supports the findings by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), who asserted that teachers who employ empathy and SEL principles create classroom environments that foster student well-being and participation.

This study's findings echo those of Nordin et al. (2024), who observed that classrooms implementing empathy-based problem-solving techniques saw improved student engagement and resilience. Their research revealed that empathy-driven interactions led to greater student involvement and more positive learning outcomes. This parallel suggests that integrating empathy into teaching, whether through problem-based learning or other instructional strategies, consistently enhances student involvement and emotional response.

The emphasis on fostering student autonomy aligns with Rogers' (1961) Person-Centred Approach, which posits that autonomy boosts motivation and engagement. The CPD programme encouraged the tutors to involve students in decision-making processes, which nurtured critical thinking and a sense of ownership. This finding is consistent with studies by Bozgün and Akin-Kösterelioğlu (2021), who underscored that empowering students contributes to intrinsic motivation and long-term academic success.

The tutors' frequent use of positive reinforcement reflects established SEL principles, which promote recognising student effort as a way to build resilience and a growth mindset (CASEL, 2020). This aligns with research by Mahyuddin et al. (2007), which demonstrated that acknowledging students' progress encourages active participation and fosters emotional resilience. The current study reinforces these findings by showing that CPD programmes that integrate empathy-based strategies can lead to teaching practices that enhance both academic and emotional learning.

5.1.2. Perceptions of Empathy-Based Pedagogy on Student Engagement and Interactions

The tutors reported significant improvements in student engagement and interactions, findings that are supported by existing literature on SEL and empathy in education. The perception that students became more engaged when their emotional needs were recognised is consistent with Goleman's (1995) work on emotional intelligence, which highlights the importance of creating emotionally safe environments for effective learning. When students feel acknowledged and valued, they are more inclined to participate fully in class activities.

The observed increase in student confidence aligns with studies that emphasise the role of empathy in fostering positive student-teacher relationships. For instance, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) found that empathetic teaching practices create classrooms where students feel secure enough to express themselves and take academic risks. The tutors' experiences corroborate these findings, as she noted that students were more likely to ask questions and seek help in a supportive environment. This is also reflected in research by Schonert-Reichl (2017), who highlighted that teachers trained in SEL report higher student engagement and more constructive classroom dynamics.

Challenges in applying empathy-based pedagogy, such as student resistance to feedback, illustrate the nuanced nature of teaching with empathy. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory suggests that while students learn effectively through observation and interaction, their emotional readiness can affect their receptivity. The tutors managed these challenges by giving students space and re-engaging them later, showcasing the adaptability needed for implementing empathy-based approaches. This resonates with the findings of Brackett et al. (2012), who emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence and flexibility in navigating complex student-teacher interactions.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of empathy-based pedagogy and its relevance in private tutoring contexts. The results affirm the integration of SEL principles, as advocated by Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory and Goleman's (1995) work on emotional intelligence, which stresses the importance of interactive and emotionally aware learning environments. The study illustrates that empathy-based communication, positive reinforcement, and promoting autonomy are effective practices that foster both academic growth and emotional well-being.

Practically, this study highlights the importance of CPD programmes that equip tutors with empathy-based teaching strategies. As the global reliance on private tutoring continues to grow (Zhang & Bray, 2020), there is a need for professional development that encompasses academic and emotional teaching methods. This research underscores that CPD initiatives providing empathy-based tools can elevate private tutoring by promoting student-centred learning and enhancing student-tutor relationships. Such implications are especially relevant in Malaysia, where private tutoring supplements formal education (Kenayathulla, 2013). Integrating empathy-based strategies into CPD could bridge the gap between public education and private tutoring, aligning both with holistic educational goals.

5.3 Recommendations

Several recommendations arise from the findings. It is crucial to expand access to CPD programmes that incorporate empathy-based pedagogy. Currently, most professional development efforts in Malaysia target public school educators (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012), leaving private tutors with limited training opportunities. Developing comprehensive CPD programmes that include SEL principles would enable private tutors to better support students' academic and emotional needs, thus enhancing the quality of tutoring services.

