

Visual Arts Contributions to Emotional-Social Development of Students with Special Needs

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Abstract- Art education has been recognized as an important approach to supporting the holistic development of learners, particularly those with special needs. Creative activities such as drawing, painting, collage, and other visual arts provide opportunities for emotional expression, communication, and social interaction. This study aimed to examine how structured visual art activities influence the emotional and social behaviors of students with special needs. Guided by the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) by Kagin and Lusebrink and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research explored how art-based experiences support emotional regulation and collaborative learning among students in an inclusive educational environment.

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using systematic observation as the primary data-gathering method. Eight male students aged 6 to 11 years old with learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder participated in the study through purposive sampling. Data were collected during six weeks of structured visual art sessions conducted twice weekly. Observation checklists, field notes, and photographic documentation (when permitted) were used to record emotional expressions and social interactions during activities such as painting, drawing, collage, and paper mâché.

The findings indicate that participation in visual art activities encouraged students to express emotions more openly, demonstrate improved self-regulation, and engage more actively in social interactions with peers. Students were observed sharing materials, cooperating during tasks, and initiating communication more frequently throughout the sessions. These results suggest that structured art activities can create supportive opportunities for students with special needs to develop emotional awareness and social skills within an inclusive learning environment.

The study highlights the value of integrating visual arts into special and inclusive education programs. Art-based interventions can support emotional wellbeing, encourage collaboration, and foster a sense of belonging among learners with disabilities. The findings may inform educators, school administrators, and researchers about the potential of creative learning approaches in promoting holistic development and inclusive classroom practices.

Keywords: Special Needs Education, Visual Art Activities, Emotional Development, Social Development, Inclusive Education, Qualitative Research

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INTRODUCTION

Art education enhances holistic learning (Salem, M., Hassan, D., & Sidkey, S. 2024). According to UNICEF, Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. Artistic learning has a powerful impact on students' social and emotional wellbeing (Beinomugisha et al., 2025). Creative activities enhance well-being (Brown, S. 2015). The outcomes are essential as students with special needs often face challenges in emotional regulation communication and social interaction.

Inclusive education emphasizes allows all students of all backgrounds

to learn and grow side by side, to the benefit of all according to the UNICEF. Creative arts not only enhance individual learning experiences but also foster a collaborative

and inclusive learning environment (Kakungulu 2024). Thorndikes law of effect suggest that if the consequences of a behavior are good, then the behavior will be repeated. The effect of arts integration into inclusive education aims to repeat the positive emotional and social behavior.

Art education contributes to student's knowledge from aesthetics, art criticism, art history and art production and its emphasis on a personal collective interpretation of a subject, idea or a theme, and that embraces the process of learning as the reconstruction of knowledge (p155) (Salem, Mona et al 2024).

Art Therapy is a promising technique for enhancing social skills and emotional regulation in children with autism spectrum disorder (Jain 2025). Art therapy supports emotional health (Rubin, J. 2016). By incorporating elements from various cultural backgrounds into art activities, daycare centers can promote inclusivity and broaden children's perspectives on art and emotions (Emotional Development Through Art in Daycare 2024).

Arts promote social-emotional learning (Goldstein, T. 2017). Cooperative art projects empower students to put their teamwork and communication skills to work (Rocky mountain college of art and design 2025). Art integration has a positive impact on students with disabilities (Shouma 2020). Department of Education-Philippines 2021 provided a better environment for all learners to collaborate, regardless of their issues or differences, and sought to make schools inclusive; this shall ensure that students with disabilities are included. This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of social interaction in learning and development.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), observation provides rich, contextual data that captures subtle behavioral changes often missed by questionnaires. Using a systematic review offers a reliable method for behavioral assessment (Al-Hendawi et al 2025). This gap suggests the need for studies like the present research, which will directly observe the behaviors of students with special needs while participating in structured visual art activities.

Research Questions

1. What emotional behaviors are observed among students with special needs during visual activities?
2. What social behaviors are observed among students with special needs during visual activities?
3. How does the development of emotional and social behaviors change by the visual art program?

