

UNDERSTANDING SILENT VOICES AND SOOTHING EMOTIONAL SCARS:
INTEGRATING FEELINGS/EMOTION PICTURE CARDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION

by

AISHA OMAR KADI

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Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

Doctoral Advisory Committee:

Tomoko Wakabayashi, Ed.D., Chair
Ambika Bhargava, Ph.D.
Julie Ricks-Doneen, Ph.D.
Rebecca Vannest, Ph.D.

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To my mother and father, who have given me love, support, and prayers throughout my life—this work is a fruit of your generosity and prayers. Thank you for your endless prayers for me. Everything I have accomplished is thanks first to God, and then to the foundation you have built for me over time.

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Statement on Language Use and AI Research Support Tools

As an international doctoral student, English is my second language. I acknowledge that in order to support the quality and clarity of my academic writing, I utilized several digital tools throughout the research process. First, the Grammarly plugin was used to improve my grammatical accuracy, academic tone, sentence structure, paragraph organization, and overall writing quality in my dissertation. I also used Google Translate, mainly to support the translation of my data, notes, and participants' stories and responses from Arabic to English. In addition, I acknowledge that the ChatGPT platform was used as a supportive tool to verify the coherence of the written analysis,

enhance paragraph flow, and confirm the logical consistency of data interpretation. I limited the use of these tools to language support, translation assistance, and writing coherence. Notably, none of these tools influenced my research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, or the scholarly conclusions of my study. Also, the generated output was reviewed, edited, and used only for language and structural support for this dissertation. Therefore, all analytical decisions and interpretations remain the sole responsibility of me as the principal investigator.

Aisha (Ayosha) Omar Kadi

PREFACE

This dissertation represents the culmination of years of academic study, professional experience, and personal reflection. My journey into understanding children's emotional expression began long before I formally studied the subject, through my early work as a kindergarten teacher, observing the subtle difficulties young learners face, and witnessing the emotional discoveries of my own children at home. When I began my doctoral studies, I felt a strong desire to explore how early childhood educators could support children's emotional communication, especially those who might not have the words to express their inner worlds. This desire led me to study Feelings/Emotional Picture Cards (FEPCs), a tool at the intersection of visual art, child development, and trauma-sensitive education. Completing this dissertation amidst motherhood, professional responsibilities, and personal challenges required patience, perseverance, and faith. The research process itself became a journey of empathy toward children and myself as a researcher. I hope this work will support teachers who strive to understand children with open hearts, and that it will be a step towards promoting trauma-informed and emotionally sensitive teaching practices in our educational environment. I pray that this study will lead to further exploration of trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practices in early childhood education throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and beyond.

ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING SILENT VOICES AND SOOTHING EMOTIONAL SCARS: INTEGRATING FEELINGS/EMOTION PICTURE CARDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by

Aisha (Ayosha) Omar Kadi

Adviser: Tomoko Wakabayashi, Ed.D.

Young children who have experienced trauma often struggle to communicate their emotions verbally, making it challenging for early childhood teachers to identify and respond to their needs. This qualitative case study explored how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia understood, implemented, and reflected on the use of Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs) as a tool to support emotional communication in early childhood settings. The study addressed three research questions: (1) What are kindergarten teachers' understanding and perceptions of FEPCs before and after training?; (2) How do teachers describe their implementation of FEPCs, including the challenges, student reactions, and daily classroom practices?; and (3) What best practices do teachers identify for effectively incorporating FEPCs into early childhood education settings? Six kindergarten teachers from a private school in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, participated in the study. Data were collected through pre- and post-training surveys and two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each teacher. Thematic analysis revealed significant growth in teachers' conceptual understanding of FEPCs following professional development. Teachers integrated FEPCs into morning routines, transition activities,

conflict resolution, and reflective discussions, noting improvements in children's emotional vocabulary, empathy, and self-regulation. Challenges included time constraints, cultural sensitivities, and uncertainty when responding to trauma-related disclosures. Teachers also reported a notable shift in their professional identities, recognizing the importance of emotional attunement and trauma-informed practices alongside academic instruction. This dissertation contributes to the limited literature on trauma-informed, art-based emotional tools in non-Western contexts and underscores the critical role of visual strategies in supporting young children's emotional well-being. By focusing on kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia, this study addresses that gap and extends the literature on trauma-informed, art-based strategies in early childhood education.

Keywords: Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs); Childhood Trauma; Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); Emotional Expression; Emotional Communication; Trauma-Informed Practices; Art-Based Interventions; Art-Based Strategies; Kindergarten Teachers; Qualitative Case Study; Saudi Arabia; Visual Communication Tools; Teacher Perceptions; Children's Emotional Development

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
PREFACE	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
LIST OF FIGURES	xv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
CHAPTER ONE	
INTRODUCTION	1
Background	3
Childhood Trauma and Resilience	3
Art-Based Techniques and Emotional Expression	7
Theoretical Framework	12
Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development	12
Theories of Emotion	16
Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development	20
Problem Statement and Research Questions	25
Problem Statement	25
Research Questions	27
Significance	28
CHAPTER TWO	
LITERATURE REVIEW	30
Review of Relevant Literature	30

TABLE OF CONTENTS—Continued

Search Terms	31
Operationalizing Terms	32
Organizing the Literature	33
Art-Based Intervention and Positive Change in Children with Traum	34
Drawings and Images Lead to Discovery and Assistance for Children with Trauma	40
The Use of Art-Based Technique in Addressing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma into Adulthood	49
Conclusions	51
CHAPTER THREE	
METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS	54
Overview and Research Design	54
Rationale	54
Research Questions	56
Conceptual Model	56
Researcher Role	59
Researcher Description and Positionality	59
Setting	61
Participants and Recruitment	63
Recruitment Procedures	65
Rationale for Selecting Saudi Kindergarten Teachers	67
Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures	68

TABLE OF CONTENTS—Continued

Instruments and Measures	69
Data Collection Procedures	78
Data Analysis Strategies	81
Data Analysis	82
My Approach	82
Theme Development and Findings Structure	85
Conclusions	86
CHAPTER FOUR	
FINDINGS	89
Introduction	89
Theme 1: Expanded Understanding and Awareness of FEPCs After Training	91
Theme 2: FEPCs As a Catalyst for Emotional Expression in Kindergarten Classrooms	97
Theme 3: Instructional Practices and Daily Classroom Routines Supporting FEPCs Implementation	102
Theme 4: Challenges, Barriers, and Contextual Constraints in Implementing FEPCs	108
Theme 5: Best Practice Recommendations for Effective and Culturally Responsive Use of FEPCs in Early Childhood Settings	113
Theme 6: Teachers' Reflections on Emotional Growth— Their Own and Their Children	118
Summary of Findings	123

TABLE OF CONTENTS—Continued

CHAPTER FIVE	
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	126
Introduction	126
Discussion	127
The Overall Relationship Between Theories, Literature, and Findings	129
Summary and Implications of Findings	134
Interpretation of Findings as a Whole	143
Recommendations	148
Limitations of the Study	149
Directions for Future Research	151
Conclusion	155
REFERENCES	160
APPENDICES	
A. Questionnaire Survey (Pre- and Post-Survey)	170
B. Interviews Protocol and Questions	171
C. Information Sheet, FEPCs (Online Training), and Invitation Message to Teachers	172
D. Mahad Al-Ebtikar School's Permission and IRB Approval	173

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Conceptual Scheme for Study Methodology	71
Table 3.2	Data Collection and Analysis of Data	81
Table 4.1	The Set of Analytical Frameworks and the Connections of Each Theme to the Research Questions	90
Table 4.2	Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes Under the First Theme of the Study	95
Table 4.3	Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes under the Second Theme of the Study	101
Table 4.4	Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes under the Third Theme Of the Study	107
Table 4.5	Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes under the Fourth Theme of the Study	112
Table 4.6	Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes under the Fifth Theme of the Study	118
Table 4.7	Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes under the Sixth Theme of the Study	123

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1	Basic Emotional Expressions That Remain Similar Worldwide	18
Figure 3.1	Conceptual Model of Kindergarten Teachers' Use of FEPCs to Support Emotional Expression and Trauma-Informed Practices	58
Figure 3.2	Example of FEPCs Used in Participants' Classrooms	77
Figure 4.1	Kindergarten Students' Drawings of Their Current Feeling	98
Figure 4.2	An Example of an Activity Area that One Participant Created in Her Classroom to Encourage the Use of FEPCs Among Her Kindergarten Students	106

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AATA	The American Art Therapy Association
ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ATI	The Art Therapy Institute
ATTP	Art Therapy Trauma Protocol
DAPs	Prescribed Developmentally Appropriate Practices
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ERIC	Educational Resources Information Center
FEPCs	Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards
KG	Kindergarten
KSA	The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
NAEYC	The National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCTSN	The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
PD	Professional Development
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
WHO	World Health Organization
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING SILENT VOICES AND SOOTHING EMOTIONAL SCARS: INTEGRATING FEELINGS/EMOTION PICTURE CARDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Introduction

In many kindergarten classrooms around the world, teachers are often the first adults—beyond parents—to notice when a child seems withdrawn, anxious, or emotionally overwhelmed. These moments can be subtle: a child who avoids eye contact, who does not speak, or who draws pictures filled with storms and shadows. For some children, especially those who may have experienced trauma, words are not always the easiest way to say, “I am hurting.”

It is essential to take the necessary measures to confront this worldwide dilemma and limit the increase in adverse effects on innocent children who have been subjected to painful trauma. According to art therapist Lisa Bennett, stress and painful trauma can be described as a “pressure cooker” as an allegory for emotions and stress building up within us, emphasizing the need for a release, lest we “blow our top” (L. Bennett, personal communication, October 9, 2023). Emotional experiences can be described as riding waves; our emotional journeys are not linear but more wave-like, requiring us to address and manage each crest and trough (L. Bennett, personal communication, October 9, 2023).

The worst aspect of childhood trauma is the absence of support and availability of appropriate treatment for children (Rubin, 2005). This lack of treatment may worsen matters and lead to these traumas being passed on to subsequent generations, causing

widespread crises with negative consequences (World Health Organization, 2023).

Teachers want to help, but many feel they do not have the tools to truly connect with children who are carrying emotional burdens they cannot explain. In Saudi Arabia, as in many parts of the world, there is growing recognition of how trauma in early childhood affects a child's ability to learn, relate to others, and feel safe. Yet, there is still a long way to go when it comes to equipping educators with simple, accessible ways to support these young learners.

For the sake of humanity, justice, and equality among all, and to preserve what remains of these young people's childhood, through my dissertation, I sought to discover one of the simplest emerging, yet most effective, ways to help alleviate the side effects of trauma children may have experienced, or from which they may still be suffering helplessly in silence. This promising approach involves the use of Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs)—a tool designed to help children express their feelings through images instead of words. While these cards have become increasingly popular in early childhood settings, little is known about how teachers actually describe their use in real classrooms or how they may truly help children to open up and express their emotions in a more natural way.

In order to listen to the silent voices in early childhood classrooms, this study dives into that very question. By listening to the voices of kindergarten teachers at one Saudi school, I sought to understand how teachers perceive the role of Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards in supporting the emotional needs of all children, especially those who may have experienced trauma. In a world where childhood mental health is finally getting the attention it deserves, this research aimed to offer deeper insight into the use of FEPCs as

a simple, powerful and meaningful art-based tool, as well as into the educators who, by implementing it, bring it to life through their daily classroom practices.

Background

For decades, early childhood education in Saudi Arabia focused mainly on literacy, math, and preparing young children academically for school. Emotional well-being, especially in very young children, was often overlooked and assumed to be the family's responsibility or simply something children would grow out of. Indeed, this subject received no attention, unlike academic subjects, which required structured teaching. This occurred not because it was viewed as unimportant, but because people believed it would develop naturally through natural processes rather than require the purposeful teaching methods that academic subjects required. There was also a limited understanding of the strong connection between children's emotional well-being and their academic engagement, behavior, and social relationships. However, over the past decade, educators and researchers have begun to understand a deeper truth: children do not learn well when they do not feel safe. And trauma—whether from neglect, abuse, violence, illness, or even instability in the home—can have a lasting impact on how a child behaves, trusts others, and connects emotionally.

Childhood Trauma and Resilience

Childhood trauma may arise from common behaviors, such as exposure to bullying, whether by family or friends. It may also occur from terrible things, such as children being exposed to abuse, whether sexual, emotional, or physical. Unfortunately, now, with the presence and availability of technology at the fingertips of young children, they may be exposed to secondhand trauma, or secondary trauma, including watching or

being exposed to various types of traumas. For example, secondhand trauma may result from the misuse of technology (Erdman et al., 2020, p. 5). Watching terrifying, pornographic, or violent scenes, especially news coverage of wars, is not appropriate for children. In this way, “a child might experience second-hand trauma through watching news footage of a terrorist attack, hearing about community violence from adults, or having a close, trusted adult who has experienced trauma” (Erdman et al., 2020, p. 5). It may lead to deep psychological trauma among children that can last for long periods and develop into worse symptoms, if not addressed appropriately.

I was six years old when I saw the first thunderous war scene on television. This scene has been stuck in my memory ever since. I continue to see these resounding war scenes repeated and continued in many parts of our beautiful planet. The unfortunate thing is that these wars not only cause the destruction of land, property, homelands, and lives, but their impact extends to the destruction of childhood innocence and leaves behind deep traumas that may last for several generations. Trauma and its effects are personal and subjective; how a child understands and reacts to an event will depend on their perspective and previous experiences (Erdman et al., 2020). If left unaddressed, trauma can persist for several years after witnessing events. We are in a continuous cycle of producing trauma around the world, and there are still many children globally who are living in active combat zones. However, it is worth noting that childhood traumas are not caused only by wars. Rather, they may arise from seemingly straightforward things, such as neglect and abandonment, or they may be due to violence and abuse inside or outside of the home, or even the death of loved ones (World Health Organization, 2022).

According to statistics published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020, about one billion children around the world suffered from long-term impact—including mental, emotional, physical, social, or economic consequences—due to trauma exposure. Moreover, per the WHO (2023), one out of two children around the world between the ages of two and 17 experiences some form of violence annually, and about 300 million children suffer from violent disciplinary methods from their parents or caregivers. Being exposed to violence, whether in the home or the community, is a terrifying adversity that can cause trauma in childhood and adolescence (WHO, 2022).

Such violent events have the potential to impede a child's development and ability to cope and, if they occur often, destroy feelings of security, which can result in traumatic stress. This trauma may manifest as behavioral problems, persistent psychological distress, or trouble controlling and expressing emotions (WHO, 2022). Trauma is more than just the event itself; it is also about how children react to stress and how it affects their ability to manage various things in their world (Erdman et al., 2020). As a result, children who have experienced trauma are vulnerable and more likely to experience several adversities. Per Felitti (2019), adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a significant impact on how people evolve throughout their lifetimes. Researchers have found a close connection between having many adverse events as a child and a range of detrimental social and health outcomes later in life. Similarly, Erdman et al. (2020) stated, "Researchers found that a higher ACE score puts individuals at increased risk for later negative outcomes in health and well-being, including mental illness, risky behaviors ... and educational opportunities" (p. 5). Trauma in early childhood can

severely hinder a child's ability to express feelings verbally. These children may struggle to express their emotions with a limited vocabulary and fear of verbal communication.

Therefore, those who were exposed to trauma are at higher risk and subject to grave and often dire long-term consequences. This is true both in terms of (1) mental health challenges, such as anxiety disorders; reckless behaviors and substance abuse, including using alcohol and drugs and having unprotected sex; (2) physical health outcomes, such as chronic diseases, including cancer, diabetes, and heart disease; social issues, such as participating in acts of violence or crime; and (3) academic shortcomings, such as poor educational achievement (WHO, 2023). These consequences are one explanation for the significant impact of trauma on children's emotional well-being, behavior, and academic performance, stressing the need for teachers and other educational professionals to collaborate. As a child goes through a traumatic situation, it might unleash overt emotional or behavioral responses that can be harmful if they are not prepared or not adequately supported. Even with parental support, it is always necessary to respect the child's need to develop appropriate coping mechanisms for adequate defenses, as well as their psychological need to accept forbidden impulses and process difficult or conflicting emotions in a safe and supportive environment (Rubin, 2005).

In the Saudi cultural context, emotional expression is particularly important regarding feelings such as fear, sadness, or vulnerability. These feelings are sometimes shaped by social norms that emphasize strength, privacy, and family honor. As a result, open discussions about children's emotional struggles may vary across families. This reality may influence how emotional tools such as FEPCs are perceived and supported at home and in other settings.

Art-Based Techniques and Emotional Expression

My approach in this dissertation is informed by the belief that creative and visual arts can support emotional expression. It can also help with healing for young children who may have experienced trauma. There are multiple methods for supporting children through artistic and creative activities. Some of these methods require extensive training and professional certification, such as Art Therapy, which is a licensed mental health profession. The role of a kindergarten teacher, however, is not to serve as a therapist. Therefore, my study does not engage certified and/or implement formal art therapy practices. Instead, I focus on art-based strategies and wellness-oriented activities that can be integrated into early childhood classrooms to help teachers foster emotional expression and create supportive environments for children.

It is important to recognize that there is no single, universally accepted definition of Art that has remained unchanged over time and across cultures (Sansi, 2022). Art includes a wide range of human activities and artifacts that span from creative and imaginative skills to those that inspire meaningful experiences (Vilhauer, 2024). These experiences may contain emotion, notion, technical skill, beauty, ritual, critique of society, or community identity (Bonard & Humbert-Droz, 2024). Art in one culture, such as oral storytelling, ritual performance, calligraphy, or digital media, may differ from the arts in another (McGiveron, 2024). The practice of creating meaningful, expressive, or skillful materials and experiences is nearly universal; therefore, art exists even in societies without a specific term for it (Bonard & Humbert-Droz, 2024). In brief, a broad, globally informed understanding of art might be: art is a universal human activity encompassing a wide range of creative practices and expressions. Sansi (2022) described

art as culturally, historically, and individually shaped, which can reflect the contexts in which it is created and experienced. Other researchers emphasized the role of art in evoking, communicating, and embodying meaning and emotion across societies (Bonard & Humbert-Droz, 2024). In addition, McGiveron (2024) offered a contemporary perspective that art may take multiple forms and share values, whether through visual, auditory, performative, or digital media, without fixed boundaries. This concept acknowledges that art's limits are not set in stone and that it can connect people from diverse cultures. Thus, it is not limited to a single definition, allowing it to reflect and shape the human experience.

Arts-based interventions began to emerge in the mid-20th century as a therapeutic alternative for people impacted by trauma. In 1969, the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) formalized the field and was founded on the premise that art can be used as a form of therapy (Junge, 2010). The AATA has defined Art Therapy as a professional relationship between an art therapist and people who have experienced trauma, intending to increase the client's self-awareness of dealing with trauma. Thus, Art Therapy helps people face their struggles and trauma, express their feelings, increase self-awareness, support emotional healing, and develop strategies to better manage their behaviors (AATA, 2017).

In this study, I draw from Art Therapy's foundational ideas and principles. One idea is the understanding that creative expression can facilitate emotional release, self-awareness, and healing (Junge, 2010; Rowe et al., 2017). Similarly, the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy emphasizes the "100 languages of children," which highlights how young learners express their emotions and understanding through artistic forms

(Scott, 2023). Building on these principles and theoretical perspectives, my study conceptualizes practices of manual arts, such as drawing, coloring, and the use of visual symbolic tools, as part of a broader art-based approach to emotional expression. Although the use of Feeling/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs) is not traditionally identified as a formal art-therapy technique, my study positions FEPCs as an art-based strategy that is informed by art therapy principles and expressive arts literature, rather than as a clinical art therapy intervention.

In my study, I focused on the use of FEPCs, which are visual tools that display a range of facial expressions and emotional cues. These cards help children identify, name, and communicate their feelings in a non-verbal and accessible way. Although FEPCs are not a form of drawing or painting, they support emotional development through visual representation. This approach using FEPCs aligns with the broader concept of art-based interventions, where visual tools are used to support children's emotional awareness and social-emotional learning.

Art-based techniques are rooted in the idea that creative expression can foster healing and mental well-being (L. Bennett, personal communication, October 9, 2023). According to art therapist Lisa Bennett, it can be an effective way for people to explore emotions, develop self-awareness, manage stress, and boost self-esteem (Personal communication, October 9, 2023). There is a growing need to address the silence of childhood trauma. I firmly believe that art and image are a common language for all children. Through it, children can communicate their emotions, their voices, and express their feelings easily, spontaneously, transparently, and without pressure. Since trauma often remains in children's memories as visual images rather than verbal narratives

(Kometiani & Farmera, 2020), art-based techniques combined with a wellness-oriented curriculum may provide structured opportunities for children to process these images effectively in a safe and supportive way.

In early childhood education, a wellness curriculum generally refers to an approach that integrates its content through two methods that help children learn to manage their emotional and social needs by expressing their feelings, developing emotional control, and building social connections (Campbell, 2010). This framework enables children to use art-based activities as expressive tools to convey their inner experiences through non-verbal means, including trauma-related images. Likewise, many children suffering from trauma resort to escaping and not confronting their experience (Rowe et al., 2017). As a result, emotional withdrawal and avoidance are frequently observed among these children. For this reason, art-based techniques can encourage children to gradually acknowledge and express their feelings (difficult emotions) in less stressful, more flexible ways, so that the fear and silence of children become audible voices.

Given that trauma often manifests in children as emotional withdrawal, behavioral changes, or psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and fear, providing safe and developmentally appropriate expressive outlets is essential (Campbell, 2010; Kometiani & Farmera, 2020). From this point of view, my study positioned FEPCs as a gentle, child-friendly means for expressing difficult emotions that can help transform their silence into voice. Over time, these visual tools may promote confidence, resilience, and emotional growth in all young children, especially those who may have experienced trauma.

In conclusion, the field of trauma-informed education emerged from the understanding that trauma and ACEs impact children throughout their lives. It calls on teachers not just to notice behavior problems, but to ask, “What happened to this child?” rather than, “What is wrong with this child?” In many countries, schools have begun to adopt strategies that create safer, more supportive learning environments. However, in Saudi Arabia, while awareness is growing, trauma-informed approaches are still in early stages of implementation—especially in early childhood classrooms. At the same time, there is growing interest in tools that help children express emotions without needing advanced language skills. One such tool is FEPCs, a collection of illustrated cards that show different facial expressions and emotional scenarios. These cards are designed to help children name and discuss their feelings by pointing or selecting an image that matches how they feel. For children affected by trauma who may struggle to speak or understand what they are feeling, this visual support can be a lifeline. But *how are these tools actually used by teachers in real classrooms? Do they find them helpful? Do they feel confident using them? Do the cards really help children open up?* These are the questions that inspired my research. Thus, in this study, I focus on a group of kindergarten teachers in a private school in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, who will be trained to use FEPCs in their daily practice. The goal was to understand their experiences, perspectives, and insights—not only to learn more about the tool itself, but also to contribute to a bigger conversation about how to bring trauma-informed practices into early education in ways that are culturally relevant, sustainable, and centered on children’s emotional needs.

Theoretical Framework

Through a constructivist lens, my study explored the use of FEPCs with early school-age students from an art-based techniques framework to support emotional expression and understanding. My theoretical framework was grounded in multiple and interconnected perspectives. Hence, this framework informed my study's focus on emotional communication in early childhood settings. The framework draws on constructivist theory as the overarching lens through which I focus on theories of childhood trauma and resilience, emotional expression, and early learning contexts.

The first constructivist framework that guided my study included pertinent early childhood theorists, including theories of cognitive and emotional development. One of these theories is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which is incorporated to emphasize the role of social interaction, language, and guided support in a child's emotional learning and meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). Second, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development was used to situate children's emotional expressions within the larger contexts of children's world. Third, I incorporated theories of emotion, such as Paul Ekman's work on facial expressions. Ekman's work offers insight into how emotions are recognized and communicated through visual cues (Ekman, 2006). Overall, these theoretical perspectives provided a coherent framework for examining how FEPCs function as an art-based strategy in order to support emotional expression and understanding among young children in their educational settings.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development

According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, social interactions and cultural tools strongly influence cognitive development, which is shaped through

them (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasized that learning is deeply rooted in social interactions and cultural contexts, including interacting with parents, teachers, and peers who support children's growth by providing appropriate guidance that scaffolds them (Mooney, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978). "Scaffolding" can be defined as that which entails more knowledgeable people helping the child learn and acquire skills faster than they could alone. Instead of isolated learners, Vygotsky believed "higher cognitive functions develop from these social interactions" (as cited in Crain, 2011, p. 232). Young students develop independently of individual stages because of social interactions.

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that humans were born with four elementary mental functions: (1) attention, (2) simple sensations, (3) perception and reorganizing perception, and (4) memory and thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). These basic abilities are developed and expanded through social experiences within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - the range between what children can do independently and what they accomplish with help (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, Vygotsky believed that social interactions stimulate higher cognitive functions that individuals internalize (Ormrod, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, Vygotsky's (1979) ZPD illustrated that learning is a deeply social process where children advance cognitively through "active engagement within their cultural and social contexts" (as cited in Crain, 2011, p. 232). Finally, this theory highlights the important role of cultural tools like language and symbols in cognitive development (shaping thinking), as does scaffolding, where knowledgeable others help children learn more than they could alone (Mooney, 2013; Ormrod, 2011). Through guided participation and interaction, children internalize knowledge and can build their capacity to regulate their own learning.

Vygotsky's concepts can be highly applicable in several different ways in the classroom, especially regarding strategies that encourage group work learning and conversation, verbal interaction, and guided support. Personally, I was genuinely influenced by Vygotsky's emphasis on the three main ideas: social interaction, scaffolding, and the cultural context of learning. These ideas shifted how I thought about child development and early intervention programs for children who have been through trauma. In real life, this theory supports using scaffolding in diverse classes, where each child can get the help that they need to reach their full developmental potential (Ormrod, 2011).

In his writing, Vygotsky (1978) noted the critical role of adults in shaping children's learning through speech and imitation:

Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults; or that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information; or that, through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills? Learning and development are interrelated from the child's very first day of life. (p. 84)

Vygotsky's ZPD can help educators establish education for students at their level and challenge them to move forward (Ormrod, 2011). Vygotsky's theory can provide insights into social interactions within the early childhood environment, mainly through his ideas about scaffolding and the ZPD (Cole et al., 1978), as well as through play. It can be mediated through tools like FEPCs and may facilitate emotional and cognitive development in young children. Indeed, this theory connects meaningfully to emotional development. In the context of my study, tools such as FEPCs can support young

children's ability to recognize and express emotions. For younger or less emotionally aware children, the FEPCs can be used to introduce basic emotions such as "happy," "sad," or "angry." For older or more emotionally aware children, discussions might dig into more complex emotions or situations that generate specific reactions and feelings, pushing their ZPD boundaries. Often, children reproduce and repeat actual situations they have experienced and emotions they have felt during their play (Scharer, 2017). For example, a child whom a parent abuses may repeat what happened to them on the small doll he is playing with. It is through play that children make meaning to their emotional experiences. Art-based techniques, such as drawing, can also support this process by offering children a visual for emotional expression. These interactions can be planned to help students talk about and work through their feelings in a safe and supportive space. For example, children can express their feelings and thoughts by drawing. They might draw a representation of their family not based on direct observation, but on memory and emotional perception. Vygotsky (1978) explained this phenomenon:

If asked to draw their mother sitting opposite them or some object before them, they draw without ever looking at the original-not what they see but what they know. Often, children's drawings not only disregard but also directly contradict the actual perception of the object. (p. 112)

This insight reinforces how expressive tools like art and FEPCs can mediate internal experiences in order to help children make sense of their world. Although these methods are not formal therapy, they serve as developmentally appropriate strategies within a wellness curriculum that encourages emotional communication and self-awareness in early childhood.

