E-ISSN: 2502-3519 P-ISSN: 2798-3234
JGA, Vol. 10(2), June 2025 (813-826)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14421/jga.2025.104-12

Golden Age
Jurnal Ilmiah Tumbuh Kembang Anak Usia Dini

OPEN ACCESS

Fostering Creative Expression in Early Childhood Learners: Ekraf Academy and the Development of Visual Arts Skills in Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi

Imam Machali[1], **Bintang Shafa Masnaini Z**[2], **Tiara Permata Bening**[1], **Waode Asri Fahma Rishanda**[1]

[1]Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia,
[2]KUA Kota Baubau, Indonesia

Keywords:
Early childhood education, Visual arts learning, Creativity, Non-formal education, small-group learning.

Correspondence to
Imam Machali, Department of Islamic Education Management, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
e-mail:
imam.machali@uin-suka.ac.id

Received 24 08 2025
Revised 20 12 2025
Accepted 28 12 2025
Published Online First 31 12 2025

Check for updates

Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2025. Re-use is permitted under CC BY-NC. No commercial re-use. See rights and permissions. Published by JGA.

Abstract

Early childhood visual art learning is frequently reduced to routine, product-oriented activities, leaving limited scholarly attention to the micro-processes through which creativity is negotiated in practice. This instrumental case study examines how Ekraf Academy, a non-formal art program in Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, structures conditions that support children's creative visualization. Data were generated through an in-depth interview with the founder-instructor, participant observation across four naturally occurring sessions during a two-week field period in 2025, and analysis of children's portfolios, artworks, and institutional documents. The dataset was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that creative visualization develops through social-evaluative mediation, in which affective cues—such as peer attention and instructor reassurance—shape children's formal decisions regarding color, line, and composition. The pedagogical design operates through structured flexibility characterized by several trade-offs: mentoring reduces fear of error while occasionally encouraging confirmation-seeking; an "Exploration Day" format expands artistic variety but increases initiation costs under conditions of high choice; and small-group proximity facilitates peer learning yet intensifies comparison pressures when participation levels differ. The study conceptualizes non-formal early childhood art learning as a context-sensitive ecology of creative decision-making, offering analytically transferable pedagogical principles for designing creativity-oriented art programs in early childhood education.

To cite: Machali, I., Masnaini, B. S. Z., Bening, T. P., & Rishanda, W. A. F. (2025). Fostering creative expression in early childhood learners: Ekraf Academy and the development of visual arts skills in Baubau, Southeast Sulawesi. *Golden Age: Jurnal Ilmiah Tumbuh Kembang Anak Usia Dini, 10*(4), 819–834. https://doi.org/10.14421/jga.2025.104-12

Introduction

Visual arts in early childhood are widely positioned as a foundation for creativity, imagination, and self-expression, yet classroom realities often compress artmaking into routine, product-oriented tasks that leave limited room for experimentation and meaning-making (Sitanggang et al., 2024; Terreni, 2017; Wakayama, 2018). This tension matters because creativity in early childhood is not an ornamental add-on but a developmental capacity tied to character formation, thinking patterns, and children's adaptability to their social environments (Hairiyah & Mukhlis, 2019; Mayar et al., 2022; Palupi et al., 2022). Visual arts can foster creative, critical, and reflective thinking when they are meaningfully integrated into early learning (Denee et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024; Ruiz-del-Pino et al., 2022). At this stage, art learning is commonly enacted through play and open exploration, including two- and three-dimensional work that supports representational thinking, sensory engagement, and socio-emotional development (Nadlifah et al., 2022; Nurlina & Bahera, 2024; Sarasehan et al., 2020; Sumyati, 2023; Zaidah & Ariyati, 2024). Recent syntheses also underline that arts education can contribute to cognitive and emotional development, but that these benefits are shaped by how learning conditions are designed and enacted (Alsaqabi & Alazmi, 2024; Samaniego et al., 2024). The persistent question, therefore, is not whether art is beneficial, but how specific learning ecologies enable young children to sustain creative engagement and develop visual expression under real constraints.

Evidence from diverse contexts suggests that early childhood art learning is frequently limited by narrow expectations, constrained pedagogical repertoires, and uneven infrastructural support. In several Indonesian settings, art activities have been reported to rely heavily on worksheets and repetitive tasks, while dedicated spaces and facilities for creative exploration remain underdeveloped (Muhammad et al., 2023; Primawati, 2023; Suprapti & Pamungkas, 2022; Waruwu et al., 2024). Similar constraints are reported internationally through limited teacher training, low self-efficacy, and inadequate resources that hinder the enactment of visual arts programs (Hayes et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2025; Lindsay, 2021). These conditions can restrict children's opportunities to generate original visual ideas and to build confidence in artistic expression (Anggraeni & Pamungkas, 2023). In parallel, policy shifts that emphasize child-centered learning do not automatically translate into stronger arts pedagogy in practice when teacher readiness and institutional priorities remain uneven (Nuraeni et al., 2025). If such constraints persist, children may enter later schooling with weaker capacities for flexible thinking and innovation that are increasingly demanded in contemporary life (Telaumbanua & Bu'ulolo, 2024).