Students with learning disability reported lower social self-efficacy and lower SWB and feelings of loneliness from elementary to high school (Heiman, Tali et al 2020). Students with LDs also encounter social challenges in the form of fewer friends, disconnectedness from their classmates, and heightened perceptions of isolation (Bruefach & Reynolds, 2022). Providing complete assistance in special education settings is important for the social and emotional needs of children with disabilities (Singh, 2023). According to The Deron School (2024), creative activities such as drawing, painting, and sculpting provide children with nonverbal avenues for emotional expression, which is especially beneficial for those who experience communication challenges. By integrating the arts into education, teachers could be better equipped to enhance learners' overall wellbeing, fostering greater engagement and helping them grow into more balanced and well-rounded individuals (Beinomugisha, Peninah et al 2025).

The purpose of this research is to encourage parents, regular teachers, special education teachers and researchers into integrating visual art programs into the lesson to promote emotional and social interaction for students with special needs. It aims to observe and describe the ways in which structured visual art activities influence the emotional

expressions and social interactions of students with special needs. By generating context-based, observational data, this research seeks to inform teachers, administrators, and program developers about the value of art-based interventions in promoting holistic development and inclusion.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study is anchored on two theoretical foundations: The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) by Kagin and Lusebrink (1978) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory.

The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) is a transtheoretical organizing system that provides a language to facilitate communication across diverse approaches to art therapy. It promotes a healing function and an emergent function that can be used therapeutically. Kinesthetic sensory is functional experience to promote motor movement that releases tension, muscle relaxation and self-soothing through rhythm and movement.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that learning and development occur through social interaction and shared experiences within a community. It is effective for individuals to learn in social activities. A learner will actively learn through meaningful collaboration with assistance of an individual.

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, the study proposes that structured involvement in visual art activities supports both emotional and social development among students with special needs. Ongoing participation in these activities is anticipated to strengthen emotional expression, improve self-regulation, and foster greater cooperation and communication skills.

Independent Variable: Participation in structured visual art activities (painting, drawing, collage, paper mâché).

Dependent Variables: Emotional development: Expression of feelings, self-regulation, recognition of emotion. Social development: Peer interaction, cooperation, sharing and communication skills observed in students with special needs.

This framework suggests that consistent exposure to art activities enhances both emotional expression and social interaction.

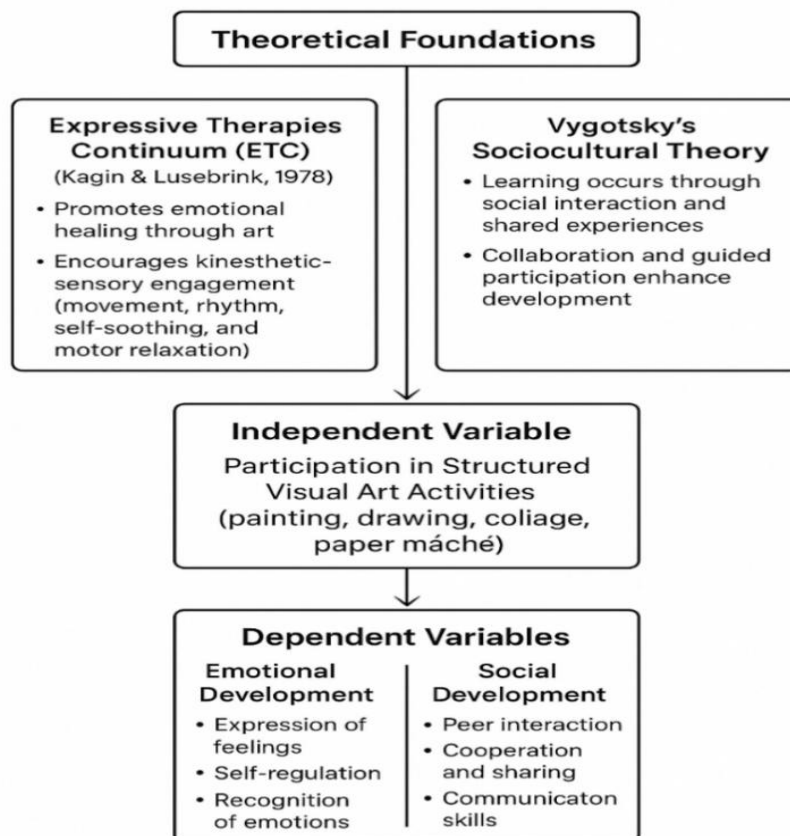


Fig. 1. Theoretical foundation, Independent and Dependent Variables

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study will utilize a qualitative descriptive research using systematic observation as the primary data-gathering method. The design will interpret the natural behaviors, emotional expressions, and social interactions of students with special needs as they participate in structured visual art activities. The qualitative approach allows for a detailed understanding of observable changes. There would be a checklist to guide data collection, ensuring consistency and reliability across observations. Qualitative descriptive studies aim to provide a comprehensive summary of events. The approach to this study design is journalistic, with the aim being to answer the questions who, what, where and how (Ayton, 2023).

