



Journal of Didactic Studies

Published by: Primary Teacher Education and Early Childhood Education study program
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Cibiru Campus
Journal homepage: <https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/jds>

jds
didactic

The Role of Visual Arts Education in Developing Children's Imagination and Expression: A Literature Review in Early Childhood and Elementary Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of art education in developing children's imagination and expression at the early childhood and elementary school levels. Using a qualitative approach with a literature review design, the data were analyzed through content analysis. The results show that art education provides opportunities for children to explore ideas, emotions, and experiences through visual and creative activities. Learning activities such as drawing, coloring, and creating artworks encourage children to develop imagination, self-confidence, and expressive abilities. In addition, the findings indicate that imagination and expression are interconnected processes that occur simultaneously in artistic activities. This study discusses that children's artworks are not only learning outcomes, but also representations of their experiences and interactions with their social and cultural environments. Therefore, art education should be understood as a holistic learning space that supports cognitive, emotional, and creative development in children.

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 03 May 2025
First Revised 20 Jun 2025
Accepted 10 Aug 2021
First Available online 17 Sep 2025
Publication Date 01 Dec 2025

Keyword:

Art education,
Embodied cognition,
Expression,
Imagination,
Literature review.

1. INTRODUCTION

Art education is a field of learning that plays a significant role in supporting children's holistic development, particularly at the early childhood and elementary school levels. In the context of children's education, art is not merely understood as an activity of producing visual works, but also as a process involving aesthetic experience, exploration, and meaning-making in relation to the surrounding environment. Through art activities, children can develop their imaginative capacities, enabling them to generate new ideas and symbolically represent their inner world. In addition, art serves as a medium of expression through which children can convey emotions, feelings, and personal experiences in meaningful visual forms. Drawing activities are widely recognized not only as a form of self-expression, but also as a creative process closely correlated with the development of children's imagination (Ariani et al., 2020; Pebrianty & Pamungkas, 2023). Furthermore, art education can enhance children's imaginative and aesthetic abilities through active and exploratory learning experiences (Hardiyanti et al., 2025; Telaumbanua & Bu'ulolo, 2024). Thus, art education holds a strategic position as a medium that not only develops visual skills but also simultaneously shapes children's cognitive and affective dimensions.

In line with this, various studies have shown that art learning makes a significant contribution to the development of children's creativity and expression from an early age. Open-ended and exploratory art activities enable children to think divergently and generate multiple possibilities of ideas freely. Nipriansyah et al., (2021) and Qoumariah et al., (2025) explain that exploration-based learning approaches can enhance children's creativity and imagination through interaction with various media. Zultrianti et al., (2023) emphasizes that imagination plays an important role in helping children construct understanding and create meaning through learning experiences. In a broader context, aesthetic experiences in learning can also strengthen children's ability to interpret and express ideas visually. This is supported by Caiman & Jakobson, (2025), who argue that the integration of aesthetic experience and imagination contributes to the process of meaning-making in children's learning. Therefore, art functions not only as a creative activity but also as an essential means for developing children's expression and interpretation of learning experiences.

Despite the growing body of research highlighting the importance of art in children's development, existing studies still tend to focus on specific aspects in a partial manner. Most research emphasizes either the development of creativity or the outcomes of children's visual works, without thoroughly examining the relationship between imagination and expression as two interrelated aspects. In practice, however, imagination and expression are inseparable processes within children's artistic activities. Research by Zhang et al., (2022) indicates that children's art education has not yet optimally developed imaginative thinking, even though children demonstrate high creative potential. Moreover, Hardiyanti et al., (2025) reveal that imagination plays a crucial role in supporting children's emotional development in artistic practice, yet its implementation in learning remains insufficiently integrated in a systematic way. This condition highlights a gap between the theoretical potential of art education and its practical implementation in educational settings. Therefore, a more comprehensive study is needed to understand the relationship between imagination and expression within the context of children's art education.