At the same time, much of the scholarship still centers on formal early childhood settings or on discrete interventions that treat creativity as a relatively uniform outcome of instruction. Studies have advanced understanding of teacher knowledge and efficacy (Denee et al., 2024; Leung et al., 2025; Lindsay, 2021), arts integration in early childhood classrooms (Stevens-Ballenger & Wilson, 2024), and outdoor or nature-oriented arts interventions (Hallam et al., 2022; Moula et al., 2022). However, fewer studies examine non-formal or community-based art learning environments as institutional systems that intentionally configure pedagogical guidance, emotional safety, and peer and family participation to support children's visual creativity (Hallam et al., 2022; Moula et al., 2022; Stevens-Ballenger & Wilson, 2024). In addition, prior work commonly approaches visual arts as a technique or an intervention and places analytic emphasis on outcomes, rather than tracing how cognitive engagement, emotional expression, and social support interact moment by moment as a context-dependent developmental process. This is consequential because creativity-oriented learning can also be designed through interdisciplinary arrangements that link observation, experimentation, and meaning-making, for example through arts–science inquiry in early childhood (Areljung, 2023).

To address this gap, the present study conceptualizes children's creative visualization as a situated capacity that emerges through decisions about color, line, and form, alongside the meanings children negotiate during artmaking. In this framing, cognitive engagement refers to children's visual reasoning and decision-making (e.g., selecting media, composing objects, experimenting with techniques), emotional expression refers to the ways affective states are externalized and negotiated during creative production, and the social learning environment refers to the peer, teacher, and family conditions that shape participation, confidence, and originality. This integrative focus shifts attention away from linear developmental claims and toward the mechanisms through which particular learning arrangements enable or constrain creative expression across different situations.

Empirically, the study examines Ekraf Academy in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, as an instrumental case of non-formal early childhood visual arts education. Ekraf Academy is relevant to this inquiry because it positions visual arts as the core medium of learning and organizes learning through mentoring-based instruction, small-group sessions, and structured-yet-flexible activities such as Exploration Day and Art Storytelling, alongside portfolio practices and parent communication. Rather than treating non-formal programs as peripheral supplements to schooling, this case enables close analysis of how an alternative educational space operationalizes creativity-oriented intentions within everyday instructional and interactional constraints.

Ekraf Academy is treated as an analytic window into how early childhood art learning becomes possible when thinking, feeling, and relating are handled as a single pedagogical ecology rather than separate targets. The analysis therefore tracks how instructional

arrangements and everyday interactions shape children's engagement with visual elements while they negotiate affect and social evaluation during artmaking. Three analytic foci organize the inquiry: (1) the study examines how Ekraf Academy's pedagogical practices configure learning conditions that integrate cognitive engagement, emotional expression, and social support during early childhood visual art learning; (2) it traces how children's emotional states are reflected in visual choices of color, line, and form and how these expressions are mediated through teacher guidance and peer interaction; and (3) it identifies the conditions under which small-group dynamics and varying levels of parental involvement function as catalysts or constraints for participation, confidence-building, and originality in children's artistic expression. By keeping these foci close to observed practice, the study advances a context-sensitive account of early childhood visual art learning, specifies how non-formal pedagogy operationalizes creativity-oriented intentions, and offers analytically transferable implications for designing programs that sustain exploration, emotional safety, and social scaffolding.

Methods

Case boundary and unit of analysis

The case in this study is bounded to Ekraf Academy's early childhood visual arts program in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, as enacted in its routine learning sessions and program activities. Field engagement was conducted over a two-week period in 2025 and covered four naturally occurring learning sessions of approximately four hours each. The unit of analysis is not children's developmental change over time, but the situated mechanisms through which visual art learning is organized and enacted, including (a) pedagogical arrangements and instructional moves, (b) interactional episodes during artmaking, and (c) contextual traces in documents and visual artifacts. Claims are therefore bounded to observed tendencies and institutional practices within this case, oriented toward analytical transfer rather than statistical representativeness.

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative instrumental case study design to examine how a non-formal arts education institution supports early childhood visual arts learning and creative expression in a real-life context. Consistent with case study logics articulated by (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), the analysis aims for analytical generalization by specifying mechanisms and conditions that may be transferable to comparable creativity-oriented settings, rather than producing population-level estimates.

