



Promoting preschoolers' emotional competence using contemplative education and emotional coaching

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Abstract

This work investigates the effects of organized experiences with preschoolers aged 4 to 5 years, using contemplative education and emotional coaching. Two aspects are highlighted: both emotional knowledge and emotional regulation. A comparison is made concerning those preschoolers who underwent organized experiences versus those who participated in daily normal experiences. Herein, the research is conducted through a quasi-experimental design based on a study of two groups. The sample is comprised of fifty preschoolers with twenty-five preschoolers in each group. Group 1, the experimental group, undergoes training via two steps: organized experiences and individual emotional coaching. Group 2, the control group, receives the normal experience. The duration of the research is ten weeks. Data are analyzed using the mean, standard deviation, *t*-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results demonstrate that the experimental group had higher emotional competence than previously. Both mean scores for emotional knowledge and emotional regulation reached 0.05 level of significance.

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Introduction

In United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2017) published a paper highlighting the achievements of sustainable development. As such, sustainable development called for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and the planet. To this end, there must be greater opportunities for all to ensure healthy lives. Herein, for success, happiness and

academic achievements, well-being is seen to be the most crucial factor. In promoting well-being in children, education plays a significant role, making it possible for them to enjoy and achieve a healthy, safe and happy life.

In Thailand, it is noted that mental health issues are a major problem among children and adolescents. One in fourteen children, aged 5 to 9 years, exhibits mental disorders, including developmental abnormalities. Mental health problems greatly affect health and learning,

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thereby limiting the chance for children and teenagers to fully develop their potential. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the demand for mental and psychosocial services, hugely impacting education, social connections, family stress, and the disruption of essential services (United Nations Children's Fund, Institute for Population and social research, Bernet Institute, 2022).

Teekavanich et al. (2017) studied the prevalence and factors related to behavioral and emotional problems in 463 children, aged 4–6 years, in Bangkok schools. The study, based on the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ), revealed a prevalence of 11.9 percent for behavioral and emotional problems, including emotional issues, social relationship problems, rebellious behavior, and more. This research was conducted to aid in planning for children and families to prevent future psychiatric disorders. Stress in children can lead to emotional and mental issues, often manifesting itself through headaches, stomachaches, diarrhea etc. Disruptive behavior in class is brought about by stress. Behavioral and emotional problems are commonly observed in preschoolers.

The synthesis of emotional competence in preschoolers from related literature includes two components; (1) Emotional knowledge that entails others emotions/feelings expressed through facial expressions, words, or gestures in social situations; (2) Emotional regulation that refers to the ability to control emotions, thoughts, and expressions in dealing with emotionally challenging situations and to adjust one's emotional expression back to a normal state to achieve desired goals. Promoting emotional competence helps children recognize their worth, establish positive social relationships, prepare for school, and succeed academically (Garner, 2010; Nissen & Hawkins, 2010). Fostering emotional competence should begin in preschool, setting a solid foundation for emotional development. This involves teaching children to understand themselves, recognize emotions, and manage them. Implementing contemplative practices in early childhood education can promote self-awareness and lead to transformative learning. According to Wasi (2009), education at all levels, from kindergarten onwards, should enable learners to understand themselves and develop spiritually, in a free and safe environment, encouraging trust, exchange of ideas, and non-judgmental listening. This method is known as Contemplative Education.

Contemplative education is a philosophy that emphasizes deep, heartfelt learning using religious teachings, music, art, and nature, suitable for all levels and types of education. It allows individuals to

understand themselves and others, and coexist peacefully. Applying concepts of contemplative education with children involves mindfulness. Such mindfulness helps children become aware of their emotions and focus on the present moment, reducing their stress and anxiety. Brown et al. (2015) stated that mindfulness aligns with emotional and social learning, affecting children intentional behavior and emotional knowledge. For instance, attentive preschoolers can use emotional knowledge to respond to emotional situations (Garner, 2010).

