

Art-Based Mediation of Trainee Teacher Resilience: Integrating FOAT-TIM and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of *Perezhivanie* in Teacher Training Institutes

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ABSTRACT – Trainee teachers in Malaysia often experience emotional pressure during training and practicum. Although teacher wellbeing is recognised as a national priority, less attention has been given to how trainees interpret emotionally challenging experiences. This study explores how two trainee teachers experienced *perezhivanie*, a concept from Vygotsky's theory that explains how emotion and thinking work together in meaningful experiences. The study applied Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy within a trauma-informed model, referred to as FOAT-TIM within a teacher education context. Through guided art making and reflective dialogue, participants explored their emotions within a structured and supportive space. Data were collected from artworks, interviews, observations, and reflective notes across four sessions. The two cases revealed distinct developmental pathways. Ahmad demonstrated early emotional clarity and resilience, drawing on faith and personal responsibility. Megat began with guilt and self-doubt but gradually developed greater self-awareness and hope through symbolic reflection. In both cases, art making supported emotional expression, meaning making, and professional identity development. The findings show that structured art-based reflection can strengthen resilience and emotional growth among trainee teachers. The study highlights the value of culturally responsive art-based approaches in Malaysian teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Trainee teachers in Malaysia face increasing emotional and professional demands during their training. They are expected to meet academic requirements, perform effectively during practicum, and adapt to real classroom environments. At the same time, cultural values related to respect, hierarchy, and emotional restraint influence how they respond to stress. These combined pressures can lead to anxiety, self-doubt, and uncertainty about professional identity, particularly among those who are still developing confidence as future educators (Mokhtar & Arshad, 2023; Mustapa & Poh, 2016; Ngui & Lay, 2020).

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 highlights the need to develop resilient and reflective teachers (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, emotional development does not occur in isolation. It is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which trainee teachers learn, including relationships with lecturers and peers, institutional expectations, and personal belief systems. It is therefore important to explore how trainees interpret emotionally challenging experiences during their preparation.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides a useful lens for this exploration. Its central concept, *perezhivanie*, refers to the inseparable unity of emotion and cognition within meaningful situations (Cong-Lem, 2022; Fler & Veresov, 2023). From this perspective, stress is not merely an external demand. Its impact depends on how individuals experience and interpret events within their cultural and personal contexts (Vorobeva & Leontjev, 2025). Emotional growth, therefore, involves processes of meaning-making rather than simply managing stress.

To support such development within teacher education, a mediational framework is required. This study draws on Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy adapted within a trauma-informed model (FOAT-TIM). In this educational context, FOAT-TIM functions as a structured reflective approach that helps participants recognise, symbolise, and reorganise emotional experiences through guided art making and bodily awareness (Rappaport, 2009). Trauma-informed principles further emphasise safety, trust, and respectful facilitation (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023), creating conditions that enable emotional reflection beyond performance demands.

Although art-based and trauma-informed approaches are commonly used in counselling settings, their integration within Malaysian teacher education remains limited. This study therefore offers an exploratory application of FOAT-TIM as a structured reflective framework for trainee teachers rather than as a clinical intervention.

Guided by Vygotsky's perspective, this qualitative multiple case study explores how trainee teachers in a Malaysian Teacher Training Institute experience *perezhivanie* through structured art-based sessions. It further explores how embodied reflection, symbolic expression, and guided dialogue contribute to resilience and the development of professional identity.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although teacher wellbeing and resilience are emphasised in national policy, teacher education programmes in Malaysia continue to prioritise academic performance and instructional competence. Trainee teachers are assessed mainly on subject knowledge and classroom practice, while their emotional development and identity formation receive less structured attention. As a result, resilience is often assumed rather than intentionally supported.

Research on teacher resilience in Malaysia remains limited. Many studies measure stress or burnout, but fewer explore how emotional growth unfolds during teacher preparation. Without structured support, trainee teachers may experience sustained stress, emotional exhaustion, or consider leaving the profession (Collie, 2023; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Mansfield et al., 2021). This highlights the need for approaches that move beyond identifying stress and actively nurture emotional development.

Recent scholarship recognises resilience not as a fixed trait but as a capacity shaped through reflection, relational support, and guided learning (Mansfield et al., 2021). Malaysian research also links burnout to school context and resilience, underscoring the need for culturally responsive approaches in teacher preparation (Nur Izzati Mat Zin et al., 2023). However, there is limited research that explores how such development occurs through embodied and reflective processes.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of *perezhivanie* remains underexplored in Malaysian teacher education. While it has been applied in studies of child development and learning (Ferholt & Veresov, 2020; Veresov, 2019), its relevance to adult professional preparation has received little attention. Similarly, art-based approaches such as FOAT-TIM have largely been used in counselling contexts, with limited research exploring their adaptation within teacher education or their integration with sociocultural theory.

Malaysian trainee teachers navigate emotional experiences shaped by religious values, social expectations, and respect for authority (Abdullah, 2018; Peletz, 2015). These cultural influences affect how emotions are expressed and interpreted. Yet little research has explored how reflective art-based practices interact with these cultural dimensions to strengthen resilience during teacher preparation.

Taken together, these gaps point to the need for a culturally grounded and theoretically informed approach that supports emotional awareness and resilience in teacher education. This study responds to this need by exploring how FOAT-TIM facilitates emotional development through the lens of *perezhivanie*.

This study addresses the following questions:

- a. How do participants develop a felt sense through FOAT-TIM?
- b. How do participants experience felt shift during FOAT-TIM sessions?
- c. How is *perezhivanie* experienced by the participants?