Theories of Emotion

There is a vast field of theoretical knowledge pertaining to emotions, and over time, several theories on emotions have emerged and continue to help shape the ideas behind this study. Collectively, these theories of emotion continue to provide humanity with different ways to look at how individuals who have been through stress might feel and talk about their emotions. In their study, Zhang and Provost (2019) explained that emotions send essential clues about the individual's intentions and actions. The goal of automatic emotional recognition was to separate feelings from facts about behavior. Emotion, on the other hand, is a subjective term; it may mean different things to different individuals. It could mean the emotion an individual thinks they showed, felt, or self-reported, or how other people viewed their emotions and actions. Intentionally choosing how to define these terms impacts how a study is designed and how well it is executed (Zhang & Provost, 2019). The way that emotions are defined and interpreted directly impacts how emotional regulation tools are designed and applied. In the context of my study, this theory is relevant to the use and development of FEPCs. For instance, FEPCs are used as the visual representation of emotions that align with how young children recognize emotions and communicate their feelings.

Theory of Facial Expressions

Theories of emotion are broad, but one specific theory that relates to this work is the theory of Facial Expressions. This theory originated from Charles Darwin's early hypotheses, which posited that certain facial expressions are universal indicators of specific emotions (Ekman, 2006). In his 1872 publication, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin repeatedly stated that facial expressions of emotion are

biologically based can be observed across species, including animals and humans.

Darwin's work opened the way for additional research on facial expressions and emotions, exploring the connection between emotion and facial behavior (Ekman, 2006). Afterward, Paul Ekman expanded this idea to become a theory that is not based on culture but on biology and is universal among humans.

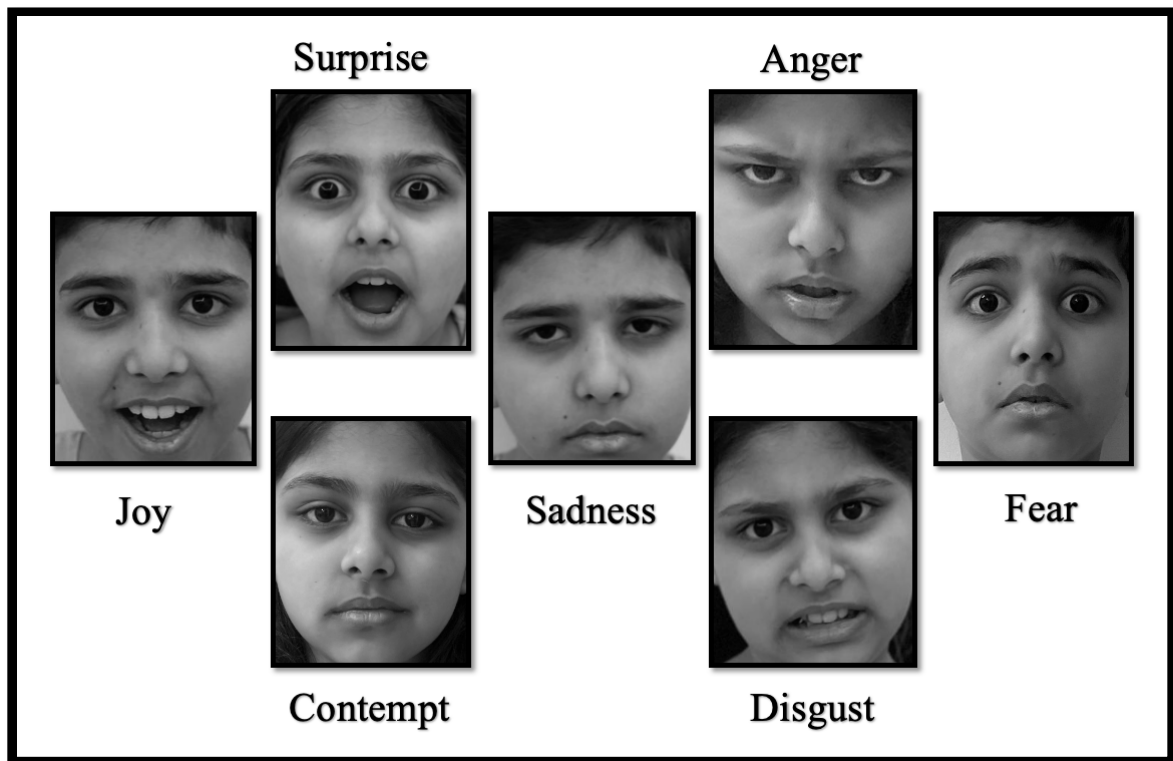
In 2006, Ekman authored a book entitled *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review*. In his book, he argued that feelings have evolved "traits" humans share. Ekman's work was one of the most critical studies of feelings and individuals' expressions through facial expressions (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). In the 1800s, Darwin made the first important step toward understanding people's feelings by developing the basic principles of the theory of universal facial expressions by studying the way animals used facial expressions (Ekman et al., 1971). In the late 1900s, Ekman's work built on this idea and proved it valid (Ekman, 2006). Ekman conducted several examinations and found that people from a wide range of Western and Eastern cultures agreed on choosing emotional names that fit facial expressions and emotions (Ekman et al., 1971; Ekman, 2006). Yet, there is some work on how facial expressions can be read in different ways by individuals from different cultures.

Ekman is best known for his work on how everyone shares facial expressions—the universal emotions that are recognized among people (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Through numerous cross-cultural studies, he demonstrated that people worldwide could recognize and understand certain facial gestures and emotional expressions (Ekman et al., 1971). Ekman identified a set of basic emotions that people worldwide exhibit similarly. These emotions include the six basic emotions: *happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise,*

and disgust (see Figure 1.1). Some researchers also include *contempt* as a seventh universal emotion (Ekman, 1973; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). These emotions are associated with specific, instinctive facial expressions that may appear across various cultural and linguistic groups. Nevertheless, some people still believe that the *Prateek* of human reflection in their representation of facial expressions differs from one culture to another, which they do not agree with Ekman's work on the universality of facial expressions. Indeed, since my study was conducted within a single school setting as a case study, I argued that, in Saudi culture, people are within shared cultural norms.

Figure 1.1

Basic Emotional Expressions That Remain Similar Worldwide.



Ekman's (1973) work supported Darwin's earlier claims that facial expressions are based on biology. Ekman believed that these basic feelings were natural and that

everyone experienced them. They are followed by facial gestures that are the same across different cultures (Ekman et al., 1971). This universality highlights the importance of facial gestures in nonverbal communication and emotional recognition across cultures. Because these feelings are universal, these techniques work well in many different cultures. This makes them especially valuable in early childhood education settings. This idea provides scientific support for tools like FEPCs, which utilize facial expressions to convey basic emotional states. Children may learn to name and recognize their feelings with the help of these pictures, even if they are unable to express them yet.

Although there are several theories related to the Facial Expressions theory, my study benefits from Ekman's Facial Expressions theory because it offers three essential advantages that make it suitable for my dissertation: (1) His theory provides researchers with an easily defined method to detect fundamental emotions by tracking facial expressions, which in turn (2) shows a structure of how people from different cultures understand basic emotional expressions. Finally, (3) I have had long-term personal access to Ekman's original work, including his seminal book, which I have thoroughly studied over time.

Facial-Feedback Theory of Emotion

Based on Darwin's study of the idea of facial feedback, William James developed and presented the idea that awareness of an individual's bodily experiences is the basis of emotion (James, 1984). James (1984) stated that "our various ways of feeling and thinking have grown to be what they are because of their utility in shaping our reactions to the outer world" (p. 11). This theory of facial feedback became popular later. According to the facial-feedback theory of emotions, there is a link between emotional

experience and facial expressions (Cherry, 2019; Cole et al., 2019). Per James (1984), “After stressing the limitations of simple reaction-time experiments, James went on to describe how they might be made useful for psychology” (p. 6). Early on, James and Darwin observed that occasionally, physiological reactions might directly affect mood rather than just being a byproduct of emotion (Ekman, 2006). James (1984) also hypothesized that thoughts and feelings, regardless of the terminology used, are simply transitory states of consciousness. Hence, alterations in the facial muscles are closely related to emotions (Ekman, 2006). For instance, those who feel compelled to grin amicably during a social gathering would enjoy themselves more than if they had scowled or had a more neutral look (Cherry, 2019). However, while Cole et al. (2019) also proved that facial feedback did have an overall effect, it was not very big. According to the facial feedback theory, how individuals move their faces affects how they feel emotionally. In sum, this theory suggests that when children mimic the expressions on FEPCs, it may help them recognize and connect with different emotions. The act of using facial muscles to imitate expressions can also enhance their emotional awareness and self-understanding.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory of Human Development

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s theory is called the Bioecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed a comprehensive model to explain how multiple surroundings influence child development. In his book *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (1979), Bronfenbrenner described how environmental layers/systems of the environment impact a person’s development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The four main components of this theory

are “Proximal Processes,” “Person,” “Context,” and “Time” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, pp. 797, 810, 814). For instance, playing with parents helps children develop social skills and confidence, which is an example of the *Proximal Process* (Swick & Williams, 2006). Proximal processes are complex interactions children learn and develop in their immediate surroundings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Secondly, the *Person* is a part of the model that examines personal characteristics that affect how a child interacts with the environment around them. These characteristics might be physical (genetic traits) or behavioral (a child’s reaction to various stimuli) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Third, Bronfenbrenner implied that the environment has multiple systems of context, each simulating a person’s growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These systems include the Microsystem (i.e., direct interactions with parents, teachers, and peers), Mesosystem (i.e., connections between family experiences and school life), Exosystem (i.e., parent’s workplace), Macrosystem (i.e., cultural values, economic situations, religions, and social beliefs), and Chronosystem (i.e., changes in family structure or societal standards; (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Finally, *Time* includes “Micro-time,” “Meso-time,” and “Macro-time” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 796). In sum, each part of Bronfenbrenner’s theory intricately presented the related and dynamic nature of human development. It is influenced by many environmental and personal factors over time, educating us about the complexity of child development.

In this study, I focus on the individual teacher-level; however, I consider its implications on the five systems described by Bronfenbrenner. Each includes rules and norms that contribute to a child’s psychological development. Below, I explain the

characteristics and influences of different systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem).

Microsystem

This level comprises different people and environments that a person deals with continuously. For instance, it includes those who live with them, go to school with them, or are members of a specific religion. In the microsystem, children can directly interact with their immediate environments around them, such as their interactions and relationships with their parents, friends, teachers, and everything and every person with whom children can directly interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Additionally, children can receive anything from their environment and contribute to the environment where they interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). I believe that children are like little sponges who soak up everything around them. This vision is what Bronfenbrenner meant when he stated that children absorb from their environment. For example, children learn to greet guests the same way they see their parents do. They may then share their toys or provide snacks when their cousins or friends visit. Today, children contribute to their surroundings as well. This concept demonstrates how children not only soak up information from their environment but also shape their development. Notably, these interactions are two-way; they can affect the children positively or negatively, or the children can affect them.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the intermediate link between the various relationships and interactions that occur within the microsystem and that are present in the children's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge,

2013). For example, parents' communication and interaction with their children's teachers or vice versa are among the most critical findings from the interview. It is a system of microsystems that consists of the connections and interactions that occur between two or more settings, at least one of which does not include the developing person, but in which things happen that have an indirect impact on the processes going on in the developing individual's immediate environment. When two of the person's microsystems connect, it symbolizes the effects that contact has on the individual. Interactions between adults at a child's early development program and their household is one example.

Exosystem

The policy of the school the children attend is an example of an exosystem. In contrast to the previous two systems, the exosystem interacts indirectly with children, thereby affecting the children's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Examples of people who may be in a child's exosystem can range from acquaintances, such as their parents' coworkers, to close relationships with a member of their household. A shorter deadline at work might cause stress for a family member, which affects both children and their families at home. Another example is teachers' level of education and experience, which indirectly influences the effectiveness of interactive environments for children with trauma.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem reflects society as a whole, including the media and the many cultures that influence individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The macrosystem directly or indirectly affects the previous

systems that interact with children. It also includes the economic, social, and cultural situation (i.e., environment) in which children live (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Accordingly, this may positively affect the health of children with trauma.

Chronosystem

Crosby (2015) stated, “The chronosystem refers to development throughout the life course and the influence of time on one’s development. As individuals age, they may encounter life events that alter how they interact within these systems” (p. 225). The chronosystem includes all children’s interactions within all four previous systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). For example, children’s level of interaction with peers and tools in the classroom varies over time. At the middle and end of the school year, children often interact with their peers in dramatic play more openly than they do at the beginning of the school year. This happens for several reasons, all related to time, the development of children’s experiences, and the way they interact with other children in interactive environments.

For effective intervention, all components of a child’s environment must be considered, and interventions must be comprehensive and contextually relevant (Swick & Williams, 2006). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological strategy ensured that teaching techniques, such as environmentally responsive education and trauma-informed practice, are responsive to family dynamics and social policies that affect children (Swick & Williams, 2006). Bronfenbrenner’s theory can help integrate FEPCs into the environment for children to ensure consistent behavioral and educational interventions.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Problem Statement

We often talk about childhood trauma in abstract terms, such as statistics, diagnoses, or clinical symptoms. However, in real classrooms, trauma shows up in quiet ways: the child who isolates themselves, who reacts with aggression, or who simply shuts down. These emotional wounds are not always visible, but they affect everything from relationships with peers and the ability to learn to a general sense of safety. I liken the traumas that happen to individuals during childhood to wounds that may heal but leave scars that remain in their adulthood. Scars from childhood trauma are reactions of the individuals affected by trauma and the ways they deal with traumatic experiences. These scars may change as a result of what happens following the trauma that individuals have suffered. Naturally, individuals may be disturbed by traumatic events and also by remembering or thinking about their trauma. According to Erdman et al. (2020), within the context of treating childhood trauma, children do not fit neatly under specific boxes; there is not one method that works for everyone. Erdman et al. (2020) defined trauma as either “Acute trauma” (a single exposure to a massive traumatic incident, and it can also result from witnessing a violent event) or “Complex trauma” (chronic and persistent abuse or neglect at the hands of another has a long-term impact). Erdman et al. (2020) stated that:

Trauma can be experienced in different ways. Firsthand trauma refers to events that happen to a child or to the child’s family member in a way that directly influences the child’s experience. This could be an acute traumatic event or a complex, ongoing trauma. (p. 4)

Another analogy to trauma is dishes falling to the ground. Sometimes, glass plates do not break, and nothing happens to them, while other times, they may suffer cracks without breaking completely. Yet, in most cases, glass dishes often break into small pieces that are difficult to return to their original shape. However, we hear about the glass restoration process and how specialists can restore broken glass to its previous form. Results may vary based on the craftsman's skill, the extent of his experience, and his dedication to restoring glass. This is my perspective regarding the types and degrees of trauma that can be experienced in childhood, the quality of its treatment, and the effectiveness of the treatment, which depend on the skill and experience of the professional.

There are also the characteristics of the children themselves. Based on Erdman et al. (2020), "the way an individual experiences trauma is completely dependent on that person's perspective, no matter how an outside person views the experience" (p. 5). Some children show remarkable resilience even though they have been through ACEs or trauma. Protective factors, such as helpful relationships, positive school experiences, and community resources, can mitigate the effects of ACEs. How a child copes with and recovers from trauma can also be affected by their genes and personality traits. Finally, early interventions can play an essential role in helping children to regulate their feelings, especially those who may have experienced trauma. Some techniques for early intervention, such as Feeling/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs), which children can use to express their emotions, can aid in their recovery. Therefore, it is necessary for classroom teachers to not only to become trauma-informed, but also, to be trained on effective tools and strategies to help children mitigate trauma (Erdman et al., 2020). Teachers are on the

frontlines of this reality. In early childhood settings, especially in Saudi Arabia, they often face the challenge of supporting children without having specialized training in mental health or therapeutic tools. That is where Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs) come in—simple visual tools designed to help children express their emotions when they may not have the words to do so. But how are these tools actually used in practice? Do teachers find them helpful? Are they used consistently? What happens when a child finally points to a picture and silently says, “This is me”?

For my dissertation, I conducted a qualitative research study in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), using teachers’ descriptions (stories) as part of the case study design. I trained teachers on the effective use of FEPCs and then explored how they use these strategies with students in early childhood (aged between three and six years old), especially with students who may have endured trauma. This approach helped me gain a deeper understanding of both the children’s and teachers’ experiences.

Research Questions

My primary focus was to investigate the teacher-reported effectiveness of using FEPCs for students in early childhood classrooms. I was especially interested in how FEPCs can support the social-emotional development of all young children, specifically those who may have experienced trauma. My research explored the following overarching questions:

1. What are kindergarten educators’ perceptions regarding the application of FEPCs with children who might have undergone trauma?
2. What best practices are identified for successfully incorporating FEPCs into kindergarten educational settings? What do teachers think about it?

Using these questions, I sought to explore and understand changes in teachers' perceptions of knowledge, competence, and confidence in incorporating FEPCs in their classrooms as a communicative tool to facilitate emotional expression and understanding among children in early childhood school settings for children ages three to six in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. By breaking down the issue into these components, the study aimed to capture not only how FEPCs are used but also how teachers feel about their role in supporting emotional healing, even when they are not trained therapists. Their voices, often overlooked, were key to understanding how schools can become safer spaces for all children—especially the silent ones.

Significance

It is important for teachers to understand their children's feelings by listening to their quietest voices. Every teacher has met a child who will not speak, will not play, or who seems *somewhere else*. Often, these children are not just shy or quiet but rather may be carrying invisible emotional wounds caused by trauma. Moreover, while academic achievement remains a top priority in schools, educators are beginning to realize that no meaningful learning can happen unless a child feels safe, seen, and emotionally understood, elevating the importance of my research.

In Saudi Arabia, conversations around childhood trauma, emotional expression, and mental wellness are still emerging. Tools like Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards offer a practical and visual way for young children to express their feelings, especially when they do not yet have the words to articulate them. However, we know very little about how teachers actually utilize these tools, whether they believe they are helpful, and what support they need to use them effectively. By listening and documenting the real-life

experiences of teachers who have tried using FEPCs in their classrooms, this study gave voice to a group rarely heard in educational reform. Early childhood educators can work directly with children affected by trauma. Their insights could inform new teacher training programs, shape school policies, and influence how emotional support tools are introduced and used, not just in Saudi Arabia, but across cultures where silence is often misread as strength.

More broadly, this study contributes to a growing global shift. For example, from classrooms focused solely on achievement, to classrooms that value emotional connection, healing, and care. In this way, it is not only about picture cards or trauma; it is about reimagining what it means to teach, and what it means to listen to children who may not yet know how to speak their truth. Chapter One established the problem, purpose, and significance of this study; the next chapter turns to the existing body of knowledge that informs and shapes my study. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on childhood trauma, art-based strategies, and the use of visual tools such as FEPCs. This review lays the conceptual foundation for this dissertation and highlights the gaps my dissertation seeks to address.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Relevant Literature

In this review of literature, I sought to identify effective strategies to change the undesirable behavior of children resulting from their exposure to trauma that affected their psyche. The study was primarily designed to investigate teachers' understanding and views on applying and using FEPCs within their classrooms, with an emphasis on the methods, strategies, and practices employed. Secondly, I aimed to explore and advise on some of the best practices for incorporating FEPCs into early childhood educational strategies. The effectiveness of this strategy lies in providing a safe environment for these children to participate in the practice of manual arts, such as drawing and using images, to help them remove or reduce Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD in children can manifest through a range of behavioral, emotional, and psychological responses. According to Campbell (2009), there are many ways that can show behavioral manifestations like excessive eating, isolation, lack of desire to sleep, involuntary urination, and externalizing behaviors, such as self-harm or harming others. Other behavioral problems that may appear due to trauma-related responses in children at risk may present as emotional and psychological symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, stress, feelings of guilt or shame (Kometiania & Farmer, 2020). In addition, children who experience trauma develop attention problems that share characteristics with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms, mainly among those who face high-risk factors (Campbell, 2009).

The purpose of my qualitative study was to explore the most effective solutions and strategies that can be applied in the early childhood classroom to alleviate the suffering of traumatized children through the practice of art and imagery, such as the use of FEPCs within their classroom.

Search Terms

I conducted searches in Scopus Preview, Google Scholar, Academia, and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database for peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2004 through 2024 using the following terms: trauma*, child*, art*, picture cards, emotion*, feeling cards, painting, and drawing. The key term, “art*” was included in the search because peer-reviewed journal articles about feeling emotion cards were extremely limited, and because art-based techniques and feeling emotion cards overlap in terms of their use of visual art to bring awareness to one’s feelings and emotions, extract silent voices of victims of trauma and buffer negative impact. When I searched in ERIC using some of these terms and with the option of “Peer reviewed only” and “Full text available on ERIC,” my search yielded 69 results. At the same time, when using Google Scholar with all the terms and ranges published, my search yielded 513 results, while in Scopus Preview, my search yielded four results. Lastly, I used all the above terms under the empirical article search when I searched on the Academia platform. My search yielded 16 results.

To narrow my results from Google Scholar, I used the “filter list” function and applied only the terms “children with trauma” and “art*,” which retrieved 51 empirical articles. From these articles, I selected six studies from Google Scholar and the Scopus Preview database that specifically addressed the use of art-based techniques, emotion

cards, and interventions related to children who may have experienced trauma. The selection was guided by several criteria: (1) the study involved early childhood or kindergarten-age participants; (2) it focused on emotional or psychological support through creative or visual art activities; and (3) it was published in a peer-reviewed journal. I then returned to the ERIC database and limited the publication date range to “last five years.” This yielded two results. After reviewing their abstracts, I found one article that specifically addressed art-based interventions for traumatized children through the use of imaging and drawing. Finally, I include two additional relevant studies from the Academia platform. Therefore, in total, nine peer-reviewed empirical articles met the above-mentioned inclusion criteria and were reviewed in this dissertation.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they did not directly address the emotional or psychological support for young children through art-based or visual techniques. Non-peer-reviewed sources, such as blogs, conference abstracts, and opinion pieces, were also excluded to maintain the scholarly rigor of the review.

Operationalizing Terms

Throughout my paper, I relied on the following definitions: (1) Art, in the context of this study, is defined broadly and includes many different abstractions. It does not refer to formal Art Therapy, a licensed mental health profession requiring board-certified art therapists. Rather, art here consists of a range of expressive and visual experiences, such as drawing, painting, and engaging with emotional visuals, including tools like FEPCs. This type of practice is better described as an art-based intervention and art-based techniques, which refers to the use of artistic elements to support emotional development;

(2) Feeling/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs) are cards that help children to learn about emotions and build their emotional intelligence. Each card has a facial picture that, on one side, expresses an emotion that young children may recognize (ABC Learning Center, 2020); (3) Emotion is frequently described in psychology as a complicated state of feeling that causes physiological and psychological changes that affect cognition and behavior (Cherry, 2022); (4) Trauma, according to Rodríguez (2023), refers to the adverse effects that result from individuals being exposed to events that endanger their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, as well as their safety. The individual may experience feelings of being overburdened and overwhelmed due to a lack of sufficient resources to effectively contend with or overcome such events (Rodríguez, 2023); and (5) Children with Trauma, according to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) (n.d.), are those who may exhibit indications of stress as a result of their anxiety of losing a loved one, being subjected to violence, abuse, or harm.

Organizing the Literature

After reading the articles, the following three themes organized my review: (1) Art-based intervention and positive change in children with trauma, (2) drawings and images lead to discovery and assist children with trauma, and (3) the use of art-based techniques in addressing the long-term effects of childhood trauma into adulthood. These themes provide an understanding of the value of art as a supportive and expressive medium for children who have been exposed to trauma. Within the context of early childhood education programs, art-based interventions are implemented through their wellness-oriented curriculum to support children in developing their emotional, social, and psychological well-being (Campbell, 2010). The most critical features of art-based

interventions within this framework include engaging children's senses, supporting social and emotional development, and conveying and depicting children's thoughts and ideas visually. These features help them express their emotions through the art-making process, creating meaningful experiences and outcomes that yield pleasing works, experiences, and emotional healing and growth.

Art-Based Intervention and Positive Change in Children with Trauma

Four studies sought to understand the positive changes in children with trauma while practicing art-based intervention. Waller (2006) conducted qualitative research using art-based interventions, such as art therapy, to help children with emotional, developmental, and behavioral difficulties. Waller (2006) explained, "The aim of art therapy is to facilitate positive change through engagement with the therapist and the art materials in a safe environment" (p. 271). Waller (2006) illustrated a descriptive study of several cases from previous research. Conforming to a narrative method, these case studies described the benefits of art-based interventions and the changes to undesirable behaviors that occur among children. In Waller's (2006) explanatory study, it was emphasized that children who find it challenging to practice specific social skills can gain confidence to do so through art-based intervention sessions within safe environments. In addition, the researcher claimed that it is not necessary for children to be professional artists for a positive change in their behavior to occur. An important takeaway from this study was the spontaneous formation of children's art, which expresses their pent-up feelings and depicts traumas that they suffer from and struggle to reveal (Waller, 2006).

One of the case studies examined by Waller (2006) occurred three decades ago. The case study included six children who suffered from various behavioral and

psychological problems between the ages of eight and 15 years. These children were enrolled in a three-month art-based intervention course that met twice weekly for two hours per session. The art therapist noticed that some children were very violent and uninterested in therapy. Thus, the art therapist decided quickly to build relationships with all the children to help them better while preventing them from hurting one another (Waller, 2006). Waller (2006) asserted that group art-based intervention causes changes in the behavior and feelings of children's group members as children develop trust in each other and the art therapist. The researcher explained that the results of the methodical treatment yielded fruitful results in a short time. One of these children was suffering from hyperactivity, which is now known as attention deficit disorder. At the end of the group sessions, the art therapist noticed an apparent stability by merging art-based interventions with three-dimensional art forms without distraction (Waller, 2006).

The researcher also conducted a case study of an abused child who was self-harming and had suffered from violence and abuse from an early age. Waller (2006) stated that after several weeks of art-based interventions, the child's behavior positively changed while participating in painting with an art therapist. It was noticed that her ability to trust others increased, and she was ready to share her experience of suffering severe scars on her arms with her family. This child was able to recognize her pain and see her weakness and was better able to control her feelings and actions. Therefore, art-based interventions caused a positive change in her behavior (Waller, 2006). Waller's study also highlighted an eight-year-old girl with confusion and behavioral struggles. As a result of exposure to violence and emotional neglect, art-based interventions provided

her with the opportunity to safely express her feelings of anger and shame through her drawings and sharing them with the art therapist (Waller, 2006).

In summary, Waller's (2006) study proved that through the practice of art, children can understand how their world is constructed and how they grow and change. In addition, the benefits of sharing this artwork with an empathetic adult for care and support help reduce the negative feelings of children who have experienced trauma. Art-based interventions offer children a way to symbolically or non-verbally express their feelings and fears, which cannot be easily expressed in words. This, in turn, frees children from these feelings by sharing them with the therapist. Art-based intervention is a means of communication between children and the outside world around them (Waller, 2006). Finally, the researcher found that evidence has been presented across several studies to show the positive impact on the behavior of children with trauma after practicing drawing and painting in groups. Although teachers are not licensed therapists, the findings from Waller's (2006) study are meaningful because they relate to the root of my study, which is focused on emotional healing within early childhood settings.