The research will focus on describing how students' express emotions, communicate their feelings and the facial expression. It will focus also on collaboration with peers and sharing of materials during art sessions. The study aims to generate contextual insights that can guide teachers and program developers in using art-based interventions in inclusive classrooms by documenting observable behaviors.

B. Sources of Data

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study will be students with mild to moderate intellectual disability aged 6 to 11 years old, including those diagnosed with mild intellectual disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were enrolled in a special education program and demonstrated the ability to engage in simple art activities.

A total of 8 male students participated in the study. They will represent a small, manageable group that allowed for close observation of individual and group behaviors during each art session. In qualitative research, smaller sample sizes allow for deeper analysis of participant responses. Therefore, n=8 provided enough detailed data to address the research questions.

Locale of the Study

The study will be conducted at Al Rayaheen School, a learning institution that supports inclusive education for children with special needs. The school provides a inclusive environment for creative learning through visual arts. It will make an appropriate setting for observing the emotional and social effects of structured visual art activities.

C. Instrumentation and Data Collection

Instruments Used

1. Observation Checklist – A structured checklist will be developed to record the frequency and nature of emotional and social behaviors exhibited by students during each art session. The checklist included indicators such as emotional expression (smiling, frustration control, enthusiasm) and social behaviors (sharing materials, helping peers, initiating conversation).
2. Field Notes – The researcher will take descriptive notes on each session, including student reactions, classroom atmosphere, and teacher-student interactions. These notes provided qualitative depth to supplement the checklist data.
3. Photographic Documentation (if permitted) – With proper consent, photographs of the art sessions were used to visually document engagement and cooperation among participants. These served as supporting evidence for observed behaviors.

Development and Validation Process of the Instrument

The observation checklist used in this study was developed by the researcher based on existing literature related to social-emotional development and art-based interventions for students with special needs. Indicators included in the checklist focused on observable emotional behaviors such as expression of feelings, enthusiasm, and self-regulation, as

well as social behaviors including sharing materials, helping peers, initiating interaction, and cooperating during group activities. These indicators were derived from previous studies on social–emotional learning and inclusive education.

To ensure the content validity of the instrument, the checklist was reviewed by experts in the field of special education and educational research. Their feedback focused on the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of each behavioral indicator for students with special needs. Based on their recommendations, minor revisions were made to improve the wording and organization of the checklist items.

Prior to the actual data collection, the instrument was pilot-tested during a preliminary observation session to determine its practicality and effectiveness in recording students' behaviors during visual art activities. The pilot testing allowed the researcher to refine the checklist format and ensure that all indicators could be clearly observed and consistently recorded during the art sessions. This process helped improve the reliability and usability of the instrument for systematic observation throughout the study.

Data Collection Procedure

1. **Pre-Observation Phase:** The researcher coordinated with the school administrator and special education teachers to schedule six weeks of visual art sessions. Consent forms were obtained from parents and guardians before participation.
2. **Observation Phase:** Each session lasted for approximately 45–60 minutes, will be conducted it twice weekly. During each activity (painting, drawing, collage, paper mâché), the researcher will observe and record the emotional and social behaviors of participants using the observation checklist and field notes.
3. **Post-Observation Phase:** After the completion of the sessions, the recorded data will be organized, categorized, and interpreted to identify emerging patterns of emotional and social development.

The data gathered from observation checklists, field notes, and photographic documentation were analyzed using thematic coding. This approach allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes related to the emotional and social development of students with special needs during visual art activities.

The analysis followed a systematic process adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization with the Data.

The researcher reviewed all collected data, including observation checklists and field notes, multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' behaviors. Initial notes and impressions were recorded during this phase.

2. Generating Initial Codes.

Relevant features of the data were systematically coded by identifying observable emotional and social behaviors such as smiling, frustration control, sharing materials, and initiating interaction. Codes were assigned to meaningful segments of the data.