In relation to the above, the limitations of previous studies stem from an epistemological perspective that continues to separate imagination and expression in a mechanistic manner. Most research positions imagination as an "idea in the mind" that is subsequently "translated" into visual expression through manual. This dualistic view reduces the essence

of children's artworks. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives and the concept of embodied cognition, children's activities such as drawing or painting should not be understood as processes of transferring pre-formed ideas; rather, they constitute dialectical processes in which cognition (thought), affect (feeling), and physical interaction with materials in the environment are intertwined (Caiman & Jakobson, 2025). Within a broader cultural framework, such aesthetic experiences function as integrative media that synthesize children's internal world with their social and ecological realities. Therefore, a critical literature review is needed to reconstruct the relationship between imagination and expression not as two sequential stages, but as a unified existential event within art education.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a literature review design to examine the role of art education in developing children's imagination and expression at the early childhood education and elementary school levels, allowing for the systematic synthesis of research findings (Annasthasya et al., 2025; Ridwan et al., 2021; Yam, 2024). A qualitative method was chosen because this study focuses on interpreting concepts, meanings, and educational perspectives related to children's imagination and expression in art learning processes, rather than measuring variables statistically. Through this approach, the researcher was able to critically synthesize various findings from previous studies and construct a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The research subjects consisted of library sources in the form of scholarly articles from accredited national journals and reputable international journals relevant to the topic of study, as literature reviews place documents as the primary object of research (Annasthasya et al., 2025; Ridwan et al., 2021). The sources of data in this study were limited to journal articles obtained from Google Scholar, Scopus, and ERIC databases, while books and conference proceedings were excluded to maintain consistency and relevance of the data sources. Data collection was carried out through a systematic search of scholarly databases using keywords related to art education, imagination, expression, and child development. The keywords used included "art education," "children's imagination," "children's expression," "early childhood education," and "elementary school art learning." The initial search resulted in 20 articles, which were then screened based on relevance, duplication, accessibility, and suitability to the research focus. After the screening process, 15 articles were selected and analyzed as the primary data sources. Sources were selected based on relevance and open access to ensure data validity (Annasthasya et al., 2025; Ridwan et al., 2021).

The data collection process was conducted through several stages: (1) determining keywords and databases, (2) identifying and collecting articles, (3) screening articles based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, (4) classifying articles according to themes and research focus, and (5) organizing selected studies for analysis. The inclusion criteria included articles discussing art education, imagination, expression, and children's creative development published within the last ten years, while irrelevant articles or studies with incomplete data were excluded from the review.

The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques by identifying and synthesizing the main findings from various studies (Annasthasya et al., 2025; Ridwan et al., 2021; Yam, 2024). The analysis process involved identifying recurring concepts, categorizing major themes, comparing findings across studies, and interpreting the relationship between imagination, expression, and art education practices. The results of the analysis were used to

build a comprehensive understanding of the role of art education in developing children's imagination and expression.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RESULT

3.1.1 The Fundamental Nature of Visual Arts Education as a Medium of Imagination and Expression

The review findings indicate that art education serves as a medium that connects children's imagination and expression through exploratory visual activities. Activities such as drawing and artistic creation help children transform the ideas in their minds into meaningful forms. In this sense, art is not only an aesthetic activity but also a way for children to understand and convey their experiences. In addition, Hardiyanti et al., (2025) found that imagination in artistic practice plays an important role in supporting children's emotional development; however, its implementation in learning remains insufficiently integrated in a systematic manner. Art learning has been shown to foster students' creativity through active engagement in exploratory processes and the use of various media. Artistic activities not only produce visual works, but also create learning experiences that are enjoyable, meaningful, and encourage students to express ideas and imagination freely. Moreover, direct involvement in artistic activities makes students more enthusiastic and active, thereby making the learning process more vibrant and having a more optimal impact on creativity development (Hardiyanti et al., 2025; Pratama, 2023; Rohim et al., 2025; Winnuly & Pamungkas, 2022). Children do not merely imitate; they begin to construct meaning through symbols they create themselves. This shows that art serves as a bridge between children's inner worlds and the world around them. Thus, imagination and expression can develop simultaneously. This understanding provides a basis for examining how the role of art is discussed in other studies, particularly in relation to the development of children's creativity and expression.

