SCIENTIFIC Publishing Limited

Journal of Qualitative Research in Education
https://ojs.ukscip.com/index.php/jqre

Article

Interaction Mechanism between Teachers' Emotional Intelligence Experiences and Conflict Management Styles from the Perspective of Educational Phenomenology: An Empirical Qualitative Study

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Received: 4 December 2025; **Revised:** 30 December 2025; **Accepted:** 19 January 2026; **Published:** 23 January 2026

Abstract: This study adopts an educational phenomenological perspective. It explores the emotional intelligence experiences of 12 secondary school teachers in conflict management through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The research examines how these experiences interact with management styles. The findings reveal five core dimensions of teacher emotional intelligence experiences. First, bodily awareness forms the embodied foundation of emotional intelligence. Teachers identify emotions through physiological signals such as "tightness in the chest" and "trembling hands." These signals activate regulation mechanisms. Second, the relational self is dynamically constructed during conflicts. Teachers negotiate among multiple identities, including "authority figure-caregiver" and "evaluator-supporter." This positioning directly influences the choice of management styles. Third, situational sensitivity serves as the core of practical wisdom. Teachers integrate five-dimensional cues from interpersonal dynamics, events, culture, time, and space. They make "here-and-now" judgments based on these cues. Fourth, emotional regulation ability develops through four stages: suppression, disguise, integration, and naturalization. Reflective practice drives stage transitions and reduces emotional exhaustion. Fifth, the meaning-making framework evolves from "conflict as threat" to "conflict as opportunity." This evolution marks a qualitative transformation in professional maturity. The study reveals that the interaction between emotional intelligence experiences and conflict management styles is not a linear causal relationship. Instead, it forms a cyclical interactive process. The study emphasizes the central role of reflective practice and professional identity reconstruction in teacher emotional intelligence development.

Keywords: Conflict Management Style; Educational Phenomenology; Qualitative Research; Reflective Practice; Relational Self; Teacher Emotional Intelligence Experience

1. Introduction

Teachers inevitably face various conflict situations in their daily educational practice. These conflicts may become destructive teaching obstacles. They may also transform into educational opportunities that promote mutual growth between teachers and students. How to manage these conflicts effectively concerns not only the maintenance of classroom order. More profoundly, it affects the quality of educational relationships and the creation of learning environments [1]. In recent years, emotional intelligence has gradually attracted scholarly attention as an important component of teacher professional competence. Its role in identifying, understanding, and regulating emotions is considered to have a significant influence on teachers' conflict management abilities. \Such approaches often simplify emotional intelligence into a set of operationalized ability indicators. They neglect the authentic emotional

experiences, meaning construction, and identity negotiation processes of teachers as "living persons" in conflict situations [2]. Educational phenomenology emphasizes that educational research should return to "the things themselves." It should focus on educators' "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt). We need to understand how they experience, perceive, and assign meaning in specific situations. Although quantitative studies have examined correlations between teacher emotional intelligence and conflict management outcomes, and some qualitative research has explored teachers' emotional labor in general educational contexts, there remains a lack of phenomenological studies that deeply explore how teachers experience emotional intelligence in conflict management and how this experience interacts with their management styles. This limitation keeps our understanding of teacher professional practice at the surface level of behavioral description. We have not yet touched the experiential essence and meaning structure behind these behaviors [3]. Based on the above research gap, this study proposes a core question: How do teachers experience the role of emotional intelligence in conflict management? This question aims to transcend the instrumental rationality perspective. It places teachers at the center of their "lifeworld" to explore their subjective experiences and meaning-worlds in conflict situations. Specifically, this study addresses three interrelated sub-questions. First, how do teachers understand and describe their emotional intelligence experiences? This involves phenomenological descriptions of teachers' emotional awareness, emotional naming, and emotional regulation processes. It reveals the authentic appearance of emotional intelligence as "lived experience" rather than an abstract concept [4]. Second, how does emotional intelligence experience influence their choice of conflict management styles? This requires an in-depth examination of how teachers' emotional intelligence experiences form dynamic interactive mechanisms with different management styles, such as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating, when facing specific conflicts. We need to understand the intentional connection between experience and action. Third, how do situational factors moderate this interactive mechanism? Educational phenomenology reminds us that human experience is always "situated." The interaction between teachers' emotional intelligence experiences and conflict management styles is inevitably moderated by multiple situational factors such as teacher-student relationships, school culture, and conflict types. Therefore, we need to understand the complexity and uniqueness of this interactive process within specific educational situational contexts [5]. This study holds threefold significance. At the theoretical level, by adopting an educational phenomenological research orientation, this study will enrich the understanding of teacher emotional intelligence. It shifts from traditional ability models toward revealing experiential essence. This provides a new theoretical perspective for teacher emotional intelligence research and deepens the phenomenological understanding of the interactive mechanism between emotional intelligence and conflict management [6]. At the practical level, by presenting teachers' authentic emotional intelligence experiences in conflict management, this study can provide insights grounded in "lived experience" for teacher education and professional development. It helps pre-service and in-service teachers understand more deeply their emotional worlds and professional growth pathways. This promotes their development of embodied and situationally sensitive conflict management wisdom rather than merely acquiring technical coping strategies [7]. At the methodological level, this study demonstrates the application value of educational phenomenological methods in teacher research. It expands the possibilities of qualitative research in revealing the deep meaning structure of teacher professional practice. This provides methodological reference for subsequent related research and promotes a paradigm shift in educational research from "about teachers" toward "understanding teachers."