These questions guide the exploration of how structured art-based reflection may strengthen emotional wellbeing and professional resilience among trainee teachers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study is to understand how *perezhivanie* is experienced and supported through FOAT-TIM within a Teacher Training Institute context. To achieve this, the study focuses on the following objectives:

- a. To explore how participants develop a felt sense during FOAT-TIM sessions.
- b. To understand how participants experience felt shift as embodied moments of change.
- c. To explore how *perezhivanie* is experienced and shaped through participants' engagement with FOAT-TIM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional development in teacher education has been discussed from several perspectives, including resilience research, sociocultural theory, reflective practice, and trauma-informed pedagogy. However, these perspectives are often explored separately. To understand how trainee teachers grow emotionally during professional preparation, it is necessary to consider how embodied experience, cultural meaning, and guided reflection work together. This section reviews key scholarship on teacher resilience, *perezhivanie*, arts-based reflection, trauma-informed approaches, and the Malaysian cultural context.

Teacher Resilience and Emotional Development

Teacher resilience is no longer viewed as a fixed personal trait. It is understood as a capacity that develops through experience, reflection, and supportive relationships (Mansfield et al., 2021). Resilience involves not only coping with stress but also interpreting emotional challenges in ways that strengthen professional identity.

Research links high job demands and emotional strain to reduced wellbeing and higher turnover intention (Collie, 2023). In Malaysia, resilience is closely connected to school context and burnout (Nur Izzati Mat Zin et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of emotional development during teacher preparation.

From a sociocultural perspective, emotional growth is shaped by lived experience and social interaction (Fleer & Veresov, 2023). Resilience develops through guided support and meaningful reflection rather than individual effort alone. Yet many studies focus on measuring stress rather than exploring how emotional growth unfolds. This suggests the need for structured approaches that actively nurture resilience through reflective and embodied processes.

***Perezhivanie* and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory**

The concept of *perezhivanie*, rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, offers a framework for understanding emotional development in professional contexts. It describes the unity of emotion and cognition within meaningful situations (Vygotsky, 1994; Fleer & Veresov, 2023). Development depends not only on external circumstances but on how individuals experience and interpret those circumstances.

Closely related is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where growth occurs through guided interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Malaysian research on mediated learning similarly shows that structured relational guidance supports professional development (Abdul Rahim et al., 2009).

Although *perezhivanie* has been widely explored in child development and learning studies (Ferholt & Veresov, 2020; Veresov, 2019), its application to adult teacher education remains limited. In this context, it shifts attention from observable performance to the internal meaning-making processes shaping how trainee teachers respond to practicum challenges and institutional expectations.

Trauma-Informed and Focusing-Oriented Approaches

Trauma-informed practice emphasises safe, respectful, and supportive learning environments (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). It recognises that individuals bring stress and personal experiences that influence how they respond to professional demands. This perspective is relevant in teacher education, where trainees manage academic expectations, practicum pressures, and identity formation. However, trauma-informed approaches remain underexplored in teacher preparation settings.

Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy integrates art-making with bodily awareness, helping individuals access emotional meaning through imagery and reflection (Rappaport, 2009, 2023). Participants attend to subtle bodily sensations and express them visually, allowing emotional experiences to unfold gradually. When guided within a trauma-informed model, the process provides structure and psychological safety (Rappaport, 2010).

While expressive arts approaches have been widely used in clinical and community contexts (Malchiodi, 2020), their application in teacher education is limited. There is also little research exploring the connection between art-based reflection and sociocultural theory, particularly *perezhivanie*. Integrating these perspectives allows a deeper understanding of how creative engagement and guided support shape emotional development.

Felt Sense and Felt Shift

Within focusing-oriented practice, felt sense refers to a bodily awareness of experience that may not yet be fully verbalised (Gendlin, 1981). It represents an internal sense of meaning that carries emotional significance. Attending to this awareness can clarify emotional experience.

A felt shift occurs when this internal awareness changes, often bringing relief, insight, or emotional release (Gendlin, 1981). In art-based settings, such shifts may develop gradually through reflection and symbolic expression (Rappaport, 2009).

In teacher education, these concepts help explain how trainees move from emotional tension toward clearer self-understanding. When supported through structured processes such as FOAT-TIM, attention to felt sense may promote reflective growth rather than reactive coping.

Cultural Context and Emotional Expression

Emotional experience is shaped by cultural context. In Malaysia, religious values, respect for hierarchy, and collective norms influence how emotions are expressed and interpreted (Abdullah, 2018; Peletz, 2015). Trainee teachers may feel pressure to appear composed even when experiencing uncertainty. Research in Malaysian art education also shows that creative practices are shaped by cultural expectations and learning traditions (Douglas, 2023; Shahuddin et al., 2021). Reflective art-based processes must therefore remain culturally meaningful and contextually appropriate.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Existing research highlights resilience, reflective practice, and supportive learning environments as central to teacher development (Mansfield et al., 2021; Collie, 2023). Sociocultural theory emphasises mediation and relational support as mechanisms of growth (Fleer & Veresov, 2023), while Malaysian scholarship recognises guided interaction in professional learning (Abdul Rahim, 2019).

Art-based approaches offer embodied and symbolic pathways for emotional expression (Malchiodi, 2020), and trauma-informed principles stress safety and structured facilitation (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). In Malaysia, creative engagement has supported confidence and participation (Douglas, 2023; Shahuddin et al., 2021; Amos & Khairani, 2019). However, these approaches are rarely explored together within teacher education or through a sociocultural lens.

There is limited research exploring how *perezhivanie* unfolds among trainee teachers through structured art-based engagement. Concepts central to focusing-oriented practice, such as felt sense and felt shift, also remain underexplored in Malaysian teacher preparation. The integration of Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy within a trauma-informed model for teacher education is still developing.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring how FOAT-TIM functions as a mediational space where *perezhivanie* unfolds through embodied creative engagement. By integrating sociocultural theory and art-based reflection, the study offers a theoretically grounded and culturally responsive contribution to teacher education research.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the research design, participants, procedures, data collection, and analysis used in the study.

Research Design

To address the research questions, this study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design. Although only two participants were involved, the multi-session structure and cross-case comparison allowed detailed exploration of both shared and contrasting developmental paths. The aim was to gain a deep understanding of trainee teachers' lived emotional experiences rather than measure outcomes statistically.