Fundamentally, art for children is not merely a school subject, but a way for them to affirm their existence in the world. When children draw, they are not passively imitating reality; rather, they are engaging in a dialogue with their social and cultural environment. This dialogue enables their deepest feelings and thoughts to become something that can be seen and touched in tangible form. In this way, artworks become a living language that bridges what exists within the child and the reality outside the self. From this perspective, art education is a primary space for children to learn how to become whole human beings.

3.1.2 The Role of Visual Arts in Developing Creativity and Expression (A Partial Perspective)

The literature review indicates that art plays a significant role in fostering children's creativity and expression, although these aspects are often discussed separately. Learning environments that provide opportunities for exploration have been shown to stimulate imagination and generate new ideas. This is supported by Nipriansyah et al., (2021), who argue that the use of flexible media can enhance children's creativity and imagination. Furthermore, freedom in artistic creation enables children to experiment with various forms and methods of self-expression. On the other hand, imagination also helps children make sense of their learning experiences. Sumirat et al., (2025) explain that imagination allows children to explore and generate new possibilities. Meanwhile, aesthetic experiences in art

learning play a crucial role in helping children express ideas visually through diverse creative activities. Artistic activities function not only as a means of producing artworks, but also as a medium for developing aesthetic appreciation and expressive abilities that optimally stimulate children's imagination and creativity (Caiman & Jakobson, 2025; Inzoni et al., 2025; Telaumbanua & Bu'ulolo, 2024). However, existing studies have not yet integrated imagination and expression as a unified process. Therefore, the following discussion addresses the limitations in combining these two aspects within learning practices.

The separation observed in previous studies stems from a tendency to regard children's minds and bodies as two distinct systems. Many adults assume that children first form complete images in their minds, and that the hand merely executes these ideas on paper. In reality, however, children's thinking and bodily actions operate simultaneously and inseparably. The very act of engaging with tools such as paint or crayons often triggers the spontaneous emergence of new ideas. Consequently, separating imagination from expression leads to a loss of understanding of the true complexity and richness of children's creative processes.

3.1.3 The Limitations of Integrating Imagination and Expression

The findings indicate that the integration of imagination and expression in art learning is still not optimal. Although children possess strong imaginative capacities, art education has not fully supported their development. Zhang et al., (2022) state that art education is still insufficient in fostering children's creative thinking. This indicates a gap between children's potential and the instructional approaches being applied. In addition, art learning practices still tend to emphasize final outcomes rather than the creative process experienced by students. This is evident in the dominance of teacher-centered approaches and an emphasis on achieving learning outcomes, which limits students' active involvement in exploratory processes and results in less optimal creativity development (Aprilia & Rugaiyah, 2022; Rukoyah et al., 2025). Children are guided more toward producing a particular work than toward exploring their own ideas. As a result, the relationship between imagination and expression does not develop to its fullest extent. This condition indicates the need for a shift in the approach to art education. Therefore, a learning method that more fully integrates these two aspects is required.

The root of this problem lies in adults' tendency to overvalue beautiful and uniform final products. When schools focus only on images that appear perfect, children lose the courage to explore and make mistakes. They eventually become mere receivers of instructions rather than creators of meaning from their own life experiences. True art education should value learning processes that are messy, uncertain, and full of surprises. It is within such free and honest processes that children's thinking and emotional intelligence develop most authentically.