2. Literature Review

Educational phenomenology represents a distinctive research paradigm that emphasizes returning to educational "things themselves," focusing on the lived experiences and meaning construction processes of educators and learners in specific situations [8,9]. This orientation, originating from Husserl's phenomenological philosophy and developed through the work of thinkers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and van Manen, has demonstrated unique explanatory power in multiple educational fields. In school education research, phenomenological methods have revealed how teachers and students experience knowledge, authority, and growth in specific educational situations, transcending the limitations of behaviorism and cognitivism by understanding education as an unfolding process of the "lifeworld" [10]. In teacher development research, scholars have employed educational phenomenology to reveal the dynamic construction process of teacher professional identity, with studies on international Chinese language teachers showing how they experience cultural conflicts and identity negotiation in cross-cultural teaching, emphasizing that teachers are active meaning-makers rather than passive skill executors [11]. However, despite this

significant value, current phenomenological studies mainly concentrate on teachers' teaching experiences, curriculum understanding, and identity formation, with an obvious research gap regarding teachers' experiences in conflict management—a highly emotional and relational practice field where phenomenological explorations of how emotional intelligence experiences interact with management styles remain particularly lacking [12, 13]. Meanwhile, teacher emotional intelligence research, while receiving widespread attention as a core element of teacher professional competence, shows obvious limitations in theoretical perspectives and methodologies, as mainstream quantitative studies operationalize emotional intelligence into measurable dimensions and explore correlations with variables like teaching efficacy through questionnaire surveys [14], thereby simplifying emotional intelligence into static ability indicators while neglecting teachers' dynamic and situated emotional experience processes in authentic educational contexts. Educational phenomenology represents a distinctive research paradigm that emphasizes returning to educational "things themselves," focusing on the lived experiences and meaning construction processes of educators and learners in specific situations [8,9]. This research tradition is deeply rooted in classical phenomenological philosophy and has evolved through several foundational works that inform the present study's theoretical framework.

The philosophical foundation begins with Husserl's (1913/1982) seminal work *Ideas Pertaining to Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, which established the concept of "phenomenological reduction" or "epoché"—the systematic bracketing of presuppositions to access the essential structures of consciousness and experience. Husserl's call to return "to the things themselves" (zu den Sachen selbst) provides the epistemological basis for this study's commitment to understanding teachers' emotional intelligence not as abstract constructs but as lived, intentional experiences. Our research inherits Husserl's emphasis on describing phenomena as they present themselves in consciousness, avoiding premature theoretical impositions that would distort the authentic nature of teachers' emotional experiences in conflict situations.

Heidegger's (1927/1962) *Being and Time* advanced phenomenology from descriptive analysis toward hermeneutic interpretation, arguing that human existence is fundamentally interpretive and situated in a meaningful world. Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" (In-der-Welt-sein) directly informs our understanding of teachers' conflict management as embedded in specific educational contexts rather than decontextualized behaviors. His notion of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit) illuminates how teachers find themselves already situated within institutional cultures, relational histories, and professional expectations that shape their emotional intelligence experiences. This study extends Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology by examining how teachers interpret and navigate the "thrown" conditions of conflict situations through emotional awareness and meaning-making.

In recent years, with the rise of qualitative research, some scholars have begun to focus on teacher emotional labor phenomena. They explore how teachers manage, regulate, and display emotions in daily work to meet occupational role expectations [15]. These studies reveal the complexity of teachers' emotional work. On one hand, teachers need to "perform" positive emotions in classroom interactions to create good learning atmospheres. On the other hand, prolonged emotional suppression and disguise may lead to emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout [16]. For example, Yuan studied rural volunteer teachers in China. They found that teachers need to continuously perform emotional labor in challenging teaching environments. This labor represents both professional commitment and potential threats to psychological health [17]. However, existing emotional labor research mostly focuses on the negative effects of emotion management or pressures from organizational expectations. Few studies deeply explore how teachers experience emotional intelligence in specific conflict situations. Research rarely examines how this experience shapes their coping strategies or how situational factors moderate this interactive process [18]. Furthermore, although some studies have begun to use qualitative methods such as metaphor analysis to reveal personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural dimensions of teacher emotional labor, these studies remain mainly at the descriptive level. They lack phenomenological depth in explaining the essential structure of experience and meaning generation mechanisms [19]. Therefore, integrating educational phenomenological perspectives with teacher emotional intelligence research can fill theoretical and methodological gaps in existing studies. Exploring teachers' emotional intelligence experiences in conflict management and their interactive mechanisms with management styles can provide deeper insights for understanding the complexity of teacher professional practice [20]. Conflict management represents an important component of teachers' daily work. Traditional research mainly approaches this from organizational management and psychological perspectives. It focuses on conflict type classification, effectiveness assessment of management strategies, and influences of individual traits

on management style choices [21]. Although this research provides basic frameworks for understanding teacher conflict management, it often views conflict as a "problem" that needs solving. It treats management as a technical "tool." This neglects the potential value of conflict as an educational opportunity and teachers' subjective experiences in conflict situations [22]. In recent years, as educational research deepens, scholars have begun to reexamine conflict management from educational perspectives. They emphasize that conflict is not only a challenge to teacher-student relationships but also an opportunity for mutual growth and understanding [23]. For example, Shi and Liu explored through phenomenological research how school principals understand school education that includes death education. This revealed the meaning negotiation and ethical reflection processes of educational leaders when facing value conflicts [24]. Such research suggests that teachers' choices in conflict management are not purely rational strategy calculations. Instead, they are deeply rooted in educational beliefs, emotional experiences, and relational positioning.

However, these predominantly quantitative investigations, while valuable in establishing correlational patterns and measuring outcomes, primarily treat emotional intelligence and conflict management as discrete, measurable variables amenable to statistical analysis [14,25]. Contemporary qualitative research has begun addressing the experiential dimensions of teachers' emotional work, with studies exploring emotional labor strategies, the psychological costs of emotion regulation, and the sociocultural contexts shaping teachers' emotional experiences in challenging situations [15,17,19,26]. Yet even these qualitative explorations largely employ thematic analysis or metaphor-based approaches that, while illuminating surface-level patterns, do not penetrate the phenomenological essence of how teachers subjectively experience, interpret, and enact emotional intelligence within the lived reality of specific conflict episodes [18,19]. Consequently, despite robust empirical foundations documenting what teachers do and correlational evidence of effectiveness, current literature remains limited in revealing how emotional intelligence is actually experienced as embodied, situated, and meaning-laden practice, how this lived experience dynamically shapes moment-to-moment conflict management decisions within authentic educational contexts, and how teachers themselves construct meaning from these emotionally charged relational encounters—questions that necessitate the phenomenological orientation adopted in the present study [3,13,27].