A qualitative approach was appropriate because *perezhivanie* involves the integration of emotion, thought, and social context. These dimensions are best explored through rich descriptive accounts rather than numerical measurement (Yin, 2014; Veresov, 2019). The multiple case design allowed close attention to how felt sense, felt shift, and *perezhivanie* unfolded during the FOAT-TIM sessions. By exploring two contrasting cases in depth, the study traced emotional development over time while identifying patterns of similarity and difference.

Figure 1 presents the methodological framework guiding the FOAT-TIM facilitation at the Teacher Training Institute. The framework ensured alignment between the study's aims, procedures, and analysis.

Participants

Two male final year trainee teachers were selected through purposive sampling. Both were enrolled at the Teacher Training Institute and were preparing to graduate in 2024. Participant 1, Ahmad (TT1), aged 22, was reflective and expressive. He often interpreted his experiences through spiritual and ethical perspectives. Participant 2, Megat (TT2), also aged 22, was quieter and more introspective. His reflections frequently centred on guilt, regret, and identity struggles. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

Sample Size Justification

The study focused on depth rather than breadth. In qualitative case research, small samples allow close attention to individual meaning-making processes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Yin (2014) notes that multiple case studies strengthen analysis by enabling comparison across contrasting cases. The aim was not statistical generalisation but analytical depth. Rich case comparison allowed theoretical insight into emotional processes that may not be visible in larger survey-based designs.

The FOAT-TIM process involved four individual sessions lasting between 90 and 120 minutes, detailed artwork analysis and bilingual transcription. This intensive design required a small, information-rich sample. The two contrasting emotional paths provided sufficient depth to explore how emotional transformation occurred within this context.

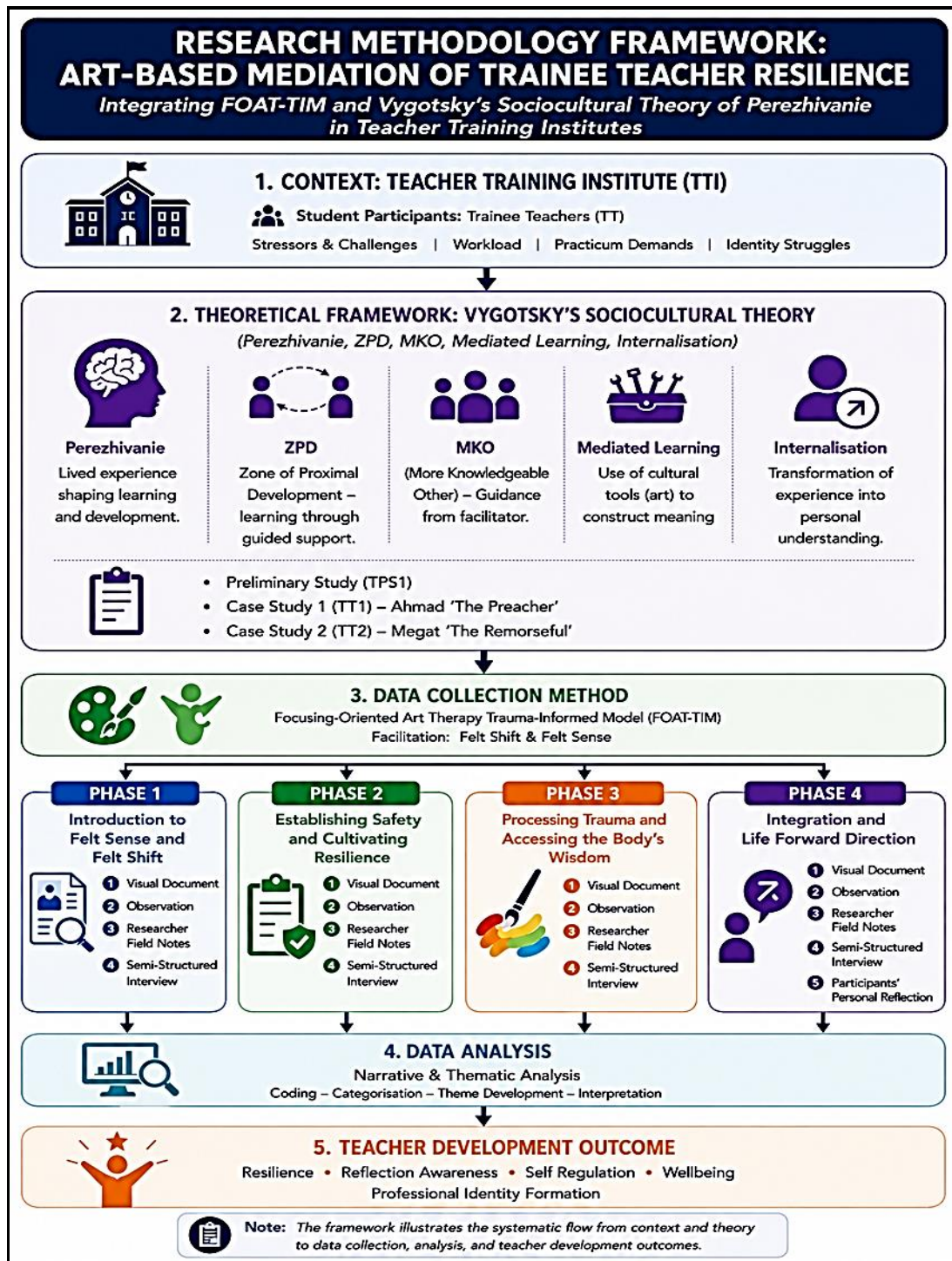


Figure 1. Research Methodology Framework of FOAT-TIM Facilitation at Teacher Training Institute
Source: Research data

Note: This diagram shows how common stressors faced by trainee teachers, such as workload, practicum demands, and identity struggles, were explored across the four FOAT-TIM phases. Each phase was guided by specific artwork themes, including *Body Mapping*, *My Protector*, *A Gift for Myself*, *My Issues*, *Closure My Issues*, *Vitamin for Life*, and *Moving Forward*. Within Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, FOAT-TIM provided a supportive space where participants could safely express vulnerability while also developing new meanings through symbolic transformation.