Emotional competence needs to be directly taught to children. The concept of emotional coaching should begin with consistent responses to children. Adults must form emotional bonds with those in their care, listen to them, and gently guide them to reflect upon their emotions. This helps children communicate their feelings and set boundaries for their actions. Thus, emotional coaching is a concept that helps children learn about emotions. When adults engage in emotional coaching, it assists children in identifying their emotions, leading to a better understanding of their diverse feelings and the reasons behind them. Teachers play a vital role in promoting emotional competence by providing direct instruction and emotional guidance in situations where children face emotional difficulties. Emotional competence enhances awareness and the ability to guide emotions. Classroom implementation of contemplative education can support and develop emotional regulation by modifying the nervous system, achieving balance and mindfulness, and enabling automatic emotional responses. Such a philosophy promotes the ability to reflect on emotions and feelings, helping children respond flexibly and adapt when facing emotional situations (Shapiro et al., 2014). Using contemplative education concepts together along with emotional coaching is seen to help children learn about their emotions, driven by a positive relationship between children and adults. The researcher was thus interested in studying the effects of organized experiences using contemplative education and emotional coaching on the emotional competence of preschoolers in Bangkok.

Literature review

Contemplative Education

Contemplative education refers to a learning process that emphasizes the experience of awareness,

self-understanding, and self-knowledge through various contemplative practices. These practices, such as meditation, art, and yoga, serve as tools for deep self-reflection and introspection and are highlighted in a number of notable sources (Nilchaikovit & Jantrasook, 2009; Panich, 2008; Pongphakthian, 2010; Thongtawee et al., 2009). Contemplative education includes methods that deeply engage the heart and relates to human virtues. It is not limited to religious approaches but includes sciences, arts, and activities that create relationships and intrigue learners to discover the truth of nature, understand themselves and others, and cultivate compassion and loving-kindness.

Fundamental Principles of Learning Process in the Context of Contemplative Education

1. Contemplation involves nurturing mindfulness and self-awareness in learners, enabling them to engage with emotions through patience and empathic understanding. This principle is at the heart of the learning process, requiring facilitators or teachers to stimulate profound contemplation based on a calm, relaxed, focused, and aware state of mind.

2. Compassion is the creation of an atmosphere filled with love, empathy, trust, understanding, and acceptance. Believing in human potential encourages learners to openly express themselves and share their thoughts and feelings. Teachers must exhibit empathy and concern.

3. Connectedness integrates various aspects of learning to form a holistic experience that truly connects with life and the natural world. Hence, different learning bases, such as cognitive and emotional are linked together, fostering connections among learners and providing practical applications for real-life situations.

4. Confronting Reality allows opportunities for learners to step out of their comfort zones, enabling them to explore different facets of their identity through activities. This principle focuses on creating a safe, open, and accepting environment to understand personal limitations and potential.

5. Continuity ensures a smooth progression in the learning process, which is crucial for transformative learning. Change is a gradual process; accumulating experiences create conditions for fundamental change.

6. Commitment encourages learners to continuously apply what they learn in their lives. This involves centering learners' experiences, understanding, and setting common goals, promoting the practice and application of learned concepts for real change.

7. Community fosters a sense of shared community among learners and teachers, conducive to learning and personal transformation. This involves creating a space that is open and accepting, fostering mutual support and dedication to self-improvement.

These principles emphasize a holistic and reflective approach to learning, incorporating emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions to promote deeper understanding and personal growth.

Emotional Coaching

Emotional coaching is a concept of emotional communication to assist children in dealing with negative feelings. Emotional coaching serves as a tool for communicating with children who struggle in managing their emotions, which can be manifested in various ways, such as withdrawal, loss of interest, aggressive behavior, disruption, and inability to participate in activities. The goal of emotional coaching is to develop children's ability to handle emotions, helping them understand and deal with different emotions, and why they occur, in a trusting and loving environment. Gilbert et al. (2021), Gottman and Declaire (1997), and Gus et al. (2015) discuss in full the concepts and applications of emotional coaching.

Gottman and Declaire (1997) found that emotional coaching is effective when combined with positive discipline techniques, helping children clearly understand the consequences of inappropriate behavior. Adults using emotional coaching observed that behavioral issues in children are much reduced. The emotional well-being of preschoolers is crucial in shaping their overall development. The principles of emotional coaching include:

1. Consistent response from adults in low-intensity emotional situations, ensuring that children's emotions are addressed early.

2. Early emotional coaching helps children develop self-soothing skills, enabling them to remain calm under stress, reducing negative behaviors.

3. A neutral emotional stance from adults avoids conflicts by not criticizing children for expressing emotions like sadness or anger.