In a meta-analytical study by Eaton et al. (2007), the researchers discussed the power of engaging traumatized children with active manual art, such as painting and drawing, as a method of helping them overcome their trauma. The research team gathered a total of 26 peer-reviewed articles. The breadth of traumatic experiences covered in the literature included children being sexually or physically abused, having exposure of any kind to violence or negligence, or exposure to grief after losing a loved one. Only 36% of the studies reviewed by Eaton et al. (2007) provided information regarding the length of therapeutic intervention with children. However, there was a difference in the length of

treatment programs across these studies; it was difficult to ascertain the exact length of the art intervention with the children who suffered from trauma (Eaton et al., 2007).

Eaton et al. (2007) viewed the outcomes that described the effect of participating in an art-based wellness curriculum as successful in a variety of the 26 studies reviewed. However, the data revealed several limitations regarding the data analysis process from those previous studies. Most of those studies used a case study methodology, and the outcome of a wellness curriculum was evaluated using qualitative, non-statistical observations (Eaton et al., 2007). In summary, they found that the art-based wellness curriculum provided a common language between the child and the therapist through which they could communicate. Furthermore, this study concurred that art was a way for children to describe experiences, memories, and emotions that may otherwise be difficult to express in words (Eaton et al., 2007).

In a qualitative methods study, Sitzler and Stockwell (2015) collected data using a qualitative tool (group study) and a quantitative measure (i.e., survey). In contrast to the studies presented by Waller (2006) and Eaton et al. (2007), Sitzler and Stockwell (2015) sought to operationalize a wellness curriculum (a 14-week art therapy program for children and youth with trauma) to enhance coping skills and resilience. The *Wellness Curriculum*, as defined by Sitzler and Stockwell (2015), was focused on “building communication skills... [because] they are the primary vehicle for change, ... students learn to listen, describe their artwork and personal experiences, and provide feedback and encouragement to their peers” (p. 72). The art therapist applied 14 lesson plans at a rate of one per week. Each unit contained a set of goals, directions, and exercises to achieve skills that helped children overcome their painful experiences. Examples of these goals

included building trust, creating and strengthening an inner sense of security, exploring the feelings behind anger, establishing short and long-term personal goals, and developing resilience and integration (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015).

Sitzer and Stockwell (2015) gathered data from 42 primary school students who were selected to participate in the wellness program. The participants' ages ranged from nine to 12 years; 23 were girls and 19 were boys. The wellness program of art-based intervention was implemented along with other treatment modalities, such as cognitive therapy and behavioral therapy (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015). The results indicated positive changes in the resilience of the participating children and increased social and emotional functions. The results also showed that this improvement was more significant for boys than girls participating in the study. Furthermore, follow-up studies indicated that children participating in an art-based wellness program were significantly less likely to develop depression compared to children on the waiting list who had not yet participated in the program (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015). The researchers concluded that allowing the wellness program to focus on art-based interventions, such as art therapy, would be beneficial. In addition to discussions after the session, it provided an opportunity to develop self-monitoring skills in participating children, and this helped them overcome many negative feelings and behaviors (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015).

Rowe et al. (2017) studied the effect of an art-based intervention institute that provided programs to 30 Burmese refugees aged 11 to 20 years in reducing trauma-related symptoms. Among the 30 participants, there were 20 male and 10 female participants. Most of them lived in the United States for approximately five years before beginning the *Burma Art Therapy Program* (BATP; Rowe et al., 2017). According to the

researchers, 39% of refugees arriving in the United States are children (Rowe et al., 2017).

Data for the study were gathered through the *Art Therapy Institute* (ATI), a community organization providing art-based consulting services. The BATP is a unique program serving refugee children and teens, along with various others at ATI (Rowe et al., 2017). The researchers stated that the ATI believed art therapy was an effective psychological treatment for people with trauma because the trauma is stored in memory as images. Art is an effective tool for processing these images. In addition, ATI focuses on providing a sense of safety in school and school belonging due to its beliefs that protect against post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety (Rowe et al., 2017).

This study demonstrated that a wellness curriculum helps refugee children safely communicate their experiences and process their thoughts and feelings. The study included 12 evaluation tools to demonstrate the positive change that art-based intervention makes in helping children deal with trauma. These standard tools have been shown to be effective in capturing some of the effects of wellness curriculum. However, most assessment tools focus on improving psychological and behavioral problems and not on recognizing and developing refugees' personal strengths (Rowe et al., 2017). A qualitative case study was conducted during the 2013-2014 school year. An outcome assessment of the BATP measured participants' mental health outcomes, behavioral issues they experienced, their exposure to trauma, and the effect of art-based interventions.

According to Rowe et al. (2017), one of the most significant findings in their study was the decrease in the proportion of participants reporting severe difficulties in

school from 16.7% to 11.5%. In contrast, the overall positive self-concept of the participants increased from 26.7% in the first session to 38.5% after they completed 16 sessions. Finally, the participants' anxiety symptoms decreased from 20.0% to 19.2%. Data were collected both times using four clinical assessments that were validated to measure participants' mental health outcomes for each of self-concept, anxiety symptoms, depression, and previous experience of trauma. In addition, the information on the participants' strengths and difficulties were compiled by their teachers and social workers (Rowe et al., 2017). The evaluation revealed critical gaps regarding the way trauma outcomes and the mental health of the children and adolescents participating in the study were assessed. Rowe et al. noted, "Qualitative findings suggest that specific benefits of art-based interventions were not adequately captured with the tools used" (2017, p. 26). The evaluation demonstrated the effects of art-based interventions on all refugees who participated in the program; "however, symptom-focused assessment tools are not adequate to capture clients' growth resulting from the traumatic experience and this unique intervention" (Rowe et al., 2017, p. 26).

Drawings and Images Lead to Discovery and Assistance for Children with Trauma

Four studies explored the effects of drawing (non-verbal therapy methods), to effectively show the extent to which it reflects actual violent experiences. According to Lydia and Aurora (2014):

The drawing has three meanings: a playful meaning (to create), a narrative meaning (to tell oneself), and a cognitive meaning (for asking and answering questions). However, especially, the drawing has a projective value: it allows one

to explain one's conflicts and anxieties that, assuming concreteness and becoming something external to it, can finally be dealt with less anxiety-provoking. (p. 17)

Furthermore, Talwar (2007) conducted a qualitative study based on previous literature and his experience in the clinical treatment of children and individuals with trauma. Talwar (2007) designed an art therapy trauma protocol (ATTP) "to address the non-verbal core of traumatic memory" (p. 22). The researcher defined ATTP as "a method to target specific traumatic memories in a larger theoretical framework ... in which the ATTP protocol addresses the affective distress experienced by the client" (Talwar, 2007, p. 28). Also, Talwar (2007) defined ATTP as "a method that has an integrative approach offering a positive adaptive functioning model, but successfully using this method depends on each individual's internal self-representation" (p. 34).

Talwar (2007) aimed to develop ATTP to treat traumatized children's "nonverbal" memory using art-based intervention, or what the researcher called "non-verbal, somatic memory of traumatized clients using right- and left-brain methods based on a positive adaptive functioning model" (p. 26). ATTP is based on using the right-brain and the left-brain techniques together to build a "positive adaptive functioning model" (Talwar, 2007, p. 26). As Talwar (2007) noted, the right brain "deals with [visual-motor] activities, intuition, emotions, body, sensory, automatic skills and ... creativity." In contrast, the left brain is "responsible for language, speech, analytical thinking, and sequential processing" as well as logic (p. 26).

In this article, Talwar (2007) focused specifically on "somatic memory" therapy for individuals with PTSD. At the beginning of his article, Talwar (2007) explained the most significant recent developments related to human memory and the brain and how

the brain works to retrieve, store, and erase memories through the five senses, such as smells, sensations, images, etc. The researcher linked this to post-traumatic stress disorder; memories can be regulated by “regulating the sensory imprints associated with trauma” (Talwar, 2007, p. 22).

According to Talwar (2007), “in trauma treatment, it is not the verbal account of the event that is important, but the non-verbal memory of the fragmented sensory and emotional elements of the traumatic experience” (p. 23). After the researcher knew the meaning of the shock, he established the mechanism of shock disruption to the brain’s normal functioning (Talwar, 2007). This mechanism integrates experience and memory. After that, the researcher called for the necessity of using and approving art-based intervention to improve the operational brain functions after being damaged by trauma. Right and left-brain functions were enhanced to better incorporate the experiences of children with trauma, especially at the level of nonverbal memory. Thus, the researcher developed the ATTP protocol to achieve the goal of this paper (Talwar, 2007).

Talwar (2007) aimed to adapt and treat children who had been directly or indirectly traumatized (witnessing traumatic events) in a safe manner utilizing art-based strategies. He explained in his paper that children would deal with their trauma in one of two ways, namely “the adaptive method” or “the non-adaptive method” (p. 23). Firstly, in the adaptive method, children process their trauma or stressful events in supportive environments to move from the stage of grief or loss to the safe stage of emotional stability (Talwar, 2007). In contrast, children whose brains rely on the second “non-adaptive method” forget trauma or stressful events through addiction to reach temporary emotional relief (p. 23). In this context, addiction means anything that children do or

engage in to forget and reach ecstasy and temporary happiness. Examples of addiction that children with trauma may suffer from are excessive eating, watching TV for a long time, playing with iPads or electronic devices excessively, masturbation, etc. Per Talwar (2007), this addiction may continue beyond puberty and maturity, where the matter may worsen, and some of them resort to smoking, drinking alcohol, drug abuse, and other harmful behaviors. One of the most important reasons for the brains of these children to adopt the non-adaptive method is that they did not find someone to support and help them during and after their traumatic exposure (Talwar, 2007).

Talwar (2007) described these traumas as their “sensory experiences” related to their traumatic memory and that these traumas persist even over time; they may persist for months or many years after the traumatic event. Thus, this may cause an imbalance in the information storage center in the brain, leading to an imbalance in “the seat of emotions” (Talwar, 2007). Accordingly, these children may display alarming reactions and behaviors as they remember the traumatic event (Talwar, 2007).

After reviewing the previous literature related to trauma therapy and dealing with the human brain, Talwar concluded that the application of ATTP to trauma clients has been more advanced than other therapies, especially concerning PTSD, as “clients report positive results in processing speechless traumatic memories” (2007, p. 33). The researcher also mentioned that the children with trauma who received art therapy showed positive results in their behaviors. These results included a statistical reduction in acute stress symptoms they were experiencing due to their trauma. However, the studies that used clinical experience with traumatized children did not produce significant positive

effects associated with PTSD compared to wellness curriculum, confirming the effectiveness of art-based interventions on children with trauma (Talwar, 2007).

Allen and Tussey (2012) explored the effectiveness of one art-based strategy, projective drawings. Projective drawing is a technique that reflects what individuals have in their minds, such as their hidden emotions and internal conflicts. Interestingly, their study directly aligned with my problem statement. The researchers systematically reviewed published research studies in peer-reviewed journals before 2011 (Allen & Tussey, 2012). They provided a “comprehensive review of the empirical literature to determine whether the analysis of children’s drawings using identified indicators or defined scoring systems in order to detect sexual or physical abuse is supported by the scientific evidence” (p. 98). The researchers used meta-synthesis analysis via an observational instrument, clinical observations, on children who have been physically or sexually abused to capture indicators in their drawings that can distinguish them from non-abused children (Allen & Tussey, 2012). They explored whether any pictorial indications (i.e., genitalia, omission of body parts) or established scoring system can reliably and correctly distinguish abused children from non-abused children (Allen & Tussey, 2012).

Allen and Tussey (2012) described two primary methods that have been used to interpret children’s drawings to identify who has been sexually or physically abused: one of these methods focused on identifying specific features of a children’s drawing or graphic indicators, and the other method concentrated on defining a scoring system or algorithm to distinguish between children who have been abused of sexual or physical abuse and those who had not been subjected to it (Allen & Tussey, 2012). Their research

findings revealed that previous individual studies supporting various indicators or scoring systems are limited. This limitation was due to methodological deficiencies and alternate interpretations of the results, which may undermine the significance of the findings.

Thus, no graphical indicator or scoring system has sufficient empirical evidence to support its use to identify sexual or physical abuse. To overcome this bias, Allen and Tussey (2012) noted that clinicians should ask children what they meant to express in their art to avoid making assumptions that could be impacted by individual subjectivity.

The researchers also found that the most specific and well-studied indicator of child sexual abuse was children's drawings of their genitals. In summary, although the presence of genitals in children's drawings may alert professionals to the possibility of children being sexually abused, "the current review finds that the sensitivity of this technique to the experience of sexual abuse is poor as very few sexually abused children actually draw explicit genitalia" (Allen & Tussey, 2012, p. 107). This is often because very few sexually abused children tend to draw their genitals explicitly, some tending to draw hearts, over-focused or omitted body parts, or elongated objects, wedges, or overlapping circles. Finally, Allen and Tussey (2012) concluded that the review of the current literature based on attempts to identify projective indicators of sexual and physical abuse in children's drawings neglected contradictory results, which led to poor methodology and poor reliability, and focused only on essential findings as evidence of the validity of this approach (Allen & Tussey, 2012).

In Lev-Wiesel et al.'s (2020) mixed-methods study, the researchers aimed to examine the extent to which children's drawings express their personal experience of violence, with which the level of distress symptoms can be shared. The study sample

consisted of 83 participating children, 40 girls (48.2%) and 43 boys (51.8%) ranging in age from eight to 12 years old. Participants were drawn from low-income communities where these children had experienced one or more of the following traumatic experiences: physical abuse, an illness that caused hospitalization, loss of a family member, rejection of friends or loved ones, and abuse (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020).

Lev-Wiesel et al. (2020) analyzed data from participants' drawings and narrations by using a phenomenological approach, arguing that "Incorporating drawing into Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design provides a vehicle through which participants can better explore and communicate their experiences" (p. 4). The researchers found that drawings may reveal unconscious struggles and difficulties as children express their perceptions and actual experiences of violence in drawings and novels. The results indicated that the drawings of the first group included scenes of emotional or mixed violence, especially the drawings of girls, and less interaction between the aggressor and the victim. In contrast, the drawings of the second set included many scenes of physical violence, a more direct interaction between the aggressor and the victim, and more symbols of injury (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020).

The researchers also found that 37% of the sample reported having experienced violent abuse. High-level *Medical Somatic Disintegration Questionnaire* (MSDQ) scores were found in participants who reported exposure to both actual physical assault violent experiences and hospitalization experiences. Substantial evidence showed that children conveyed their experiences, feelings, and perceptions in their drawings (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020).

In conclusion, Lev-Wiesel et al. (2020) used children's drawings of violence to distinguish whether their images were directly related to their personal experience and whether children exposed to violence and children who were not exposed to violence had similar perceptions of what violence is. Despite the strong evidence that the use of drawings encourages and enriches children's narratives, one of the problems and difficulties that researchers faced in their study was that some of the participating children did not disclose the abuse they experienced because they believed violence to be familiar and therefore did not recognize it as abuse (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020). Finally, more research is needed to study methods that use drawings or graphics as accurate tools for determining whether children are being abused and as remedial tools to encourage children to express their experiences and thus help them receive appropriate treatment.

Goldner et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative, observational study on 97 traumatized children of Arab and Jewish origin. Fifty-seven of the study sample who participated in the research were males, while 40 girls participated in this study (Goldner et al., 2021). The children participating in the research ranged from six to 17 years old. In their study, the researchers aimed to understand child abuse and its meaning from the children's own perspective, which is evident in their drawings and novels. During this study, Goldner and his fellow researchers asked the participants to draw what child abuse meant to them on an A4-sized sheet of white paper (Goldner et al., 2021). Each participating child was given 12 crayons, and the researchers did not specify a time to finish the drawing. Next, the researchers asked these participants to write a narrative or novel explaining their drawings. The researchers assumed that children's drawings explain their feelings and thoughts so that the therapist could know their perception of

their families and the people around them through their drawings. Additionally, “colors, shapes, and motifs can all represent the unconscious, ideas, distressful feelings” (Goldner et al., 2021, p. 2).

Goldner et al. (2021) encoded the participating children’s drawings and stories quantitatively to facilitate their analysis. They found that nearly half of the drawings contained some descriptive words for the drawing. It also included a drawing of 84 children participating in the scene of violent abuse, whether physical, sexual, or emotional. Fifty of these children represented abuse within the family, especially one or both parents’ children (Goldner et al., 2021).

One abnormal result was that about a third of the participants could not distinguish between the concepts of “abuse” and “violence”; they referred to them interchangeably during their narration and explanation of the drawings (Goldner et al., 2021). In addition, the researchers found that 39 participants (roughly half of the study sample) focused on emotional abuse more than other types of abuse. Emotional abuse was the most common type expressed by the children participating in their drawings. In contrast, peer abuse was the most common type of abuse outside the family environment, which 18 participants reported during their drawings and narration (Goldner et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Goldner et al. (2021) deduced several headlines from the participating children’s drawings. Forty-four participating children expressed humiliation, sadness, loneliness, guilt, and shame in their drawings (Goldner et al., 2021). In comparison, 32 of the study sample participants expressed their drawings of distress without clear emotions and no reference to abuse. Finally, when the researchers compared the data from analyzing the study sample’s drawings and the description of this

participating sample for these drawings, they concluded that 82 of the participating research samples agreed with their drawings. Yet, 14 of the participants' drawings did not match their narratives (Goldner et al., 2021).

The Use of Art-Based Technique in Addressing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Trauma into Adulthood

Although this theme draws primarily on a single study, it was intentionally included because it directly addresses the long-term impact of childhood trauma into adulthood. This theme illustrated how art-based techniques continue to support emotional healing beyond early childhood. Notably, the limited number of studies in this theme reflects a gap in the literature. This theme highlighted the need for further research on the long-term effects of childhood trauma, as well as the role of art-based interventions across the lifespan.

Indeed, Kometiani and Farmer (2020) looked explicitly at the effectiveness of art-based techniques with adults who have experienced trauma since childhood. According to Kometiani and Farmer (2020), the application of art-based techniques enhances the resilience of sex-trafficking survivors who have experienced traumatic childhood experiences. They defined resilience as “adaptability to adversity, is a component in working through trauma, but recovery cannot occur solely in isolation” (p. 3). Art-based techniques and intervention also facilitate and provide hope for a better future through emotional catharsis, helping to connect with others and improving and strengthening the self-concept of women survivors of sex trafficking who have been traumatized since childhood. As the researchers explained, “Sex trafficked survivors are subjected to countless and repeated forms of abuse, oppression, exploitation, and neglect. They live

without control over their own lives and, subsequently, struggle to feel safe” (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020, p. 2).

A qualitative case study was conducted to find out the outcome of the art-based techniques, such as an Art Therapy, and applied to two separate groups: five women survivors of sexual exploitation aged between 23-43 years, who were traumatized since childhood and their professional advocates to understand better the role of group Art Therapy in their lives (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020). Through an anti-trafficking program at an agency in northwest Ohio, group Art Therapy was introduced as a new therapeutic practice alongside other support services for study survivors. The group Art Therapy program included 12 sessions, an average of one session per month for survivors of human trafficking that started from April 2016 until April 2017. A board-certified registered art therapist, a licensed social worker, and the participants attended these sessions. Each session ranged from one hour to an hour and a half, including art making and discussion. Kometiani and Farmer (2020) explained, “The goals of the Art Therapy treatment for the survivors were feeling identification and catharsis, experiencing empowerment, building a community of support, improving self-worth, and providing [an] opportunity for trauma processing” (p. 5).

The study used the following techniques: “Co-facilitation with a familiar professional, establishing group rules together, and using drawing as a means to develop self-regulation were the primary ways to develop a sense of security and serenity for the women at the beginning of therapy” (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020, p. 5). Data were collected from participants’ direct observation, informal interviews during group sessions, and from personal artwork created during an Art Therapy session through a

comprehensive assessment by an art therapist. The results showed that “through the use of color, expressive marks, and symbols, the survivors were able to communicate about their personal feelings in a non-threatening way” (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020, p. 8).

Kometiani and Farmer (2020) found that both survivor participants and their advocates responded positively to group Art Therapy techniques directed by an art therapist. Findings validate how using art-based techniques with a professionally trained art therapist can advance recovery through a structured process to support trauma resilience and assist survivors’ transition to reintegration into society (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020). Based on a review of previous studies in my literature review, all studies demonstrated the effectiveness of Art Therapy sessions with children who were exposed to trauma and their positive effects on their recovery from trauma by restoring their self-confidence and encouraging them to express their experiences and losses in trauma. Art-based techniques help increase self-awareness so children can express themselves safely and comfortably through drawing and coloring.

Conclusions

Art-based techniques and art-based intervention are one type of wellness-oriented curriculum that is the practice of artistic, creative processes, including drawing, coloring, painting, and images to express patients’ feelings and reflect on their thoughts to help them restore their lives to draw a new, brighter life. According to Rubin (2005):

Art is a powerful tool—one that, like the surgeon’s, must be used with care and skill if it is to penetrate safely beneath the surface. Using media with those who are significantly handicapped or disturbed (even without analysis of process or product), requires an understanding not only of art, but also of the world of those

with whom one is working. The use of art with all kinds of children or families as a symbolic communicative medium is a clinically demanding task, which carries with it both a tremendous potential and an equally great responsibility. (p. 387)

Thus, individuals may share their traumas, which reduces their feelings of fear, anxiety, and isolation (Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights, n.d.).

Based on the review of nine empirical articles, I found that participating in therapeutic art sessions and practicing handicrafts such as drawing, painting, coloring, and using images seemed to alleviate the effects and the impact of trauma, violence, and the negative characteristics that children and adults who were exposed to trauma in their early childhood. The essence of art-based technique is to provide a safe and attractive environment during art practice for children with trauma. Lydia and Aurora (2014) stated:

[It] is the method that reduces ... physical issues and improves [the] interpersonal skills and socialization of the individual suffering from social discomfort. What is important is mainly the creative process in itself: [they] express themselves [and] create rather than the final artistic product. (p. 21)

In summary, although art intervention encompasses various methods (such as music, art, drama, dance, yoga, and writing), this research focused on the integration of images. In this regard, the literature review revealed a gap. Through my research, I attempted to answer my research questions by drawing on existing literature. These questions delved deeper into specific aspects of the broader research inquiry, offering a special and detailed exploration of the impacts of FEPCs on facilitating emotional expression among young children. Art helps children understand themselves and control their efforts (Kohl,

2017). Nevertheless, despite advances in art-based techniques over the years, rigorous testing of their effectiveness is still emerging (Eaton et al., 2007).

In the end, having reviewed the theoretical, empirical, and practical foundations in both Chapters One and Two, the next step is to explain how this study was methodologically designed to explore teachers' experiences with FEPCs. Chapter Three details the research methodology, including the research design, setting, participants, data collection procedures, and analysis strategies. Together, these components establish the rigor and credibility of the study's qualitative approach.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Overview and Research Design

My research employed a qualitative case study design that reflected and explored the perspectives and experiences of kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia. The aim was to understand how the training and use of FEPCs, as part of a broader art-based approach, impacts classroom practice. A case study was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth investigation of real-life teaching settings and facilitated the collection of rich, narrative data from participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In my study, I also considered how visual tools, such as FEPCs, support emotional expression in young children, which allows for nonverbal and creative communication. This type of expression is often linked to art-based strategies in early childhood education.

Rationale

I employed a constructivist design that utilized a qualitative method for several reasons, including its alignment with the purpose of exploring how kindergarten teachers understand and perceive their experiences, rather than measuring outcomes through numerical data. Moreover, it supported my study's aim of capturing the meanings teachers construct through their interactions with children and the use of FEPCs. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), constructivism posits that each person's experiences directly influence their ideas and shape their perception of the world. This philosophy highlights the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the early childhood education environment. Constructivism is also closely related to relativism, which

suggests that knowledge and understanding are influenced by individual experiences, relationships, and cultural backgrounds (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Per this view, truth is not absolute but shaped by social and emotional contexts in which individuals live and learn. Thus, Relativism, as a philosophy, is not indicative of static certainty; instead, Relativism holds that experiences, relationships, and backgrounds give each person a distinctive perspective on the world. As a result, scientific knowledge can be developed through both inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

A qualitative case study is the most appropriate approach for this research, as it enabled me to explore how kindergarten teachers perceive and experience the use of FEPCs in their classrooms. Their personal insights, emotions, and reflections were central to understanding the effectiveness of this intervention—how this approach may support emotional communication and trauma-sensitive teaching practices. By focusing on teachers’ narratives (e.g., their personal experiences, interpretations, and classroom stories), I was able to collect rich and detailed descriptions of data about emotional communication and expression within early childhood settings.

This design also supported the goal of improving trauma-informed teaching practices, recognizing that qualitative data can help explain the processes and meanings behind teachers’ actions rather than focusing solely on outcomes. It helped uncover how teachers apply arts-based interventions and techniques, such as prompting children to express their emotions using FEPCs in real-life situations, and what challenges or successes they face in doing so. The case study method provided the depth necessary to comprehend these complex experiences and generate both practical and theoretical insights. Thus, this approach offered valuable visions into best practices and areas for

professional growth. Overall, the qualitative case study design aligned well with my goals to assess and then understand the effectiveness and nuances of using FEPCs in an educational setting for children who may have experienced trauma.

Ultimately, my study was designed for multiple audiences, including teachers and parents interested in utilizing FEPCs with young children, educators working with children affected by trauma, and researchers exploring the integration of art-based and emotional expression strategies in early childhood education. Therefore, a case study design was an appropriate fit because it allowed for a detailed, context-rich understanding of teachers' lived experiences and practices in real classroom environments that offered parents a glimpse into teachers' perspectives.

Research Questions

1. What are kindergarten teachers' understanding and perceptions of FEPCs before and after training?
2. How do teachers describe their implementation of FEPCs, including the challenges, student reactions, and daily classroom practices?
3. What best practices do teachers identify for effectively incorporating FEPCs into early childhood education settings?

Conceptual Model

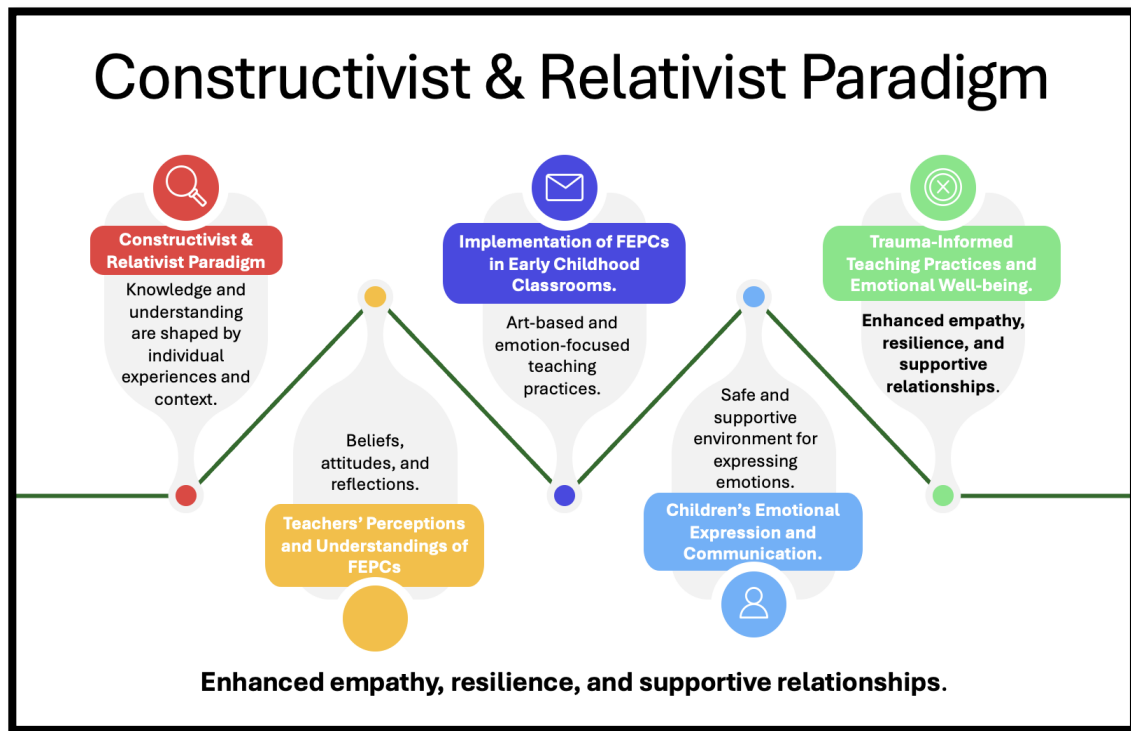
The conceptual model guiding my study was grounded in the constructivist belief that knowledge and understanding are formed through individual experiences and social interactions (see Figure 3.1). In this context, my study sought to explore how kindergarten teachers in the KSA understand and describe their experiences using FEPCs with young children who may have been exposed to trauma. The model assumed that

teachers' perceptions and practices play a key role in shaping how FEPCs are introduced and utilized in classrooms to support children's emotional expression and communication.