FOAT-TIM Procedure

FOAT-TIM was adapted to suit the cultural and developmental needs of Malaysian trainee teachers. Each participant attended four individual sessions, each lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. The sessions combined art-making, guided focusing, and reflective dialogue.

- a. Phase One: Introduction to Felt Sense and Felt Shift. Artwork theme: *Body Mapping*. Participants identified areas of tension and began engaging with bodily felt experience.
- b. Phase Two: Establishing Safety and Cultivating Resilience. Artwork themes: *My Protector* and *A Gift for Myself*. Participants developed protective imagery and reflected on sources of strength, including faith and cultural values.
- c. Phase Three: Processing Trauma and Accessing the Body's Wisdom. Artwork themes: *My Issues*, *Vitamin for Life*, and *Closure My Issues*. Participants externalised unresolved challenges and transformed stressors into symbolic forms.
- d. Phase Four: Integration and Life Forward Direction. Artwork themes: *Moving Forward*, *A Gift for Myself*, and *Vitamin for Life*. Participants reflected on changes experienced during the process and considered future professional growth.

Throughout all sessions, trauma-informed safeguards were applied. These included grounding exercises, flexible pacing, and the option to pause or withdraw at any time (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). These practices supported psychological safety.

Data Collection

Data were collected from multiple sources to provide a fuller understanding of each case. These sources included artwork produced during the sessions, observation notes, semi-structured interviews, researcher field notes, and participants' personal reflections. Interviews were conducted in Malay and English and later transcribed bilingually to preserve meaning and emotional nuance. Using multiple forms of data allowed exploration of visual, verbal, and embodied aspects of participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The process combined inductive coding, drawn directly from participants' artwork and interviews, with deductive coding informed by key concepts such as *perezhivanie*, the Zone of Proximal Development, felt shift, and felt sense. Cross-case comparison helped identify both shared patterns and contrasting developmental pathways between Ahmad (TT1) and Megat (TT2). The emphasis on felt sense as analytic data is consistent with art-based research approaches that recognise embodied experience as a valid source of knowledge (Rappaport, 2013). Member checking and supervisory discussions were used to strengthen credibility and ensure careful interpretation.

Codebook Note

The abbreviations used in Table 1 and Table 2 represent analytic codes developed through a combination of data-driven and theory-informed approaches. The codes first emerged from participants' own language and were later refined in relation to Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, the concept of *perezhivanie*, and the FOAT-TIM model.

- a. **ES - Embodied Sensation.** Refers to direct physical sensations described by participants, such as trembling, tightness, heat, pressure, or melting. This code captures raw bodily experience before it is interpreted symbolically or cognitively.
- b. **FS - Felt Sense.** Refers to embodied awareness that appears before it is fully articulated in words. This includes bodily sensations such as breath, tension, warmth, or physical activation that carry emotional meaning.
- c. **FSh - Felt Shift.** Indicates a noticeable change in experience, such as movement from tension to calm or from confusion to clarity. A felt shift reflects reorganisation within embodied awareness.

- d. **HMD - Heart-Mind Dialogue.** Represents internal negotiation between thoughts and emotions. This code captures moments where participants describe tension or dialogue between rational thinking and emotional experience.
- e. **SE - Symbolic Expression.** Refers to the use of colour, imagery, and metaphor in artwork to express internal states. Meaning is constructed visually rather than only verbally.
- f. **CGI - Cultural and Gender Influence.** Highlights how cultural expectations and gender norms shape emotional expression and self-presentation.
- g. **PS - Perceived Safety.** Identifies expressions of psychological safety, protection, or containment within the art-making process. This reflects the trauma-informed emphasis on safety in FOAT-TIM

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Universiti Utara Malaysia and the Ministry of Education Malaysia. The researcher received formal training in art therapy from La Trobe University, Melbourne, and additional training in Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy with Laury Rappaport in 2016 in Santa Rosa, USA. All sessions followed trauma-informed guidelines and the ethical standards of the American Art Therapy Association (2013). Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

To address the research questions, the findings are presented as two individual case narratives, followed by a cross-case synthesis. This structure allows each trainee teacher's experience to be understood in depth, while also highlighting shared patterns of emotional development.

The analysis focused on how emotional experiences were expressed through artwork, described in interviews, and reshaped through symbolic reflection. The cases of Ahmad (TT1) and Megat (TT2) are presented first, before drawing connections between them.

The findings are presented in accessible narrative form, with key theoretical concepts explained in context to support readers from diverse educational backgrounds.

Case Study One: Ahmad (TT1)

Ahmad entered the FOAT-TIM process with a strong sense of responsibility and moral awareness. From the beginning, his artworks reflected emotional clarity and resilience. He consistently used symbolic imagery to express tension, reflection, and hope. These patterns were visible from the first phase of the process.

Ahmad's responses show how he became aware of tension in his head and described a conflict between his thoughts and his heart. Through dialogue, this tension shifted toward self-soothing and emotional regulation. His words suggest a movement from internal conflict toward calm reflection. To enhance analytic transparency, selected artworks are presented together with transcript excerpts to show how symbolic elements were interpreted within the coding framework.

Figure 2 presents one of Ahmad's artworks from Phase One (*Body Mapping*). In this image, he expressed bodily sensations and internal stress through colour and symbolic marks.

