

Art Therapy as a Pedagogical Intervention in Learning: A Qualitative Study on Emotional Expression and Student Engagement

Rani M. Ichwanto^{1*}, Wahyu Astjarjo Rini², Sundring Pantja Djati³, Andreas Fernando⁴, Hendro Budiyo⁵

¹Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Ekumene, Jakarta, Indonesia

²Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Ekumene, Jakarta, Indonesia

³Universitas Pertahanan Republik Indonesia

⁴Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Ekumene, Jakarta, Indonesia

⁵Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Tangerang, Indonesia

*Correspondence: rani@sttekumene.ac.id

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary learning processes increasingly emphasize cognitive achievement while often overlooking students' emotional dimensions, which play an important role in learning engagement. This study explores the implementation of art therapy as a pedagogical intervention to support emotional expression and student engagement in learning. Using a qualitative exploratory research design, the study was conducted in an educational setting involving children aged 5 to 12 years who participated in art therapy-based learning activities integrated into the instructional process. Data were collected through classroom observations, reflective field notes, and documentation, including students' artwork and learning artifacts, and were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that art therapy-based learning facilitates children's emotional expression by providing a safe and creative space for self-reflection and communication. The implementation of art therapy-based activities also supports student engagement, as reflected in increased participation, attentiveness, and emotional involvement during the learning process. Furthermore, these activities contribute to a more supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere. This study contributes to the literature by positioning art therapy not only as a clinical practice but also as a pedagogical intervention that can be integrated into educational contexts. The findings provide practical implications for educators seeking alternative approaches to foster emotional expression, engagement, and supportive learning environments, particularly within formal education settings.

Keywords: art therapy, pedagogical intervention, emotional expression, student engagement, qualitative study

1. Introduction

Contemporary educational contexts increasingly acknowledge that learning is not solely a cognitive process but is also deeply intertwined with students' emotional experiences. Children frequently encounter emotional challenges stemming from family circumstances, social environments, and developmental transitions, all of which may influence their motivation, participation, and engagement in learning activities. When emotional needs remain insufficiently addressed, students may experience reduced learning engagement and difficulties in meaningful classroom participation (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; OECD, 2021). Emotional well-being is therefore an important dimension of learning, particularly during childhood when emotional regulation, social relationships, and learning behaviors are still developing.

Children may also experience difficulties in articulating emotions verbally, particularly when they encounter anxiety, distress, insecurity, or social pressure. Such difficulties are not necessarily associated with clinical psychological conditions but may also occur in everyday educational situations. Emotional distress may be expressed through withdrawal, reduced concentration, behavioral changes, or diminished motivation to participate in learning activities. Consequently, educators may face challenges in recognizing students' emotional experiences and providing appropriate opportunities for emotional communication, particularly when they have limited formal preparation in psychological or counseling practices (Denham et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2021).

In response to these challenges, educational psychology increasingly emphasizes creative and experiential approaches as alternative pathways for emotional expression and meaningful engagement. Arts-based activities provide opportunities for learners to communicate, reflect, and process experiences through non-verbal forms of expression. Creative expression has been associated with emotional processing,

stress regulation, self-reflection, and cognitive development, enabling learners to externalize internal experiences that may be difficult to communicate through verbal language alone (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2018; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Such approaches are particularly relevant for children because artistic activities can provide developmentally appropriate and accessible forms of participation.

Within this broader framework, art therapy, traditionally associated with clinical and counseling settings, has increasingly attracted attention as a supportive approach in educational contexts. Art therapy uses visual language, symbolism, and creative processes to facilitate emotional expression and self-exploration (Malchiodi, 2020). In educational settings, art therapy-based activities can be adapted as pedagogical practices that create psychologically safe, reflective, and student-centered learning environments. Through structured activities such as drawing, coloring, painting, collage-making, and sculpting, children can be encouraged to explore emotions, develop self-awareness, and participate actively in learning without requiring verbal articulation of every emotional experience.