This conceptual framework also reflected the idea that art-based and emotion-focused strategies, such as FEPCs, can provide a safe and supportive environment where children feel encouraged to express emotions that might otherwise remain unspoken. By promoting emotional awareness and communication, such strategies may help reduce feelings of isolation, stress, or anxiety among children (Kluft et al., 2000). Within this framework, my study does not aim to establish causation but rather to understand teachers' perspectives on how these tools may contribute to emotional safety, healing, and social connection in early childhood settings.

Figure 3.1

Conceptual Model of Kindergarten Teachers' Use of FEPCs to Support Emotional Expression and Trauma-Informed Practices.



As illustrated in Figure 3.1, this conceptual model is grounded in the constructivist and relativist paradigms. It viewed knowledge as co-constructed through experiences, relationships, and cultural contexts. Teachers' point of view and understanding of FEPCs influence how they integrate these tools into their daily classroom activities. Through art-based and emotion-focused strategies, FEPCs may foster emotional expression among young children. It can also support the development of trauma-informed teaching practices and promote emotional well-being in early childhood settings. Ultimately, this model aimed to provide educators, parents, and researchers with meaningful insights, practical approaches, and recommendations for

integrating FEPCs into early childhood education. Doing so fosters empathy, resilience, and emotional stability among kindergarten children.

Researcher Role

Researcher Description and Positionality

I bring both professional and personal experiences to this research. I spent almost three years as a kindergarten teacher before transitioning to a teaching assistant role at Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) in Saudi Arabia. Later, I was awarded a government scholarship to pursue my graduate studies in the United States, where I earned a master's degree in Early Childhood Curriculum and Studies from Cleveland State University (CSU). During that time, I conducted research on issues related to children and trauma. I also developed a strong interest in understanding children's emotional development and the impact of trauma on learning. Based on my own experience, I came to view early childhood trauma as a critical issue that often remains invisible in classroom settings. Through my academic reading and research, this issue continues to deeply influence children's emotional regulation, behavior, and ability to engage in learning. While pursuing my doctorate in Early Childhood Education (ECE) at Oakland University (OU), I also served as a lecturer in the ECE Department at UQU.

In addition to my academic journey, I have worked as a field supervisor for two years, supporting early childhood student teachers as they transitioned from theory to practice. I am also a mother of four children, through whom I have learned many lessons that no textbook could have taught me. Motherhood has provided me with daily lived experiences that enrich my understanding of young learners' emotions beyond what academic study alone can offer. These combined experiences have shaped my

commitment and deep interest in exploring emotional communication, trauma-informed practices, and the real-world challenges teachers face in early childhood classrooms.

Reflective Insight on the Researcher Role

As a qualitative researcher, I recognize that my background, beliefs, values, and professional identity inevitably influence how I explain data and interact with participants. Furthermore, being a native Arabic speaker allowed me to communicate effectively with the participants. It also helped me understand subtle linguistic cues and interpret culturally embedded meaning during interviews. Meanwhile, my dual perspective as both an early childhood educator and researcher offered a unique lens for interpreting the data.

In this study, I was not a participant within the research setting but rather an observer and facilitator of teachers' voices and reflections. While my prior experiences could predispose me to certain interpretations, they also allowed me to understand teachers' language, challenges, emotional, and instructional choices when using FEPCs more deeply. This insider knowledge enhanced the depth and sensitivity of my interpretations, particularly when analyzing teachers' reflections on trauma-informed practices. However, I remained mindful of the possibility of viewing the data through my professional assumptions. To reduce potential bias, I employed reflexive journaling and regular meetings with my dissertation chair throughout data collection and analysis to ensure that my explanations were grounded in participants' authentic voices rather than my expectations. This balance between professional insight and reflective awareness ultimately strengthened the credibility and depth of my study's findings. I also consistently made my assumptions and documented my reflections to remain aware of

my positionality and ensure the trustworthiness, transparency, and authenticity of my conclusions.

Setting

My study was conducted at Mahad Al-Ebtikar School in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The school includes five kindergarten (KG) classrooms: one for KG1, two for KG2, and two for KG3. KG1 classrooms typically serve children aged three to four years, KG2 classrooms include children aged four to five years, and KG3 classrooms serve children aged five to six years. Each classroom includes approximately eight to 13 children, depending on the level. This setting was selected for its cultural and educational relevance. Importantly, this setting enabled my research to fill a significant gap in the literature on this topic, as there are currently no studies on non-Western educational contexts. The Mahad Al-Ebtikar School emphasizes Islamic Studies and the Arabic language and represents a typical early childhood environment in the Saudi context. These characteristics offer a meaningful setting to examine how teachers perceive and apply FEPCs in real classroom situations outside of Western environments.

This setting was purposefully selected as a single case study site because it reflects a typical early kindergarten educational environment within the Saudi context. In this setting, kindergarten teachers interact closely with young children and implement daily practices for emotional and social learning. The school provided a naturally occurring context for understanding how teachers integrate FEPCs in real classroom situations. Thus, these reasons made the Mahad Al-Ebtikar School ideal for exploring kindergarten teachers' lived experiences in depth.

Policies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

As I planned to conduct my dissertation research in Saudi Arabia, I consulted the policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Education policy in the KSA aims to develop human resources and enhance national identity (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024). Education policy emphasizes the importance of Islamic values and incorporates religious teachings into its curriculum at all educational levels. It also aims to strengthen national identity through history and social studies (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024).

In Saudi Arabia, kindergarten is optional and serves children aged 3 to 6. It includes three levels of kindergarten (KG; e.g., KG1, KG2, and KG3). These levels of education focus on developing social, emotional, and cognitive aspects through play and interactive activities (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024). Kindergarten is followed by primary school (i.e., elementary school). Primary school is mandatory for children aged 6 to 12 years. There, students learn basic skills in reading, writing, math, and arithmetic, along with introductions to science and social studies. Students then continue their education in intermediate (middle) and high schools, which deepen their knowledge and offer academic and technical options to enhance learning and prepare for their future career (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024).

This system is considered modern and is currently approved in all national schools in the KSA. Based on my experience, this system aims to facilitate the application of innovative educational strategies more effectively, as it allows the academic load to be distributed in a balanced manner throughout the year. These strategies may include using tools such as FEPCs practices to help children, especially

those who may have experienced trauma, express their feelings and process their experiences in a way that is consistent with their cultural and religious values.

Accordingly, this system provides students with sufficient rest periods between classes to regain their energy and enhances their ability to learn and recover emotionally within an integrated educational environment.

Ultimately, the Saudi government endeavors to enhance the quality of education by refining curricula, teaching methods, and evaluation processes (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024). Additionally, it qualifies and trains teachers every semester to achieve these goals. It also aims to expand the scope of higher education by establishing additional universities and colleges, as well as stimulating scientific research and innovation (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024). All of these policies support the continued development of the education system in line with Saudi Vision 2030, a national initiative aimed at implementing forward-thinking social and structural improvements. Therefore, it is dedicated to further developing the KSA and achieving a prosperous society. Finally, these national policies collectively create an environment that values emotional development, teacher training, and innovative practices in the kindergarten educational settings. Hence, these are all factors that align directly with the focus of this study and justify the selection of Mahad Al-Ebtikar School as the study site.

Participants and Recruitment

The participants were purposefully selected to align with my study's focus on understanding how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia utilize FEPCs to support young children's well-being. This study included six kindergarten teachers at Mahad Al-Ebtikar

School in Makkah, KSA. The small sample size was appropriate for a qualitative case study. It also allowed for in-depth exploration of each participant's perspectives and experiences while maintaining a manageable data set for detailed analysis. Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and their interest in using FEPCs in their classrooms. Additional selection criteria included teachers who had previously participated in a professional development training on the use of FEPCs with young students and had begun integrating the cards into their daily teaching practices. Clearly, the eligibility criteria required that participants (1) be full-time kindergarten teachers at Mahad Al-Ebtikar School; (2) have attended the FEPCs training sessions before data collection; and (3) be actively using FEPCs in their classroom settings. Moreover, fluency in Arabic was also important to ensure clear communication and accurate expression of their reflections during interviews.

Finally, these criteria emphasized that all participants possessed both the knowledge and practical experience necessary to provide meaningful insight into the application of FEPCs within early childhood settings. All participants were female kindergarten teachers. Their ages ranged from 24 to 51 years, and their teaching experience varied from a minimum of two years to a maximum of 16 years in early childhood education. This diversity in age and professional experience contributed to a range of perspectives on the use of FEPCs in classroom practice. Exclusion criteria included failing to provide a narrative response and failing to complete the training or pre- and post-surveys. Two teachers were excluded because they did not answer all of the questions during the interview. This purposeful inclusion and exclusion process indicated

that the sample represented teachers with direct and relevant experience in implementing FEPCs. Thus, it enhanced the depth and contextual relevance of the data.

Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment for this study began after obtaining approval from first my dissertation advisor, Dr. Tomoko Wakabayashi, and then the school principal of Mahad Al-Ebtikar. Next, I contacted the principal to explain my study. Then, with her support, an invitation and an information sheet were shared with all kindergarten teachers at the school (see Appendix C). The information sheet briefly explained the study's goals, what participation involved, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. No signatures were required (participation was based on informed consent and voluntary agreement). The consent form briefly described the purpose and objectives of the research, assured that no recordings or photographs would be used, and outlined participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Moreover, I outlined detailed steps for my study, including timelines for recruitment, intervention, data collection, and analysis. This outline included the scheduling of training sessions and two surveys, the period of FEPCs implementation, and the times set aside for interviews and feedback collection.

After that step, the school principal and I chose the best day and time to meet with the teachers to train them in how to elicit children's emotional expressions using FEPCs in the Summer of 2025. This training included (1) an overview of childhood trauma and its impact on emotional development; (2) introduction to FEPCs and their purpose; (3) how to use FEPCs with young children through games and discussions; (4) strategies to help children recognize and name emotions using the cards; (5) examples of age-

appropriate questions and classroom applications; (6) benefits and limitations of FEPCs in trauma-informed settings; and (7) opportunities for teachers to ask questions and share ideas.

After obtaining permission from both the school and the university's IRB approval (see Appendix D), an online information session was held to provide additional clarification about my study. Initial contact with the participants was made through the school principal, who helped facilitate communication. In addition, in order to ensure privacy and voluntariness, the principal was not involved in any stage beyond forwarding the initial invitation. Thus, I met with each interested teacher privately and individually via Zoom to explain the study procedures, answer questions, and obtain their verbal informed consent prior to data collection.

Teachers were informed about the study and invited to participate voluntarily. Consent was obtained digitally through an online form shared via official school communication channels. During the informational meeting, I emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the absence of any video or photographic recordings. Teachers who expressed interest were scheduled for professional development training sessions on the use of FEPCs. Two training sessions on using FEPCs introduced participants to the tools and demonstrated how to implement them in trauma-informed classrooms. These sessions included slides, demonstrations, and discussion (see Appendix C). These sessions, which were held virtually via Zoom, explained the study and answered questions.

Participants completed a brief survey before the training to assess their initial understanding (see Appendix A) and another survey immediately after the training to

evaluate what they had learned (see Appendix A). These surveys focused on descriptive rather than inferential statistics. After using FEPCs in their classrooms for several weeks, each teacher participated in two separate, in-depth interviews conducted remotely via Zoom to reflect on their experience and provide feedback. Recruitment concluded once the six teachers, who met the eligibility criteria and expressed continued interest, consented to participate. Notably, all recruitment, training, and data collection activities were conducted in alignment with ethical research practices, prioritizing participant comfort, privacy, and confidentiality.

Rationale for Selecting Saudi Kindergarten Teachers

The selection of Saudi teachers in Saudi Arabia as the focus of my study was strategic and purposeful. As a Saudi student, my academic pursuits are deeply intertwined with the cultural and religious fabric of my communities. This cultural identity has significantly informed the direction of my study. Thus, it led me to seek out research environments that mirror the cultural and religious environment from which I hail. In this manner, my paper was deliberately oriented toward Saudi kindergarten schools. These institutions contrast with the conventional choice of a local, public, American educational setting. Kindergarten-aged children are at a crucial developmental juncture at which intervention can significantly alter the trajectory of their emotional development (Salisch, 2001). Hence, my dissertation focused on training this demographic about FEPCs in the KSA to provide locally actionable, scalable insights in a broader context. Indeed, I would continue the EFPCs training for Saudi teachers in the future in the KSA. In sum, this purposive sampling approach aligned with the qualitative case study design of this research, as it prioritized depth of understanding over breadth of representation.

Therefore, by focusing on teachers who voluntarily engaged with FEPCs and expressed a genuine interest in the topic, my study captured rich, context-specific insights that reflect authentic classroom experiences and cultural perspectives within Saudi early childhood education. Thus, it leads to prioritizing depth of understanding and contextual richness over representativeness or generalization.

Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures

This study utilized multiple qualitative and descriptive data sources to explore how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia understood, implemented, and reflected on the use of FEPCs. The instruments used included pre- and post-training open-ended surveys, two semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant, and documentation related to the professional development (PD) sessions on FEPCs. These tools were selected to gather rich, multi-layered data that align with the study's constructivist orientation and its emphasis on teachers' lived experiences.

The first data source consisted of two open-ended surveys administered before and after the FEPCs training (see Appendix A). Before conducting the training session via Zoom, I asked all participants to fill out the pre-survey. This survey was administered through a secure platform (*Qualtrics*). It was designed to explore teachers' initial understanding, expectations, prior knowledge of FEPCs as a communicative tool for supporting children's emotional expression, and their perceptions of FEPCs (see Appendix A). After the training, participants completed a post-survey to assess what they learned and how their perceptions may have changed. To collect rich and detailed qualitative data, I conducted two individual semi-structured interviews with each teacher (see Appendix B). These interviews explored their experience using FEPCs in the

classroom and their observations of how children responded to the strategies. All interviews were conducted online and audio recorded (with participant consent) for later transcription and analysis.

Instruments and Measures

Survey Questionnaire

This study utilized two open-ended surveys, one administered before and one after the training sessions on FEPCs. A pre-survey was the initial tool in this study, focusing on exploring teachers' understanding, expectations, and ideas for using the feelings/emotion picture cards strategy with young students prior to training. Next, I conducted two four-hour training sessions and two two-hour training sessions for Mahad Al-Ebtikar School teachers. These sessions covered the purpose, use, and potential impact of FEPCs in the classroom, specifically for children who may have experienced trauma (see Appendix C).

After the training, the post-survey was used to assess any changes in kindergarten teachers' understanding and perspectives. Survey questions were developed specifically for this dissertation and were guided by my research questions and conceptual framework. Both surveys addressed four key constructs to determine changes in their perceptions and the effectiveness of FEPCs in facilitating communication with young students who may have experienced trauma:

1. What FEPCs are (opinions)—teachers' understanding on FEPCs;
2. How they are used (strategies)—perceived instructional strategies for using FEPCs;
3. Why they are used (experiences); and

4. The perceived usefulness of using FEPCs in trauma-informed classrooms (effectiveness).

Specifically, these constructs directly reflect the study's aims of understanding teacher perceptions before and after training and examining how FEPCs might support kindergarten students' emotional communication. It focused on the potential benefits, methodologies, and age appropriateness of using FEPCs from educators' perspectives. Although these surveys generated descriptive rather than inferential data due to the small sample size, they provided a structured way to capture shifts in kindergarten teachers' thinking across time. It was not designed to make inferences about relationships between variables.

Each survey contained seven open-ended questions, including prompts about defining FEPCs, methods of application, purposes of use, and which children are likely to benefit most from them (see Appendix A). Using purposive sampling, the survey questionnaire was non-randomly distributed via email to teachers at Mahad Al-Ebtikar School in the Makkah Region, KSA, to understand their perspectives on using FEPCs before and after training. For the purpose of my study, I stipulated that participants should actively use FEPCs and interact with early childhood students after completing the training. The pre- and post-surveys were distributed via email using *Qualtrics*, and each took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

I started the questionnaire with a welcoming note to express my gratitude towards the teachers at Mahad Al-Ebtikar School in Saudi Arabia for their participation. My written introduction emphasized the voluntary nature of the study and the anonymity of the responses, setting a tone of mutual respect and cooperation. Participants also

completed six demographic questions only on the pre-survey to provide context, such as their years of experience, grade level taught, and educational background. This demographic data aimed to understand the diversity within the participant pool and how it might have influenced their perceptions and usage of the FEPCs. Table 3.1 summarizes the data collection components:

Table 3.1
Conceptual Scheme for Study Methodology.

Method	Participants	Number	Purpose	Procedure	Data Analysis
Pre-and post-surveys		2 Surveys (before and after training about FEPCs)	Exploring teachers' understanding and perceptions of FEPCs	Conducted online via Qualtrics before and after training	Descriptive comparison (no statistical testing).
One-on-one in-depth Semi-Structured Interviews	Six kindergarten teachers	(2 per teacher = 12 total)	Understanding how teachers implement FEPCs and reflect on their impact	Conducted via Zoom (audio recorded), approx. 30–45 minutes each	Transcription and thematic analysis.
Training Session		2 Online Sessions	Teaching and describing FEPC strategies and how to apply them in classrooms	Conducted via Zoom using a structured PowerPoint presentation; no recordings	Not applicable

The diversity of my data collection methods ensured a robust examination of the topic from various angles. In my initial recruitment phase, after obtaining IRB approval to conduct the research, I mailed explanatory and invitation letters to the principal of Mahad Al-Ebtikar School, asking her to distribute the letters to potential participants who agreed to participate in my interviews and surveys.

Individual Interviews

The second major data source I used in my study conformed to in-depth, phenomenological model proposed by Seidman (2019), which involved multiple interviews with participants. Each participant engaged in a series of two individual semi-structured interviews (a total of 12 interviews), conducted via Zoom. The interview questions were developed based on the conceptual model, the literature on art-based interventions, and the goals of the FEPCs training sessions. The protocol was piloted with one early childhood teacher before data collection. Thus, minor adjustments were made to clarify wording and improve the flow of questions. I had previously piloted this interview approach and found that participants were both willing and able to meet two discrete times, especially since the meetings were conducted via Zoom.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions that allowed participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experiences using FEPCs in their classrooms. According to Seidman (2019), “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Also, Seidman (2019) emphasized that in-depth interviewing “affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration. Furthermore, it is deeply satisfying to researchers who are interested in others’ stories” (p. 14). It can also help participants reconstruct the details of their experiences by asking follow-up questions. The revised interview protocol was further adapted from the initial protocol to continue exploring teachers’ experiences with using the FEPCs with their young students (see Appendix B). Each interview lasted

approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent for transcription and thematic analysis.

Moreover, according to Seidman's (2019) approach, each interview should have a distinct purpose. The first interview should be focused on "the context of the participants' experience" (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). This interview explores the participant's background, relevant previous experiences, and any past exposure to the phenomenon. The goal is to place the participant's experience within a broader personal and professional context. Second, interview two allows "participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs" (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). This session focuses on participants' actual engagement with the phenomenon under investigation. Questions should be asked regarding the specifics of their experience(s). The goal is to capture vivid and detailed accounts of what happened in practice.

Third, interview three, which should be focused on "Reflection on Meaning," encourages the "participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them" (Seidman, 2019, p. 20). The final interview prompts participants to reflect on their experience. For instance, in this study, participants were asked to reflect on what the use of FEPCs has meant to them professionally and personally. Moreover, they were asked how their perceptions of teaching and emotional communication may have shifted, and what long-term insights or applications they see from this experience.

Although Seidman's (2019) approach calls for three interviews per participant, to streamline the process for a dissertation timeline and to ease the time burden on participants, I merged interviews one and two, keeping the third interview separate. Thus, I conducted two interviews with each participant, resulting in 12 total interviews. The

protocols for both interviews were based on the structure outlined by Seidman and tailored to the specific context of the study (see Appendix B). This approach emphasized understanding participants' lived experiences and the meanings they construct from them.

Professional Development (PD)

The professional development (PD) session training program on FEPCs served as an additional source of contextual data. These two online training sessions provided instructional demonstrations, opportunities for discussion, and structured guidance for using FEPCs in trauma-informed classroom settings. Although the PD sessions were not designed to generate formal research data, these sessions played an important role in preparing participants for the implementation of FEPCs and in establishing a shared instructional baseline across participants. The content and sequence of the PD sessions informed the development of survey questions and interview items; as a result, they provided participants with opportunities to interpret, learn, and reflect.

Finally, for accuracy, transparency, and cultural appropriateness, all instruments were prepared in English and then translated into Arabic. The Arabic versions were reviewed as an IRB requirement by a bilingual expert familiar with research and educational terminology to ensure clarity and equivalence in meaning. As a native Arabic speaker, I conducted all interviews in Arabic to support participants' comfort and authentic expression. This bilingual process emphasized that the data collection instruments aligned with participants' linguistic needs while maintaining fidelity to the study's conceptual design.

In sum, the combination of data collection instruments created a robust set of data sources that allowed for triangulation. They also provided deeper insight into teachers'

evolving perspectives and experiences. These instruments were intentionally selected and designed because they directly map onto my research questions and conceptual model. Thus, they allowed the study to examine how teachers' understanding of FEPCs changed over time, how they applied the tool in practice, and how they interpreted its usefulness in supporting young children's emotional communication within kindergarten classrooms.

Instrument-Practices. Given the global increase in trauma among young people and its impacts on their early education and childhood development, I sought to use safe artistic tools, such as picture cards, drawing, or coloring, to help all children express their feelings, including children who suffer from stress, trauma, or ACEs. I chose the FEPC strategies because they may help children relieve their psychological stress and tension in safe ways and without exposing themselves to any harm.

Secondly, it may help teachers understand children's feelings in a safe environment. Therefore, teachers can help by communicating with experts and psychological counselors and finding appropriate treatment for them without the need for pharmacological intervention. According to Moussa—a professional mental health counselor with expertise in behavioral and cognitive health services, special education, and art education—art is vital to the development of emotional intelligence (Z. Moussa, personal communication, November 11, 2023).

All feelings are essential and natural, with their own energies rather than being simply right or wrong. People should be aware of their feelings, such as sadness, while focusing on essential daily responsibilities, such as attending school or work. By creating art, people can better understand and express their feelings, thereby building a more

comprehensive emotional vocabulary. This step is crucial for understanding the worth of each feeling and using art-based activities to explore and share those feelings (Z. Moussa, personal communication, November 11, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to confront and discuss challenging issues like grief, loss, depression, challenging topics, and anxiety to feel connected and less isolated.

Giving children who have experienced trauma creative experiences helps lessen their problems and enables them to communicate their worries and trauma in secure atmospheres (Eaton et al., 2007; Kometiani & Farmer, 2020). Additionally, emotions are essential for communication, understanding, and expressing human thoughts (Lutz & White, 1986; Singh et al., 2022). Therefore, it is critical to take the necessary steps to confront this worldwide difficulty and limit the increase in adverse effects on innocent children who have been subjected to painful trauma by applying FEPCs.

I was keen on finding and providing FEPCs, from blank canvas through to healthy healing, which could be continuously applied across various locations and practiced with all children, essentially those who may have experienced trauma. It is essential to include artistic and art activities to improve mental health and resilience (Z. Moussa, personal communication, November 11, 2023). To help in this regard, adults can use FEPCs to explore their own feelings, as well as those of their children (see Figure 3.2). According to Erdman et al. (2020), “creating a safe environment with consistent routines and establishing trusting, strong relationships give educators numerous tools they can employ with the children they work with” (p. 18). These tools are beneficial in enabling people to notice and manage their emotions, like sadness and anger.

FEPCs, as non-verbal tools, could offer a potentially valuable means for these children to communicate their feelings without pressure. As they rely on illustrated facial expressions, FEPCs function as a form of visual art, making it part of an art-based strategy through which children connect emotionally via images rather than words.

Figure 3.2

Example of FEPCs Used in Participants' Classrooms.



Because of the deep emotional effects that witnessing or experiencing trauma at such a young age can have, supporting interventions such as Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards are necessary to close the communication gap and encourage emotional healing. The need for practical tools, such as FEPCs, that children can use to safely express their emotions in a healthy way is critical. Traditional verbal communication may not be viable for young

children who have suffered trauma; their ability to express complex emotions verbally is often difficult. This is where FEPCs enter the balance, serving as a bridge for expression and understanding.

Data Collection Procedures

During this qualitative case study, my data collection followed a systematic, ethically grounded, and culturally responsive approach. This approach is consistent with established qualitative research frameworks that emphasize intentional planning, ethical responsibility, and sensitivity to participants' cultural and social contexts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). I designed this process to explore kindergarten teachers' perceptions, implementation practices, and interpretations of FEPCs in Saudi early childhood classrooms. The procedures described below reflect what occurred during my study. The process also aligned directly with my research questions concerning teachers' understanding before and after training, their classroom implementation of FEPCs, and their identification of best practices. Moreover, access to the research site was obtained through formal approval from both my dissertation advisor at OU and the principal of Mahad Al-Ebtikar School in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. Once site permission and IRB approval were obtained, the principal forwarded an email containing an information sheet and invitation to all eligible participants. To ensure voluntariness and confidentiality, the principal's involvement ended after the email was distributed. Teachers who expressed interest contacted me privately via email or phone, thereby protecting their anonymity and reducing any perception of administrative pressure.

Following initial contact, I met individually with each participant via Zoom to explain the study in Arabic—reviewing the information sheet, answering questions, and

obtaining their verbal informed consent before any data collection. Data collection consisted of two phases: (1) pre-training survey, FEPCs professional development sessions, and post-training survey; (2) FEPCs implementation period; and (3) two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The timeline and procedures for each component were carefully planned to align with my study's goal and research objectives.

Phase One

All participating teachers completed a digital pre-survey administered through *Qualtrics* before the first training session. This pre-survey gathered baseline information about teachers' initial understanding and perceptions of FEPCs, which directly addressed the first research question of my study: *What are kindergarten teachers' understanding and perceptions of FEPCs before and after training?* Participants also completed demographic questions, including years of experience, grade level taught, and educational background, to contextualize their responses.