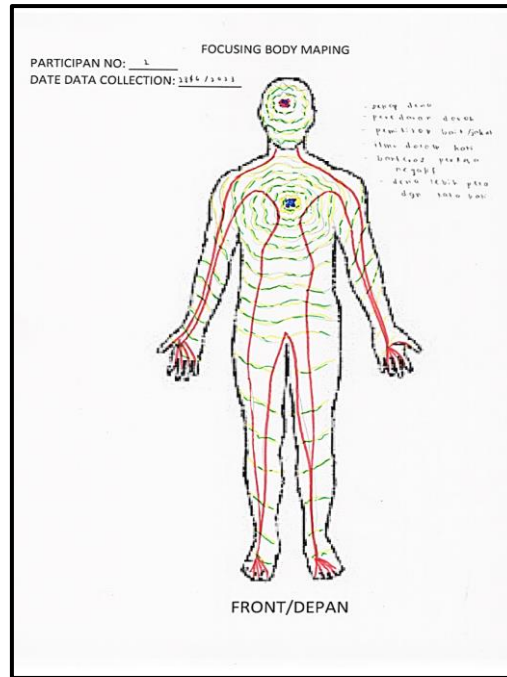


Figure 2. Case Study One, Ahmad (TT1): FOAT-TIM Phase One, Artwork Theme *Body Mapping*
Source: Research data

Note: Ahmad depicted pressure around his chest and head, while light radiated outward from the heart area. This contrast reflected an internal dialogue between emotional burden and inner strength. Faith, community, and personal values appeared to support his sense of stability. His experience shows how emotional strain was gradually reframed into clarity and resilience.

The following excerpt from Phase One (*Body Mapping*) illustrates Ahmad's growing awareness of bodily sensation. Table 1 shows how he translated physical tension into symbolic meaning. This marks the early emergence of felt sense.

Table 1. Case Study One, Ahmad (TT1): Sample transcript excerpt from Phase One (*Body Mapping*) illustrating embodied awareness and the emergence of felt sense

Ref. Code	Researcher (R)	Ahmad (TT1)	Code	Thematic Category	Remarks
T1-P1-6	As we began the "Body Mapping" process earlier, what were you sensing inside your body? (<i>"Semasa kita mulakan proses Body Mapping tadi, apakah yang awak rasa di dalam badan?"</i>)	I could feel all the sensations... the air going in and out, the blood flowing from my heart through my whole body. (<i>"Saya dapat merasakan setiap deria... udara masuk dan keluar, bagaimana darah mengalir dari jantung ke seluruh badan saya."</i>)	ES/ FS	Embodied Awareness / Physiological Sensation	Early emergence of felt sense through bodily sensations.
T1-P1-7	Was there any area that felt tense or pressured in particular? (<i>"Ada tak bahagian badan yang rasa tegang atau tertekan?"</i>)	The tension was mostly in my thinking... in my mind. (<i>"Ketegangan itu lebih kepada pemikiran... saya."</i>)	HMD / FS	Cognitive Tension / Mental Overload	Indicates mental overload linked to early felt sense awareness.
T1-P1-10	Where did you make your first mark on the body map?	I marked the head. (<i>"Saya tanda pada kepala."</i>)	ES / HMD	Locating Sensation / Head-centred Awareness	Sensation located in the head suggesting cognitive-somatic linkage.

	<p>(“Di mana awak buat tanda pertama pada body map?”)</p>				
T1-P1-12	<p>What was the sensation there in your head? (“Apakah sensasi yang awak rasa di bahagian kepala?”)</p>	<p>There was a bit of tension. I was thinking a lot... your words made things clash between my mind and my heart. (“Ada sedikit tegang. Saya banyak berfikir... setiap perkataan Puan buatkan fikiran dan hati saya bercanggah.”)</p>	HMD / FS	Mind-Heart Dissonance / Internal Conflict	Demonstrates cognitive-emotional dissonance central to <i>perezhivanie</i> .
T1-P1-14	<p>What do you mean by ‘clashing inside your heart’? (“Apa maksud awak bila kata ‘bercanggah dalam hati?’”)</p>	<p>My thoughts have positive and negative sides. But my heart kept telling me to stay calm... my heart told my mind to settle. (“Fikiran saya ada positif dan negatif... hati saya suruh pemikiran saya bertenang.”)</p>	HMD/ PS / FS / FSh	Emotional Regulation / Inner Negotiation / Self-Soothing	Shows negotiation between heart and mind; early felt shift begins to emerge.

Legend of Codes: FS = Felt Sense; FSh = Felt Shift; ES = Embodied Sensation; SE = Symbolic Expression; HMD = Head-Mind Dialogue; PS = Psychological Safety; CGI = Cultural-Gender Influence.

Ahmad’s *perezhivanie* was marked by resilience and a growing ability to work symbolically with his emotional experiences. Across the sessions, his artworks showed repeated patterns of tension followed by release. Protective and hopeful imagery allowed him to reinterpret responsibility not as burden, but as purpose. His emotional development became clearer across the four phases:

- Phase One: Artwork theme, *Body Mapping*. He used layered colours such as blue, green, yellow, and red radiating from his chest and head. These colours symbolised vitality, emotional energy, and the connection between heart and mind
- Phase Two: Artwork theme, *My Protector*. He created a cave-like shield protecting a glowing heart. This image represented safety, groundedness, and emotional strength during times of pressure.
- Phase Three: The artwork themes were *My Issues* and *Vitamin for Life*. He depicted challenges as heavy forces pressing against his body. At the same time, light radiating outward symbolised supportive relationships and inner resources.
- Phase Four focused on the artwork themes of *Moving Forward* and *A Gift for Myself*. His final artwork showed a sun rising over mountains. This image reflected optimism, clarity, and growing confidence in his professional future.

Throughout the sessions, bodily awareness, creative expression, and reflective dialogue appeared to work together in supporting his development. Rather than remaining overwhelmed, he gradually reframed responsibility as motivation and meaning. Emotional tension was acknowledged, expressed symbolically, and reorganised through imagery that drew on cultural and spiritual resources.

Overall, Ahmad showed stable felt sense awareness and increasingly coherent felt shifts. His case illustrates how *perezhivanie* can unfold in constructive ways when emotional experience is supported through guided reflection. In relation to the research questions, Ahmad’s path highlights how felt sense develops, how felt shifts emerge with clarity, and how emotional experience becomes integrated within professional identity formation.

Case Study Two: Megat (TT2)

Megat entered the FOAT-TIM sessions with visible emotional vulnerability. In the early stages, he spoke openly about guilt, self-blame, and difficulty trusting his own feelings. Past disciplinary experiences and social judgement appeared to continue shaping how he perceived himself. His *perezhivanie* at this point was fragile, closely tied to shame and inner conflict.