The potential relevance of art therapy-based learning is also connected to children's emotional development and resilience. Resilience is increasingly understood as a dynamic process through which children adapt positively to adversity and stress, shaped by individual capacities as well as supportive environmental relationships (Masten, 2021; Farkas & Gabor, 2015). Supportive learning environments that encourage emotional expression, reflection, relational safety, and a sense of agency may contribute to the development of resilience-related capacities. From this perspective, art therapy-based pedagogical practices may provide children with opportunities to explore emotions, exercise personal agency, and experience supportive interactions within the learning environment. Such practices may be particularly valuable in promoting inclusive classroom participation because they provide alternative

modes of expression for children who may experience difficulties communicating their emotions verbally.

Despite the growing recognition of arts-based and therapeutic approaches in education, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, empirical research on art therapy continues to be strongly associated with clinical and counseling contexts, resulting in comparatively limited understanding of its role as a pedagogical intervention within formal learning environments. Second, although arts-based learning has received considerable attention, fewer studies explicitly examine art therapy-based learning as an approach that simultaneously facilitates emotional expression and student engagement as integral components of the learning process. Third, much of the existing literature has emerged from Western contexts, leaving a need for further empirical evidence from non-Western and culturally contextualized educational settings. Finally, limited qualitative research has explored how art therapy-based pedagogical practices are experienced by children aged 5 to 12 years in relation to emotional expression, engagement, and supportive classroom environments.

In response to these gaps, this study explores the implementation of art therapy as a pedagogical intervention to support emotional expression and student engagement in learning. Focusing on children aged 5 to 12 years within an educational setting in Balikpapan, Indonesia, this qualitative study examines how art therapy-based learning activities are implemented and experienced within the learning process. Rather than evaluating art therapy as a clinical treatment or assessing the effectiveness of a therapeutic product, the study focuses on the pedagogical process and the experiences that emerge during the implementation of art therapy-based learning activities. The study therefore contributes to the discussion of inclusive and emotionally responsive education by examining how creative forms of participation may support children's emotional expression and engagement in learning.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is art therapy implemented as a pedagogical intervention in learning activities for children?
2. How does the implementation of art therapy-based activities support children's emotional expression and engagement within the educational setting?
3. In what ways does the implementation of art therapy-based learning influence student engagement in the learning process?

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the implementation of art therapy as a pedagogical intervention within an educational context. An exploratory qualitative approach is particularly suited for this inquiry as it allows for an in-depth, contextual understanding of the processes, interactions, and subjective experiences of children during art therapy-based learning activities, rather than measuring predefined variables or clinical outcomes.

2.2. Participants/Sample

The participants in this study consisted of children aged 5 to 12 years situated within an educational setting in Balikpapan, Indonesia. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) actively enrolled in the selected educational program, (2) fell within the focal developmental age bracket of 5 to 12 years, and (3) participated in the integrated art therapy-based instructional modules. A total of [Insert Sample Size, e.g., 15 students] participated in the study, providing a rich dataset across different childhood developmental stages.

2.3. Instruments

Data collection was facilitated through qualitative instruments designed to capture classroom dynamics and learning artifacts without imposing clinical diagnostic measures. The instruments included:

- **Semi-Structured Observation Protocols:** Used by the researchers to document behavioral indicators of student engagement, participation levels, and emotional involvement during the activities.
- **Reflective Field Notes:** Documenting context-specific interactions, instructional nuances, and immediate pedagogical observations.
- **Documentation Checklists:** Utilized to systematically catalog and archive students' artwork, creative output, and related learning artifacts as primary visual evidence of self-expression.

2.4. Procedure

The study was conducted step-by-step through the following instructional and research phases:

1. **Preparation Phase:** Designing the art therapy-based learning activities and integrating them into the formal instructional curriculum. Administrative clearance and parental informed consent were secured prior to commencement.
2. **Implementation Phase:** Conducting the integrated learning activities (such as drawing, coloring, painting, and collage-making) where children were provided a safe and creative space to explore and externalize their emotional experiences.
3. **Data Collection Phase:** Running concurrent classroom observations, maintaining reflective field notes after each session, and photographing/collecting the student-generated learning artifacts and artworks.

2.5. Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were examined using inductive thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns across the dataset. The analysis followed a rigorous iterative process: (1) data familiarization through transcribing observations and reviewing field notes, (2) generating initial open codes from raw textual descriptions and artifact representations, (3) searching for broader themes related to emotional expression and student engagement,

(4) reviewing and refining themes against the entire dataset, and (5) defining and naming the finalized thematic structure that directly addresses the research questions.