4. This approach strengthens the emotional bond between adults and children, leading to better compliance with adult requests and creating a trusting and healthy relationship.

Emotional Competence

Emotional competence refers to self-awareness, social sensitivity, understanding one's own and others' feelings, expressing a variety of emotions purposefully, self-confidence, self-control, controlling emotional expressions when necessary, and the ability to listen. This definition is supported by various scholars (Denham, 2006; Garner, 2010; Goleman, 1995 as cited in Hoyos & Gale, 2012). Parents and teacher have a significant part to play in providing a sound foundation for Children's emotional health. The synthesis of emotional competence in preschoolers from related literature includes two components:

1. Emotional knowledge involves having a vocabulary related to emotions, with the ability to name various emotions, identify others' emotions, and anticipate emotions that may arise from situations, and respond appropriately to others' emotional expressions. Such empathy includes using language that aligns with emotions, and can explain responses to others' emotions in a socially supportive way. This can be observed through an emotional understanding of preschoolers. In [Figure 1](#), below, the sketches highlight the characteristics of happiness and anger. In this context, the preschoolers have to tell the interviewer what each drawing portrays. For the correct answer, one point is given.

2. Emotional regulation includes emotional expression and emotional management, which can be assessed through observational behavior, focusing on emotions in preschoolers. In essence, emotional regulation is the ability to exert control over one's own emotional state

Methodology

Development of the research

This research utilized a quasi-experimental design with two groups. Evaluations were conducted in three stages: pre-experiment, during the experiment and post-experiment, over a period of ten weeks. The work involved developing plans based on contemplative education and emotional coaching, for the experimental group, while the control group received conventional lesson plans. Then, an index set up for consistency of content was checked. After revising and improving the plans, the two groups were tested for six weeks to determine difficulty level, discrimination power, average scores, variance, and the reliability of the assessment tool for understanding the emotions in preschoolers.

Participants

The researcher conducted the following steps to obtain the population and sample. The population used in the study entailed 100 preschoolers from schools under the Bangkok Primary Education Service Area Office. These preschoolers were selected from four classrooms, through purposive sampling based on the following criteria; (1) Schools that offer kindergarten education where the administration and teachers are cooperative and have granted permission to conduct the research; (2) Schools that implement teaching through six main activities; (3) Schools located within community areas; (4) Schools with kindergarten 2 (providing 2 classrooms); and (5) Schools where the socio-economic status of the parents ranged from low to middle.



Figure 1 An example measuring the emotional understanding assessment of preschoolers

The sample consisted of 50 preschoolers, aged 4–5 years, pupils enrolled in the first semester of the academic year, 2022. The selection was carried out as follows; (1) The researcher chose the sample based on the following criteria; (1.1) Classrooms where children have similar developmental levels, (1.2) Children whose parents consented to their participation in the research from start to finish, having been fully informed about the research through the participant information sheet and having signed the consent form; and (2) The researcher then conducted a random draw, selecting 25 preschoolers from kindergarten 2/1 to form the experimental group, and 25 children from kindergarten 2/2 to form the control group.

The experimental group underwent the organized experiences based on contemplative education and emotional coaching divided into 2 steps: each step consisted of 3 sub-steps.

Step 1: Organized experiences for the whole class involved: (1) building readiness, consisting of two activities; (1.1) preparing the child's physical and mental state, and (1.2) leading children to introspect their own postures; (2) providing new experiences, consisting of two activities; (2.1) sensory stimulation activities, and (2.2) awakening and transforming activities; and (3) reflecting practice.

Step 2: Individual emotional coaching: (1) creating a state of consciousness; (2) reviewing the causes; and (3) providing choices.

The control group followed the normal experiences.

The research compared differences in average scores for emotional knowledge and the average frequency of emotional regulation behavior among preschoolers, before and after the experiment, and between the experimental and control groups. The analysis employed analysis of variance (ANOVA). Before the experiment, researchers assessed the differences in emotional competence. The researcher found that the average scores for emotional knowledge and the average frequency of emotional regulation behavior were not significantly different between the two groups.

Data Collection

Table 1 shows that researcher implemented the experience-based plans with an experimental group. The researcher developed instruments to measure the dependent variables, which included the emotional understanding assessment and the emotional observation. Data were collected at different stages throughout the experiment, specifically at three distinct points:

1. First Measurement (O_1): Data were collected before the commencement of the experiment, over a period of one week.

2. Second Measurement (O_2): Data were gathered during the first phase after the experiment had been underway for five weeks.