During Phase One, his artwork revealed fragmentation and emotional heaviness. Dark shading, dense lines, and tense strokes conveyed internal strain. Over time, however, subtle changes began to appear. Symbols of light, renewal, and movement gradually emerged as his awareness deepened and self-compassion slowly developed.

To enhance analytic transparency, selected artworks are presented together with transcript excerpts to show how symbolic elements were interpreted within the coding framework. Figure 3 presents one of Megat’s artworks from Phase One (*Body Mapping*). The image shows how he translated bodily sensations and internal stress into visual form through layered marks, colour, and symbolic shapes.

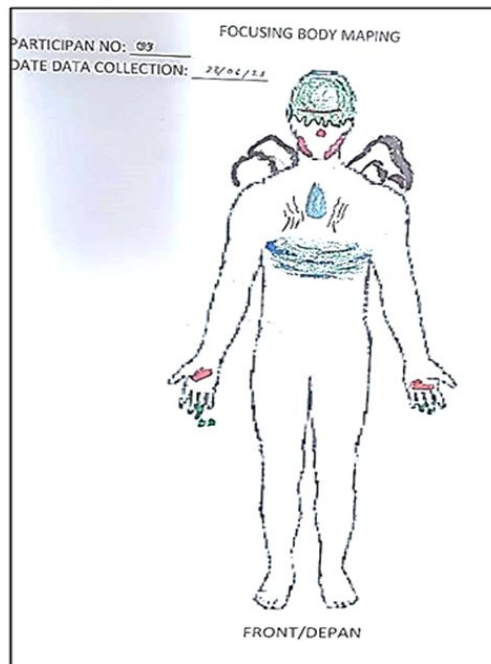


Figure 3. Case Study Two, Megat (TT2): FOAT-TIM Phase One, Artwork Theme *Body Mapping*

Source: Research data

Note: Megat’s artwork included fragmented strokes, zig-zag lines near the head, dense shading around the chest, and red marks on the palms. These elements reflected tension, guilt, and emotional constriction. Leaf-like shapes on the back and water-drop symbols suggested both overwhelm and the beginning of emotional release. Across the FOAT-TIM phases, his experience gradually shifted from vulnerability toward emerging hope.

The excerpt below illustrates Megat’s early embodied awareness during Phase One (*Body Mapping*). Table 2 shows how he described physical sensations and gradually gave them visual and symbolic form. These moments reflect the initial emergence of felt sense, as bodily experience began to take shape through imagery and dialogue.

Table 2. Case Study Two, Megat (TT2): Sample transcript excerpt from Phase One (*Body Mapping*) illustrating embodied awareness and the emergence of felt sense

Ref. Code	Researcher (R)	Megat (TT2)	Code	Thematic Category	Remarks
T2-P1-18	“Would you like to watch your process again?” (“Adakah awak ingin melihat semula proses awak tadi?”)	“I felt something like liquid... like acid melting.” (“Saya rasa macam ada cecair... seperti asid yang sedang mencair.”)	ES	Unpleasant Embodied Sensation	Early physiological awareness triggered during focusing.
T2-P1-24	“Did you feel any sensation in your head?”	“The front of my head felt like melting... and at	ES / FS	Head Tension /	Shows cognitive–

	<p>“Ada tak apa-apa sensasi di bahagian kepala awak?”</p>	<p>the back it felt extremely tight.” (“Bahagian depan kepala macam mencair... dan bahagian belakang pula rasa sangat tegang.”)</p>		<p>Somatic Pressure</p>	<p>somatic overload, an early marker of felt sense.</p>
T2-P1-26	<p>“What else were you sensing?” (“Apa lagi yang awak rasa ketika itu?”)</p>	<p>“I felt tight... I saw images of water dripping, tup... tup... tup.” (“Saya rasa ketat... saya nampak imej air menitik, tup... tup... tup.”)</p>	SE / FS	<p>Water Imagery / Emotional Overflow</p>	<p>Water imagery symbolises tears and emotional release.</p>
T2-P1-34	<p>“Is this at your chest area?” (“Adakah ini di bahagian dada awak?”)</p>	<p>“Yes... here it trembles. I always feel nervous... it comes and goes.” (“Ya... di sini ia bergetar. Saya selalu rasa gugup... ia datang dan pergi.”)</p>	ES / FS	<p>Chest Trembling / Anxiety Marker</p>	<p>Clear bodily indicator of anxiety-based felt sense.</p>
T2-P1-40	<p>“What do the leaves at the back symbolise?” (“Apa yang daun-daun di bahagian belakang itu simbolkan?”)</p>	<p>“I felt leaves behind me... like shhhh... shhhh... sounds. My hands felt hot and vibrating.” (“Saya rasa ada daun di belakang saya... bunyinya seperti shhhh... shhhh.... Tangan saya pula rasa panas dan bergetar.”)</p>	SE / ES	<p>Nature Imagery / Sensory Movement</p>	<p>Symbolic emergence of grounding; early cues of resilience.</p>

Legend of Codes: FS = Felt Sense; FSh = Felt Shift; ES = Embodied Sensation; SE = Symbolic Expression; HMD = Head-Mind Dialogue; PS = Psychological Safety; CGI = Cultural-Gender Influence.

Megat’s developmental path unfolded gradually. His felt shifts were subtle but meaningful. Feelings of shame and burden slowly gave way to moments of calmness, gratitude, and cautious hope. The structured and trauma-informed nature of FOAT-TIM supported this process by encouraging attention to bodily sensations, symbolic expression, and relational safety.