In summary, while existing research has established important correlations between teacher emotional intelligence and conflict management outcomes through quantitative measurements, three critical gaps remain unaddressed. First, methodological gap: current studies predominantly employ survey instruments that operationalize emotional intelligence into measurable dimensions, yet fail to access the lived, phenomenological essence of how teachers actually experience emotional intelligence in the immediacy of conflict situations. Second, theoretical gap: existing literature treats emotional intelligence and conflict management as relatively independent variables for correlation analysis, without revealing the internal interactive mechanisms—specifically, how emotional experiences transform into management actions through mediating processes of identity negotiation, situational judgment, and meaning construction. Third, practical gap: the dominance of skills-based, technical-rational approaches in teacher education neglects the development of embodied awareness, reflective practice, and professional identity reconstruction that our preliminary findings suggest are fundamental to authentic emotional intelligence. Therefore, this study adopts an educational phenomenological orientation to explore: (1) the essential structures of teachers' emotional intelligence experiences, (2) the dynamic interactive mechanisms between these experiences and conflict management styles, and (3) the moderating role of situational factors. The anticipated contribution lies in generating a five-dimensional experiential model grounded in teachers' lifeworld that transcends psychometric reductionism and offers new theoretical frameworks for understanding teacher professional practice.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Paradigm and Epistemological Position

This study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm grounded in constructivist epistemology, specifically drawing upon van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the interpretive understanding of lived experience through rich textual descriptions and thematic analysis [8,27]. It is grounded in constructivist epistemology. Teachers' emotional intelligence experiences and conflict management practices are not objectively fixed facts. Rather, they are dynamic processes that are continuously constructed and given meaning in specific educational contexts. At the ontological level, the research acknowledges the existence of multiple re-

alities. Each teacher forms unique understandings and experiences of emotional intelligence and conflict based on personal history, cultural background, and educational beliefs. At the epistemological level, researchers and participants do not stand in subject-object opposition. Instead, they co-construct knowledge through dialogue and interaction. Researchers need to enter teachers' "lifeworld" to understand the subjective meanings they assign to emotional intelligence experiences. At the methodological level, the research adopts an educational phenomenological orientation. Critically, throughout both the data collection and analysis process, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness by bracketing personal feelings, experiences, and biases through keeping detailed reflective journals, engaging in peer debriefing, and continuously interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes effective conflict management or emotionally intelligent teaching. The choice of qualitative phenomenological research rather than quantitative measurement stems from specific epistemological and methodological considerations: the complexity, situationality, contextual embeddedness, and meaning-laden nature of emotional intelligence experiences cannot be captured through standardized questionnaires or predetermined scales that reduce lived experience to numerical indicators. Only through in-depth phenomenological interviews that invite rich narrative descriptions, combined with interpretive thematic analysis that seeks essential structures and meanings, can we reveal the internal experiential mechanisms of how teachers perceive emotions through bodily awareness, construct meanings of conflict situations, negotiate professional identities, and make situated management choices in the immediacy of classroom interactions. This phenomenological approach provides insights with experiential depth, contextual thickness, and interpretive richness essential for understanding the embodied, relational, and meaning-constitutive dimensions of teacher professional practice. The choice of qualitative research rather than quantitative measurement stems from specific considerations. The complexity, situationality, and meaningfulness of emotional intelligence experiences cannot be captured through standardized questionnaires. Only through in-depth interviews and phenomenological analysis can we reveal the internal mechanisms of how teachers perceive emotions, construct meanings, and make choices in conflict situations. This approach provides insights with depth and thickness for understanding teacher professional practice.

3.2. Research Design

This study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. The interview design follows the principle of phenomenological reduction. Before interviews, researchers recorded their presupposed understandings of teacher emotional intelligence and conflict management through reflective journals. During interviews, they maintained a "phenomenological attitude." This avoided imposing existing theoretical frameworks onto participants' narratives. The interviews proceeded through three progressive stages. First, teachers were invited to describe a memorable conflict event with a focus on specific situational details. Second, teachers were guided to recall their emotional experiences at that time, including bodily sensations, inner activities, and emotion naming processes. Third, the interviews explored how teachers understood the influence of these experiences on their management choices, along with their post-event reflections and meaning construction [28]. Interviews were conducted in comfortable environments chosen by teachers to reduce occupational role defensiveness and encourage authentic expression. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to form "thick description" texts. Regarding research ethics, all participants signed informed consent forms. They were clearly informed of the research purpose, data usage methods, and withdrawal rights. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly protected.

3.3. Participant Selection

This study employed a purposive sampling technique. It selected 12 in-service teachers with rich conflict management experience as research participants. Inclusion criteria included: teaching experience of no less than 5 years to ensure teachers had accumulated sufficient conflict response experience; ability to clearly recall and willingness to share details and emotional experiences of specific conflict events; representation from different subject areas (Chinese, mathematics, English, science, etc.) to capture possible influences of disciplinary culture on emotional intelligence experiences. Participants were distributed across three public secondary schools in an eastern coastal city. The sample included 4 male teachers and 8 female teachers. Ages ranged from 28 to 46 years old. Teaching experience ranged from 5 to 22 years. Both homeroom teachers and non-homeroom teachers were included. This heterogeneous sample design aimed to present the diversity of experiences within the teacher population

rather than pursuing statistical representativeness [29]. The recruitment process proceeded through school administration recommendations and snowball sampling. Researchers first engaged in informal communication with potential participants to explain research purposes and participation requirements. Formal inclusion occurred after confirming eligibility and voluntary participation. After interviewing the 10th teacher, researchers found that themes were approaching saturation. New interviews brought no substantially new information. However, to ensure data sufficiency, 2 additional teachers were interviewed. The final sample size was determined as 12.

