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Research Proposal

on

Investigating the Psychological Mechanisms

of Seed Paper Crafting as Emotional

Regulation: A Case Study in Children's

Residential Shelters in the South of Vietnam

(Ages 5–15)

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Introduction: Children in residential shelters are among the most vulnerable groups [1]. Previous studies have indicated that this group often experiences adversity and is highly exposed to mental health problems due to parental absence, trauma or unstable living environment [2]. Globally, art-based therapies have shown benefits for children's mental health [3], [4]. Yet, these studies mainly focused on a few common art forms, while alternative creative practices are underinvestigated. In Vietnam, the need is urgent. Ho Chi Minh City alone hosts more than 100 children's shelters, but most lack professional psychological support due to financial and staffing constraints [5]. According to UNICEF, about one-fifth of Vietnamese children and adolescents experience mental health concerns [6], which accentuates the demand for low-cost and accessible methods of emotional regulation. The process of writing, tearing, and planting paper with seeds was piloted by SouLoop community workshops, with 25 and 20 children participating, respectively. Building on this foundation, the present study examines its psychological mechanisms through observation and pre-post surveys with children aged from 5 to 15 in residential shelters. The research does not aim to be representative at the national level, but to create a pilot model for psychological interventions in children's care settings.

Research Questions:

This study aims to investigate the mechanisms and effectiveness of seed paper crafting as a tool for emotional regulation. In this respect, the study addresses the following questions:

1. Which emotional states most frequently emerge during seed paper crafting, and how do children describe these experiences?
2. In what ways does seed paper crafting support emotion regulation and foster mental well-being among children living in residential shelters?
3. How feasible is seed paper crafting as a structured activity for caregivers to implement without specialist presence?

Literature Review:

Art therapy is well-established as an effective, non-threatening modality for children struggling to verbalize complex emotions [3], [4]. Through activities like drawing and dance, children can safely channel feelings, reduce stress, and foster a sense of agency and self-discovery [3], [4]. A systematic review confirms that art therapy significantly reduces psychosocial problems in children and adolescents by providing a means for non-verbal

expression and emotional regulation [7]. Expert practitioners observe that creating art allows children to "visually speak" their internal struggles, organizing psychological chaos into a concrete form and rehearsing new ways of coping [8].

The therapeutic benefits are underpinned by several psychological frameworks. The tactile and repetitive nature of crafting activities can induce a mindful state, grounding individuals in the present moment and reducing rumination [3]. Furthermore, the deep, absorbing engagement required by art-making can facilitate a flow state, characterized by a temporary suspension of stress and an increase in intrinsic joy [4]. For vulnerable populations, creative acts that symbolize growth and renewal are particularly potent, as they can nurture hope and build resilience by offering a tangible metaphor for positive change [9].

Despite robust evidence for art-based therapies, a significant gap persists. Research has predominantly focused on a conventional set of practices, leaving innovative, multi-sensory crafts like seed paper crafting largely unexplored. This activity, which involves writing messages, tearing paper, embedding seeds, and planting the final product, uniquely combines symbolic transformation with sensory engagement. The physical act of reshaping discarded materials into an object of growth may synergistically activate mindfulness, flow, and resilience mechanisms in a way that has not yet been empirically investigated within residential care settings. This study therefore, addresses a critical gap by examining the specific psychological mechanisms and feasibility of this novel intervention.

Proposed Methodology:

This research used a mixed-method quasi-experimental approach. We believe this is crucial as the numbers will show us if there is a change, but the children's own stories and our observations will help us understand why and how the experience affects them.

- 1. Participants and Sampling:** The sample consists of children aged 5–15 living in residential shelters in Ho Chi Minh City. We aim to recruit between 80 and 120 participants in total across 3–5 shelters using purposive sampling. Participants will be randomly assigned to two groups: (a) the experimental group taking part in seed paper crafting, and (b) an active control group engaging in an alternative art-based activity (e.g., drawing, origami or dancing) of similar duration and structure.
- 2. Study Procedure and Timeline**

- 2.1. Baseline: We will use a short survey and visual scales to help the children express their current feelings before the experiment.
 - 2.2. The experimental group will participate in guided seed paper crafting (writing, tearing, planting). The control group will engage in parallel structured art-based activity.
 - 2.3. Post-activity Data Collection: After the activity, both groups will complete surveys, and observers will record behavioral indicators of engagement immediately.
 - 2.4. Two weeks later, a short reassessment and interviews will be conducted to re-evaluate effectiveness and feasibility. This step is intended to explore whether any initial effects were sustained and to gather feedback on the feasibility and acceptability of the program from the children's perspective.
3. **Measurement tools:** Quantitative data will be collected using validated methods:
- 3.1. Emotional well-being (PANAS-C short form, stress visual scales).
 - 3.2. Emotion regulation strategies (9-item ERQ-CA).
 - 3.3. Qualitative data will include observation checklists and short interviews exploring children's subjective experiences.
4. **Data Analysis:** We plan to analyze the two streams of data both independently and together:

Quantitative Analysis: We will use paired t-tests to examine within-group changes from pre- to post-activity. To compare outcomes between the experimental and control groups, we will employ ANOVA or mixed-effects models, which can account for the nested structure of our data (children within shelters).

Qualitative Analysis: The interview transcripts and observational notes will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis. This systematic process will allow us to identify recurring patterns and themes in how children express their emotions and experiences.

Triangulation: Finally, we will integrate the findings from both datasets. This methodological triangulation will strengthen the credibility and validity of our conclusions, providing a more complete picture of the intervention's impact.

5. **Ethical Considerations:** Parental consent and the child's voluntary consent will be obtained. Participants will consent to the 6 main ethical principles guidelines in psychological research, including: informed consent, protection from harm, right to withdraw, confidentiality, debriefing and deception.

Expected Outcome: We anticipate that the simple, hands-on process of seed paper crafting will provide a tangible outlet for stress, with survey scores and our observations showing a noticeable shift toward calmer, more focused states among the children.

Potential Limitation: A key limitation stems from our focused scope; by working with only a few shelters in HCMC, the results will offer deep insight into these specific contexts but cannot be broadly applied to all care settings in Vietnam.

Conclusion: This project is designed as a practical pilot, not for sweeping conclusions, but to determine if this accessible activity can be a meaningful addition to the limited toolkit of shelter caregivers.

Project Practicalities: Our team will coordinate with two to five shelters in HCMC to guide the workshops, using a mix of simple visual surveys and direct observer notes to track the children's responses throughout the activity.

Post-program Plan: Following the analysis, we plan to compile a straightforward guide and our initial findings to share directly with the participating shelters and local NGOs, hoping they find it useful enough to try and adapt.

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