After that, teachers participated in two online PD sessions, conducted via Zoom, focused on FEPCs, childhood trauma, and some strategies for supporting emotional communication in early childhood settings. These sessions introduced FEPCs as a tool, demonstrated instructional methods, and presented scenarios relevant to Saudi classrooms. Although the PD sessions were not sources of research data, they served as the foundation for teachers' subsequent implementation of FEPCs. Following the PD sessions, participants completed a post-survey via *Qualtrics* to assess changes in their understanding and perceptions of FEPCs after the training. This post-survey data provided insight into how teachers' knowledge evolved, thereby further addressing the first research question of my study.

Phase Two

Kindergarten teachers implemented FEPCs in their classrooms for several weeks, documenting challenges, students' reactions, and classroom applications. This information directly aligned with the second research question of my study: *How do teachers describe their implementation of FEPCs, including the challenges, student reactions, and daily classroom practices?* Participants then engaged in two individual, semi-structured Zoom interviews. The first interview (combined Interview One and Interview Two following Seidman, 2019) explored teachers' context, prior knowledge and experiences, and detailed classroom implementation of FEPCs. This interview directly addressed the second research question of my study. The second interview (Reflection on Meaning) focused on how teachers interpreted the usefulness of FEPCs, the best practices they identified, and the long-term significance of FEPCs in early childhood settings. Thus, it addressed the third research question of my study: *What best practices do teachers identify for effectively incorporating FEPCs into early childhood education settings?*

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Participants were then invited to review a summary of their interview transcripts via WhatsApp for member checking to verify accuracy and provide clarifications. This process strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Furthermore, throughout data collection, all materials—including survey responses, audio recordings, transcripts, and communication logs—were stored securely. Electronic data were password-protected and stored on encrypted devices, and only I, as a researcher, had access to them. No identifying information was linked to the findings. In summary, my

data collection procedures were intentionally structured to support a deep, nuanced exploration of teachers' evolving understanding of FEPCs, their classroom implementation experiences, and their identification of best practices. These procedures ensured that all data gathered directly aligned with my study's research questions, conceptual framework, and qualitative case study design.

Table 3.2
Data Collection and Analysis of Data

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Weeks 4-13	Weeks 14-15	Week 16	Week 17
Meeting with the school's principal and field proposal	Meeting with teachers, pre-survey, and first section of training.	The second section of training, post-survey and using FEPCs in their classroom	Using FEPCs in their classroom	First one-on-one in-depth interview with 6 teachers. Using FEPCs in their classroom	Second one-on-one in-depth interview with 6 teachers.	Using FEPCs

Data Analysis Strategies

This study was situated within a broader inquiry focused on how kindergarten teachers perceive their experiences using Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards to support emotional communication with all children, especially those who may have experienced trauma. My study sought to understand their perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of using FEPCs in Saudi early childhood classrooms. Accordingly, for this analysis specifically, qualitative thematic analysis and descriptive survey analysis were employed to address the three research questions regarding: (1) Teachers' understanding before and after training; (2) Their implementation experiences; and (3) Best practices identified for FEPCs use.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in my study followed a systematic, iterative, and interpretive process aligned with qualitative case study methodology. Interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim, and survey responses were downloaded from *Qualtrics* and organized into files. I engaged in an initial round of open coding to identify recurring concepts. This step was followed by axial coding to cluster related ideas into broader categories that reflected teachers' understanding, implementation practices, challenges, and emerging best practices related to FEPCs. Themes were continually refined through constant comparison across participants. Therefore, it ensured that patterns accurately represented the lived experiences of kindergarten teachers in Saudi early childhood classrooms. This analytic process was guided directly by the three research questions, which focused on changes in teachers' understanding, descriptions of FEPCs implementation, and reflections on best practices. Notes, training materials, and contextual insights from the PD sessions also supported analysis by providing additional interpretive depth.

My Approach

I analyzed the data using a qualitative methods approach, including a thematic analysis of the interview data and a descriptive analysis of the survey responses. This dual-method identified significant changes in teacher perceptions and student behavior. Concurrently, thematic analysis explored the nuanced impacts of FEPCs on children's communication skills, as reported by the teachers.

Descriptive Comparison Analysis of Surveys (No Statistical Testing)

The pre- and post-training surveys were analyzed descriptively to examine changes in teachers' perceptions across four dimensions: (1) opinions about FEPCs, (2) strategies for use, (3) personal experiences, and (4) perceived effectiveness. Given the small sample size ($n = 6$), inferential statistics were not appropriate. Instead, I used simple descriptive comparison techniques, such as visual charts and thematic summaries, frequency descriptions, and conceptual grouping of responses. Therefore, these descriptive patterns helped illuminate shifts in understanding that were later triangulated with interview narratives to address Research Question 1.

Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Interview data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). They stated that "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, [analyzing], and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally [organizes] and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (2006, p. 6). This method allowed patterns and themes to emerge directly from participant narratives rather than imposing pre-defined categories. The analysis followed six steps: (1) familiarizing myself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) developing themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report.

I developed themes based on the participants' responses to my research questions by using *Dedoose*, a qualitative data analysis software. This method supported the coding process and efficiently managed data organization. Thematic coding was done in two rounds. The first round, Open Coding, was exploratory in nature and involved line-by-line coding of the participant's language to test major codes. The second round, Focused

Coding, involved refining and grouping codes into overarching themes that align with the research questions. This process helped organize the data for retrieval and analysis. Therefore, this qualitative approach was well-suited to understanding participants' lived experiences and generating practical and theoretical insights into trauma-informed emotional communication tools in early childhood education.

Examples of Round 1: Open Coding. Open coding involved line-by-line analysis of the transcripts, and initial codes captured the teachers' language and ideas.

- “Children choose cards more easily than words.”
- “Teacher uses cards during morning circle time.”
- “My student shows sadness through picture cards instead of speaking.”
- “Teacher uncertainty about using FEPCs for trauma cases.”
- “The children developed a common language.”
- “Children have started using the cards without guidance.”
- “FEPCs gave me a clear idea of their condition before we started our daily activities.”
- “I now have a permanent corner/area for emotion cards.”
- “I don't have enough time to use FEPCs for each child.”
- “I've noticed that some children are afraid to express their feelings, even with cards.”
- “Children need more time and consistent encouragement to use FEPCs.”
- “I would link the card to a story or religious value, such as compassion or helping others. This helped the children understand emotions in a way that resonated with their culture.”

- “The child now knows how to name his feelings.”

Examples of Round 2: Focused Coding. In the second round, related codes were grouped into broader, more analytical categories.

1. “Increased emotional awareness.” (Developed from codes about naming emotions, children choosing relevant cards).
2. “Instructional routines supporting FEPCs use.” (Derived from codes about morning circles, group discussions, and teacher prompts).
3. “Barriers to implementation.” (Related to uncertainty, lack of experience, and time constraints).

Theme Development and Findings Structure

I then consolidated the focused codes into overarching themes. Here are the final themes of my study:

- **Theme 1:** Growth in teachers’ understanding of FEPCs after training.
- **Theme 2:** FEPCs as a catalyst for emotional expression in kindergarten classroom practice.
- **Theme 3:** Instructional practices and daily classroom routines supporting FEPCs implementation.
- **Theme 4:** Challenges and contextual limitations in trauma-informed implementation.
- **Theme 5:** Emerging best practices for using FEPCs in early childhood.
- **Theme 6:** Teachers’ reflections on emotional growth.

These themes directly map the research questions of my study.

Integration of Data Sources

The final analytic story emerged by integrating descriptive survey results with qualitative interview themes. For example, survey improvements in “recognizing FEPCs benefits” were connected to interview narratives describing how children used the cards to express emotions. Similarly, classroom barriers reported in interviews were associated with lower post-survey confidence among some participants. Therefore, this integrative process emphasized that the findings represented both surface-level descriptive shifts and deeper interpretive insights. Furthermore, code validation occurred through multiple strategies, including: (1) rechecking codes across transcripts for consistency; (2) triangulating surveys, interviews, and PD content; (3) member checking through transcript summaries; and (4) maintaining a reflexive journal documenting coding decisions.

Organization and Rationale for Reporting the Findings

The final themes were organized according to the temporal and conceptual logic of the research questions. Themes about kindergarten teachers’ initial understandings appeared first (Research Question 1), followed by themes about using FEPCs (Research Question 2). Then it concluded with themes of best practices among young students and meaning-making (Research Question 3). Thus, this structure reflects both the conceptual model and the progression kindergarten teachers experienced during the study.

Conclusion

To ensure trustworthiness and strengthen the credibility of my findings, multiple strategies were employed throughout the study. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants via WhatsApp. Thus, it allowed teachers

to verify accuracy and clarify interpretations. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources—pre- and post-surveys, two interviews per participant, and documentation from the PD sessions—to cross-validate emerging themes. In addition, reflexive journaling was used throughout the process to document my positionality, assumptions, and analytic decisions. Hence, this reflexive ensured transparency and minimized the influence of researcher bias. As a native Arabic speaker researching Arabic-speaking teachers, I also took linguistic and cultural nuances into account during both coding and theme development. Moreover, the use of a consistent interview protocol and systematic coding procedures enhanced dependability, while maintaining an audit trail of analytic steps strengthened confirmability.

In addition, ethical considerations were central to every phase of my study. IRB approval was obtained prior to recruitment, and site permissions were granted site permissions. Participation was entirely voluntary, and consent was obtained verbally after participants reviewed the bilingual information sheet. This process was translated and checked for accuracy by a qualified bilingual reviewer from the IRB center. All interviews were conducted privately via Zoom to promote comfort and privacy. Additionally, no video recordings or photographs were taken, and the audio recordings were stored securely in a password-protected system on encrypted devices accessible only to me, the principal investigator. Participants' names and contact information were used solely for scheduling and member checking purposes and were not linked to the research findings. Furthermore, all data were stored digitally and were retained securely for the period required by IRB regulations before being permanently deleted. Through rigorous analytic methods, careful attention to credibility and trustworthiness, and strict

adherence to ethical guidelines, my study ensured that the kindergarten teachers' voices were represented authentically and respectfully. Therefore, it provided a rich and contextually grounded understanding of how FEPCs are perceived, implemented, and interpreted in Saudi early childhood education settings.

In conclusion, the data analysis strategies employed in this study allowed for a rigorous, systematic, and meaningful examination of how Saudi kindergarten teachers understood, implemented, and reflected on the use of FEPCs. Through descriptive survey analysis and inductive thematic coding, the findings present an integrated narrative that is closely related to the study's research questions, literature review, and conceptual framework. Therefore, these findings would offer a culturally grounded understanding of trauma-informed emotional communication practices in early childhood education.

Finally, with the methodology clearly established in Chapter Three, the focus now shifts to presenting the voices and experiences of the participating kindergarten teachers. Chapter Four reports the findings of my study through six integrated themes that illustrated how kindergarten teachers understood, implemented, and reflected on their use of FEPCs in trauma-informed classroom settings. These findings provide the foundation for the broader interpretation and implications discussed in my last chapter, Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

Chapter Four presents the findings from my qualitative case study. The study examined how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia understood, implemented, and reflected on the use of Feeling/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs) to support children's emotional communication. Chapter Four is organized around the three research questions guiding my study (see Table 4.1). It integrates data from pre- and post-training surveys, two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each participant, and contextual insights from classroom implementation of FEPCs. The findings are presented thematically and supported by direct quotations from participants to illuminate their lived experiences and illustrate the meaning they attributed to FEPCs' use in their early childhood settings. Although this dissertation is a qualitative case study, I provided frequency counts where appropriate to indicate the prevalence of patterns among the participating kindergarten teachers.

Through a constructivist and relativist lens, this chapter first examines how teachers' knowledge and perceptions of FEPCs evolved following the professional development sessions. It then explores how teachers described the day-to-day use of FEPCs in their classrooms. It includes challenges, students' reactions, and contextual influences shaping their implementations. Finally, Chapter Four highlights the best practices that teachers identified for effectively integrating FEPCs into early childhood education environments. Together, these themes form a coherent narrative that reflects

teachers’ developmental journeys in using FEPCs as an art-based intervention tool for trauma-informed and emotion-based communication with young children. The analytical framework in Table 4.1 presents the structure, connecting the study’s findings to the three research questions through its sections, which explain how each theme aligns with each research question.

Table 4.1

The Set of Analytical Frameworks and the Connections of Each Theme to the Research Questions.

Research Question 1 (QR1)	Research Question 2 (RQ2)	Research Question 3 (RQ3)
Theme 1: Expanded understanding and awareness of FEPCs after training Focus on: • How teachers’ knowledge changed after training. • FEPCs’ new understanding of the nature of education • Gaining confidence in its use. • Transforming from “general knowledge” to a “clear educational vision.”	Theme 2: FEPCs as a catalyst for emotional expression in kindergarten classrooms Include: • How children used FEPCs to express feelings. • Classroom situations demonstrating a child’s ability to choose a card. • Nonverbal expression (especially for those affected by trauma). • How FEPCs helped in “opening the door” for safe communication. Theme 3: Instructional practices and daily classroom routines supporting FEPCs implementation Include: • During circle time, learning through play, and free time—how did teachers use the FEPCs? • Their actual teaching strategies. • Prompts: Field applications, questions. • Integrating FEPCs with specific situations.	Theme 5: Best practices Recommendations for effective and culturally responsive use of FEPCs in EC settings Include: • What the teachers learned during the experience. • What advice did they give to other teachers? • Best practices in everyday inclusion. • Effective communication strategies with children. • How did they make FEPCs compatible with Islamic values and Saudi culture?

Research Question 1 (QR1)	Research Question 2 (RQ2)	Research Question 3 (RQ3)
	Theme 4: Challenges, barriers, and contextual constraints in implementing FEPCs Include: • Time constraints. • Lack of experience with emotions or children affected by trauma. • Difficulty in getting some children to participate. • Resistance or shyness among some students. • Lack of support or resources. • Cultural factors in Saudi schools.	
	Theme 6: Teachers' reflections on emotional growth—their own and their children Focus on: • How did the use of FEPCs reflect on teachers' views of the teaching profession? • Their feeling that children began to see themselves. • Children's acquisition of a language of emotions. • The development of empathy skills in teachers. • Increased awareness of the importance of emotional education.	

This table serves as a visual tool in Chapter Four to help readers understand how themes were extracted from the data and how they relate to the research questions. The framework shows how kindergarten teachers' beliefs about teaching shape their classroom practices, professional challenges, and subsequent reflective thinking. Table 4.1 presents these relationships to establish the research structure, which in turn leads to the detailed thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Expanded Understanding and Awareness of FEPCs After Training

Before facilitating the professional development (PD) sessions, participants (i.e., kindergarten teachers) generally had a limited or surface-level understanding of FEPCs. Most participants associated the cards with simple classroom activities or believed they were merely visual aids used during circle time or learning corners/areas. Following the

training, the teachers demonstrated a noticeable shift in how they conceptualized FEPCs. They also came to recognize them as purposeful and structured tools for emotional communication, mainly for children who may struggle to verbalize their feelings or who may have been exposed to trauma. This development directly addressed the Research Question 1 (RQ1) as it explored kindergarten teachers' perceptions and understanding of FEPCs before and after training (see Table 4.2).

Teachers consistently reported that their knowledge expanded in both depth and purpose. Initially, they viewed FEPCs as “pictures” or “cute cards,” but post-training reflections revealed a higher-level and more educationally-grounded understanding. One teacher noted,

قبل التدريب، كنت أعتقد بأن بطاقات المشاعر مجرد نشاط لطيف للأطفال، لكن بعد حضور الدورة “
والشرح عنها والتطبيق العملي في الروضة، اكتشفت انها أداة قوية تساعد الطفل يعبر عن مشاعره بدون ما
يتكلم” —**Quote 1.** (Before the training, I thought that emotion cards were just a nice
activity for children, but after the explanation and practical application, I
discovered that they are a powerful tool that helps children express their feelings
without having to speak.)

This quote underlined the transformation from seeing FEPCs as entertainment and fun to recognizing their instrumental role in supporting emotional communication. Similar shifts were described by all six participants. Their statements indicated strong consistency across the sample. Another teacher explained how the training clarified the structured nature of FEPCs' use. She said,

كنت أستخدم بعض الصور في الحصة، لكن ما كنت أعرف كيف أوظفها بطريقة تساعد الطفل اللي عنده “
ضغط نفسي أو خجل أو عدم ثقة بالنفس. ... التدريب وضح لي خطوات واضحة وكيف أطرح الأسئلة

Quote 2. (I was using some pictures in the lesson, but I didn't know

how to use them in a way that would help a child who is stressed or shy. The

training clarified the steps for me and showed me how to ask the right questions.)

Her reflection illustrated how training provided both methodological clarity and

confidence, thereby showing that the training enabled teachers to move from

understanding use to intentional, trauma-informed application.

Moreover, four kindergarten teachers described a deeper appreciation for the non-verbal communicative power of FEPCs—a safer channel for expression. One participant stated,

كنت أعتد على كلام الطفل فقط. الآن لاحظت بأن الطفل أحيانا يختار البطاقة التي تعبر عن إحساسه “

Quote 3. (I used to rely

solely on the child's words before we learned about FEPCs. Now I've noticed that

the child sometimes chooses the card that expresses their feelings faster than they

can put it into words, especially children who don't know how to describe their

emotions).

This recognition is particularly significant in the Saudi early childhood context, where

emotional expression may vary across cultures and languages. All six participants began

to see FEPCs not as supplementary tools, but as vital instruments for facilitating

emotional expression among children with different communication abilities. Participants

further reported that the training reshaped their perceptions of how FEPCs could be

integrated into daily educational practice. As one teacher described,

بعد التدريب فهمت أن بطاقات المشاعر المصور موبس للتعليم، هي أداة تواصل تحسس الطفل بالامان “

Quote 4. (After the training, I understood

that FEPCs are not just for education; they are a communication tool that makes the child feel safe and allows them to express themselves in a simple and direct way).

This quote underscored the sense of empowerment teachers felt in using FEPCs to establish emotionally safe classroom environments. This establishment is an essential component of trauma-informed practices.

Finally, five out of six kindergarten teachers highlighted the contrast between their initial hesitation and their post-training confidence. This shift demonstrated their growth confidence following training. One kindergarten teacher shared,

“كنت مترددة في البداية، لأن الموضوع جديد علينا، لكن لما شفت كيف التدريب ركز على الجانب العاطفي وكيف تساعدنا البطاقات نفهم الطفل أكثر، تشجعت وصرت واثقة في استخدامها” —Quote 5.

(I was hesitant at first because the topic was new to us, but when I saw how the training focused on the emotional aspect and how the cards helped us understand the child better, I became encouraged and confident in using them.)

Their growing confidence reflected a broader developmental shift; teachers not only understood FEPCs better but also perceived themselves as more capable of supporting children’s emotional needs through these art-based intervention tools.

Collectively, the data shown in Table 4.2 indicate a clear and meaningful expansion in kindergarten teachers’ understanding of FEPCs—from basic awareness to informed, intentional, and culturally contextualized application. The training provided them with a framework for recognizing emotions and prompting children’s expression. It also provided them with a way to navigate sensitive emotional interactions in developmentally appropriate ways (see Table 4.2). These evolutions in understanding laid

the foundation for their subsequent implementation of FEPCs in the classroom, which is explored further in theme two.

Table 4.2

Analysis of Some Participants' Quotes Under the First Theme of the Study.

Quotes (Q)	Analysis	Research Implications
Q.1: "Before the training, I thought that emotion cards were just a nice activity for children, but after the explanation and practical application, I discovered that they are a powerful tool that helps children express their feelings without having to speak."	This quote clearly reveals the teacher's shift from a "superficial and apparent" understanding of FEPCs to a "functional and in-depth" understanding. Before the training, she viewed the cards as recreational activities rather than an interactive educational tool. After the training, her perception changed, and she began to see FEPCs as a tool for non-verbal communication, especially for children who cannot express themselves verbally.	• Reflects the "before and after" aspect targeted by the first research question. • Reveals the impact of direct training on professional awareness. • Demonstrates a new understanding of the nature of emotional communication in children affected by trauma.
Q.2: "I was using some pictures in the lesson, but I didn't know how to use them in a way that would help a child who is stressed or shy. The training clarified the steps for me and showed me how to ask the right questions."	This quote shows that the teacher was using images in an unsystematic way, without a clear educational purpose. As a strategy for providing psychological and emotional support to children who exhibit signs of shyness or stress, she gained an understanding of how to utilize FEPCs after the training.	• Training made the use of intentional strategies more effective. • It indicates an increase in teachers' ability to support children with emotional needs. • It highlights the impact of training in providing teachers with consistent and targeted strategies.
Q.3: "I used to rely solely on the child's words before we learned about FEPCs. Now I've noticed that the child sometimes chooses the card that expresses their feelings faster than they can put it into words, especially children who don't know how to describe their emotions."	This quote illustrates a crucial point in early childhood literature: Children do not always possess the language to name their feelings, especially those affected by trauma or stress. The teacher realized after the training that: • Relying solely on verbal communication is limiting. • FEPCs provide an alternative and safer channel for the child.	• A shift in the teacher's educational philosophy. • Supports the idea that FEPCs are an "emotional empowerment" tool, not just a teaching aid. • Reinforces the importance of non-verbal communication in the culture of Arab and Saudi children.
Q.4: "After the training, I understood that FEPCs are not just for education; they are a communication tool that makes the child feel safe and allows them to	Here, a qualitative shift is evident on three levels: 1. From "educational tool" → "communication tool." 2. From focusing on activity → focusing on feeling safe	• Supports the concept of a "safe environment" – a cornerstone of trauma theory. • Reveals a cognitive and emotional shift in the teacher. • Connects FEPCs (Family-Engaged Kindergarten

Quotes (Q)	Analysis	Research Implications
express themselves in a simple and direct way.”	3. From recreational use → art-based intervention/emotional use This quote reflects a very deep understanding of the correct use of trauma-informed approaches in FEPC environments. This quote presents two important elements:	Classrooms) with children’s daily experiences and emotional communication.
Q.5: “I was hesitant at first because the topic was new to us, but when I saw how the training focused on the emotional aspect and how the cards helped us understand the child better, I became encouraged and confident in using them.”	1. Hesitation before training (corresponding to a lack of knowledge/absence of confidence). 2. Confidence after training (resulting from a deeper understanding of the emotional aspect). This transformation is very important because it demonstrates “growth in teacher confidence,” which is a crucial component in any successful training in the field of early childhood education.	• Reflects the impact of training on improving teachers’ efficiency. • Reveals a “change in professional behavior,” not just a change in thinking. • Confirms that providing real-world examples in training was effective.
Q.6: “FEPCs have specific methods and a clear objective, especially for children who have gone through difficult circumstances. Although I was already using facial expressions with the students, this is the first time I’ve learned that something called ‘FEPCs’ exists.”	Among the organized strategies (facial expressions), this quote draws attention to the difference between natural, evidence, and art-based practices such as FEPCs: The teacher realized:	• The difference between “spontaneous” and “systematic.” • The importance of having tools to help children who have gone through difficult experiences.
Q.7: “Honestly, the difference is huge. Before the training, I thought they were just pictures; after the training, I learned how to start a conversation with the child based on the card they choose.”	This quote illustrates a very important step in the analysis: The teacher moved from using pictures to constructing a dialogue (dialogic interaction). The dialogue here is not only linguistic but also emotional and is art-based (presented by the child) (choosing a card).	• The training shows an effect on socio-emotional awareness in children who may have experienced trauma. • It reveals cultural sensitivity in the teacher towards affected children.
		• The training transformed the teacher’s communication skills. It became a “conversation starter,” as the literature (FEPCs) states. • Strongly supported Research Question 1.

The quotes in Table 4.2 demonstrate how teachers developed their knowledge of FEPCs through the training program under Theme One. All six teachers who participated in the study reported experiencing a fundamental change in their understanding of FEPCs, shifting from viewing them as general or activity-based to using them as

purposeful, art-based communication tools. The teachers reported that five of six became more confident when using FEPCs, and four stated that nonverbal communication skills help children who cannot speak or express their feelings.

Theme 2: FEPCs As a Catalyst for Emotional Expression in Kindergarten Classrooms

Following the training and exposure to structured FEPCs strategies, kindergarten teachers described a wide range of ways in which these cards could act as a catalyst for emotional expression among their students. Their accounts revealed that FEPCs enabled their students to communicate feelings that they were unable or often unwilling to verbalize. Particularly, these feelings were communicated when students experienced stress, anxiety, or signs of trauma. Indeed, the second theme directly reflects Research Question 2 (RQ2), which examines how teachers implemented FEPCs. These implementations included the challenges, students' reactions, and daily classroom practices (see Table 4.3).

Across interviews, five of six teachers explained that FEPCs provided children with what one participant described as a “non-verbal and emotionally safe tool” to express complex internal states. According to their stories, for many kindergarten children, especially those who struggled to articulate emotions in words, these cards became a preferred mode of communication. For example, one participant explained that by saying,

لاحظت أن الطفل اللي ما يتكلم كثير يروح مباشرة للبطاقة التي تمثل احساسه. كأنه يقول لي : (هذا اللي “
—”أحس فيه) بدون ما يستخدم الكلام. ... غالبا ما يرسمون مشاعرهم التي يشعرون بها في منطقة الفني

Quote 1. (I noticed that the child who doesn't speak much goes directly to the

card that represents his feeling, as if to say to me, ‘This is what I feel,’ without using words ... They often draw the feelings they experience in the art corner).

See Figure 4.1.

Her observation emphasized the important communicative bridge that FEPCs created for young children who may lack emotional vocabulary or who may experience communication barriers.

Figure 4.1

Kindergarten Students’ Drawings of Their Current Feelings



Also, participants frequently described moments when FEPCs enabled their kindergarten students to express emotions that would have otherwise remained hidden. For instance, one kindergarten teacher told,

في أحد الأيام، اختار طفل بطاقة الحزن بدون ما اطلب منهم الاختيار. كانت هذه اول مرة اعرف انه “
”حزين بطريقة واضحة—Quote 2. (One day, a child picked the ‘sadness’ card without
me saying anything. It was the first time I knew he was sad in such a clear way.)

The teacher’s explanation demonstrated how FEPCs discovered emotional states that teachers would not have identified through typical verbal interactions alone. By visualizing and picturing feelings, FEPCs helped kindergarten teachers better understand their young students’ needs and adjusted their teaching approach accordingly.

In addition to enabling individual expression, FEPCs became an integral part of “group routines and classroom discussions,” one participant explained. All teachers found that kindergarten children often engaged in deeper conversations when FEPCs were used collectively during circle time or morning meetings. One teacher described this effect by stating that

لما استخدمنا البطاقات في بداية اليوم، فجأة صار الاطفال يتكلمون عن مشاعرهم وبعضهم يشجع الثاني. “
”الجو كله تغير—Quote 3. (When we used the cards at the beginning of the day,
suddenly the children started talking about their feelings and encouraging each
other. The whole atmosphere changed.)

This finding illustrated how FEPCs supported individual emotional communication as well as fostered a sense of emotional community among children. This finding is indeed a key component of trauma-informed practice. Based on kindergarten teachers’ responses and narratives, they also observed positive changes in children’s “self-awareness” and

“ability to recognize emotions in peers.” They underlined that through the repetitive and visual nature of FEPCs, children began recognizing patterns in their own feelings and those of their classmates. For example, one participant said,

صار عند الاطفال لغة مشتركة. لما يشوفون بطاقة معينة يعرفون ان صاحبهم يمكن يحتاج مساعدة او “

Quote 4. (The children developed a common language. When they see a particular card, they know that their friend might need help or support.)

This shift in explanation reflects the development of emotional literacy and empathy among young learners, an outcome that has been widely reported in the literature on art-based intervention and visual emotion-based tools.