The 12 participants were recruited from three public secondary schools in Hangzhou, a major eastern coastal city in China's Zhejiang Province. These schools serve diverse student populations and represent different socioeconomic contexts, providing variation in the types and intensities of conflicts teachers encounter. School A is a key provincial secondary school serving predominantly middle-to-upper-class families, where academic pressure is intense, and parent expectations are high; conflicts in this context often involve academic performance disputes and authority challenges from high-achieving students. School B is a district-level ordinary secondary school serving mixed socioeconomic backgrounds, where teachers face greater diversity in student motivation levels and behavioral issues; conflicts here frequently involve classroom discipline and peer relationship problems. School C is located in a rapidly urbanizing area serving many migrant worker families, where teachers encounter challenges related to parental absence, economic hardship, and cultural adaptation; conflicts often stem from students' emotional needs and family-school communication difficulties. Among the 12 participants, four are Chinese language teachers, three mathematics teachers, two English teachers, two science teachers, and one social studies teacher, reflecting diverse disciplinary cultures. Seven participants serve as homeroom teachers, responsible for comprehensive student management beyond subject instruction, while five are subject teachers without homeroom duties. Teaching experience ranges from 5 years (two participants) to 22 years (one participant), with a median experience of 11 years. This purposive sampling strategy ensures representation of varied conflict contexts, enabling examination of how school culture, student demographics, and teacher roles shape emotional intelligence experiences and management style choices, while maintaining the study's focus on in-depth phenomenological understanding rather than statistical generalization.

3.4. Ethics Approval and Informed Consent

This study received ethical approval from the Trinity University of Asia Institutional Review Board (TUA-IRB, Approval No.: TUA-HREC-2024-ED-087, approved on August 15, 2024). All research procedures were conducted in strict accordance with the ethical guidelines for human subjects research established by the institution and aligned with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Prior to participant recruitment and data collection, the research protocol, including interview guides, informed consent forms, and data protection measures, underwent rigorous ethical review to ensure participant safety, dignity, and rights protection. Before conducting any interviews, all 12 participants were provided with comprehensive written information about the study, including its purpose (to explore teachers' emotional intelligence experiences in conflict management from a phenomenological perspective), research procedures (one 60–90 min semi-structured interview to be audio-recorded and transcribed), potential risks (possible emotional discomfort when recalling difficult conflict situations, time commitment), anticipated benefits (opportunity for professional reflection, contribution to educational research and teacher development), voluntary nature of participation, and the unconditional right to withdraw at any time without penalty or negative consequences to their professional standing. Participants were given at least 48 h to review the information sheet and ask questions before deciding whether to participate. Written informed consent was obtained from all 12 participants before conducting interviews, with participants signing consent forms indicating their understanding of the study and voluntary agreement to participate. The informed consent process was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the participants' native language, to ensure full comprehension, and participants were encouraged to ask clarifying questions at any point. To protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts, and participants were assigned pseudonyms (T1 through T12) used consistently throughout data analysis and reporting. School names and specific geographic identifiers beyond the general description of "an eastern coastal city" were omitted from all publications. Audio recordings and verbatim transcripts were stored in password-protected digital files on encrypted devices accessible only to the principal researcher and faculty advisor. Physical documents, including signed consent forms, were kept in locked filing cabinets in the researcher's secure office. All participants were informed that data would be retained

for five years following study completion to allow for potential follow-up analysis and verification, after which all recordings and identifiable documents would be permanently destroyed in accordance with institutional data retention policies. Participants were also informed of their right to request withdrawal of their data from the study up until the point of publication, and contact information for the research team and institutional review board was provided for any concerns or complaints. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness of power dynamics inherent in researcher-participant relationships and took measures to create a comfortable, non-judgmental interview environment where participants felt safe to share authentic experiences, including scheduling interviews at times and locations convenient to participants and emphasizing that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers to interview questions.

3.5. Data Collection

Data collection was primarily conducted through one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews took place from September to November 2024 in quiet conference rooms at participants' schools or comfortable locations chosen by teachers. The interview guide contained three types of open-ended questions: situational reconstruction questions ("Please describe a teacher-student conflict experience that left a deep impression. What happened at that time?"), experience exploration questions ("In that situation, what physical sensations did you have? What emotional changes did you experience internally?"), and meaning construction questions ("Looking back on this experience, how do you think your emotional experience influenced your coping approach?"). The interview process employed phenomenological inquiry techniques. When participants provided abstract descriptions, researchers guided them back to specific situations through follow-up questions ("Could you describe the scene in more detail?"). When participants showed emotions, empathetic responses were given to maintain trust relationships. Each interview averaged 75 min in length. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim within 24 h. Transcription texts included tonal pauses, repetitions, and emotional markers. This formed approximately 180,000 words of raw data [30]. Additionally, researchers wrote reflective notes immediately after each interview.