3. Searching for Themes.

The identified codes were then grouped into broader categories to form potential themes. For example, codes related to expressing feelings were grouped under "Emotional Expression," while interaction-related codes were categorized under "Peer Interaction."

4. Reviewing Themes.

The preliminary themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data. The researcher checked the consistency of themes across all data sources and ensured that each theme was distinct and supported by sufficient evidence.

5. Defining and Naming Themes.

Each theme was clearly defined and labeled to capture its essence. Themes such as Emotional Expression, Self-Regulation, Peer Interaction, Cooperation and Sharing, and Behavioral Progression were finalized.

6. Producing the Report.

The final step involved organizing the themes into a coherent narrative supported by observational evidence and relevant literature. These themes were used to interpret how visual art activities contributed to the emotional and social development of students with special needs.

D. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and quality of the qualitative findings, the study followed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as suggested in qualitative research approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative descriptive design is a valuable method, providing first-hand descriptions of events, experiences or phenomena being studied. These accounts enable researchers to gain a straightforward and comprehensive understanding (Villamin et al., 2024).

Credibility. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement and careful observation of the participants during the six-week visual art sessions. The researcher consistently recorded students' emotional expressions and social interactions using an observation checklist and detailed field notes. Repeated observations allowed the researcher to identify patterns and ensure that the recorded behaviors accurately reflected the students' experiences during the art activities.

Triangulation. Data triangulation was applied by using multiple sources of evidence, including observation checklists, field notes, and photographic documentation when permitted. These different forms of data provided supporting perspectives that strengthened the accuracy and interpretation of the findings.

Dependability. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a consistent observation procedure throughout the sessions. The same checklist indicators and observation methods were used in each activity to maintain consistency in data recording. This systematic approach allowed the researcher to track behavioral changes reliably across the duration of the program.

Confirmability. To maintain objectivity, the researcher carefully documented observations based on actual behaviors rather than personal interpretations. Field notes and photographic documentation served as supporting records that could verify the interpretations of the observed emotional and social behaviors.

Transferability. Although the study involved a small group of participants, detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and procedures were provided. These descriptions allow other researchers or educators to determine whether the findings may be applicable to similar special education or inclusive classroom contexts.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research involved a small sample size of eight students, which limits the generalizability of the results to a wider population of students with special needs. The participants were selected using purposive sampling from a single school, which may not fully represent the diverse characteristics of students with special needs in other educational settings.

Second, the study relied primarily on systematic observation as the main data collection method. Although observation allowed the researcher to capture authentic emotional and social behaviors during the art sessions, the interpretation of behaviors may still involve a degree of researcher subjectivity.

Third, the duration of the intervention was limited to six weeks, which may not be enough to fully observe long-term changes in students' emotional regulation and social development. A longer implementation period could provide deeper insights into sustained behavioral improvements.

Lastly, the study focused only on visual art activities such as painting, drawing, collage, and paper mâché. Other forms of creative expression, such as music, drama, or movement-based arts, were not included and may also contribute to the emotional and social development of students with special needs.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable observational insights into how structured visual art activities can support emotional expression and social interaction among students with special needs in an inclusive educational environment.

DISCUSSION

The data gathered from observation checklists, field notes, and supporting documentation were analyzed using thematic coding. The analysis revealed five major themes related to the emotional and social development of students with special needs during participation in structured visual art activities.

Emotional Behaviors Observed During Visual Art Activities

Theme 1: Emotional Expression

Students demonstrated an increased ability to express their emotions during visual art activities. Observable behaviors included smiling, enthusiasm, and active engagement in tasks. Art activities provided a nonverbal medium through which students could communicate their feelings, particularly for those who had trouble with verbal expression.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that art serves as an effective tool for emotional expression among learners with special needs (Koch & Thompson, 2017; Rege, 2025). Similarly, Pu et al. (2024) emphasized that creative engagement enhances emotional sharing and self-confidence in children. The results suggest that visual art activities create a safe and supportive environment that encourages students to express emotions more openly.

Theme 2: Self-Regulation

Students showed noticeable improvement in emotional regulation throughout the sessions. Initially, some participants displayed signs of frustration, impatience, and difficulty maintaining focus. However, over time, these behaviors decreased, and students were able to complete tasks more calmly and with greater concentration.