Research Context and Site

Ekraf Academy operates outside the formal early childhood education system and organizes learning through flexible curricula, mentoring-based instruction, and small-group sessions. The site was selected because visual arts function as the program's central learning medium and because institutional routines explicitly combine exploration-oriented activities (e.g., Exploration Day), opportunities for meaning-making (e.g., Art Storytelling), portfolio documentation, and parent communication. These features make the site analytically relevant for examining how cognitive engagement, emotional expression, and social support are configured as an integrated learning ecology.

Participants and Researcher Positioning

The primary informant is the founder of Ekraf Academy, who also serves as the main visual arts instructor and holds central responsibility for curriculum design, pedagogical decisions, facilitation of sessions, and communication with parents. Purposive selection was applied because this role concentrates institutional knowledge about program intentions, routines, and instructional rationales.

The study is explicitly framed as an account of institutional practice and observed learning episodes rather than a multi-perspectival actor study. The reliance on a single key informant is

treated as an epistemic boundary: interview data are interpreted as an institutional narrative to be examined alongside observational evidence, documents, and visual artifacts.

The researcher had prior involvement at Ekraf Academy as a teaching assistant for a limited period. To manage insider proximity, the study employed reflexive memoing throughout field engagement and analysis, documented interpretive decisions in an audit trail, and actively sought episodes that challenged affirmative interpretations (e.g., hesitation, peer tension, and moments of dependence on instructor validation).

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document and artifact analysis. These sources were combined to examine convergence and divergence between instructional intentions, enacted practices, and contextual traces.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with the founder-instructor focused on pedagogical intentions, interpretations of children's artistic expressions, instructional strategies, and perceived roles of peers and parents. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by follow-up clarification questions during member checking to verify interpretive accuracy and to refine emerging themes.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted at a moderate level of involvement across four learning sessions. observation focused on time-bounded interactional episodes, including teacher guidance, children's material choices, experimentation with techniques, visible emotional responses, peer interactions, and feedback patterns. Fieldnotes were written during and immediately after sessions, with time markers to retain episode boundaries and to support traceability from raw observations to analytic claims.

To reduce anecdotal reporting, observation was guided by an operational focus aligned to the study's analytic foci. Cognitive engagement was tracked through children's media selection, compositional decisions, problem-solving moves, revision behaviors, and verbal reasoning about visual choices as they worked. Emotional expression and negotiation were documented through affective cues during work, such as enthusiasm, frustration, or withdrawal, alongside regulation moves such as pausing or restarting, and observable shifts following feedback from peers or the instructor. The social learning environment was examined through peer collaboration or comparison, material sharing and conflict, instructor mediation during group dynamics, and moments in which parental involvement was referenced or became consequential for participation; given the short field period, observations were used to document situational tendencies rather than developmental trajectories.

Documents and visual artifacts

Document and Artifact Analysis included learning modules, teacher reflection notes, portfolio records, photographs of artworks and learning activities, and institutional social media content (Facebook). Visual artifacts were treated as contextual traces of learning episodes, not as independent psychometric measures of development.

Artifacts were selected through a combination of comprehensive capture and purposive sampling. First, artifacts produced or documented during observed sessions were collected as direct traces of the field period. Second, additional portfolio and documentation materials were purposively sampled to reflect variation in media, task types, and levels of visual complexity, allowing the analysis to identify recurrent patterns as well as deviations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a reflexive orientation to theme development and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019), following six phases: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. Coding was conducted across interview transcripts, episode-

bounded fieldnotes, and documents/visual artifacts to maintain analytic comparability across sources.

Initial codes were generated inductively, with analytic attention to how cognitive, emotional, and social processes co-occurred within episodes. Codes were iteratively clustered into themes that captured mechanisms and conditions (e.g., mentoring as reassurance and as dependency risk; small-group interaction as support and as comparison pressure). Theme development was accompanied by a maintained audit trail documenting code definitions, merges, splits, and reasons for theme boundaries.

To strengthen transparency, the analysis was anchored by traceable links between data excerpts, codes, and themes. An illustrative pathway is shown below table 1.