3.6. Data Analysis

This study adopted Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method combined with an educational phenomenological orientation to systematically analyze interview texts. The analysis process proceeded through six progressive steps. In the first step, researchers repeatedly read all transcribed texts at least three times. They immersed themselves in the data to capture overall impressions and record preliminary thoughts. In the second step, line-by-line open coding was conducted. NVivo 12 software assisted in management. A total of 326 initial codes were generated, such as "tightness in chest," "anger at authority being challenged," and "choosing silence to avoid escalation." In the third step, similar codes were categorized and integrated into potential themes. For example, codes like "accelerated heartbeat," "trembling hands," and "choking throat" were grouped under "bodily experience of emotions." In the fourth step, the internal consistency and external distinctiveness of themes were reviewed. Each theme was tested for sufficient data support and mutual independence. At this stage, 3 overlapping themes were deleted, and 2 similar themes were merged. In the fifth step, final themes were defined and named. Core characteristics and connotations of each theme were written, forming five major themes. In the sixth step, typical quotes were selected and phenomenologically interpreted. Themes were brought into dialogue with educational phenomenological theory to reveal meaning structures behind experiences [31]. The entire analysis process lasted three months. Researchers regularly discussed coding and themes with two qualitative research experts. Peer review enhanced the credibility of the analysis.

3.7. Research Quality Assurance

This study employed four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba to ensure research quality: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For credibility, the research implemented member checking. Preliminary analysis results were fed back to 5 participants to confirm whether their experiences were accurately understood. Based on feedback, 2 theme descriptions were adjusted. Continuous comparison was conducted simultaneously. New data were constantly tested against formed themes. Rich narratives from participants were presented through thick description. For transferability, the research provided detailed descriptions of participant characteristics, research contexts, and interview processes. This allows readers to judge the applicability of research findings

in other contexts. Each theme was accompanied by 3 to 5 original participant quotes. These preserved their expressive characteristics and situational details [32]. For confirmability, researchers wrote reflective journals recording personal assumptions, emotional reactions, and analytical dilemmas. Three peer review meetings were held with two colleagues to discuss the reasonableness of data interpretation. This ensured that research findings originated from data rather than researchers' subjective speculation.

4. Results Analysis

4.1. Bodily Experience of Emotional Intelligence—"Felt Wisdom"

Teachers' emotional intelligence experiences in conflict situations first manifest as direct perception at the bodily level. This embodied emotional awareness constitutes the foundational dimension of emotional intelligence. Interview data show that all 12 participants emphasized bodily signals as the "first scene" of emotional cognition. They could keenly capture physiological reactions and use them as early warning mechanisms for emotion regulation. Teacher T3 described: "When a student challenged my authority, I could feel tightness in my chest and shallow breathing. At that moment, I realized my emotions were telling me something." Similarly, Teacher T7 mentioned: "My hands would tremble slightly. This is my warning signal for losing emotional control. Years of experience have taught me to listen to these body languages." These narratives reveal that emotional intelligence is not purely a cognitive skill. Rather, it is embodied wisdom deeply rooted in bodily perception [33]. Further phenomenological analysis reveals that teachers' awareness of bodily signals presents hierarchical characteristics. Primary awareness remains at vague discomfort sensations, while advanced awareness can precisely identify specific bodily part reactions and assign emotional meanings. Cardiovascular responses emerged most prominently across narratives, with T2 describing "heart pounding, as it would jump out of my chest" and T3 noting "a stone pressing on my chest." Respiratory disturbances constituted another significant pattern, as T5 recounted "breathing became fast and shallow, couldn't catch breath," while T8 experienced "throat felt strangled, couldn't speak." Musculoskeletal manifestations included T7's "hands trembled involuntarily" and T11's "shoulders stiff as if filled with lead." Additional somatic signals ranged from T6's "stomach churning, felt like vomiting" to T10's "temples throbbing, head dizzy" and T4's "face suddenly burned up." Senior teachers demonstrated refined somatic literacy, distinguishing subtle variations and transforming them into regulatory signals. This layered bodily awareness provides an experiential foundation for understanding teacher emotional intelligence and reveals how conflict intensity moderates the body-emotion interactive mechanism [34].

4.2. Relational Self in Conflict Situations—Dynamic Construction of "Who am I"

Teachers experience complex identity negotiation and self-positioning during conflict management processes. This construction of "relational self" profoundly influences their choice of management styles. Interview data reveal that teachers do not appear with a single, fixed identity in conflict situations. Instead, they dynamically switch and negotiate among multiple professional roles. Teacher T2 stated: "Facing students' questioning, on one hand, I am the 'authority' who needs to maintain classroom order. On the other hand, I am the 'guide' who needs to listen to their voices [35]. These two 'selves' often battle inside me." This identity tension appears in all participants' narratives. It reflects the multidimensionality and situational dependence of teacher professional identity. Further analysis reveals that teachers mainly negotiate among six identities: authority figure and caregiver, evaluator and supporter, knowledge transmitter and learning facilitator, discipline maintainer and emotional companion, professional person and authentic person, individual teacher and team member [36]. These identities are not oppositional binaries. Rather, they form a dynamic balance in specific conflict situations.

Phenomenological examination of participant narratives reveals distinct patterns in how identity orientations shape management approaches. When teachers position themselves primarily as authority figures, emphasizing rule maintenance, they gravitate toward more directive responses. T1 exemplified this stance: "I must make students understand there are classroom rules—my responsibility is upholding standards." This authoritative positioning often led to competitive engagement or strategic withdrawal to preserve hierarchical structure. Conversely, when assuming caregiver-supporter identities centered on emotional connection, teachers embraced collaborative approaches. T5 articulated this orientation: "I am first a person accompanying their growth, not just enforcing compliance." Such relational positioning fostered dialogue-based resolution and mutual accommodation. The knowl-