3.1.4 The Need for an Integrative Approach

A fundamental critique of current art education practice is the mistaken dichotomy between a "process orientation" and an "outcome orientation." Disregarding the artwork as an outcome in order to prioritize process is an axiological error. A synthesis of the literature indicates that children's visual works, as outcomes, should not be viewed merely as final products judged solely by technical beauty; rather, they should be read as "memory documents" or material traces of the child's presence and experience in the world (Ariani

et al., 2020). When a child makes marks on paper with crayons, imagination does not come before those marks. On the contrary, it is the form, color, and texture of the crayons that stimulate and generate new imagination simultaneously. This is what is meant by dialectical integration. Art education provides a space for exploration in which the boundary between “imagining” (imagination) and “doing” (expression) dissolves into a single unity. This is consistent with the findings of Mardliyah et al., (2020) who show that children’s imagination emerges precisely when they actively manipulate materials in response to the problems around them.

In relation to the explanation above, to bring these two aspects together, we must begin to view children’s artworks as traces of their life journeys. Every line they draw is tangible evidence of a choice, an overflowing feeling, and a thought in motion. Drawing paper is not an empty space that must be filled with assignments, but a small world in which children come face to face with reality. By valuing these traces, we no longer judge children as if they were machines for producing artworks. Instead, we recognize them as whole human beings who are growing and searching for meaning in life.

3.1.5 The Significance of the Study in Establishing Pedagogical Foundations

Based on the overall findings, it is evident that most studies agree that art education supports the development of children’s imagination, creativity, and expression. Art is understood as a learning activity that provides space for students to explore and express themselves through a variety of creative experiences. In practice, art learning is not oriented toward a single aspect, but encompasses multiple dimensions such as creativity, aesthetic experience, and visual expression, making the focus of art education research diverse and multidimensional (Marni & Mayar, 2023; Nurhamidah et al., 2025). On the other hand, there are still limitations in integrating imagination and expression into a single, coherent discussion. Many studies continue to treat these two aspects separately. Therefore, this review affirms that art education needs to be understood as an integrated whole that connects imagination and expression. In this way, the main contribution of this study is to provide a more holistic understanding as a foundation for future research and learning.

Ultimately, this literature review seeks to repair the broken bridge of understanding that has long existed in relation to children’s worlds. By bringing together fragmented studies, we return to the fundamental awareness that children’s growth cannot be divided into isolated parts. Education must embrace children as whole beings, in whom thinking, feeling, and acting are all part of the same breath. This comprehensive perspective provides a far stronger and more humane scholarly foundation. It is highly important as a guide for researchers and teachers in designing future cultural learning spaces.



Figure 1. The Dialectical-Simultaneous Model of Imagination and Expression in Children's Visual Arts Education

Based on the diagram of the findings, this conceptual model demonstrates that art education functions as the primary medium connecting imaginative and expressive processes in children's development. The imaginative process is reflected in the ability to generate ideas, create visual symbols, and engage in creative exploration, while the expressive process is manifested through the articulation of emotions, the representation of experiences, and visual communication. These two processes do not operate separately; rather, they are interconnected within an integrated system of meaning that involves the interplay between ideas and emotions, meaningful exploratory processes, and unified aesthetic experiences. Thus, this model emphasizes that art education serves as an integrative space that simultaneously combines children's cognitive and affective dimensions within the learning process.

In relation to the explanation above, this model invites us to move beyond viewing imagination as a "superior" that gives commands and expression as a "subordinate" that merely executes them. Instead, they should be understood as equal partners engaged in a continuous and inseparable interplay. When a child creates a visual symbol, at that very moment they are also releasing emotions and interacting with their physical world. There is no clear beginning or end in this cycle of meaning-making. Rather, it is an ongoing process of becoming, through which children continuously come to understand themselves through art.

3.2 DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that art education plays a highly significant role in developing children's imagination and expression through exploratory and symbolic visual activities. These findings answer the research question by showing that art cannot be understood merely as an aesthetic activity or as a supplementary element of learning, but rather as a medium that directly influences children's psychological, cognitive, and affective development. Ariani et al., (2020) affirm that drawing is a medium of expression and part of children's creative and imaginative process. Hardiyanti et al., (2025) likewise show that art education can stimulate children's imagination and creativity while also helping them view the world from the perspective of beauty. Thus, art education becomes an existential space in which children integrate the way they think and the way they feel simultaneously through direct interaction with artistic materials.