- a. Phase One: Artwork theme, *Body Mapping*. His body silhouette was shaded with darker tones around the chest, back, and head, representing guilt, pressure, and trembling sensations. Small water-drop shapes symbolised tears and emotional release.
- b. Phase Two: The artwork themes were *My Protector* and *A Gift for Myself*. He created organic shapes in blue, purple, yellow, and red. These images reflected a fragile sense of protection. Although the imagery suggested vulnerability, it also indicated the beginning of strength and continuity.
- c. Phase Three: Artwork themes, *My Issues* and *Closure My Issues*. Megat showed his struggles as storm clouds and heavy stones. In later images, these were balanced by symbols of sunrise, leaves, and light. These changes suggested growth and gradual emotional reorganisation.
- d. Phase Four: The artwork themes were *Moving Forward* and *Vitamin for Life*. His final artwork showed colourful threads wrapping around his body. He described these threads as memories that were once painful but now woven into something meaningful. The image reflected gratitude and cautious optimism about the future.

Throughout the transcripts and artworks, Megat’s experience revealed a clear connection between bodily sensations, imagery, and reflection. In the early sessions, he described melting sensations, trembling, tightness, and heat, which reflected emotional strain. As the process continued, natural symbols such as leaves, water, and light appeared more frequently in his artwork. These shifts suggest a gradual integration of emotional experience.

Megat began the process from a position of vulnerability, yet over time he developed greater awareness of his felt sense and experienced steady, though subtle, emotional shifts. His reflections became more measured and self-aware. Through this progression, his *perezhivanie* moved toward greater coherence, offering a contrasting developmental pathway within the study.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Taken together, the two case studies show different but complementary patterns of emotional development through engagement with FOAT-TIM. Although both trainee teachers experienced change, the pace and form of that change were not the same.

Ahmad (TT1) followed a relatively steady and coherent path. He often drew on faith and moral reflection when responding to stress. Experiences that initially felt heavy or demanding were gradually reframed as meaningful responsibility. His artwork and reflections showed consistency and symbolic clarity. Spiritual grounding appeared to support his emotional regulation and meaning-making throughout the process.

Megat (TT2), in contrast, began from a more vulnerable position. His early sessions were marked by shame, hesitation, and difficulty holding intense feelings. His artwork reflected fragmentation and tension, particularly in the body. Over time, however, he began to express greater self-awareness and acceptance. Symbols of light, growth, and connection appeared more frequently. Although his progress was slower and more tentative, the changes were meaningful. The structured and trauma-informed support of FOAT-TIM appeared to help him gradually reorganise his emotional experience.

Across both cases, FOAT-TIM played two important roles. First, it provided a safe and supportive space where difficult emotions could be expressed without judgement. At the same time, it encouraged movement and change through art-making, bodily awareness, and reflective dialogue. Through this process, *perezhivanie* became visible in shifts in bodily sensations, imagery, and interpretation. Each trainee worked through emotionally significant experiences in ways shaped by their own personal and cultural context.

Summary of Key Findings

This study shows that emotional development among trainee teachers unfolds as an embodied and relational process shaped by cultural context. Through engagement with FOAT-TIM, participants were able to express emotionally charged experiences, attend to bodily sensations, and gradually reshape their understanding through symbolic expression and guided reflection.

The findings suggest that felt sense develops when participants become more aware of bodily tension and emotional signals. Felt shifts, in turn, mark moments when this awareness changes, bringing relief, clarity, or new insight. These changes were not sudden. Emotional development occurred gradually through reflection, dialogue, and symbolic work.

Across both cases, FOAT-TIM provided a safe and structured space where vulnerability could be expressed without judgement. At the same time, it encouraged growth through art-making, bodily awareness, and supportive facilitation. This process supported emotional regulation, resilience, and the development of professional identity, even for participants who began from positions of uncertainty and self-doubt.

Overall, the findings highlight the value of FOAT-TIM as a trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach within Malaysian teacher education. By bringing together art-based practice and sociocultural understanding, the study offers insight into how emotional growth and professional identity can be strengthened through guided and reflective processes.

DISCUSSION

The discussion is organised around the three research questions to clarify how the findings address each objective of the study. The findings show that emotional development among trainee teachers is not simply a matter of coping with stress. It unfolds through bodily awareness, reflection, relationships, and cultural meaning. Through their participation in FOAT-TIM, both trainees were able to bring hidden tensions into view, give shape to difficult emotions through art, and gradually reinterpret their experiences. Insight did not emerge suddenly. It developed through the steady interaction of art-making, guided focusing, and supportive dialogue.

Across both cases, resilience appeared not as a fixed trait but as something that developed over time. It was shaped by personal history, cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and the presence of a structured yet flexible space for reflection. The discussion below considers how these findings respond to the three research questions.

RQ1: How do participants develop a felt sense through FOAT-TIM?

Both trainees developed felt sense through attention to bodily experience combined with symbolic expression. This aligns with Gendlin's (1981) view that emotional meaning first appears in the body before it becomes clear in words.

For Ahmad, felt sense emerged relatively quickly. He identified tightness and pressure in his head and chest, and he was able to connect these sensations to inner dialogue between mind and heart. Through art-making, these sensations became images of radiance and centred energy. His process suggests a readiness to translate bodily signals into symbolic meaning.

Megat's development of felt sense was slower. Early sessions revealed sensations of melting, trembling, and constriction. These signals reflected emotional strain and difficulty containing distress. Over time, however, the structured and trauma-informed nature of FOAT-TIM helped him remain with these sensations without withdrawing. Gradually, he was able to describe and symbolise them. In his case, felt sense developed through patience, safety, and repeated engagement.

RQ2: How do participants experience felt shift during FOAT-TIM sessions?

Felt shift occurred when bodily tension changed and new meaning emerged. These shifts were sometimes subtle but meaningful.

Ahmad experienced several clear moments of reorganisation. His artwork moved from images of pressure to symbols of light, expansion, and rising horizons. These changes reflected clarity, confidence, and a stronger sense of purpose.

Megat's shifts were more gradual. Images of leaves, threads, water, and sunrise began to replace earlier fragmented and heavy forms. These symbols suggested reconnection and renewal. His transformation was not dramatic, but it showed steady emotional movement. This pattern highlights that felt shifts do not always appear as sudden breakthroughs; they can accumulate slowly through continued reflection and symbolic work.

RQ3: How is *perezhivanie* experienced by the participants?