3. Third Measurement (O_3): Data collection occurred after the completion of the experiment, at the end of ten weeks.

Researchers' preliminary steps

The researcher spent one week becoming familiar with the children. A form of consent had to be obtained from the guardians for the children participation in the research process. The Research Timeline (Total Duration of 16 Weeks) was as follows:

Pre-experiment Phase (2 Weeks)

1. Measurement of emotional knowledge of preschoolers in both the experimental and control groups, conducted during their free time.

2. Observation of emotional behavior of preschoolers. Both parents and teachers take part.

Experiment Phase (10 Weeks)

1. The researcher conducted the experimental process for both the experimental and control groups over 10 weeks, 5 days per week, for 30 minutes. The experimental group underwent 50 experiences, organized from 8.30 to 9.00 a.m. using the contemplative education and emotional coaching approach. The control group followed 50 conventional lesson plans from 9.00 to 9.30 a.m. all taught by the researcher.

Table 1 Repeated measures of the two-group design

Group	Before the experiment	During the experiment	After the experiment
E_1	O_1	$X_1 X_2 X_3 X_4 X_5$	O_2
C_1	O_1	$X_6 X_7 X_8 X_9 X_{10}$	O_3

Note: Symbols used in the research, X_1 - X_{10} : Represent the experience organized, using contemplative education and emotional coaching approaches plans. The plans consisted of 3 steps: (1) building readiness, consisting of 2 activities, (1.1) preparing the child physical and mental state appropriately, and (1.2) leading children to explore their own postures; (2) providing new experiences, consisting of 2 activities, (2.1) sensory opening activities, (2.2) awakening activities; and (3) reflection training. O_1 - O_3 : Indicate the measurement of emotional competence in preschoolers.

2. Further, an assessment of preschoolers’ emotional competence took place after 5 weeks.

Post-Experiment Phase (2 Weeks)

1. The researcher measured the emotional knowledge in individual preschoolers in both the experimental and control groups.

2. Observation of emotional regulations was applied to the two groups.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the average scores for emotional competence in the experimental group before, during, and after the experiment. Next, both the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) were calculated. Subsequently, the average scores for emotional knowledge and the average frequency for emotional regulation behavior were compared. This comparison was done, using an independent sample *t*-test and by calculating the effect size. Finally, the data were analyzed using the analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess variations over time.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis

Analysis of gender data among the 50 samples revealed that in the experimental group, there were 10 boys and 15 girls, constituting 40 percent and 60 percent, respectively. In the control group, there were 13 boys and 12 girls, making up 52 percent and 48 percent, respectively.

Emotional Knowledge

A comparison of the average scores for emotional knowledge, at all three stages: before the experiment, during the experiment, and after the experiment, between the experimental and control groups, is presented.

Table 2 illustrated before the experiment, the average score for emotional knowledge in the experimental group was 9.08, while the control group had an average score of 9.04. After the experiment, the average score for the experimental group was found to be 13.44, and for the control group, it proved to be 10.76. The effect size of the average score for emotional knowledge in the experimental group after the experiment was higher than before the experiment ($d = 1.70$). The effect size of the average score for emotional knowledge in the control group after the experiment was also higher than before the experiment ($d = -0.55$)

Figure 2 illustrates the scores for emotional knowledge in the experimental group before, during, and after the experiment were 9.08, 11.06, and 13.44, respectively. In the control group, these scores were 9.04, 9.76, and 10.76 for the same respective periods. For both groups, scores for emotional knowledge of preschoolers in each period are seen to increase. The experimental group showed higher scores than the control group for all three measurement stages. The effect size ($d = 1.26$) indicated that changes and experiences organized using contemplative education and emotional coaching were effective in enhancing emotional competence in terms of emotional knowledge in preschoolers.

Emotional regulation involved a comparison of the frequency of emotional regulation behavior. All three stages i.e. pre-experimental, during the experiment, and post-experiment are presented. Both groups, experimental and control, underwent examination (Table 3 and Figure 3).