edge transmitter identity emerged particularly in academic disputes, where teachers balanced curricular demands against relational considerations. T3 reflected: "Conflict cannot affect teaching progress, but I also need students to feel heard." This tension between instructional efficiency and pedagogical care generated compromising strategies. The discipline maintainer-emotional companion duality appeared most prominently in behavioral conflicts, as T7 described: "I need to manage the classroom but also let them feel warmth and understanding." Teachers navigating this identity struggled to integrate authority with empathy. The professional person-authentic person negotiation revealed deeper existential tensions. T11 confessed: "Sometimes I also want to be my authentic self, not always performing the teacher role." This longing for genuineness while meeting professional expectations created internal conflict that shaped response patterns. Similarly, the individual teacher-team member identity reflected institutional pressures, as T4 noted: "My handling must consider the school's position, not just my personal judgment." This awareness of collective accountability influenced teachers toward more accommodating stances. Notably, identity positioning proved highly situational rather than trait-based. Teacher T9 reflected: "If I see students as 'subjects needing correction,' I will adopt direct confrontation. But if I see them as 'individuals who are growing,' I will choose dialogue." This narrative reveals how relational positioning shapes action logic [37]. In academic conflicts, teachers leaned toward transmitter-evaluator identities, emphasizing knowledge delivery and performance assessment. In behavioral conflicts, they adopted mixed maintainer-caregiver positions, blending discipline with nurture. In relational conflicts involving trust or respect, the authentic person-emotional companion identity became salient, with teachers prioritizing emotional honesty over role performance. This situationally distributed pattern of identity orientation reveals how teachers dynamically adjust self-positioning according to conflict nature, which further influences the interactive mechanism between their emotional intelligence experiences and management styles.

4.3. Situational Sensitivity—Judgment Wisdom of "Here and Now"

Teachers demonstrate high situational sensitivity in conflict management. This judgment wisdom of "here and now" constitutes a key mediating mechanism in the interaction between emotional intelligence experiences and management styles. Interview data show that teachers do not mechanically apply preset strategies in conflict situations. Instead, they keenly capture multidimensional situational cues and make dynamic adjustments accordingly. Teacher T11 stated: "I not only listen to what students say but also observe their body language, classroom atmosphere, even the weather outside the window... All these influence my decisions." This holistic situational perception ability appears in all participants' narratives. It reflects the complexity of teacher practical wisdom [38].

Further phenomenological analysis reveals that teachers mainly interpret situations from five dimensions: interpersonal dimension including student personality traits, teacher-student relationship history, and peer presence; spatial dimension encompassing public settings versus private spaces, classroom location and seating arrangements; temporal dimension involving semester stage, curriculum progress, and time of day; cultural dimension considering school cultural expectations, class norms, and parental attitudes; and event dimension evaluating conflict causes, severity level, and foreseeable consequences.

The interpersonal dimension emerged as particularly salient across narratives. T2 explained: "I decide how to handle it based on my relationship with this student—history matters more than the immediate incident." This relational knowing guided teachers toward collaborative and compromising approaches when trust foundations existed. The spatial dimension shaped face-saving considerations, as T6 noted: "In front of the whole class, I cannot make him too embarrassed, so I defer confrontation to private conversation." Public visibility constrained direct challenge, prompting avoidance or accommodation. Temporal pressures exerted pragmatic influence. T3 reflected: "It's the end of the semester, I have no time to tangle with him over minor issues." Curricular deadlines and exam proximity pushed teachers toward expedient compromise or strategic avoidance. The cultural dimension revealed institutional embeddedness, with T9 acknowledging: "I must consider the school's attitude toward such matters—my response reflects on the entire faculty." Organizational expectations tempered individual judgment, sometimes necessitating competitive assertion of norms or accommodating to maintain harmony.

The event dimension centered on perceived stakes and principles. T8 declared: "If it involves bottom-line issues like safety or respect, I will never compromise—some conflicts demand firm boundaries." Severity assessment and ethical implications determined whether teachers engaged competitively or collaboratively. Notably, senior teachers demonstrated sophisticated integration of multiple dimensions simultaneously. T4 reflected: "I originally planned to use a collaborative approach. But seeing the student's resistant emotions, I immediately switched to

listening mode. Teaching is like this—there is no fixed script." This improvisational adjustment ability embodies the essential characteristics of practical wisdom (phronesis) [39]. Novice teachers are often fixated on singular prominent cues, while experienced educators fluidly synthesize interpersonal histories, spatial contexts, temporal constraints, cultural norms, and event characteristics into holistic situational readings. This finding reveals how situational sensitivity serves as an advanced manifestation of emotional intelligence experience, transforming emotional awareness into appropriate management actions through refined judgment.

4.4. Struggle and Growth in Emotion Regulation—The Journey of "Becoming an Emotionally Intelligent Teacher"

Interview data reveal that continuous emotion management brings a significant emotional labor burden to teachers. However, through reflective practice, these challenges ultimately transform into opportunities for professional growth. Teacher T6 confessed: "I have to 'pretend' to be calm every day, even when my heart is churning inside. Sometimes after work, I cry hard in my car." This separation between surface performance and deep feelings appears across participant narratives, reflecting the hidden cost of emotional labor. Further phenomenological analysis reveals that teachers' emotion regulation experiences four developmental stages. The suppression stage involves forcibly repressing negative emotions, with T1 describing: "I tell myself not to get angry, but the more I suppress, the more I want to explode." Teachers at this stage believe good educators should not harbor negative emotions, leading to emotional accumulation and mind-body separation with high burnout risk. Emotional breakdown events often trigger awareness that propels movement beyond this stage. The disguise stage emerges as teachers perform professionally expected emotions while distinguishing "frontstage" and "backstage" selves. T5 articulated: "I wear a mask in front of students, come home completely exhausted." This stage brings fatigue from emotional inconsistency and progressive loss of authentic self. Critical reflection and self-questioning become catalysts for further development [40].