Furthermore, all participants emphasized that FEPCs worked as a “regulation tool” during moments of distress. Participants described situations where children proactively used FEPCs during emotional escalation. For instance, one kindergarten teacher noted,

أحد الاطفال عندما غضب ذهب بنفسه واختار البطاقة التي بها صورة طفل غضبان. ... بعدين جلسنا “

Quote 5. (When one of the children got angry, he went to the cards himself and chose the ‘anger’ card. Then we sat and talked about the reason, and he calmed down quickly.)

This example clarified how FEPCs supported coping and self-regulation, offering children a constructive outlet for emotional release.

Table 4.3*Analysis of Participants' Quotes under the Second Theme of the Study*

Quotes (Q)	Analysis	Research Implications
Q. 1: "I noticed that the child who doesn't speak much goes directly to the card that represents his feeling, as if to say to me, 'This is what I feel,' without using words. ... They often draw the feelings they experience in the art corner."	Children tend to use FEPCs as an art-based way to express their emotions without words. FEPCs and drawing helped them communicate their feelings safely and naturally.	• Supported non-verbal, art-based emotional expression. • Helped children with limited language. • Encouraged child-initiated emotional communication.
Q. 2: "One day, a child picked the 'sadness' card without me saying anything..."	It highlighted that spontaneous emotional expression occurs through a visual, art-based symbol.	• Supported emotional awareness. • Promoted empathy and emotional sharing. • Supported daily emotional check-ins
Q. 3: "When we used the cards at the beginning of the day, ... The whole atmosphere changed."	It reflected how using FEPCs improved the classroom emotional climate and peer support.	• Built emotional literacy. • Encouraged peer empathy.
Q. 4: "The children developed a common language. ..."	FEPCs became shared visual symbols that helped children understand and respond to each other's emotions.	• Supported emotional regulation. • Encouraged problem-solving. • Supported the sustainability of art-based interventions.
Q. 5: "When one of the children got angry, he went to the cards himself ..."	It showed children using FEPCs independently as an art-based self-regulation tool.	• Encouraged children's autonomy.
Q. 6: "... children started using the cards without any guidance.... became part of their daily routine."	It reflected that FEPCs became a natural, routine-based art activity in the kindergarten classrooms.	

Finally, kindergarten teachers repeatedly described how FEPCs transformed the overall classroom climate by making emotional expression more accessible, natural, and normalized. As a result, kindergarten students began to view feelings as something to share and manage. As one kindergarten teacher summarized,

الشيء اللي ما كنت اتوقعه هو انه الاطفال صاروا يستخدمون البطاقات بنفسهم بدون توجيهه مني. كأنها “

Quote 6. (What I didn’t expect was that the children started using the cards without any guidance. It was as if they had become part of their daily routine).

In sum, Table 4.3 demonstrates a summary of the findings under the second theme of my study. It shows that FEPCs serve as a powerful compound for emotional expression. Using FEPCs may allow young children to express core situations, participate in feeling discussions, and practice emotional regulation. Participants’ reflections indicated that FEPCs enhanced communication and played a crucial role in building emotionally responsive, trauma-informed early childhood environments.

Theme 3: Instructional Practices and Daily Classroom Routines Supporting FEPCs

Implementation

There were no formal instructional practices provided to the participants during the professional development sessions; rather, general tips and broad examples on suggested FEPC use were provided. The kindergarten teachers who participated in this study integrated FEPCs into their daily instructional routines in multiple intentional and spontaneous ways, demonstrating how the cards functioned as a flexible pedagogical tool rather than a stand-alone activity. Their narratives revealed that FEPCs became embedded within the rhythm of the school day. Thus, using them shaped their morning routines, transition periods, moments of conflict resolution, and emotional check-ins.

The third theme that emerged expanded RQ2, which was focused on the practical strategies that teachers used to incorporate FEPCs into early childhood settings. It then emphasized how these strategies supported kindergarten children’s emotional interaction

(see Table 4.4). Throughout the interviews, participants explained that FEPCs quickly became a central part of their “morning routines,” with kindergarten children using them to express how they felt at the start of the school day. Based on participants’ descriptions, I found that this practice was valuable to them for identifying emotional states early and adjusting instructional interactions accordingly. One kindergarten teacher described,

صرنا نبدأ يومنا بأن كل طفل يختار بطاقة تعبر عن شعوره. هذا النشاط أعطانني فكرة واضحة عن “

Quote 1: (We started today by having each child choose a card that expressed their feelings. This gave me a clear idea of how they were feeling before we began our day).

Thus, this routine allowed teachers to anticipate potential challenges, support children experiencing sadness and anxiety, and reinforce positive emotional readiness among the group.

In addition, participants integrated FEPCs into “transition moments,” such as moving from free play to structured activities and from playing to activity areas. These transitions could often be emotionally charged for young children. Hence, FEPCs helped smoothen out the process safely. For example, one kindergarten teacher stated,

عند الانتقال من نشاط الى اخر، كنت اطلب منهم اختيار بطاقة تعبر عن شعورهم. ساعدت هذه “

الاستراتيجية في تهدئة التوتر الحاصل بين الاطفال، خصوصا عند الاطفال اللي يرفضون ترك النشاط اللي

Quote 2: (When transitioning from one activity area to another, I would ask the children to choose a card that expressed their feelings. This helped to calm their tension, especially among children who refused to give up an activity they loved).

This example stressed the use of FEPCs as a regulatory tool that supported smoother behavioral and emotional transitions. A significant instructional practice reported involved using FEPCs during “*individual emotional coaching*.” Participants stressed that when a kindergarten child struggled with *frustration*, *conflict*, or *disappointment*, teachers used FEPCs to initiate conversations about the child’s feelings. One participant described,

أجيبه معاي لركن المشاعر وأخليه يختار بطاقة. بعدها نسوي حوار إذا كان في طفل زعلان من زميله، “
—Quote 3: (If a child is upset with a
classmate, I bring them along and let them choose a card. Then we have a short
conversation about why they chose the card and how we can resolve the
situation).

These interactions fostered emotional literacy, conflict resolution skills, and empathy—key components of trauma-informed practice.

Furthermore, participants also used FEPCs during “*story time and thematic lessons*,” integrating them into literacy, art, and social-emotional learning activity areas/corners. For instance, when reading a story about a character experiencing emotions such as “*fear, joy, sadness*,” etc., teachers asked their kindergarten children to choose FEPCs that matched the character’s emotional state. One participant stated,

لما أقرأ قصة، اخلي الاطفال يختارون بطاقة تعبر عن شعور الشخصيات في القصة. هذا النشاط يجعل
—Quote 4: (When I read a
story, I let the children choose a card that represents a character’s feelings. This
made the story more interactive and helped the children understand emotions in a
deeper way).

Therefore, through this integration, FEPCs supported comprehension, empathy, and vocabulary development.

Additionally, four participants emphasized that FEPCs became especially powerful during “conflict resolution” among most of their kindergarten children. According to their interview responses, when disagreements arose, children were encouraged to use the cards to express their emotions before discussing solutions. One kindergarten teacher explained that

صار عندي ركن ثابت للبطاقات، اسمه ركن المشاعر وبه مرايا ومجموعة البطاقات. ... اذا كان هناك “

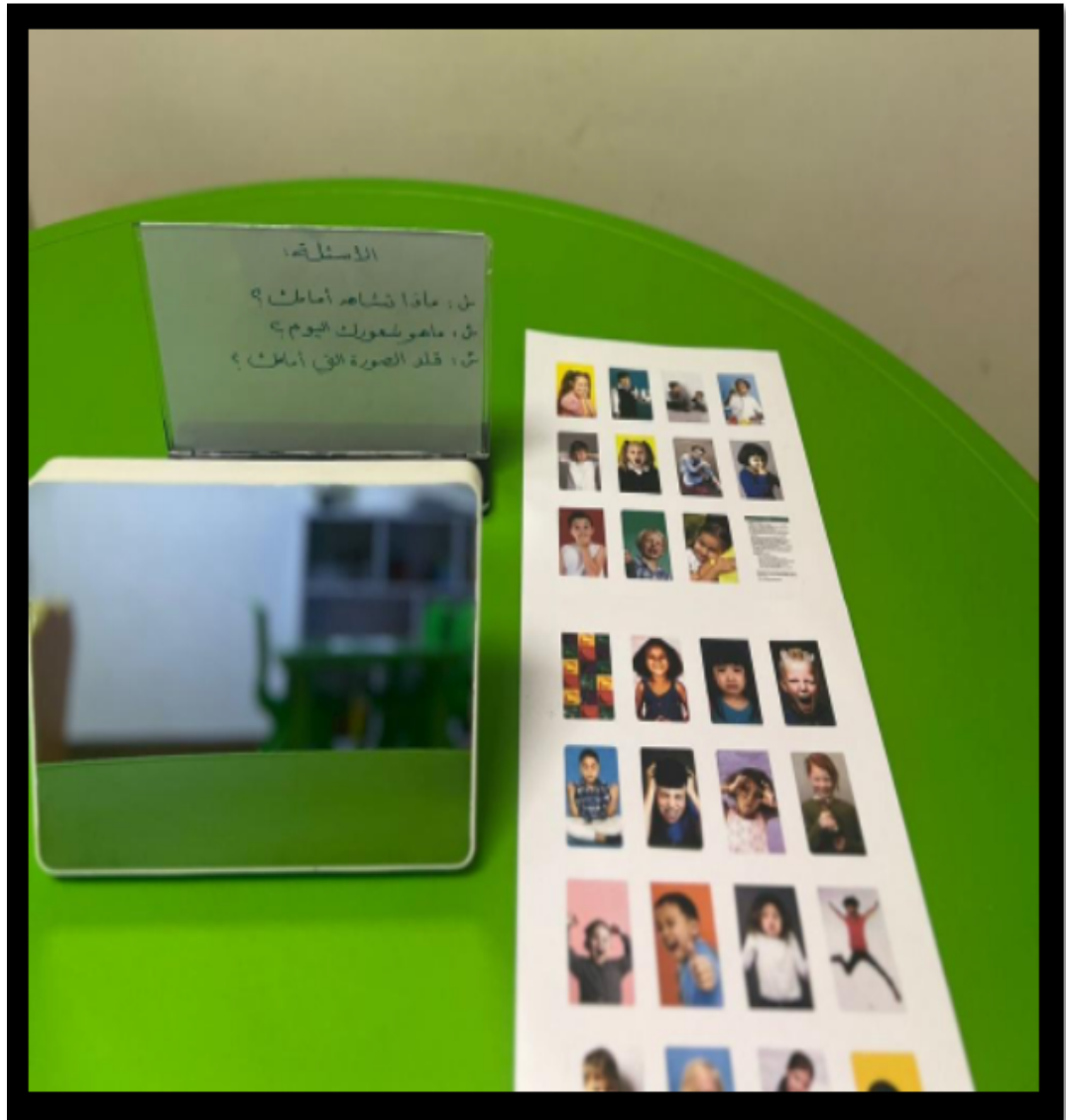
خلاف بين الاطفال، نروح للركن منطقة المشاعر وكل طفل يختار بطاقة تعبر عنه. بعدها نبدأ نفكر

—**Quote 5:** (I now have a designated corner/area for cards. If there’s a disagreement between the children, we go to the corner/area, and each one chooses a card that represents them. Then we start thinking of a solution.)

Her strategy—which included a small mirror, a prompt asking, “What do you see?” and FEP images for children to choose from on a classroom table demonstrated in Figure 4.2—helped mitigate the conflict and provided a structured way for children to articulate their perspectives. Moreover, participants believed that FEPCs played a role in helping children “self-regulate.”

Figure 4.2

An Example of an Activity Area that One Participant Created in Her Classroom to Encourage the Use of FEPCs Among Her Kindergarten Students.



All participants observed that some kindergarten children independently approached the FEPCs station during emotional distress, even without their prompting. For example, one participant remarked,

في صفّي طالب كل ما يتضايق يذهب من نفسه لمنطقة المشاعر ويختار صورة من البطاقات تعبر عنه “

Quote 6: (I have a child in my

class who, whenever he’s upset, goes to the cards and chooses a picture. Then he

comes and shows it to me, as if to say, ‘I need help’).

This pattern indicated that FEPCs became internalized as an accessible emotional outlet that young children could use independently.

Table 4.4

Analysis of Participants’ Quotes under the Third Theme of the Study

Quotes (Q)	Analysis	Research Implications
Q. 1: “We started today by having each child choose a card that expressed their feelings. ...”	FEPCs are used as an art-based emotional check-in (<i>morning routines</i>) at the start of the day.	• Supported daily emotional awareness. • Helped teachers respond early. • Supported smoother transitions.
Q. 2: “When transitioning from one activity area to another, ...”	FEPCs as a calming tool during transitions.	• Reduced emotional tension. • Encouraged reflection and communication.
Q. 3: “If a child is upset with a classmate, ...”	FEPCs support emotional dialogue and conflict resolution.	• Supported peaceful problem-solving. • Connected emotions with literacy.
Q. 4: “When I read a story, I let the children choose a card that represents a character’s feelings. ...”	It reflected the integration of FEPCs into storytelling as an art-based learning activity.	• Deepened emotional understanding. • Supported emotional safety.
Q. 5: “I now have a designated corner/area for cards (FEPCs). ...”	It showed the value of a safe, art-based emotional space.	• Encouraged shared problem-solving.
Q. 6: “I have a child in my class who, whenever he’s upset, goes to the cards and chooses a picture. Then he comes and shows it to me, as if to say, ‘I need help.’”	Kindergarten children used FEPCs independently to seek help.	• Supported non-verbal help-seeking.

Finally, participants also highlighted that consistency in the routine use of FEPCs

strengthened children’s emotional vocabulary over time. Their narratives showed that

regular exposure helped kindergarten children identify and express their own emotions and comprehend the emotions of others. Then, this shift could support both emotional expression and broader social-emotional development.

In conclusion, Table 4.4 shows that FEPCs were seamlessly integrated into kindergarten teachers' daily classroom routines. Therefore, the opportunity to engage with FEPCs offered children structured yet flexible opportunities to express emotions, communicate needs, and develop emotional awareness. Through these daily instructional practices, FEPCs functioned as a multimodal tool (see Table 4.4). Accordingly, this tool supported their communication, behavior regulation, relationship building, and trauma-informed responses within their classrooms.

Theme 4: Challenges, Barriers, and Contextual Constraints in Implementing FEPCs

Although participants expressed strong gratitude for the value of FEPCs, they also faced several challenges. Participants stated that these challenges shaped how effectively they could use the strategy in their classrooms. Also, I found that these challenges emerged from the structural, cultural, and practical realities of working in Saudi Arabian early childhood settings. Theme four addressed the key aspects of RQ2. Thus, this theme illuminated the barriers participants faced, offering insight into the contextual complexity of integrating FEPCs (see Table 4.5). One of the most frequent challenges that participants mentioned was the "limited time within the daily schedule." Kindergarten teachers explained that while FEPCs were beneficial, using them required committed time for emotional conversations. They also said that time was often constrained by curriculum pacing, assessments, and administrative expectations. Per one participant,

أحيانا يومنا الدراسي يكون مزدحم جدا بالأنشطة والمناهج المطلوبة، لذا لا يكون لدي وقت كافي لعمل “

”جلسة مشاعر لجميع الاطفال—**Quote 1:** (Sometimes the school day is so busy with activities and required curriculum that I don’t have enough time to hold an emotional support session for each child).

This challenge highlighted the tension between the relational, child-centered nature of FEPCs and the structured demands of the curriculum.

Participants also described difficulty “supporting children who displayed hesitation or emotional avoidance,” particularly those who may have experienced trauma or were naturally shy or unconfident. FEPCs created opportunities for expression, but not all their young students were immediately comfortable using them. For example, as one kindergarten teacher shared,

”لاحظت أن بعض الأطفال يخافون يعبرون عن مشاعرهم، حتى بالبطاقات. . . يحتاجون وقت أطول “

”وتشجيع مستمر—**Quote 2:** (I’ve noticed that some children are afraid to express their feelings, even with cards. They need more time and consistent encouragement).

This example reflected wider findings in trauma-informed literature. Indeed, it suggested that emotional expression must be scaffolded gently and consistently, especially for children with limited emotional vocabulary or a history of trauma who lack the emotional intelligence to process their adversities appropriately, or are reluctant to express their emotions due to cultural norms (e.g., expectations that boys should not cry or girls should never get angry).

Another challenge centered on “teachers’ confidence and previous training.”

Although the FEPCs’ training sessions increased the kindergarten teachers’ awareness,

two of them felt they were learning as they went, mainly when addressing sensitive emotions. One of them explained that

أحيانا احتار كيف أتعامل مع بعض البطاقات، بالأخص لما الاطفال يختارون بطاقات تعبر عن الخوف أو “

الغضب. أحس اني احتاج تدريب أعمق—**Quote 3:** (Sometimes I’m unsure how to handle

certain cards, especially when a child chooses one that expresses fear or anger. I

feel I need more in-depth training). This reflects training for dealing with

emotions like fear and anger, not necessarily on how to use the cards.

Her insight underscored the need for continued PD and ongoing coaching in trauma-

informed emotional interaction. Participants also faced “cultural considerations” that

impacted FEPC’s utilization. In Saudi classrooms, emotional expression is often

influenced by social expectations and family upbringing. One teacher described that by

saying,

بعض الاهالي/ الاباء لا يحبون أن طفلهم يتكلم عن مشاعر مثل الحزن او الخوف خاصة الذكور منهم، “

لأنهم يعتقدون بانها ضعف. فكنت اواجه صعوبة عندما يرجع الطفل ويطلب منهم بطاقة او يعبر عن

شعوره—**Quote 4:** (Some parents don’t like their children talking about feelings

like sadness or fear. They think it’s a sign of weakness. So, I used to have

difficulty when my child came to school and asked for a card or tried to express

his feelings).

This barrier pointed out the importance of cultural responsiveness and the need for

broader community education about emotional development.

Furthermore, “managing group dynamics during FEPCs use” was a notable

challenge. According to participants’ narratives, when their young students used FEPCs

in group settings, several students became curious or overly reactive to their peers’ emotional choices. One outstanding quote was,

أحيانا الاطفال يسألون بعضهم البعض: لماذا اخترت هذه البطاقة؟ وهذا يسبب احراج لبعضهم، خصوصا “
—**Quote 5:** (Sometimes children ask each other,
‘Why did you choose that?’ and this embarrasses some of them, especially those
who do not like to share their feelings).

This quote suggested that while FEPCs promote emotional sharing, children also need guidance in respecting boundaries and maintaining psychological safety. Additionally, participants claimed that a smaller but meaningful challenge involved “resource access and sustainability.” Some participants also indicated that they lacked printed sets of FEPCs or needed replacements when cards were damaged. One kindergarten teacher remarked,

بعض بطاقتي تمزقت من كثر الاستخدام وكذلك فقدت بعضها . في الحقيقة احتجت الى طباعة العديد “
—**Quote 6:** (My cards tore or some of the images got lost due to
frequent use. I had to reprint them several times).

Such logistical concerns can affect the long-term sustainability of FEPCs’ use in classrooms that rely on physical materials.

Finally, participants argued that the emotional labor involved in “navigating children’s difficult feelings.” FEPCs occasionally surfaced deep *sadness, fear, anger, or anxiety* in kindergarten students—emotions that participants were committed but not always fully trained to handle. For example, one participant explained,

لما طفل اختار بطاقة الخوف وبدأ يبكي، شعرت بثقل المسؤولية. ... حاولت ان اساعده لكن تمنيت لو “
—**Quote 7:** (When a child

chose the ‘fear’ card and started crying, I felt the weight of responsibility. I tried to help him, but I wished I had more training in dealing with difficult emotions).

This example reflected a recurring theme: *FEPCs open emotional doors, but teachers need support and training to walk through those doors effectively.*

Table 4.5

Analysis of Participants’ Quotes under the Fourth Theme of the Study.

Quotes	Analysis	Research Implications
Q. 1: “Sometimes the school day is so busy ...I don’t have enough time...”	Time limitations that affect consistent use of FEPCs.	• Showed need to embed art-based tools into routines.
Q. 2: “... some children are afraid to express their feelings, ...”	Emotional expression takes time, even with art-based tools (FEPCs).	• Highlighted the need for patience and consistency.
Q. 3: “Sometimes I’m unsure how to handle certain cards ... I feel I need more in-depth training.”	It reflected teachers’ need for deeper training when emotions are intense.	• Indicates need for advanced PD.
Q. 4: “Some parents don’t like their children talking about feelings ...”	It revealed cultural and parents’ challenges related to emotional expression.	• Highlighted the need for parent awareness.
Q. 5: “Sometimes children ask each other, ‘Why did you choose that?’...”	It showed peer-related challenges that may affect children’s emotional safety.	• Emphasized the need for clear classroom norms.
Q. 6: “My cards tore, or some of the images got lost ...”	Pointed to the article’s challenges of frequent use.	• Highlighted the need for durable materials.
Q. 7: “When a child chose the ‘fear’ card and started crying, ...”	It reflected the emotional responsibility that teachers feel when using FEPCs.	• Showed need for support and training.

Despite these challenges, in addition to those that are outlined in Table 4.5, participants consistently expressed a desire to continue using FEPCs and to deepen their skills. The difficulties they encountered did not diminish their belief in the value of FEPCs. Instead, they highlighted essential areas for future training, resources, and systemic support.

Theme 5: Best Practice Recommendations for Effective and Culturally Responsive Use of FEPCs in Early Childhood Settings

As kindergarten teachers gained experience using FEPCs in the classrooms, they identified a set of best practices. They stated that these practices supported effective, meaningful, and culturally sensitive use of the cards with their young students. I found that these practices emerged from their classroom experiences, trial and error, emotional observations, and reflections on what worked best in serving the needs of their kindergarten students. *Theme 5* is directly related to and addresses RQ3. Indeed, it explored the best practices participants identified for implementing and incorporating FEPCs into the early childhood education settings (see Table 4.6). A central best practice repeatedly emphasized by the participants was the importance of “establishing a predictable routine for the use of FEPCs.” Participants noted that consistency helped kindergarten students understand the purpose of the cards and made emotional expression feel natural rather than forced. For example, a participant described that

عندما أصبحت البطاقات جزء من روتين الصباح، الاطفال تعودوا عليها وصاروا يستخدمونها بثقة “

—**Quote 1:** (Once the cards became part of their morning routine, the children got used to them and began using them with greater confidence).

I conclude that implementing this practice could create a safe and stable emotional space where children know they will be heard and supported.

According to participants’ stories, another best practice involved “using FEPCs as a part of intentional emotional check-ins,” not only during positive moments but especially during challenging ones. The participants found that pausing a conflict,

transition, or escalation moment to use FEPCs contributed significantly to emotional regulation. Per one participant,

أفضل وقت لاستخدام البطاقات هو عندما يكون الطفل متضايق. لما نوقف شوي ونختار بطاقة، عادة “
Quote 2: (The best time to use the cards is when the child is
upset. When we pause and choose a card, the child usually calms down and starts
talking).

The participant example explained one practice that reflected trauma-informed principles by prioritizing emotional safety and promoting self-regulation. The participants also stressed the value of “modelling emotional expression.” They found that children were more willing to share their feelings when they saw their teacher using FEPCs in front of them. As one participant shared,

كنت أختار بطاقة تعبر عن شعوري قبل الاطفال. هذا التصرف جعلهم يحسون انه نشاط طبيعي وليس “
Quote 3: (I chose a card that expressed my feelings before the
children. This made them feel it was something normal, not a test).

Her strategy helped kindergarten students normalize their emotional dialogue, as well as reduce stigma around expressing emotions, such as sadness, fear, and frustration.

In addition, participants mentioned another critical best practice: “linking FEPCs to culturally appropriate language and values.” The participants emphasized the importance of using emotion words aligned with the Arabic language and cultural understanding of empathy, patience, and emotional support. For instance, a participant explained that

كنت أربط البطاقة بقصة أو قيمة دينية، مثل الرحمة أو مساعدة الآخرين. هذا جعل الأطفال يفهمون “
Quote 4: (I would link the card to a story or religious
المشاعر بطريقة تناسب ثقافتهم

value, such as compassion or helping others. This helped the children understand emotions in a way that resonated with our culture).

As a result, I found that by contextualizing FEPCs within cultural frames, participants strengthened both their emotional and moral understanding. My participants also identified the essential of “asking open-ended, child-centered questions” when utilizing FEPCs. Participants found that, rather than directing or interpreting feelings for their young students, their goal was to create space for the kindergarten children to articulate meaning for themselves. As one participant expressed,

—“أفضل سؤال كنت استخدمه هو وش خلاك تختار هذي البطاقة هذا السؤال يفتح باب كبير للنقاش”

Quote 5: (My favorite question to ask my students is: ‘What made you choose this card?’ This question opens up a lot of discussion).

I found that her approach aligns with the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) prescribed developmentally appropriate practices (DAPs), encouraging autonomy and reflection (Friedman et al., 2022). The educational principles that support DAPs base their approach on child-centered learning that demands student involvement and developers who connect emotional development with social growth and cognitive understanding (Friedman et al., 2022). NAEYC defines a DAP as a method in which teachers establish learning spaces that honor children's personal needs, cultural heritage, and current developmental stage while promoting self-directed learning and active involvement. The framework enables children to develop their reflective abilities while they establish personal connections between their learning experiences across different developmental domains.

Additionally, maintaining a “designated FEPC space” in the classroom was described as highly effective. Participants noted that having a consistent physical location signaled to children that it was a safe area for emotional support. One of them noted,

Quote 6: “خصصت ركن/ منطقة للبطاقات، وصار الأطفال يلجؤون له لحالهم لما يحسون بالتوتر”

(I set up a corner/an area for cards ‘Emotions Area’, and the children started going there on their own when they felt stressed).

This “Emotions Area” supported both independence and emotional regulation for kindergarten students. Another best practice repeated by the kindergarten teachers was “collaboration with families.” Participants explained that FEPCs are even more effective when families understand their purpose and reinforce emotional language at home. One participant shared,

—“كنت أرسل صورة البطاقة للأهل وأشرح لهم معناها. هذا ساعد الطفل يستعمل نفس اللغة في البيت”

Quote 7: (I send a picture of the card to the parents and explained its meaning to them. This helps the child use the same language at home).

Although this was not always easy due to cultural variations within the Saudi context, as detailed in Chapter Three, teachers found that it enhanced the child’s emotional consistency.

Finally, the participants emphasized that it is important to reflect after having FEPC sessions, both individually and with children. They found out that reflective conversations helped children build emotional vocabulary, understand cause-and-effect, and generalize social-emotional skills to other settings. As one teacher described,

بعد ما يختار الطفل البطاقة، نسوي حوار بسيط ونرجع للموضوع آخر اليوم. هذا يخلي الطفل يفهم

Quote 8: (After the child chooses a card, we have a short “مشاعره بشكل أعمق”

conversation and return to the topic later in the day. This helps the child understand their feelings more deeply).

Together, these best practices underscored the thoughtful, reflective, and culturally responsive strategies that kindergarten teachers used to incorporate FEPCs effectively in their classrooms.

In the Saudi context, culturally appropriate response strategies may include this method, which links emotional dialogues to Islamic values that promote both empathy and self-control, maintain respectful communication about family heritage, and consider emotional display as an acceptable behavior in our cultural background. Thus, beyond fostering emotional expression, these practices and strategies helped create classrooms where emotional safety, empathy, and communication were foundational to children's learning experiences. Therefore, I believe these insights provide a practical framework for educators seeking to implement FEPCs in similar cultural and educational contexts.