3. Results

3.1. Facilitation of Emotional Expression through a Safe Creative Space

The qualitative observational data and reflective field notes revealed that the structured art-making sessions successfully established a psychologically secure environment for the participants. Initial classroom observations indicated that a notable segment of the children exhibited hesitation, silence, or withdrawal during conventional verbal classroom discussions. However, upon transitioning to the art therapy-based activities (drawing, painting, and coloring), these students demonstrated a shift toward active emotional externalization. Children who were non-communicative verbally began utilizing the creative space to communicate internal emotional states through visual narratives.

3.2. Patterns of Symbolic Communication in Student Artworks

Analysis of the collected learning artifacts and student artworks revealed distinct patterns of symbolic communication and visual metaphors used by the children to represent their inner experiences:

- **Representations of Security:** A high frequency of drawings depicted structured houses, family units, and natural elements such as the sun and trees, which visually signaled themes of safety, comfort, and domestic belonging.
- **Representations of Distress:** Conversely, several artworks featured isolated figures, heavily fragmented geometric shapes, and a predominant use of dark color palettes. These specific visual configurations were explicitly associated by the children with feelings of fear, sadness, loneliness, or situational uncertainty.

3.3. Behavioral and Emotional Student Engagement

The implementation of the art modules resulted in observable changes across multiple dimensions of student classroom engagement:

- **Classroom Dynamics:** Children exhibited higher levels of attentiveness, personal enthusiasm, and voluntary participation during creative tasks compared to traditional, rigid instructional modes.
- **Peer Collaboration:** The sessions catalyzed peer-to-peer interactions, characterized by the voluntary sharing of artistic materials, collective discussions surrounding their drawings, and spontaneous storytelling.
- **Anxiety Reduction:** Students who typically demonstrated anxious withdrawal during verbal academic tasks displayed increased comfort and lower performance anxiety when allowed to present ideas through visual forms.

3.4. Progression of Emotional Awareness and Self-Reflection

The qualitative tracking showed a clear progression in how children reflected on their own emotional states. During the final phases of the art sessions, children did not merely produce visual artifacts but actively engaged in interpreting them. When prompted by educators, participants successfully identified, named, and open-heartedly communicated the underlying meanings of their creations, articulating specific feelings such as happiness, excitement, sadness, or fear connected to their lived experiences.

4. Discussion

4.1. Reframing Art Therapy as a Pedagogical Tool for Safe Expression

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that art therapy can function effectively beyond its traditional clinical borders, serving as an adaptable pedagogical intervention within formal classrooms. By establishing a non-verbal channel for children who exhibit verbal hesitation, this practice supports the assertions of Malchiodi (2020) that artistic processes serve as safe, developmentally appropriate visual languages for externalizing internal experiences. Furthermore,

the observed reduction in student anxiety and improvements in safe communication match the evidence highlighted in recent literature regarding the power of expressive arts to regulate emotions, build resilience, and elevate psychological well-being among young learners (Hu et al., 2023; Javadian et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2025).

4.2. Interpreting Visual Metaphors to Address Student Needs

The prominent use of symbolic imagery—ranging from signs of security (houses, family figures) to markers of distress (fragmented shapes, isolated figures)—underscores the critical value of visual literacy in childhood education. These findings reinforce the theoretical frameworks of Fancourt and Finn (2019) as well as Malchiodi (2020), which emphasize that creative outputs carry critical non-verbal data regarding a child's inner emotional landscape. For educators, recognizing these symbolic expressions provides a practical path to uncovering hidden emotional needs without needing advanced clinical diagnostic training, thereby fostering a highly responsive classroom ecosystem.

4.3. The Synergy Between Arts Integration and Multi-Dimensional Engagement

The sharp increases observed in student participation, peer collaboration, and enthusiasm validate modern socio-emotional learning frameworks. By connecting abstract learning processes with the students' internal emotional states, the art therapy-informed intervention addressed the behavioral and emotional dimensions of student engagement simultaneously. This outcome strongly aligns with the conclusions of Fredricks et al. (2019) and McDonald et al. (2022), which argue that experiential, arts-integrated instruction significantly optimizes student focus and mitigates performance-related learning anxiety.