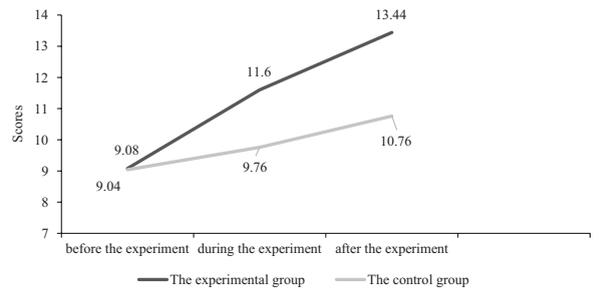


Figure 2 Scores for emotional knowledge of preschoolers.

Table 2 Comparison of the average scores for emotional knowledge of preschoolers in the experimental and control groups, across all three stages

Data analysis results	Emotional competence of preschoolers Emotional knowledge			
	The experimental group		The control group	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Before the experiment	9.08	3.21	9.04	2.24
During the experiment	11.60	2.90	9.76	3.14
After the experiment	13.44	1.91	10.76	2.31

Table 3 Comparison of the frequency of emotional regulation behavior of preschoolers in the experimental and control groups, at all three stages.

Data analysis results	Emotional competence of preschoolers frequency of emotional regulation behavior			
	The experimental group		The control group	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Before the experiment	9.27	2.14	9.11	2.18
2. During the experiment	12.14	3.06	8.59	1.90
3. After the experiment	13.40	3.10	10.58	2.53

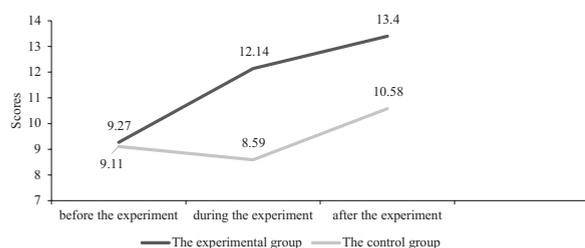
**Figure 3** Comparison of scores for frequency of emotional regulation behavior in preschoolers

Table 3 illustrated before the experiment, the experimental group had a mean score for frequency of emotional regulation behavior of 9.27, while the control group had a mean score of 9.11. After the experiment, the experimental group achieved a mean score of 13.40, and the control group achieved a mean score of 10.58. The effect size of the frequency of emotional regulation behavior in the experimental group after the experiment proved to be higher than before the experiment ($d = 1.58$). For the control group, the effect size was higher than before the experiment ($d = 0.62$).

As in Figure 3, a comparison of scores for the frequency of emotional regulation behavior of preschoolers, at all three stages, for the experimental and control group, is presented. Thus, it was found that the scores for frequency of emotional regulation behavior for the experimental group before, during, and after the experiment were 9.27, 12.14, and 13.40, respectively. For the control group, these scores were 9.11, 8.59, and 10.58, respectively. For both groups, the scores for frequency of emotional regulation behavior for preschoolers, in each period, are seen to increase. In the experimental group, however, the results revealed higher scores than the control group at all three measurement stages having an effect size ($d = 1.02$). These findings indicate that changes and experiences organized, using contemplative education and emotional coaching, were most effective in enhancing emotional competence in terms of emotional regulation in preschoolers.

Discussion

The Unique Characteristics of the Intervention Increased Preschoolers Emotional Competence

The effect size for emotional knowledge before and after the experiment in the experimental group was 1.70, and the effect size for frequency of emotional regulation behavior was 1.58, which is considered a moderate level (Ferguson, 2009). Herein, results demonstrate that the preschoolers experienced changes in emotional competence when exposed to experiences organized, using contemplative education and emotional coaching.

It is noted that the contemplative education approach enabled preschoolers to become more aware and understand themselves better, recognizing their identity through deep, introspective learning, using various contemplative methods as tools. This policy included practices, such as meditation, art, and yoga. Being mindful and present helps children to be ready for learning. Greenland (2010) affirmed that mindfulness training builds awareness, presenting moment concentration, and emotional capabilities, enabling pupils to see things clearly as they are free from emotional influence. Seeing reality, as it is, aids in managing and reducing arising emotions: teachers can respond with empathy. Albrecht (2016) stated that mindfulness fosters a sense of connection with others and appropriate responsive interactions, essential for building up relationships and peaceful coexistence. Mindfulness also deepens the connection between teachers.