Embedding SEL strategies into CPD frameworks can bolster the effectiveness of empathy-based teaching. Research shows that SEL improves emotional regulation and classroom engagement (Bozgün & Akin-Kösterelioğlu, 2021). By embedding SEL into CPD, educators can be better equipped to create supportive environments that foster both academic and emotional growth.

Future research should incorporate student perspectives to build a fuller understanding of empathy-based pedagogy's impact. While this study focused on the tutor's viewpoint, student feedback would provide valuable insights into how these strategies influence learning from the student's perspective. Additionally, longitudinal or mixed-methods research could explore the long-term effects of empathy-based CPD and assess its scalability across different educational settings. This would help to establish a clearer link between empathy-based practices and sustained academic success.

5.4 Limitations

The main limitation of this study is its short-term focus. While the findings indicated positive changes in student engagement and interactions, long-term effects were not assessed. Conducting longitudinal studies could help determine whether the benefits observed are sustained over time. Another limitation is the single-case context of the study. Although it provided detailed insights, findings from one tutor may not generalise across all tutoring settings. Future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample to examine how empathy-based teaching practices are applied in different tutoring environments.

5.5 Implications for Educational Policy

The findings have significant implications for educational policy at both local and national levels. Formal CPD programmes that integrate empathy-based pedagogy could be included in professional development initiatives for private tutors. By aligning private tutoring practices with broader educational goals, Malaysia's education system can benefit from a more cohesive approach to student development. Internationally, these findings could inform global CPD strategies, encouraging a shift towards student-centred, empathy-driven education that enhances academic achievement and emotional well-being.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that CPD programmes focused on empathy-based pedagogy can transform private tutors' teaching practices. By promoting engagement, confidence, and stronger student-tutor relationships, empathy-based strategies support both academic and emotional development, underscoring the critical role of empathy in education.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the impact of a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme focused on empathy-based pedagogy on the teaching practices of private tutors in Kuala Lumpur and the perceived outcomes for student engagement and interactions. The findings indicate that participation in the CPD programme led to significant changes in teaching practices, particularly in communication, fostering student autonomy, and using positive reinforcement. By adopting empathy-based strategies such as Nonviolent Communication (NVC), tutors were able to create more supportive, student-centred learning environments that enhanced student engagement, confidence, and positive classroom interactions.

A key insight from this study is the identification of existing gaps in CPD opportunities for private tutors. While CPD initiatives are often available to public school educators, private tutors frequently lack access to structured training programmes that address both academic and emotional learning needs. Addressing this gap through empathy-based pedagogical training can provide tutors with essential skills that support students holistically, improving not just academic performance but also emotional and social well-being. This study's findings underscore the benefits of structured CPD that integrates empathy-based practices, highlighting the transformative potential of such approaches in the private tutoring sector.

Policymakers should consider expanding CPD opportunities to include private tutors, recognising the value of empathy-based strategies in non-formal educational settings. The results of this study serve as compelling evidence that empathy-based practices can significantly enhance the quality of private tutoring, which plays an increasingly vital role in many educational systems. By extending CPD programmes that incorporate SEL and NVC frameworks, policymakers can ensure that private educational providers are equipped with the tools necessary for holistic student development.

Based on the study's outcomes, CPD programmes should be designed to include modules focused on empathy and SEL. These modules should provide practical training on how to integrate empathy-based communication, positive reinforcement, and student autonomy into daily teaching practices. Additionally, creating accessible resources and support systems for private tutors would ensure that these strategies can be effectively implemented. Such efforts

would not only elevate the quality of private tutoring but also align it more closely with the goals of formal education, fostering a more unified approach to student learning and well-being.

In summary, this study contributes to the understanding of how empathy-based pedagogy can be successfully integrated into private tutoring. The research highlights the value of empathy-driven teaching practices in promoting student engagement and confidence, offering a framework that could be adapted and scaled for broader educational contexts. The implications extend beyond individual teaching practices, suggesting that structured, empathy-oriented CPD programmes have the potential to enhance non-formal education on a larger scale. Such developments would ensure that all students, regardless of educational setting, receive comprehensive support that nurtures both their academic and emotional growth.

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