This progression supports findings by Lavric and Soponaru (2023), who reported that art-based interventions contribute to reduced anxiety and increased emotional control. Art activities provide structured yet flexible opportunities for students to manage their emotions, supporting the development of self-regulation skills in inclusive classroom settings.

Social Behaviors Observed During Visual Art Activities

Theme 3: Peer Interaction

Students increasingly engaged in interactions with their peers during visual art activities. They initiated conversations, responded to classmates, and participated in collaborative discussions. These interactions became more frequent as the sessions progressed.

This finding aligns with the sociocultural perspective of learning, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in development (Vygotsky, 1978). Previous research has also shown that art integration promotes communication and social engagement among students with special needs (Bayer & Liman Turan, 2023). The results indicate that art activities can serve as a platform for enhancing peer interaction and reducing social withdrawal.

Theme 4: Cooperation and Sharing

Students demonstrated improved cooperation and willingness to share materials with their peers. They assisted one another during tasks and showed increased awareness of group participation. Collaborative behaviors such as helping, turn-taking, and joint task completion were frequently observed.

These findings support the work of Fasahat (2025), which highlights the role of art-based activities in developing social relationships and teamwork skills. The collaborative nature of visual art activities fosters a sense of community and belonging, which is essential in inclusive education environments.

Development of Emotional and Social Behaviors Over Time

Theme 5: Behavioral Progression

A clear progression in both emotional and social behaviors was observed across the six-week intervention period.

Early Stage: Students exhibited hesitation, minimal interaction, and occasional frustration.

Middle Stage: Increased participation and emerging cooperation were observed.

Final Stage: Students demonstrated confidence, active communication, and improved emotional control.

This developmental progression is consistent with findings by Thuketana and Westhof (2018), who noted that initial hesitation in art activities decreases as students gain confidence through repeated engagement. The gradual improvement observed in this study suggests that consistent exposure to structured visual art activities contributes significantly to both emotional and social development.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the findings indicate that structured visual art activities positively influence the emotional expression, self-regulation, peer interaction, and cooperative behaviors of students with special needs. The results reinforce the value of integrating art-based approaches in inclusive classrooms, supporting both individual development and social participation.

These findings further support the Expressive Therapies Continuum, which posits that engagement with art materials facilitates emotional processing and regulation. Additionally, the results align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing that learning occurs through interaction and shared experiences.

The study highlights the potential of visual art activities as an effective educational and developmental tool for promoting holistic growth among students with special needs.

Table 1. Summary of Themes

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Theme	Category	Observed Behaviors
Emotional Expression	Emotional	Smiling, enthusiasm, expressing feelings
Self-Regulation	Emotional	Reduced frustration, improved focus
Peer Interaction	Social	Initiating communication, responding to peers
Cooperation & Sharing	Social	Helping others, sharing materials
Behavioral Progression	Development	Gradual improvement over time

The thematic analysis revealed that visual art activities significantly contributed to the emotional and social development of students with special needs. The identified themes demonstrate that art-based learning provides opportunities for emotional expression, enhances self-regulation, and promotes meaningful social interaction.

These findings support the idea that structured creative activities are effective tools in inclusive education. The results align with sociocultural perspectives, emphasizing that learning occurs through interaction and shared experiences. Additionally, the findings reinforce the role of art in facilitating emotional growth and social participation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of structured visual art activities on the emotional and social development of students with special needs. The findings revealed that participation in art-based activities enhanced students' ability to express emotions, improved self-regulation, and increased social interaction and cooperation with peers.

The results demonstrate that visual art activities provide a supportive and inclusive environment where students can communicate feelings, build confidence, and develop meaningful relationships. The observed progression from hesitation to active engagement highlights the importance of consistent and structured exposure to creative activities in promoting developmental growth.

These findings support the Expressive Therapies Continuum, which emphasizes the role of art in facilitating emotional processing, as well as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which underscores the importance of social interaction in learning. Together, these frameworks explain how visual art activities contribute to both emotional regulation and social development.

In conclusion, integrating visual art activities into special and inclusive education programs can serve as an effective strategy for fostering holistic development among students with special needs. Educators are encouraged to incorporate structured art-based interventions in classroom practice to support emotional well-being, enhance social skills, and promote inclusive learning environments.

Future research may explore the long-term effects of art-based interventions, include a larger and more diverse group of participants, and examine other forms of creative expression such as music and drama to further understand their impact on student development.

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