In both cases, *perezhivanie* was shaped by cultural and spiritual meaning. Emotional experience was not separate from identity or belief systems.

Ahmad's reflections were closely tied to faith, responsibility, and moral grounding. These cultural and spiritual resources helped him reinterpret internal tension as purposeful motivation.

Megat's experience involved working through shame and self-doubt before arriving at gratitude and acceptance. His process shows how *perezhivanie* can shift when emotional experience is revisited in a safe relational space.

Across both cases, bodily sensations, imagery, and dialogue worked together to support new understanding. Emotional change was connected to cultural values, spirituality, and social expectations within the Malaysian context (Abdullah, 2018; Peletz, 2015). Emotional growth, therefore, cannot be separated from cultural meaning-making.

Integrative Reflection

Taken together, the two cases show that emotional growth in teacher education involves the body, imagination, relationships, and culture. FOAT-TIM provided a structured and supportive space where difficult emotions could be expressed and gradually reorganised. Through this process, art became more than a creative activity; it became a meaningful tool for reflection and change.

These findings contribute to Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective by showing how emotional experience and symbolic expression play an important role in professional development (Veresov & Fleer, 2022; Vygotsky, 1994). Rather than treating resilience as a fixed personal quality, this study presents it as something that can grow through guided participation, relational support, and reflective engagement.

Overall, FOAT-TIM supported both trainees in integrating emotional experience into their developing professional identities. It created a space where vulnerability could be acknowledged and where growth could take place in a gradual and meaningful way. In doing so, the study contributes to arts education by demonstrating how structured visual art processes can function as mediational tools for reflective learning and professional identity formation within teacher training contexts.

In this sense, FOAT-TIM functioned as a mediational space within the Zone of Proximal Development, where emotional experience could be reorganised through guided participation and symbolic meaning-making.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study offers several implications for theory, research, teacher education, supervision, and policy. From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* into adult teacher education. While the concept is often applied to child development, this study shows that it is also useful for understanding how trainee teachers make sense of emotional experiences during professional training. By exploring felt sense and felt shift as small but meaningful moments of change, the study illustrates how emotional growth develops gradually. It also highlights the importance of cultural values, spirituality, and symbolic expression as part of the learning process. In doing so, the study broadens sociocultural theory to include embodied and creative forms of meaning-making.

These findings extend previous art-based educational research (Douglas, 2023; Shahuddin et al., 2021) by demonstrating how reflective visual processes can function as mediational tools for emotional development within teacher training contexts.

Methodologically, the study shows that Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy within a trauma-informed model can serve both as a supportive practice and as a research approach. The combination of artwork, interviews, observations, and reflective notes provided a deeper understanding of emotional development. This supports the value of qualitative and multimodal research in teacher education, particularly when exploring resilience and identity, which are not easily measured through surveys alone.

In terms of pedagogy, the findings suggest practical ways to support trainee teachers more holistically. Simple art-based and reflective activities, such as body mapping or guided imagery, can help trainees recognise and explore emotional tension in safe ways. Grounding exercises and structured reflection can strengthen emotional awareness without requiring clinical expertise. These approaches create space for honest discussion of stress while maintaining psychological safety.

From a supervisory perspective, the study highlights the importance of emotionally responsive mentoring. Many trainees experience self-doubt and pressure during practicum. A trauma-informed approach allows supervisors to acknowledge these experiences without judgement. Structured but flexible reflection can help trainees process challenges constructively, supporting development through guidance rather than evaluation alone.

At the policy level, the findings align with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, which emphasises resilient and reflective educators. The study shows that socio-emotional development can be intentionally supported within teacher training institutions. Integrating reflective and art-based practices into teacher education programmes may strengthen wellbeing and reduce burnout. As a culturally responsive approach, FOAT-TIM offers practical direction for teacher training institutes and education authorities seeking sustainable professional growth.

Overall, the study demonstrates that emotional development in teacher education can be supported in meaningful and structured ways. When trainees are given space to reflect and make sense of their experiences, resilience becomes something that can be nurtured rather than assumed.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how *perezhivanie*, felt sense, and felt shift were experienced by Malaysian trainee teachers through Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy within a trauma-informed model. Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, the findings show that emotional development during teacher training unfolds through the body, relationships, and cultural meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978; Rappaport, 2009).

The two cases revealed different but meaningful pathways. Ahmad's development reflected stability supported by faith and responsibility. Megat's journey began with vulnerability but gradually moved toward acceptance and hope. In both cases, bodily awareness, artwork, and dialogue worked together to help reorganise emotional experience. Resilience developed over time through reflection and support.

By integrating sociocultural theory and art-based practice, this study extends the concept of *perezhivanie* into adult teacher education. It demonstrates how art-making and focusing can support emotional awareness and reflective growth within a structured and culturally sensitive setting. The findings suggest that resilience should be understood as developmental and relational, shaped by social support, symbolic meaning, and guided participation within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Overall, the study contributes to discussions in teacher education and wellbeing by placing emotional experience at the centre of professional formation. It highlights the value of FOAT-TIM as a culturally responsive approach that supports reflective, emotionally grounded, and resilient future teachers in Malaysian teacher education contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, writing, or publication of this manuscript.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Fairuz Binti Abdul Haleem Shah contributed to the conceptualisation of the study, research design, data collection, facilitation process, data analysis, interpretation of findings, visualisation, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. Professor Dr. Fauziah Binti Abdul Rahim contributed to the supervision, validation of the research process, critical review, academic guidance, and manuscript editing. All authors have read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access to the data is subject to ethical and privacy considerations related to participant confidentiality.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language refinement and to improve the clarity and readability of the writing. Following the use of ChatGPT, the authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

ETHIC STATEMENTS

This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and approval procedures of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), and the Teacher Training Institute. Ethical approval and institutional permission were obtained before data collection. The researcher received formal training in Art Therapy from La Trobe University, Australia, and additional professional training in Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT) with Dr. Laury Rappaport, USA. All sessions followed trauma-informed principles and the ethical standards of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA, 2013). Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and participant wellbeing were protected throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage.

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