Although this existential role of art is highly crucial, the findings show that most studies remain partial and have not yet integrated these two aspects as a unified whole. Nipriansyah et al., (2021) report that STEAM learning using loose parts “could increase children’s creativity and imagination,” confirming the importance of exploratory space in stimulating children’s creative potential. Harris, (2021) explain that children’s imagination emerges when they “invent, anticipate, and explore” problems that matter to them, indicating that imagination does not stand alone but is closely tied to the process of meaning-making. In a similar vein, Caiman & Jakobson, (2025) position “aesthetic experience” within interconnected science–art activities. However, these valuable findings still contain a gap because they have not recognized that imagination and expression are actually two sides of the same coin, occurring simultaneously rather than sequentially in a child’s creative process.

Furthermore, the limited integration of imagination and expression in learning practice reveals a gap between theoretical potential and classroom implementation. Zhang et al., (2022) explicitly state that “the common art education lacks the guidance of innovative thinking,” indicating that children’s art learning still often fails to provide sufficient direction for the development of creative and imaginative thinking. Hardiyanti et al., (2025) extend this perspective by placing creative imagination, illustration, and storytelling within support for social, emotional, and mental health. From this, it is clear that the main problem lies not in the absence of children’s potential, but in learning designs that confine children within rigid rules of art production. Therefore, the main solution is not simply to reject a “product orientation” and glorify a “process orientation,” but to unite the two. Art learning must be designed to view children’s artworks as tangible traces of an authentic creative process, so that imaginative and expressive functions are recognized as one complete existential experience.

As a response to these gaps, this article offers a conceptual contribution in the form of the Dialectical-Simultaneous Model, which positions art education as a space where imaginative and expressive processes merge. This model radically revises earlier understandings that separate imagination (as a faculty of the mind) from expression (as a physical act or emotional outpouring), because the literature shows that both are mutually vitalized when children interact with visual forms. Chang et al., (2023) emphasize the role of imagination in exploration, while Zhang et al., (2022) call for innovation. More broadly, every mark and visual symbol produced by children on paper does not emerge from a vacuum; rather, it carries traces of values, social philosophy, or collective memory from the environment in which the child grows. Thus, art education must be returned to its true essence: not merely as a space for training skills to produce beautiful pictures, but as a cultural space in which children construct meaning, identity, and aesthetic sensitivity simultaneously. This conceptual framework provides a strong foundation for improving early childhood and elementary art learning practices in the future.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on this study, it is concluded that art education at the early childhood and elementary school levels is not merely a supplementary activity, but rather a primary ontological space for the development of children’s embodied cognition. Through critical examination, this study rejects the dualistic view that separates imagination, as a mental process, from expression, as a physical product. The novelty of this article lies in the formulation of the “Dialectical-Simultaneous Model,” which demonstrates that in art activities, imaginative and expressive processes occur simultaneously, mutually shape one another, and cannot be separated. Children’s artworks are not merely final outcomes, but material traces of the dialogue between the child’s internal world and the surrounding

sociocultural context. The practical implications of these findings require educators to stop judging children's work through adult aesthetic standards that emphasize final products, and instead begin to facilitate art as a meaningful, open, and holistic space for dialectical engagement.

Despite successfully demonstrating the importance of art education in fostering children's imagination and expression, this study has several limitations. First, it relies solely on a literature review approach; therefore, the findings are primarily conceptual in nature and depend on previously published research. Furthermore, the literature examined is still dominated by studies that discuss imagination and expression as separate constructs, resulting in limited empirical evidence regarding the integration of these two aspects within art education practices. Consequently, future research is recommended to empirically test the Dialectical-Simultaneous Model proposed in this article through field-based studies at the early childhood and elementary school levels. Future studies may also develop art education learning designs that integrate imagination and expression simultaneously and evaluate their effects on children's creativity, socio-emotional development, and thinking skills. In this way, the conceptual model generated by this study can obtain empirical validation while making a stronger contribution to the advancement of both theory and practice in art education.

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