Emotional coaching provided during both organized experiences and individual guidance involved steps like creating awareness in a calm space, and leading preschoolers to self-exploration. Revisiting situations that cause emotions were also discussed, reflecting pupils' feelings, naming emotions, and offering choices for action and problem-solving. These steps enabled pupils recognize and manage their emotions. Therefore, experiences organized using contemplative education

and emotional coaching resulted in increased emotional competence in preschoolers. Such experiences are consistent with the research (Rose et al., 2015). In their research, emotional coaching is seen to support the development of emotional and social capabilities and fosters positive relationships between carers and pupils.

Key Features of Teaching Practices that Promote Emotional Competence, such as Creating a Positive Atmosphere, Practicing Real-Life Experiences, and Stimulating Challenging Tasks

The basic principles supporting the enhancement of preschoolers' emotional competence through these approaches are as follows:

1. Teachers must create an atmosphere of compassion, trust, and positive relationships, maintaining a neutral emotional state. Such an environment fosters trust and safety in children, making them responsive to teacher guidance. In this research, teachers expressed love and compassion towards the preschoolers, thus allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings without judgment. This strategy aligns with Epstein (2014) who stated that teachers should be attentive to the emotional state of the child, whether expressed verbally or through actions. Teachers should communicate using words, facial expressions, and gestures to show attentiveness and eye contact, engaging with the child at their level. This approach strengthens the bond between the child and teacher, making the child more receptive to the teacher guidance. Teachers acknowledge emotions without judging them as good or bad, focusing instead on stopping unsafe behavior and preventing harm. Research shows that when children feel close to their teachers, they are more likely to follow guidance with affection and improve their behavior.

2. Epstein (2014) further suggests that through small groups, children can learn about emotions. Hence, preschoolers can learn about emotions through storytelling, role-playing, puppetry, and art related to people and emotional events, such as losing a pet, having a sibling, riding public transport etc. In this research, teachers discussed real events to allow pupils to experiment with problem-solving. For instance, teachers created scenarios where there were insufficient items for all children, leading them to collaboratively think of solutions and become aware of their own and others' emotions. As such, the pupils learned to identify problems and tried various methods to solve them. Thereby, the pupils are able to develop social, emotional, and physical skills.

3. In this research, when problem-solving methods were attempted, teachers gave preschoolers sufficient time to summarize their thoughts, allowing them to choose and prioritize their solutions until they were satisfied with their outcomes. The experiences created for preschoolers involved scenarios that encouraged them to think and solve problems. They encountered situations that required management, making them accustomed to thinking and trying different things to solve problems. Epstein (2014) believed that teachers should encourage children to identify problems and try to solve them themselves to develop mindfulness, social, emotional, and physical skills. Teachers who do not allow children to solve problems or intervene too quickly can make children feel incapable and dependent, whereas delayed assistance can cause anxiety and despair.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper is part of research, Effect of organizing experiences by using contemplative education and emotion coaching approaches on emotional competence of preschoolers. The results demonstrated that the experimental group had higher emotional competence than before. Both mean scores for emotional knowledge and emotional regulation proved to be higher than those before at 0.05 significance level: effect sizes were found to be 1.70 and 1.58, respectively. Besides, it is seen that the experimental group had higher emotional competence than the control group. Both mean scores for emotional knowledge and emotional regulation were higher than those of the control group at .05 significance level: effect sizes were 1.26 and 1.02. The work, herein, serves as a guideline for educational institutions in developing the quality of their management plans or curriculums such that the emotional competence of preschoolers can be enhanced. Moreover, our work offers a direction for defining strategies and methods for solving conflicts in the classroom and guidelines for assessing the tangible emotional competence of preschoolers. To this end, teachers must prepare themselves by attending workshops and seminars on emotional guidance. It is essential for teachers to develop emotional competence before they can effectively guide the emotions of their students. Future research should consider other variables, such as parenting styles, family socio-economic status, and the status of guardians, which are expected to impact the promotion of emotional competence in preschoolers. Further studies should explore

the effects of organized experiences and emotional coaching concerning other abilities of preschoolers, such as social skills and communication abilities. The researcher found that these abilities increased in the preschoolers but were not studied in detail. It is believed that in addition to increasing the emotional competence of preschoolers, experiences undertaken by preschoolers are contributing factors that can lead to their academic success and future life.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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