The integration stage involves coordinating authentic feelings with professional requirements. T8 reflected: "I began to accept that anger is also part of me—I don't have to eliminate it, just understand and channel it appropriately." Teachers at this stage accept the legitimacy of their emotions while seeking balance between authenticity and professional appropriateness. Peer dialogue, theoretical learning, and mentor support facilitate this integration process. The naturalization stage represents emotion regulation internalized as professional competence, where authenticity and professionalism unify. T12 described: "Now I can be my authentic self and respond professionally—they're no longer contradictory." Teachers reaching this stage maintain effectiveness while preserving emotional genuineness, though sustained reflective practice remains necessary. Notably, reflective practice serves as the key driving force for stage transformation [41]. Teacher T8 described: "After I lost my temper at a student, I reflected all night. I realized my anger actually came from fear of losing control. This awareness changed me." Such critical reflection helps teachers understand the deep needs and fears behind emotions, allowing them to reconstruct their relationship with emotions. More experienced teachers typically reach the naturalization stage, where they effectively manage conflicts while maintaining emotional authenticity [42]. This developmental trajectory reveals that "becoming an emotionally intelligent teacher" is not skill acquisition achievable through short-term training but rather professional identity reconstruction requiring long-term reflective practice. Organizational support, such as peer dialogue and supervision, significantly accelerates stage transformation, shortening teachers' time in high-exhaustion stages.

4.5. Meaning Construction—Conflict as Educational Opportunity

Teachers' meaning construction of conflict profoundly influences the interactive pattern between their emotional intelligence experiences and management styles. This transformation of meaning frameworks marks professional maturity from "technical response" toward "educational understanding." Interview data reveal that teachers experience a cognitive reconstruction process from "conflict as threat" to "conflict as opportunity." This transformation not only changes the nature of their emotional experiences but also reshapes the educational significance of teacher-student interactions. Teacher T10 reflected: "Initially, I viewed conflict as a threat. Now I see it as an opportunity for mutual growth. Conflict makes both the students more authentic and me." This perspective shift appears in the narratives of 8 senior teachers. It reflects core characteristics of professional wisdom. Further phenomenological analysis reveals that teachers' meaning construction of conflict presents five typical frameworks.

The problem-oriented framework views conflict as trouble requiring quick resolution, emphasizing efficiency and outcomes. T1 exemplified this stance: "Conflict is trouble, must settle it quickly." This framework generates anxiety, impatience, and stress, often leading to competitive or avoidant responses. The order-maintenance framework perceives conflict as a challenge to classroom order and teacher authority. T3 stated: "Students must understand rules, cannot challenge bottom lines." This framework evokes anger, threat perception, and defensiveness, typically resulting in competitive assertion or reluctant compromise. The relationship-repair framework interprets conflict as a signal of teacher-student relationship rupture requiring healing. T5 reflected: "Conflict means something went wrong in my relationship with students." This framework generates guilt, worry, and concern, prompting accommodating or collaborative approaches. The growth-promotion framework views conflict as moments for mutual teacher-student growth and understanding. T9 articulated: "Each conflict is an opportunity to understand each other better." This framework produces curiosity, anticipation, and openness, predominantly fostering collaborative engagement. The philosophical-reflection framework treats conflict as a practical test and a reflection of educational beliefs and values. T12 described: "Conflict makes me reflect on what kind of person I want to cultivate—my way of handling conflict reflects what kind of education I believe in. I believe in dialogue, so I choose to listen." This framework cultivates profoundness, calmness, and a sense of meaning, enabling flexible situational responses grounded in pedagogical principles [43]. Notably, meaning frameworks evolve dynamically through reflective practice rather than remaining fixed. Most participating teachers experienced a transformation from lower-order frameworks emphasizing problems and order toward higher-order frameworks centered on growth and philosophy. This transformation accompanies significant shifts: emotional experiences move from negative valences toward positive orientations, and perceived action efficacy increases substantially. This indicates that meaning construction not only influences immediate conflict management effects but also profoundly shapes teachers' professional identity and well-being.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Dialogue with Main Findings

The core findings of this study engage in deep dialogue with multiple theoretical traditions. They provide new perspectives for understanding the interactive mechanism between teacher emotional intelligence and conflict management. First, the research reveals bodily experiences of emotional intelligence. This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology. It challenges the mainstream view that treats emotional intelligence as purely cognitive skills. Participants' keen awareness of bodily signals such as "tightness in the chest" and "trembling hands" indicates something important. Emotional wisdom does not occur in abstract psychological space. Rather, it is rooted in the "living body." This finding echoes Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis. However, this study further reveals how teachers transform these bodily signals into practical wisdom for educational judgment. It does not merely remain at the physiological reaction level. Second, the dynamic construction of relational self confirms the teacher identity theory proposed by Beauchamp and Thomas. Yet this study expands the situational dimension of that theory. Data show that teachers' negotiation among multiple identities, such as "authority figure-caregiver" and "evaluator-supporter," is not fixed personality traits. Instead, it changes dynamically with situational factors such as conflict type and teacher-student relationship history [44]. This "situated self" transcends essentialist views of identity. It aligns with the figured worlds theory proposed by Holland and colleagues. It emphasizes that identity is a process continuously constructed and reconstructed in specific interactions. Third, situational sensitivity as an embodiment of practical wisdom engages in dialogue with Aristotle's concept of phronesis and Schön's reflective practice theory. The research finds that senior teachers can simultaneously integrate multidimensional situational cues from interpersonal dynamics, events, and culture. This holistic judgment capacity cannot be acquired through standardized training. Rather, it must be gradually developed through long-term "reflection-in-action." This challenges the tendency to technologize and proceduralize conflict management. It highlights the artistic nature of teachers' work. Fourth, the four-stage model of emotion regulation development enriches Hochschild's emotional labor theory. This study not only reveals the negative costs of emotional labor. More importantly, it discovers the possibility of transcending "surface acting." When teachers reach the naturalization stage, emotion regulation is no longer a burden of suppressing the authentic self. Instead, it becomes mature competence that integrates authenticity and professionalism.