Table 4.6*Analysis of Participants' Quotes under the Fifth Theme of the Study*

Quotes	Analysis	Research Implications
Q. 1: "Once the cards became part of their morning routine ..."	Routine built confidence and comfort.	• Supported consistency in art-based practices.
Q. 2: "The best time to use the cards is when the child is upset ..."	Highlighted FEPCs as a calming, art-based strategy.	• Supported emotional regulation.
Q. 3: "I chose a card that expressed my feelings before the children ..."	Reflected that teachers are modeling to normalize emotions.	• Build emotional safety.
Q. 4: "I would link the card to a story or religious value ..."	Culturally responsive use of FEPCs.	• Reduces pressure.
Q. 5: "My favorite question to ask my students is: 'What made you choose this card?' ..."	Open-ended questioning is a key strategy.	• Supported culturally relevant emotional learning.
Q. 6: "I set up a corner/an area for cards ..."	Showed how the environment supports emotional independence.	• Encouraged reflection and dialogue.
Q. 7: "I send a picture of the card to the parents and explain its meaning to them ..."	It emphasized the home-school emotional continuity.	• Encouraged self-regulation and freedom.
Q. 8: "After the child chooses a card, we have a short conversation and return to the topic later in the day ..."	Importance of the intentional follow-up for deeper understanding.	• Strengthened family engagement.
		• Supported emotional processing over time.

In sum, the best practices from participant feedback appear in Table 4.6, which shows how daily classroom activities used culturally responsive art-based methods. The table above demonstrates that teachers implemented these practices identically through their purposeful questioning approach while working with families and establishing emotional support systems to achieve success with FEPCs.

Theme 6: Teachers' Reflections on Emotional Growth—Their Own and Their Children

I noticed that the more deeply participants engaged with FEPCs, the clearer their understanding of children's emotional needs and the more they developed a heightened awareness of their own emotional responses, beliefs, and growth. In this study, deep engagement was characterized by several points. These points were reflected in teachers'

intentional and consistent use of FEPCs, their ability to articulate the purpose behind the cards, their use of open-ended, child-centered questions, and their recognition of FEPCs as an art-based, trauma-informed communication tool rather than a simple classroom activity. The professional development training led teachers to move from basic knowledge to purposeful, informed teaching methods, as reflected in their post-training reflections, as shown in Table 4.2. Their reflections showed a dual process: (1) children experienced notable emotional development, and (2) teachers themselves underwent meaningful professional and personal transformations (see Table 4.7). This theme enriched my findings by illustrating how FEPCs shaped the relational and emotional landscape of the classroom. It extended beyond simple instructional practice.

The six kindergarten teachers consistently observed “significant emotional growth among children,” specifically in their ability to recognize, label/name, and communicate feelings. They strongly stated that many of their kindergarten children who previously struggled to express themselves verbally began using FEPCs as a bridge to articulate complex emotions. One teacher reflected,

صار الطفل يعرف يسمي شعوره، أول كان يقول ما أدري، لكن الآن يختار البطاقة ويشرح لي سبب

”اختياره—**Quote 1:** (The children have learned to name their feelings. Before, they would say ‘I don’t know,’ but now they choose a card and explain to me why they chose it).

This reflection shift indicated a deeper acceptance of emotional vocabulary and an emergent sense of emotional awareness and control. Participants also noted enhancements in their kindergarten children’s “empathy and social understanding.”

Through their repeated use of FEPCs, their young children became more attuned to their peers' emotions. One participant shared that

لما يشوفون زميلهم مختار بطاقة الحزن صاروا يقربون منه ويحاولون يساعدونه تطورت عندهم مهارة “
التعاطف” — **Quote 2:** (When they saw their classmate choose the sadness card, they started to approach him and try to help him. Their empathy skills developed).

Her explanation demonstrated how FEPCs served as a social-emotional learning tool.

This tool strengthened interpersonal connections and compassion within the participants' classroom community.

Beyond the children's growth, teachers expressed deep reflections about “their own emotional and professional development.” Five of them noted that FEPCs changed how they perceived children's behavior, shifting from viewing behavior as “misconduct” to understanding it as communication. One teacher shared,

اكتشفت أن وراء كل سلوك شعور، قبل كنت أركز على التصرف نفسه. الآن صرت أبحث عن السبب “
العاطفي” — **Quote 3:** (I discovered that behind every behavior lies a feeling. Before, I focused on the action itself; now I look for the emotional reason).

This reflection implies a profound shift toward trauma-informed practice and demonstrates the powerful role FEPCs played in prompting teachers to adopt a more empathetic, attuned perspective. Teachers also described how using FEPCs fostered “greater patience,” “emotional sensitivity,” and “reflective thinking” in their daily interactions with children. As one teacher explained,

العمل مع البطاقات خلاني أفكر أكثر في مشاعر الأطفال ومشاعري. أنا حسيت انني صرت أهدأ وأكثر “
تفهماً” — **Quote 4:** (Working with the cards made me think more about the children's feelings and my own. I felt calmer and more understanding).

Such reflections suggest that FEPCs not only benefitted the children but also cultivated emotional growth and “professional development” in teachers themselves.

Four kindergarten teachers expressed that FEPCs changed their understanding of their role as early childhood educators. Rather than focusing solely on academic outcomes, they began to see themselves as facilitators of emotional development and healing. One teacher stated,

“قبل كنت اشوف دوري تعليم المنهج فقط الان اشوف ان دوري اكبر ... اني اساعد الطفل يفهم نفسه “

”ويحس بالأمان—**Quote 5:** (Before, I saw my role as simply teaching the curriculum.

Now I see my role as much bigger ... helping the child understand themselves and feel safe).

This shift in the kindergarten teacher’s role identity underscored the long-term significance of FEPCs in shaping her philosophy about her students and practice. The participants also described emotional moments they experienced during FEPC sessions—moments of connection, surprise, or even heartbreak. One teacher recounted,

“لما طفل اختار بطاقة الخوف وقال: أنا خائف من الصراخ في البيت، حسيت بمسؤولية كبيرة. البطاقات

”فتحت لي باب ما - كنت اشوفه—**Quote 6:** (When a child chose the fear card and said,

‘I’m afraid of yelling in the house,’ I felt a great sense of responsibility. The cards opened a door for me that I hadn’t seen before).

The teacher’s reflection showed that FEPCs uncovered young children’s emotional truths that might otherwise remain hidden; thus, it may harm them. Therefore, it highlighted the emotional weight teachers carried and their growing ability to respond with compassion and care.

Furthermore, teachers expressed a newfound appreciation for the power of non-verbal communication, both for children and for themselves. They recognized that emotions often surface before words and that visual tools like FEPCs can bridge gaps in communication. One participant summarized,

“تعلمت أنه مو لازم الكلام عشان أفهم الطفل. البطاقة تكفي” —**Quote 7:** (I learned that I don’t need to speak to understand a child. A card is enough).

Overall, Table 4.7 shows that participants’ reflections revealed that FEPCs did far more than serve as a classroom activity. Indeed, it became a transformative tool shaping emotional experiences, relationships, and professional identity. All participants said they grew more skilled in interpreting children’s emotional signals, more reflective in their own responses, and more committed to fostering emotional safety in their classrooms. Concurrently, their kindergarten children demonstrated increased emotional literacy, empathy, confidence in expression, and self-regulation.

Table 4.7*Analysis of Participants' Quotes under the Sixth Theme of the Study*

Quotes	Analysis	Research Implications
Q. 1: "The children have learned to name their feelings ..."	Growth in children's emotional awareness through art-based tools (FEPCs).	• Supported emotional literacy.
Q. 2: "...They started to approach him and try to help him. Their empathy skills developed."	Reflected the increase of empathy among peers.	• Encouraged social connection and support.
Q. 3: "I discovered that behind every behavior lies a feeling ..."	Showed a shift in participants' understanding of kindergarten children's behavior.	• Supported trauma-informed thinking.
Q. 4: "Working with the cards made me think more about the children's feelings and my own. I felt calmer and more understanding."	Highlighted teachers' emotional self-awareness.	• Supported teacher well-being.
Q. 5: "Before, I saw my role as simply teaching the curriculum. Now I see my role as much bigger ..."	Reflected a change in teachers' professional identity.	• Reinforced holistic teaching roles.
Q. 6: "When a child chose the fear card and said, 'I'm afraid of yelling in the house,' I felt a great sense of responsibility."	FEPCs revealed hidden emotional experiences.	• Supported early identification of distress.
Q. 7: "...I don't need to speak to understand a child. A card is enough."	The power of non-verbal, art-based communication.	• Supported inclusive emotional practices.

Cooperatively, these reflections highlighted the huge relational and emotional impact of FEPCs. FEPCs are reinforcing their value as art-based interventions that are culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate, and trauma-informed tools in early childhood education.

Summary of Findings

In conclusion, the findings of my qualitative case study presented in Chapter Four explored how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia understood, used, and reflected on the Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards as an art-based intervention tool. This tool can then support young students' emotional communication. Across the six themes outlined above (see Table 4.1), the data showed a clear developmental progression in the Saudi

kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practices. These teachers shifted from having a limited or surface-level understanding of FEPCs to adopting a more purposeful, informed, and trauma-informed perspective after the PD (see Table 4.2). FEPCs worked as a powerful promoter that enabled children to (1) express emotions non-verbally, (2) engage in meaningful emotional dialogue, and (3) show increased empathy, emotional awareness, and self-regulation (see Table 4.3).

The findings also demonstrated that kindergarten teachers integrated FEPCs into their daily classroom routines through a variety of structured and spontaneous instructional practices. These practices included (1) morning check-ins, (2) transition support, (3) conflict resolution, (4) storytelling, and (5) emotional coaching (see Table 4.4). Meanwhile, kindergarten teachers faced several challenges. Some of these challenges included (1) time constraints, (2) children's hesitation, (3) cultural expectations, and (4) the emotional weight of supporting children's difficult feelings (see Table 4.5). Despite these barriers, all teachers identified a range of best practices that supported effective, culturally responsive use of FEPCs. The best practices as described by the six participants were (1) consistent routines; (2) modeling emotional expression; (3) open-ended questioning; (4) designated FEPC spaces; and (5) collaboration with families (see Table 4.6).

In sum, kindergarten teachers reflected deeply on the emotional growth experienced by both themselves and their students. They emphasized the interactive, transformative nature of FEPC use in early childhood settings (see Table 4.7). Consequently, all these findings illustrated the potential of FEPCs. These art-based cards can act as a trauma-informed, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate tool in

order to strengthen our children's emotional communication in Saudi kindergarten classrooms. The themes presented above lay the foundation for further analysis and interpretation of my study's implications, which are addressed in Chapter Five.

Next, the findings that exist in this chapter provide a comprehensive understanding of how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia perceived and used FEPCs, as well as the challenges and best practices that shaped their experiences. Building on these findings, Chapter Five moves beyond description to interpretation. It also situates the findings within the broader literature on early childhood education and visual emotion-based interventions. Therefore, the following chapter will (1) integrate these insights; (2) discuss the implications for early childhood educators and policymakers; (3) identify limitations; and (4) offer recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of my qualitative case study was to explore how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia understand, use, and reflect on the use of Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards (FEPCs) in order to support young children's emotional communication. I used a constructivist framework to examine how these teachers viewed children's emotional management in the classroom before and after they completed the FEPC professional development (PD) session training program in this research. Then, based on teachers' interviews, I documented their implementation practices in real classroom contexts and identified their best practices, which promoted meaningful emotional expression among their young learners. By centering the voices of the six kindergarten teachers, I sought to explain how art-based strategies can enhance emotional communication in kindergarten settings.

In Chapter Four, I presented six major themes that emerged from kindergarten teachers' surveys and interviews. Through these themes, I found several substantial shifts in teachers' understanding, instructional approaches, and emotional awareness as they integrated FEPCs into their daily practice. The data demonstrated that FEPCs enabled children to express their emotions while teaching them empathy, and that teachers gained an understanding of students' trauma, which helped them improve their teaching methods. Building upon these insights, in this chapter, I provide a deeper interpretation of the findings in relation to the existing literature. Also, Chapter Five discusses the broader

implications of my study, identifies the limitations, and offers recommendations for practice, policy, and future research in early childhood education.

Because Chapter Five requires interpretation, explanation, and analysis that goes beyond mere description, I retained the six themes presented in Chapter Four. However, some of these themes are discussed together in this chapter due to their conceptual and analytical overlap. Rather than creating new merged themes, in the discussion section I integrated the related themes to provide a more cohesive interpretation of the findings of this study. Specifically, Theme 1 and Theme 6 are discussed together, as both address teachers' reported growth in understanding and conceptualization of FEPCs under Research Question 1 (RQ1). Likewise, Theme 2 and Theme 3 are examined in relation to classroom implementation and practices under Research Question 2 (RQ2). On the other hand, Theme 5 is discussed in the context of trauma-informed shifts and best practices under Research Question 3 (RQ3). Similarly, Theme 4 remains distinct in that it addresses challenges, barriers, and cultural considerations. Therefore, this approach maintains the integrity of the original structure of the themes while allowing for deeper and more integrated analytical discussion.

Discussion

The findings of my study aligned with several prior studies that indicated that art-based and image-focused interventions create safe opportunities for children to externalize and process traumatic experiences. However, my present study extended this literature by shifting the focus from clinical art therapy settings to daily classroom settings for children. It thus stressed how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia can adapt FEPCs as a practical, art-based tool to support young children's emotional expression.

I organized this chapter around the three research questions. The findings were interpreted through the four integrated themes that reflected teachers' evolving perceptions, classroom practices, and professional experiences with FEPCs. These themes, together, clarified how FEPCs function as an art-based communication tool that supports children's social-emotional development. First, I addressed the dissertation's first research question. I examined six kindergarten teachers' FEPC usage patterns during two time periods—before and after their training. The findings for my first research question showed that participants experienced significant changes. These changes were in their understanding, self-assurance, and professional expertise with regard to interpreting children's emotions. Teachers developed their understanding of FEPCs from simple visual aids to recognizing them as essential artistic components that enable students to express emotions and communicate through art-based and trauma-informed approaches.

Second, research question two focused on how teachers described their use of FEPCs in everyday classroom practice. It included their young students' reactions and challenges. The findings discussed under this second question demonstrated how FEPCs were integrated into routines, transitions, storytelling, conflict resolution, and emotional support moments. This discussion also took into account the challenges teachers faced, such as time constraints, emotional responsibility, and cultural considerations, which shaped their experiences with FEPCs.

Lastly, the dissertation investigated through its third research question which early childhood education practices kindergarten teachers found most effective for implementing FEPCs in their classrooms. My research findings revealed that kindergarten teachers used specific methods, including demonstrating practices to

students (modeling), asking open-ended questions, establishing emotional spaces, and maintaining regular contact with parents through home–school communication. Overall, these practices showed kindergarten teachers’ reflective growth and their evolving role in supporting their children’s emotional expression, even though they are not trained therapists. Across all three research questions, I underscored the importance of teachers’ voices in understanding how schools can become emotionally safer and more responsive environments during the discussion. By studying teachers’ perceptions, practices, and reflections, I focused on the potential of art-based interventions, such as FEPCs, to support emotional expression and healing among young children—particularly those whose emotions might otherwise remain unspoken.

The Overall Relationship Between Theories, Literature, and Findings

Interestingly, the findings of my study strongly aligned with and extended both the theories in Chapter One and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Both highlighted in particular the body of my research demonstrating the value of art-based and image-supported strategies for helping children externalize, process, and regulate difficult emotions stemming from traumatic experiences.

Theories and the Findings

The main themes I discovered through my dissertation research illustrated how FEPCs enabled teachers to develop their knowledge, which led to better classroom teaching methods and improved their work with children, especially those who face negative experiences. The themes evolved through multiple stages—their progression reflected a layered process, as described below.

Beginning with teachers' enhanced awareness of their kindergarten children's emotional cues, the six participants found that FEPCs provided a safe, expressive medium for their kindergarten children to externalize their feelings nonverbally. Indeed, these kindergarten children began using FEPCs with greater openness, fostering deeper trust between teachers and students and resulting in safer emotional environments, better communication, and stronger classroom bonds. Teachers modified their teaching methods as classroom relationships shifted, requiring them to establish FEPCs for their regular instructional work. Teachers noticed that FEPCs evolved into an essential resource that assisted children who displayed trauma symptoms by enabling them to express their distress, control their emotions, and decrease their problematic behaviors. Ultimately, the teachers of kindergarten students expressed a desire for more training and institutional support because they understood that ongoing PD and organizational support would lead to lasting achievement.

The integrated pattern demonstrated a single continuous process that began with awareness development, moved to communication, then to relationship building, teaching method modification, and ended with professional growth. Importantly, my research study contained different themes that maintained vital relationships that support the theoretical frameworks that guided it. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), learning and development result from mediated social interactions, which in this case the FEPCs functioned as a tool to influence children's emotional expression and teachers' reading of their behavior. The bioecological model, which Bronfenbrenner presented in 1979, demonstrates how teacher-child interactions at the micro-level create

effects that spread across classroom culture and child behavior, thereby affecting teacher professional development.

The universality of facial expressions described by Ekman (2006) underpins why FEPCs effectively bridged communication gaps in a culturally diverse and linguistically developing early childhood context. My research findings showed that the universality of facial expressions, as supported by Ekman's theory, contains common elements that enable FEPCs to operate successfully between different cultural groups and with children who cannot speak or follow emotional control traditions. While there are various theories related to facial expressions, Ekman's theory was particularly well situated for this study for three main reasons: (1) it establishes a systematic method to detect basic emotions by monitoring facial expressions; (2) it demonstrates how people from different cultures understand fundamental emotional expressions; and (3) to be transparent, I had personal access to Ekman's original book, which I was exceedingly familiar with and had previously thoroughly analyzed. The theory of Ekman has proven to be highly influential, yet some educators continue to debate about the complete worldwide occurrence of emotional facial expressions. Research shows that people express their emotions through cultural display rules that exist in their social environment. Most researchers support the existence of core emotional expressions, which makes Ekman's framework suitable for studying FEPCs in early childhood settings, although scientists continue to debate about these expressions. This research confirmed and expanded previous findings by presenting new evidence demonstrating that FEPCs function as expressive tools that deliver effective results, are effective beyond Western clinical settings, and can be meaningfully integrated into Middle Eastern kindergarten educational environments.

In integrating these findings, my study demonstrated that FEPCs generate effects that extend beyond personal/single actions and short-term moments. Instead, the process of FEPCs led to changes that affected the entire emotional environment of a classroom. These tools enable children to express their unspoken needs, while teachers gain insight into what was previously unseen. Therefore, the practices of trauma-informed care can start to develop in early childhood facilities, which normally do not have access to therapeutic services. The different themes that interacted with one another illustrated that well-designed visual tools can activate multiple healing processes, fostering social connections and supporting professional development among early childhood education professionals.

Literature Reviewed and Findings

Prior empirical studies, explained in Chapter Two, consistently emphasized that children express themselves through drawing and painting and symbolic images, which function as visual communication tools that do not require spoken language, bypassing the limitations of verbal expression (Allen & Tussey, 2012; Eaton et al., 2007; Talwar, 2007; Waller, 2006). My dissertation confirmed these claims and validated these findings through its investigation of a teacher-operated early childhood program, demonstrating that FEPCs function as emotional symbolizers within a non-clinical setting in the same way as complete art therapy protocols. The participants in my study explained that FEPCs function as tools that “opened a door,” “made feelings visible,” and “gave children permission to speak.” These explanations mirrored the therapeutic tools identified in prior research on art-based trauma intervention. Hence, educational

resources that help students express their emotions through visible art-based intervention while learning to share their feelings with others.

Moreover, the literature reviewed also stressed that emotional expression through images not only reduces internal distress but also strengthens relationships and fosters a sense of safety (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020; Rowe et al., 2017; Sitzler & Stockwell, 2015). The kindergarten teachers in my research study demonstrated the same pattern of child development through their recorded stories, which showed that children developed trust, improved their communication skills, and engaged in social interaction when FEPCs were applied regularly. This idea indicated the underlying benefits of art-based interventions that can be translated into general classroom settings when teachers are provided with appropriate training and support.

The literature review also highlighted the importance of contextual and cultural factors in shaping young children's emotional communication (Goldner et al., 2021; Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020). Accordingly, my study contributed a new dimension by illustrating how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia interpreted, used, and adapted FEPCs within their own cultural, linguistic, and educational contexts. Overall, my dissertation advances the literature by simultaneously bridging two gaps: it extends art-based trauma research (1) into early childhood education; and (2) into the Saudi Arabian cultural context. Indeed, my study revealed that kindergarten teachers who receive basic emotional expression tools that match children's developmental levels can create artistic processes similar to those documented in therapeutic and clinical art-based studies. Therefore, it demonstrated that FEPCs function as an effective teaching method that teachers can use directly in their classrooms to deliver emotional support instruction.

Summary and Implications of Findings

Theme 1 and Theme 6

Summary of Findings and Interpretation. My findings showed that kindergarten teachers began the study with a limited and often ambiguous understanding of FEPCs. The FEPCs served as basic picture tools for these educators, who used them as additional classroom materials. Yet, after the professional development (PD) training sessions, teachers reported a clearer, more nuanced understanding of FEPCs as intentional emotional communication tools. These tools could support their kindergarten children's expression, emotional vocabulary, and trauma-related needs. The teachers also explained FEPCs in more detail, including how they defined and used them, as they evolved into a catalyst for trauma-informed practice that operated as a purposeful and standalone resource for students.

This shift in conceptualization suggested that structured training played an essential role in deepening teachers' understanding. The participants expressed initial confusion because they lacked motivation or had not been taught about emotion-based visual tools, like FEPCs, during their tenure in Saudi early childhood education. The PD training sessions established a conceptual framework that enabled these teachers to understand FEPCs as emotional communication tools. These tools went beyond their role as visual materials, helping children who struggled with verbal expression. The teachers showed rapid learning progress, which demonstrated that early childhood educators can acquire FEPCs by directly observing their actions and receiving specific examples. These Saudi teachers developed a better understanding of their kindergarten students because

the training provided them with the support needed to use FEPCs—art-based and trauma-informed methods.

Relationship to the Literature Reviewed. The transformation in teachers' understanding developed throughout the PD programs, which data showed were essential for teaching educators to adopt trauma-informed and art-based methods. Also, the shift toward their teaching methods emphasized more intentional, responsive approaches that align with recent child development research on trauma-informed educational practices. The research about art-based interventions that was conducted by both Eaton et al. (2007) and Waller (2006) examined how adults who understand children's emotions use less-stressful communication to help children build resilience. Thus, increased awareness that teachers described after the FEPCs training aligned with Waller's (2006) argument that visual and expressive tools deepen adults' understanding of internal child experiences that are often hidden or unspoken. Similarly, Eaton et al. (2007) found that art-based techniques create an entry point into children's emotional worlds. As a result, they can allow adults to perceive distress that might otherwise be misinterpreted as misbehavior. Therefore, my study extended these findings by showing that even non-therapists, such as general early childhood teachers, can gain similar insights when equipped with simple visual tools like FEPCs. Moreover, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) supported the idea that tools mediate learning and understanding. As a result, FEPCs acted as a mediating cultural tool enabling teachers to "see" children's inner states more clearly and scaffold their emotional development.

At the same time, my study also extended Eaton et al.'s (2007) work by proving that FEPC training not only enhanced teachers' emotional insight but also changed their

pedagogical decision-making. This idea aligned with the literature advocating for trauma-informed, emotionally attuned teaching practices. Bronfenbrenner's model additionally explained these changes as microsystem-level adjustments shaping children's social-emotional outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Multiple outcomes from previous studies have shown that early childhood teachers often lack formal training in emotional or mental health strategies. These outcomes created uncertainty in interpreting children's behaviors (Erdman et al., 2020; Kometiani & Farmer, 2020). Hence, consistent with the current findings, researchers highlighted that explicit modeling and guided practice are essential for teachers to use emotional tools effectively (Eaton et al., 2007). Indeed, the teachers' shift from vague awareness to informed conceptualization echoed findings from Kometiani and Farmer (2020), who found that visual emotion tools help bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering concrete, child-friendly methods for emotional expression.

Additionally, the growth in teachers' understanding reflected principles of constructivist learning theory. This theory posits that adults advance in meaning-making when new ideas connect with prior experience (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). Before training, teachers lacked conceptual scaffolding for FEPCs; however, once provided with structured knowledge, they naturally integrated the tool into their worldview. This finding supported the findings by Kometiani and Farmer (2020), who argued that trauma-informed tools become meaningful to teachers only when accompanied by reflective dialogue and opportunities for application.

Theme 2 and Theme 3

Summary of Findings and Interpretation. My findings revealed that kindergarten teachers integrated FEPCs into their classrooms through a larger range of intentional and spontaneous instructional practices. Teachers used FEPCs during morning check-ins, activity transitions, conflict resolution, individualized emotional coaching, and during small-group time, such as storytelling or reflective discussions. These practices allowed young children to select cards that represented their feelings and explain the reasons behind their choices. It also promoted their engagement in interpersonal conversations with their peers and teachers. Over time, FEPCs became part of their daily classroom routines rather than isolated or abstract activities.

This diverse use led kindergarten teachers to see FEPCs as flexible pedagogical tools that were adaptable to multiple instructional contexts rather than confined to a single structured activity. As a result, their practices reflected emergent, useful creativity shaped by both training and the lived experiences of classroom interaction. The integration of FEPCs into spontaneous moments, such as handling conflict or easing transitions, indicated that teachers internalized the tool as a natural extension of emotional communication instead of being a scripted program. This pattern also illustrated how FEPCs supported these teachers' skills to create emotionally safe environments. It also supported children in externalizing their internal feelings in age-appropriate, culturally sensitive ways. Moreover, teachers' decision to embed FEPCs into emotionally charged moments (e.g., sibling-like peer conflicts, separation, anxiety) helped children recognize and honor their feelings. That is, the teachers recognized their

children's emotional needs more readily and responded with greater empathy and intentionality.

Relationship to the Literature Reviewed. The implementation practices identified in my study mainly align with existing research on trauma-informed and art-based approaches in early childhood education. The literature reviewed herein emphasized that children, particularly those exposed to trauma, often struggle with traditional verbal expression. This challenge made visual-based tools essential for bridging gaps in emotional communication (Allen & Tussey, 2012). Rowe et al. (2017) similarly found that expressive visual activities built safety and trust among refugee children with trauma histories. FEPCs appear to trigger the same underlying therapeutic mechanisms, safety, connection, and belonging within a regular educational context. Bronfenbrenner's microsystem concept (1979) also supports this interpretation, as consistent relational tools like FEPCs strengthen child-teacher interactions, which are foundational for emotional development.

In addition, my study's findings also supported the work of Sitzler and Stockwell (2015), who argued that trauma-informed pedagogy requires flexible, relational, and responsive classroom practices—exactly the type of spontaneous FEPC use that Saudi teachers engaged in. Indeed, my findings paralleled Sitzler and Stockwell's (2015) conclusion that art-based wellness programs foster trust, belonging, and peer connection. In my current study, kindergarten teachers observed that their students became more willing to approach them, reveal emotions, and engage in social interaction once FEPCs were integrated into daily routines.

Furthermore, the way kindergarten teachers incorporated FEPCs into conflict resolution mirrored research showing that visual tools can scaffold children's emotional regulation and help them articulate the feelings underlying problematic behaviors (Eaton et al., 2007). The teachers' integration of FEPCs into storytelling, transitions, and conflict management is also consistent with findings by Kometiani and Farmer (2020). The research highlighted that emotion cards are most effective when embedded naturally within daily routines rather than used episodically. The teachers' adaptive implementation also reflected Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which holds that learning emerges through mediated interactions with adults and peers. FEPCs acted as mediating artifacts that facilitated co-regulation, shared emotional meaning-making, and opportunities for guided reflection, principles widely recognized in the literature on socio-emotional learning (Rowe et al., 2017).