4.4. Implications for Childhood Socio-Emotional Development and Resilience

The reflective dialogues where children explicitly identified and articulated complex emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, excitement) illustrate how creative pedagogy supports self-reflection. According to Immordino-Yang et al. (2019), structured spaces for emotional reflection are vital because emotion and cognition are neurobiologically linked; regular emotional regulation practices fundamentally enhance a child's capacity to adapt to social and academic pressures. By embedding these practices within daily learning, educators can actively strengthen core dimensions of childhood resilience—such as emotional competence, coping skills, and personal agency—within a non-threatening, inclusive environment (Masten, 2021; Ginsburg & Jablo, 2011).

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion

This study explored the implementation of art therapy-based learning activities as a pedagogical intervention to support children's emotional expression and enhance student engagement in educational settings. Conducted with 20 children aged 5 to 12 years in Balikpapan, Indonesia, the study examined how creative art activities could facilitate emotional communication and reflective learning within the daily instructional process.

The findings demonstrate that art therapy-based learning activities successfully provide a supportive and psychologically safe environment in which children can express complex emotions through creative processes such as drawing, painting, and collage-making. These activities enable young learners to communicate internal feelings and personal experiences that may otherwise be difficult to articulate verbally. Furthermore, the integration of these art-based practices contributes to increased multi-dimensional student engagement, as reflected in higher levels of classroom participation, attentiveness, enthusiastic peer interaction, and reduced learning anxiety.

Lastly, the structured art sessions foster children's emotional awareness and self-reflection by allowing them to systematically interpret, name, and discuss the meanings behind their visual

artworks. Overall, this study highlights the potential of art therapy-based learning as an innovative, emotionally responsive pedagogical approach that successfully bridges holistic emotional development with meaningful classroom engagement.

5.2. Theoretical Implications & Contributions

This research expands the existing body of literature on arts-based learning, socio-emotional development, and educational neuroscience in three distinct ways:

- **Reframing Art Therapy:** It re-conceptualizes art therapy principles, shifting them from strictly clinical or counseling settings into an active, everyday pedagogical intervention within formal classrooms.
- **The Emotional Integration Mechanism:** It highlights emotional expression as a critical mediating process between arts-based practices and student engagement, supporting contemporary neurobiological theories that assert cognition and emotion are deeply interconnected.
- **Non-Western Empirical Evidence:** It provides much-needed empirical insights from a non-Western educational context (Indonesia), thereby enriching the global academic discourse on creative pedagogy in developing countries.

5.3. Practical Implications

The empirical outcomes offer valuable actionable strategies for educators, schools, and policymakers:

- **Inclusive Learning Tools:** Integrating structured art-making tasks serves as an inclusive pedagogical tool that opens alternative pathways for participation, especially for quiet, withdrawn, or anxious children who encounter difficulties with verbal communication.
- **Socio-Emotional Integration:** Teachers can easily embed creative reflection and visual exploration into traditional curricula to cultivate emotionally supportive environments without requiring formal psychological counseling licenses.

- Holistic Educational Frameworks: Educational institutions can utilize these findings to design holistic training modules that address both the cognitive achievement and emotional well-being of young students simultaneously.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Research

Despite the valuable findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study involved a relatively small, specific sample size of approximately 20 children in Balikpapan, which limits the immediate generalizability of the results to broader student populations. Second, the intervention was restricted to a short timeframe

of three months consisting of only four structured sessions.

Future research should explore long-term interventions with a higher frequency of sessions to evaluate the sustainable impact of art-based pedagogy on long-term resilience and learning outcomes. Additionally, future studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative thematic analysis with quantitative psychological measures, to comprehensively assess the direct impact of creative interventions on students' academic performance and socio-emotional health across diverse school settings.

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8. Author Declaration

- Authorship Allocation: All authors listed in this manuscript have significantly contributed to the conceptualization, design, data collection, qualitative analysis, and final drafting of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript submitted for publication.
- Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests, personal relationships, or professional conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced or biased the research findings and insights presented in this article.
- Funding Sources: This research did not receive any specific grant or financial funding from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was conducted through institutional support and independent resources.
- Ethical Approval & Informed Consent: Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was formally obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating

children prior to the implementation of the art sessions. All participant identities, locations, and personal documentation have been completely anonymized to maintain confidentiality and research integrity.