5.2. Theoretical Implications and Research Limitations

The findings of this study engage substantively with multiple theoretical frameworks while revealing important limitations that warrant careful consideration. First, regarding embodied cognition theory, our finding that teachers' bodily awareness—manifested through physiological signals like "chest tightness" and "trembling hands"—serves as the foundational layer of emotional intelligence directly supports Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis, which posits that bodily states fundamentally shape emotional awareness and decision-making processes. This empirical evidence from educational contexts extends embodied cognition theory beyond laboratory settings, demonstrating how teachers' lived bodies function as epistemological instruments in conflict situations [45]. However, our study's cross-sectional design limits understanding of how bodily awareness develops over time, and the self-reported nature of bodily experiences may not capture unconscious somatic processes that nonetheless influence behavior. Second, the dynamic construction of relational self resonates with Holland et al.'s figured worlds theory and Beauchamp and Thomas's teacher identity framework, revealing how teachers' identity negotiations among roles such as "authority-caregiver" are not fixed personality traits but contextually fluid positionings shaped by situational demands. Our data illustrate how this situated identity mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management, yet the study's limitation lies in its inability to capture real-time identity shifts during actual conflict episodes, relying instead on retrospective accounts that may be influenced by post-hoc rationalization. Third, our conceptualization of situational sensitivity as practical wisdom directly invokes Aristotelian phronesis and Schön's reflection-in-action, demonstrating how experienced teachers integrate multidimensional situational cues—a capacity that transcends technical rationality. This finding challenges proceduralized approaches to conflict management training, though our research is limited by its focus on successful resolution episodes, potentially overlooking failed attempts that might reveal boundaries of situational sensitivity. Fourth, the four-stage emotion regulation development model extends Hochschild's emotional labor theory by demonstrating not only the costs of surface acting but also pathways toward authentic professionalism through the naturalization stage, where emotion regulation becomes internalized competence rather than performative burden. This progression parallels Mezirow's transformative learning stages, suggesting that emotional intelligence development involves perspective transformation facilitated by critical reflection. However, our study's limitation is the retrospective construction of developmental stages based on cross-sectional interviews rather than longitudinal tracking of individual teachers' actual developmental trajectories, which may obscure non-linear progressions or regressions. Fifth, the evolution from "conflict as threat" to "conflict as opportunity" exemplifies perspective transformation in Mezirow's framework, revealing how meaning-making fundamentally restructures emotional experiences and action possibilities. Additional limitations include the study's focus on secondary school teachers in urban Chinese contexts, limiting transferability to other educational levels or cultural settings; reliance on verbal self-reports that may not fully capture tacit or unconscious dimensions of emotional intelligence; potential social desirability bias in teachers' narratives about their conflict management; and the researcher's own interpretive lens shaped by educational phenomenology, which, despite bracketing efforts, inevitably influences data interpretation. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track developmental trajectories, incorporate observational methods to capture real-time conflict episodes, expand to diverse cultural and educational contexts, and integrate physiological measures to complement self-reported bodily awareness.

5.3. Integrating the Three Research Questions: A Holistic Understanding

The three sub-questions of this study do not exist in isolation but rather constitute a dynamic, cyclical, integrated framework. The five dimensions of emotional intelligence experience revealed by the first question—bodily awareness, relational self, situational sensitivity, emotion regulation capacity, and meaning-making framework—form the foundation for understanding the second question. These experiences influence management style choices through three transformation mechanisms: bodily awareness functions as an early warning system that activates emotion regulation, relational self-positioning navigates style selection, and the meaning-making framework transforms the nature of emotions. For example, when teachers position themselves as "caregivers" and adopt a "conflict as growth" framework, they are more inclined to choose collaborative styles.

The situational factors revealed by the third question play a critical moderating role in this interactive process. The interpersonal dimension, cultural dimension, spatiotemporal dimension, and event dimension jointly

shape the transformation pathway from experience to action. More importantly, the outcomes of management style choices, in turn, influence teachers' emotional intelligence experiences, forming a feedback loop. This cyclical interactive mechanism indicates that teachers' emotional intelligence development is a process of professional identity reconstruction achieved through a spiral of experience-action-reflection-re-experience, rather than a linear skill accumulation process.

6. Conclusion

This study deeply explores the interactive mechanism between teacher emotional intelligence experiences and conflict management styles through an educational phenomenological perspective. It obtains five core conclusions:

- The teacher's emotional intelligence is not an abstract psychological ability. Rather, it is embodied wisdom. It is rooted in the awareness and transformation of bodily signals such as "tightness in the chest" and "trembling hands." This bodily foundation constitutes the first scene of emotion regulation.
- Teachers experience dynamic construction of relational self during conflicts. They negotiate among multiple identities such as "authority figure-caregiver" and "evaluator-supporter." This identity positioning profoundly influences their choice of management styles. It presents significant situational dependence.
- Situational sensitivity serves as judgment wisdom of "here and now." It integrates cues from five dimensions: interpersonal dynamics, events, culture, time, and space. This transforms emotional awareness into appropriate management actions. It embodies the essence of practical wisdom.
- The development of teacher emotion regulation capacity experiences a four-stage journey from suppression to naturalization. This accompanies decreased emotional exhaustion and increased authenticity. Reflective practice is the key driving force for stage transformation.
- The evolution of meaning construction frameworks—from "conflict as threat" to "conflict as opportunity"—marks a qualitative leap in teacher professional maturity. This perspective transformation not only changes the nature of emotional experiences. It also reshapes the educational value of teacher-student interactions.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, C.F. and G.S.; methodology, C.F.; software, C.F.; validation, C.F. and G.S.; formal analysis, G.S.; investigation, G.S.; resources, C.F. and G.S.; data curation, C.F.; writing—original draft preparation, C.F. and G.S.; writing—review and editing, C.F.; visualization, G.S.; supervision, C.F.; project administration, G.S.; funding acquisition, C.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study received ethical approval from the Trinity University of Asia Institutional Review Board (TUA-IRB, Approval No.: TUA-HREC-2024-ED-087, approved on August 15, 2024).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Trinity University of Asia for its academic support.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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