Finally, my study contributed to the limited but growing literature on emotional communication tools in non-Western contexts. Implementation in Saudi classrooms added important cultural nuance, as the teachers adapted FEPC practices to align with Islamic values, Arabic-language expression, and local understandings of emotional appropriateness. This expanded the cross-cultural literature by demonstrating that FEPCs are not only transferable across educational systems but also capable of being integrated into diverse cultural and pedagogical landscapes. In sum, the findings added to the emerging literature on emotional communication in non-Western early childhood contexts—an area still underrepresented by demonstrating that Saudi teachers respond positively and critically to structured training on visual-based emotional tools.

Theme 4: Challenges, Barriers, and Cultural Considerations in Using FEPCs

Summary of Findings and Interpretation. One of the most memorable findings was that teachers encountered several challenges while implementing FEPCs. The major challenges included limited time within daily schedules, children's initial hesitation or shyness, varying levels of emotional vocabulary among students, and navigating culturally sensitive or difficult-to-discuss emotions. The kindergarten teachers also expressed uncertainty about how to respond when their young children disclosed emotionally heavy or trauma-related content during FEPC sessions. Additionally, some of them felt tension between allowing open emotional expression and meeting academic expectations or administrative demands.

Hence, based on these challenges, I suggested that FEPCs, while powerful, require more than procedural training; they demand ongoing emotional, cultural, and professional support. The kindergarten teachers' initial difficulty in eliciting emotions from young students reflects developmental realities: many young learners lack the linguistic or cognitive readiness to articulate feelings, especially if trauma is present. Cultural norms surrounding emotional privacy may also have influenced their willingness to openly identify feelings such as fear or sadness. Meanwhile, teachers' doubts when confronted with traumatic disclosures point to a need for structured guidance in trauma-informed practice. The tension between academic priorities and emotional support highlighted a systemic issue: while teachers valued FEPCs, they sometimes struggled to balance emotional work with an already demanding curriculum. In light of these barriers, I found that FEPC use is not purely a technical task but a deeply relational, culturally mediated process that requires time, sensitivity, and institutional support.

Relationship to the Literature Reviewed. These challenges mirrored findings in the broader literature on trauma-informed and socio-emotional strategies in early childhood education. Teachers' reported that FEPCs help children regulate behaviors resembling trauma manifestations (withdrawal, aggression, shutdown) were consistent with studies documenting behavioral improvements—following art-based interventions (Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015; Waller, 2006). Talwar's (2007) art therapy trauma protocol (ATTP) model also provided theoretical support—using visual stimuli engages sensory memory and helps children process difficult emotions, reducing dysregulated reactions. Teachers' improbability in responding to trauma-related disclosures was consistent with existing literature. Based on Sitzer and Stockwell (2015), early childhood educators frequently feel unprepared for trauma-informed emotional work. Their findings are especially true in contexts where mental health systems are still developing and stigma surrounding trauma may persist. Additionally, the nervousness teachers described between emotional support and academic pressure reflected a global issue—educational systems often prioritize cognitive development at the expense of emotional well-being (Waller, 2006). The kindergarten teachers' experiences reinforced the argument that effective trauma-informed practices require systemic support. It included administrative flexibility, ongoing professional learning, and clear protocols for safeguarding children.

Furthermore, children's reliance on images instead of words mirrored findings by Talwar (2007). He emphasized that traumatic memories often reside in non-verbal, sensory form, making image-based expression a more accessible medium for children (Talwar, 2007). Studies by Lev-Wiesel et al. (2020) and Goldner et al. (2021) also found that drawings and visual symbols helped children externalize painful experiences and

communicate emotions they struggled to verbalize. The present study adds new evidence by demonstrating that FEPCs, though less sophisticated than full art therapy interventions, operate through similar mechanisms. They reduce emotional load, lower communication barriers, and create psychological distance that enables children to express vulnerable feelings safely. Moreover, time constraints have been widely documented as barriers that prevent teachers from fully integrating art-based practices into daily routines (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020). The hesitation children displayed when asked to identify emotions aligned with research demonstrating that young children, especially those experiencing trauma, often avoid expressing vulnerable emotions due to fear, shame, or underdeveloped emotional vocabulary (Erdman et al., 2020).

Finally, the challenges observed in this study enrich the cross-cultural literature by highlighting how FEPC implementation intersects with local cultural expectations, religious values, and social norms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the Saudi cultural context added another layer, as emotional restraint and privacy are valued attributes in many Arab societies, particularly regarding expressions of sadness, fear, or family-related struggles. This cultural dimension also helped explain why teachers reported needing to approach emotional discussions with sensitivity. These findings support calls in the literature for culturally responsive art-based intervention tools, arguing that emotional strategies must be adaptable to local cultural frameworks rather than imported without modification (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2020). The Saudi teachers' perspectives demonstrated that while FEPCs are beneficial, thoughtful adaptation and sustained institutional support are essential for success. My study contributes new

insights by showing that FEPCs, used by general educators rather than therapists, can support emotional regulation in ways previously observed mainly in clinical settings.

Interpretation of Findings as a Whole

As a whole, the findings of my study present a coherent narrative about how kindergarten teachers in Saudi Arabia make sense of, implement, and grow through the use of Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards as an art-based intervention and trauma-informed tool for supporting young students' emotional communication. Across all themes, one overarching interpretation emerges: FEPCs function not simply as art-based materials but as relational, cultural, and developmental mediators that reshape children's emotional expression. These outcomes showed that when teachers are provided with appropriate training and reflective spaces, they are most likely to integrate FEPCs into their daily classroom practice. These results can happen in ways that address young learners' emotional needs while simultaneously transforming their own understanding of child development.

The teachers' growth in conceptual understanding suggested that FEPCs unlocked a language of emotions that had previously been inaccessible to many children and underutilized by teachers. This finding indicates that emotional communication in early childhood settings is not limited solely to children's developmental abilities, but also to the availability of tools and to teachers' confidence in using them. These findings implied that emotional expression is a co-constructed process that depends on teacher scaffolding, cultural responsiveness, and consistent routines. Based on the developmental shifts observed among children by the participants, there was an increase in emotional vocabulary, empathy, and self-regulation. These developmental shifts can be interpreted

as evidence that visual tools—FEPCs—can reduce the cognitive and emotional load required for verbal communication, thereby providing young learners with accessible pathways to express complex internal states.

At the same time, the challenges that kindergarten teachers encountered point to systemic and cultural factors that shaped how trauma-informed practices are enacted. Limited time, academic pressures, and cultural norms surrounding emotional privacy all influence how effectively FEPCs can be implemented. According to these findings, I suggested that emotional tools like FEPCs cannot exist in isolation; they require supportive institutional structures, clear guidelines for trauma disclosures, and a school culture that values emotional development alongside academic learning. The follow-up teachers' reflections on culturally sensitive emotions highlighted the importance of grounding trauma-informed practices within local cultural frameworks rather than importing them wholesale from Western contexts.

Theme 5: Emerging Best Practices Recommendations for Effective and Culturally Responsive Use of FEPCs in EC Settings.

Summary of Findings and Interpretation. According to my findings, teachers identified several best practices that enhanced the effectiveness of FEPCs: consistent daily routines, modeling emotional expression, using open-ended questions, creating designated FEPC spaces, and integrating cards into conflict resolution and reflective discussions. Saudi kindergarten teachers emphasized that these strategies increased their young students' emotional awareness, improved peer interactions, and facilitated more open communication. Alongside these classroom practices, all participants described a significant shift in their professional identity, moving from seeing their role as primarily

academic instructors to recognizing themselves as emotional supporters, guides, and facilitators of trauma-informed communication. Many of them reflected that using FEPCs not only helped young students but also transformed their own patience, empathy, and understanding of young students' emotional lives.

These emergent best practices recommended that teachers internalize FEPCs not merely as instructional tools but as relational instruments that guided their daily interactions with children. Their commitment to routine and modeling indicates that teachers recognized the need for emotional predictability, an essential component of trauma-informed training. The shift in professional identity reflected a bigger change: teachers began to see emotional communication as inseparable from learning, rather than a peripheral aspect of early childhood education. This transformation indicates that FEPCs created opportunities for teachers to slow down, observe more carefully, and listen more intentionally to children's expressions. The emotional disclosures children made through FEPCs also heightened teachers' awareness of the invisible burdens some children carry. It reinforced their sense of responsibility and emotional attunement. Accordingly, these insights suggested that best practices did not arise solely from technical strategies but from teachers' evolving relational stance—one grounded in empathy, safety, and trauma awareness.

Relationship to the Literature Reviewed. The best practices identified by the Saudi participants are closely aligned with research that has consistently highlighted the importance of predictable routines and safe emotional spaces for every child and those who may have experienced trauma (Eaton et al., 2007). The need for more training aligns with Eaton et al.'s (2007) critique that many art-based trauma programs lack structured

support for facilitators. Thus, Saudi teachers' emphasis on modeling emotional language reflected foundational principles of emotion theories, which posit that children learn emotional expression by observing trusted adults (Ekman, 2006).

Likewise, Kometiani and Farmer (2020) emphasized that the facilitator's skill deeply influences the effectiveness of expressive interventions. The present findings reinforce these concerns (e.g., teachers felt more capable after the FEPCs training, yet desired ongoing support to sustain trauma-informed practice). These findings extend the literature by providing evidence from the early childhood education sector suggesting that schools, not only therapy centers, need systemic professional development to implement visual emotion tools effectively. The use of open-ended questioning supported Kometiani and Farmer's (2020) findings that art-based emotional tools are most effective when accompanied by reflective dialogue that allows children to elaborate on their internal experiences.

Finally, the kindergarten teachers' shift in professional identity also reflected findings in the trauma-informed education literature. Studies reported that as educators adopt emotionally supportive practices, they often reconceptualize their roles as co-regulators and relational anchors for children (Allen & Tussey, 2012). This concept mirrors the transformation described by kindergarten teachers in my study, who began to integrate emotional support into their sense of teaching purpose. FEPCs functioned similarly to other visual-emotional tools documented in the literature, acting as mediating artifacts that help teachers and children co-construct meaning. These tools create pathways for nonverbal or hard-to-articulate emotions, supporting children's self-regulation and interpersonal understanding (Kometiani & Farmer, 2020). As a result, this

dissertation demonstrated that when given appropriate training and tools, Saudi teachers can embrace trauma-informed practices. Therefore, they can harmonize with cultural and religious values, enriching the global discourse on culturally responsive FEPCs.

In sum, perhaps most significantly, the findings revealed that FEPCs served as catalysts for teachers' professional transformation. The kindergarten teachers did not merely learn a new technique. Indeed, they adopted a new lens through which to understand their kindergarten children's behaviors, needs, and emotional experiences. This shift in professional identity—from instructor to co-regulator and emotional guide—indicated that FEPCs inherently reshape the relational landscape of early childhood classrooms. When teachers view emotions as central rather than peripheral to learning, their everyday decisions, responses, and interactions become more attuned and empathetic. This relational shift has deeper systemic implications: emotional well-being curriculum is not an add-on but a foundation of high-quality early childhood practice.

When viewed as a whole, these findings advocated that FEPCs offer a culturally adaptable, developmentally appropriate, art-based intervention and trauma-informed approach. Therefore, these findings aligned with global movements toward universal early childhood education, while also resonating with the values and practices of Saudi educational contexts. The combined results reinforced the argument that emotional expression is both a personal and cultural act, shaped by children's developmental readiness, teachers' professional beliefs, and the educational ecosystem in which these interactions take place. Therefore, FEPCs not only supported the children in this study but also illuminated broader opportunities for strengthening emotional well-being and trauma-informed capacity in early childhood settings across the KSA.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of my study, several recommendations emerged that aim to enhance trauma-informed emotional communication in early childhood classrooms through FEPCs as an art-based intervention tool. Teachers need to receive continuous, organized professional development that goes beyond their initial training about FEPCs. My research showed that teachers developed a stronger conceptual understanding and taught creativity through training. Therefore, additional workshops on advanced applications, modeling, and reflective dialogue would help them build stronger trauma-informed competencies. Such sessions should include real-case examples, opportunities to practice emotional coaching, and guidance on responding appropriately to trauma-related disclosures.

At the policy level, the research findings indicate that policymakers need to establish professional learning systems that equip early childhood teachers with knowledge of emotional development tools, visual communication methods, and trauma-sensitive approaches through pre-service and in-service training. Teacher preparation programs need to offer targeted training sessions that teach art-based emotional pedagogy through classroom instruction and actual teaching practice. The curriculum should include opportunities for teachers to begin their careers with the confidence to support the emotional development of their young students. Furthermore, schools should consider creating clear protocols and guidance documents for responding to emotional disclosures or trauma indicators expressed through FEPCs or similar tools. My research found that teachers experience uncertainty when dealing with emotionally sensitive content due to

policy-based systems. These systems require them to follow specific response protocols, which safeguard students and reduce teacher stress.

Limitations of the Study

My qualitative case study yielded many important findings on Saudi Arabian kindergarten teachers' comprehension and application of FEPCs. Yet researchers must consider multiple study constraints. The research findings maintain their significance despite these limitations, which define the study scope and require specific evaluation methods for result analysis. First, the timeframe limited the sample size and scope, as it is based on six kindergarten teachers from a single private school in Makkah. While small samples are typical and appropriate in qualitative research, the restricted number of participants limits the range of perspectives represented (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Although the goal of this study was not to draw generalizable findings, the timeframe for conducting the study was shortened because it was a dissertation, reducing the number of teachers and locations from which I could collect data. The participants in my study shared the same institutional environment, administrative expectations, and training conditions, which might have led to similar perspectives among them. Thus, it may minimize the range of answers participants provided about their difficulties, their cultural perspectives, and their understanding of trauma. As a result, my research findings might not accurately reflect the full range of teaching experiences Saudi Arabian teachers encounter across the country.

Secondly, the study was limited by a short duration of FEPC implementation, which lasted only weeks. Emotional communication and trauma-informed practices often require extended time for meaningful transformation. My study could have shown more

detailed emotional changes in children, new teaching methods, and rising difficulties if it had run for a longer duration. The kindergarten teachers observed that some of their young students required additional time to learn FEPC procedures, which might explain their initial difficulties with this tool. Also, my research findings from an extended study period would have demonstrated how kindergarten teachers and students sustained their emotional shifts and whether their educational methods progressed or went back to their original state. Therefore, a brief data collection period limits scientists' ability to determine how FEPCs affect schools in the long run and how they function when integrated into broader school systems.

The third limitation in my study was the constraints of a single-site case study, conducting the research in only one school, creating contextual limitations. The Mahad Al-Ebtikar School operates with specific cultural practices that might vary from those of other educational institutions in the KSA. The specific features of the learning environment affected teachers' comfort levels, attitudes toward FEPCs, capacity to express emotions, and preparedness to use these tools for teaching. The research results would have shown different implementation methods and faced various obstacles when the study included teachers who taught at multiple schools across different public institutions, rural locations, and diverse cultural settings. The research findings from this single-site study remain restricted to the particular institutional environment and cultural setting in which the study was conducted.

Finally, the study participants who joined FEPC training did so by choice, which might indicate they were more receptive and driven than teachers who chose not to participate. Therefore, my study findings might have been affected by self-selection bias,

as it attracted kindergarten teachers who naturally show interest in emotional communication, which could have made FEPCS seem more effective than it would for other teachers.

Directions for Future Research

The outcomes from my dissertation study opened up several important research paths: investigating emotional communication and trauma-sensitive methods, and the application of Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards in early childhood environments. My study investigated an emerging field of study because there exists only limited academic work about art-based interventions, emotion-based visual tools, and trauma-informed practices in Saudi Arabia and non-Western early childhood settings. The research directions below outline a sequence of scientific investigations that will help scientists advance this body of knowledge.

First, future research should use larger study groups that represent teachers working in public and private schools across various locations in Saudi Arabia. The research would achieve greater transferability of results by expanding participant selection to include diverse viewpoints. The field would benefit from longitudinal research studies that track FEPCs' impact on emotional development at multiple time points to determine whether children sustain their emotional development after the research period concludes.

Second, it is crucial for future work to incorporate direct child data, such as observations and studying their drawings. Since my dissertation relied on teacher-reported data rather than direct child observations, future research should seek to capture children's voices. This would happen more directly through methods such as:

- Naturalistic classroom observations.
- Video-recorded FEPC sessions (with strict ethical safeguards).
- Child drawings or artwork as emotional indicators.
- Storytelling sessions using FEPC prompts.
- Child interviews (when developmentally appropriate).

By engaging the children directly, researchers can better understand young learners' FEPC processing through child-centered research methods, which reveal hidden aspects adults may not notice. The collection of child-generated data will enable researchers to study how FEPCs impact students' emotional vocabulary development, their social abilities, and their skills for handling difficult situations. Doing so would also allow researchers to examine discrepancies between teacher perceptions and children's lived emotional realities.

Additionally, the research needs to include teachers from different regions, educational institutions, and teaching backgrounds, as my study included only a few teachers from one private school. Future research should investigate how the FEPC operates across different educational settings. The research would benefit from teachers in public schools and rural areas, as well as international institutions and schools serving diverse economic backgrounds, because their diverse backgrounds would help scientists understand how environmental factors affect emotional communication methods. Future research should consider studying three vital elements, which analyze: (1) children's emotional expression based on their regional cultural norms; (2) teachers' perceptions of FEPCs in rural and disadvantaged educational environments; (3) and how school administrators affect FEPC program execution. Research findings would become more

transferable through studies that use large qualitative datasets and mixed-methods research to identify universal educational patterns across different learning environments.

Fourth, along the same lines, longitudinal research on emotional development and trauma recovery is among the strongest needs emerging from my study. Long-term, longitudinal research can, in fact, track children's emotional growth over time. Because emotional development unfolds gradually, short-term studies may not capture bigger changes. Future research needs to track four elements which show how FEPC works in practice: (1) The complete academic year effects of FEPC implementation on children's emotional vocabulary growth; (2) the duration children maintain their emotional development after they discontinue FEPC usage; (3) the initial effects of FEPCs on children's emotional control and social bonds when they begin using them; (4) the long-term advantages of FEPCs for children who have gone through traumatic experiences. Therefore, longitudinal designs could also examine whether teachers' trauma-informed beliefs and practices continue to evolve over time as FEPC use continues.

Moreover, the development of culturally responsive FEPC tools requires immediate attention, as this need emerged as the most critical in my dissertation. The FEPCs demonstrated their ability to succeed in Saudi educational settings, but they need to modify their emotional expression strategies because emotional expression patterns differ across cultural backgrounds. Future research could focus on:

- Designing Saudi-specific or Arab culturally grounded versions of FEPCs;
- Investigating which emotions from different cultural backgrounds (modesty, respect, and family honor) should appear in visual representations;

- Investigating how FEPCs operate through cultural adaptation when deployed in settings different from their original design.

This line of inquiry could significantly enhance the ecological validity and cultural sensitivity of emotional tools in Saudi Arabia and other Arab contexts.

Finally, the last direction for future research based on my research is investigating the role of families and home-school emotional communication. Children learn to manage their emotions through time spent at home and interactions with family members. Future researchers should investigate four main areas of study: (1) parental understanding of FEPCs and emotional communication; (2) their effectiveness in home settings; (3) their impact on children's emotional openness; and (4) how parental stress and trauma affect their emotional expression. The research should focus on three main areas: home-based FEPC kits, parent training sessions, and collaborative school-home emotional programs.

In sum, the limitations that I identified in this study directly inform the directions for some future research. Future studies should address the current study's limitations, examine trauma-based visual aids in greater detail, use direct child data, consider cultural differences, and track children's development throughout various developmental periods of their lives. These suggested future research paths can work to establish a comprehensive study plan to develop new emotional communication techniques for students in the KSA while generating important results for international research on early childhood trauma, artistic tools, and their associated frameworks.

Conclusion

Looking back, this study opened new doors into how art-based intervention tools impact young learners, especially where culture shapes education. Instead of relying on familiar methods, it turned to visual expressions as ways for children to show feelings in places other than Western classrooms. In this dissertation, I studied six Saudi kindergarten teachers through an in-depth qualitative examination of their real experiences with FEPCs. I examined facts collected from interviews and surveys while truly listening to what each teacher shared about their real-life experiences and moments engaging with FEPCs. I paid attention to what each teacher felt and thought, and ultimately learned that the moments they shared were shaped by emotion and creativity. Through careful questioning, patterns emerged showing how art-visual emotional tools can shift teacher roles, children's emotional literacy, and strengthen bonds between children and adults, while quietly reshaping what a teacher being means there. As a whole, the findings yielded several key conclusions that are valuable to practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and early childhood advocates interested in supporting trauma-informed educational environments.

First, based on the data collected via pre- and post-surveys, I found that early childhood teachers are capable of developing sophisticated understandings of emotional tools when they receive meaningful training and opportunities for sustained reflection. Prior to the intervention, teachers expressed limited or vague knowledge of FEPCs. Most people viewed them as pictures rather than as art-based intervention tools for teaching. However, after providing structured PD training sessions, the teachers became more open minded about FEPCs. Their beliefs and practices evolved most effectively when new

strategies were introduced; they came to see FEPCs as tools that help children share how they feel. This change had a significant truth and impact on their delivery of early childhood education. Kindergarten teachers learned more when they observed new ideas in use through guided modeling, engaged in discussion with others, and tried them in real classroom contexts.

A second critical conclusion emerging from my study is the importance of enhancing emotional communication among young children in Saudi Arabia. According to data collected via interviews, I concluded that FEPCs offer a developmentally and culturally appropriate approach. Teachers found that FEPCs provided children, especially those who struggled verbally, with accessible means to express inner emotional states. Hence, it demonstrated the cultural adaptability of FEPCs. The teachers recorded how students improved their emotional vocabulary, their ability to understand others, and their skills for emotional management and peer relationship development. The research shows that visual emotional tools help children connect their emotional experiences to their social abilities for expressing feelings.

The third main finding shows that FEPCs prompted teachers to develop new professional identities alongside different relational approaches. Kindergarten teachers began to understand that their role extended beyond academic teaching, as they needed to provide emotional support and co-regulation, aligning with the principles of trauma-informed teaching methods. The change required special attention in Saudi education, as current teacher-training programs for early childhood educators do not include trauma and emotional health education in their curricula. This study thus highlighted an important professional development need: teachers must be supported and trained to

interpret children's behavior through an emotional and trauma-aware lens. This shift has the potential to reduce teacher frustration, enhance classroom relationships, and promote more supportive learning environments for children with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or emotional needs.

The study concluded that the effective use of FEPCs requires institutional and systemic support. Teachers encountered three main difficulties: managing their time effectively and maintaining cultural sensitivity, and they needed help processing students' trauma revelations while working to meet academic and emotional requirements. The existing problems indicate that independent teacher work will not solve the problem, as schools need to develop trauma-informed environments through institutional and governmental initiatives. Educational institutions that wish to implement FEPCs or comparable assessment systems need to develop specific guidelines, educational programs, and administrative support that enable teachers to manage students' emotional revelations in accordance with ethical and professional standards.

Finally, my study established that FEPCs function as a teaching method that provides a comprehensive system for transforming how early childhood programs deliver emotional support. The findings showed that emotional literacy and trauma-informed communication should be established as core elements of kindergarten education rather than remaining as supplemental features in high-quality early learning programs. Teachers who used FEPCs discovered emotions that students would have otherwise hidden from view. The FEPCs revealed children's fear, uncertainty, sadness, and frustration, helping teachers better understand their needs and make improved educational choices. This discovery provides vital information about child welfare

because FEPCs serve as effective assessment tools, enabling teachers to identify emotional problems at their onset, prevent psychological harm, and foster emotional resilience in students.

The findings of my dissertation highlighted the transformative potential of FEPCs as trauma-informed educational tools within Saudi kindergarten classrooms. The results also showed that teachers require training in culturally appropriate emotional communication approaches, while national education systems need to adopt FEPCs, and scientists must continue studying to develop evidence-based culturally suitable practices. Ultimately, this study affirmed that early childhood educators who receive appropriate resources, training, and support systems will have a major positive impact on children's emotional growth, helping them express emotions, build empathy, maintain healthy relationships, and succeed in early childhood settings. The research results show that early childhood education in Saudi Arabia and globally needs to use visual methods that are sensitive to trauma while honoring cultural backgrounds to establish supportive educational environments.

In conclusion, my dissertation found that FEPCs can help young children express their feelings in the classroom and function as an effective method that enables children to express their emotions when they participate in classroom activities. Indeed, FEPCs can work with many cultures and fit into daily school life as a tool that supports emotional expression among children who have been through trauma. The six Saudi kindergarten teachers' narratives about FEPCs explained that it made it easier for children to talk about their feelings. This art-based tool also changed how teachers

viewed things, brought teachers and children closer together, and helped teachers respond more effectively, especially when children had tough days.

These findings match what earlier studies showed about art-based support: visual and expressive tools can be helpful when trained educators use them, even in settings beyond therapy. The insights gained from my study underscored the importance of (1) equipping teachers with practical skills and hands-on training in using art-based emotional tools such as FEPCs; (2) providing accessible emotional-support strategies, and the need for ongoing professional development; (3) ensuring school-level support; and (4) offering culturally relevant training. Lastly, my research added to a growing global recognition that emotional well-being is foundational to learning. By integrating tools like FEPCs into early childhood education, kindergarten teachers can help young children feel seen, heard, and emotionally safe, laying essential groundwork for resilience, healing, and healthy development.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Questionnaire Survey (Pre- and post-survey)

Pre-survey (pp. 1-5).

Post-survey (pp. 6-10).

Appendix B

Interviews Protocol and Questions

Questions for Interview One: Background, Beliefs, and Initial Use of FEPCs

(pp. 7-8)

Questions for Interview Two: Practice, Impact, and Reflection on FEPCs Use

(pp. 9-10)

Appendix C

1. **Information sheet**
2. **FEPCs (Online Training)**
3. **Invitation Message to Teachers**

Dear Teachers,

I hope you are all doing well. As part of my doctoral research at Oakland University, I am conducting a study on how kindergarten teachers use Feeling Expression Picture Cards (FEPCs) to support emotional communication in their classrooms.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. Your participation would include:

- Attending one online training session (about 4 hours).
- Completing two short surveys: before and after the training.
- Using FEPCs in your classroom for a few weeks.
- Taking part in three in-depth online interviews (each about 30–45 minutes) during the study period.

Your insights and experiences will be very valuable to this research. Participation is completely voluntary, and all responses will be kept confidential. If you are interested or have any questions, feel free to contact me directly.

Thank you so much for considering joining this study!

Kindly,

Ayosha Kadi

PhD Student – Oakland University

aokadi@oakland.edu

Appendix D

Mahad Al-Ebtikar School's permission

IRB Approval

Date: 7-30-2025
IRB #: IRB-FY2025-233
Title: Understanding Silent Voices and Soothing Emotional Scars: Integrating Feelings/Emotion Picture Cards in Art Therapy Practices for Children with Trauma in Early Childhood Education 1
Creation Date: 12-10-2024
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Ayosha Kadi
Review Board: OU IRB
Sponsor:
Study History
Submission Type Initial Review Type Exempt Decision Exempt
Key Study Contacts
Member Tomoko Wakabayashi Role Co-Principal Investigator Contact twakabayashi@oakland.edu
Member Ayosha Kadi Role Principal Investigator Contact aokadi@oakland.edu
Member Ayosha Kadi Role Primary Contact Contact aokadi@oakland.edu