Table 1. Illustrative analytic pathway from data excerpts to codes and themes

Data excerpt (interview/fieldnote/artifact)	Initial code	Theme-level claim
Child restarts drawing repeatedly after a peer comment; resumes after instructor reassurance (fieldnotes)	reassurance-dependent persistence	Emotional expression is mediated by social evaluation and instructor scaffolding
Instructor describes small groups of 3–4 to tailor mentoring (interview) + observed tool sharing and idea exchange (fieldnotes)	structured proximity for peer learning	Social environment functions as a conditional catalyst for participation and originality
Portfolio comparison shows alternating bursts of complexity and exploratory fragments across sessions (artifacts)	situational variability in visual reasoning	Cognitive engagement appears as context-dependent tendency, not linear progression

Negative case analysis was used to avoid idealized accounts by systematically noting episodes that contradicted dominant patterns (e.g., disengagement during high-choice tasks, peer tension over materials, and reliance on instructor confirmation).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and analytic challenge procedures. Triangulation was applied by supporting key claims through convergence across at least two sources where possible, for example by reading interview rationales alongside episode-bounded observations and artifact traces. Member checking was conducted by discussing preliminary themes and selected interpretations with the founder-instructor and revising interpretations when they were judged misaligned with enacted practices or relevant contextual constraints. Peer debriefing was used to test theme boundaries and counterexamples through structured discussion with a critical peer, with attention to alternative readings that could reduce confirmation bias. Thick description was maintained by retaining contextual detail about tasks, interactions, and institutional routines so that readers can judge the scope and analytical transfer of the findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures included informed consent from the adult participant and parental consent for children's participation in observed learning activities and the use of visual data. children's identities were protected through anonymization practices for visual materials (e.g., avoiding identifiable facial images in reporting, removing names from artifacts, and limiting contextual identifiers). Naturally occurring child utterances documented in fieldnotes are reported as observed speech rather than as formal child interviews.

All data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team and used solely for academic purposes. The study acknowledges limitations related to a single-site focus and a single key informant; these limits are addressed through explicit boundary-setting of claims and

an analytic emphasis on institutional practices and observed learning tendencies rather than causal or longitudinal developmental assertions.

Result

The analysis draws on the founder-instructor interview (INT-01), episode-bounded observation fieldnotes from naturally occurring learning sessions (FN-01 to FN-07), portfolio and artwork traces (ART-01 to ART-03), and supporting institutional documentation (DOC-01 to DOC-02). Across these sources, children's visual art learning at Ekraf Academy is best described as an interactional ecology in which visual reasoning, affect, and social evaluation co-produce what children attempt, revise, and ultimately complete.

Integrative, social-evaluative ecology

Rather than showing separate "cognitive", "emotional", and "social" strands, the data show repeated moments in which one dimension becomes consequential only through another. Visual decisions were often made in response to affective cues and social attention; emotions were frequently negotiated through peer comparison and instructor reassurance; and the social environment shaped participation by making some forms of experimentation feel safe and others feel risky.

Situated visual reasoning under task structure and scaffolding became visible in children's cognitive engagement, which was most apparent at the level of concrete decisions about media, composition, and technique, but these decisions were not uniform across children or sessions. The founder-instructor described changes in children's work as an expansion of visual options and combinations rather than as a simple increase in "skill".

> "Technically, there are many changes, including more detail in composition, a wider range of color choices, and greater ability to combine different techniques." (INT-01)

Observation episodes complicate any linear reading of this claim. In one session, two children cycled through tools and materials several times before committing to a medium, while other children began immediately with a clear thematic intention and sustained focus with minimal prompting (FN-01). The contrast suggests that visual reasoning in this setting often begins as a problem of initiating choices under uncertainty, not merely executing a known plan. Fieldnotes also document variation in how children treated proportion, spatial arrangement, and basic lighting cues: some attempted these representational decisions, while others returned to familiar symbols and repetitive shapes, especially when attention drifted or when peer activity drew them into comparison (FN-01).

Portfolio and artwork traces reinforce this pattern as situational rather than cumulative. Across sampled portfolios, some works show more structured organization and more deliberate layering, while others remain exploratory or fragmented even within the same general period (ART-01). Read together with observation episodes, these traces suggest that Ekraf Academy functions as a site of cognitive scaffolding where children rehearse visual decision-making in episodes that are sensitive to task design, emotional readiness, and the availability of responsive guidance.

Emotion-to-form relations were mediated by peer attention and instructor reassurance, so emotional expression in children's artwork is better understood as negotiated and socially mediated than as a stable "mood signature" that directly maps onto color or form. The founder-instructor articulated a recurring practical heuristic about how mood is reflected in visual choices.

> "Children often use bright colors when they feel happy, and darker or more monochromatic colors when their emotional state is not good." (INT-01)

In observed episodes, affective cues did appear in formal choices such as color intensity, line pressure, and persistence, but the pathway ran through social evaluation. One child repeatedly erased a drawing after a peer comment and left the work incomplete until the instructor reframed the episode as experimentation rather than failure; after the reassurance, the child resumed and shifted to bolder strokes (FN-02). Another episode shows frustration

emerging when a child's output did not match an internal expectation; the child slowed down, avoided adding new elements, and verbally signaled dissatisfaction, with progress resuming only after targeted prompting and a reduction of perceived performance pressure (FN-03). These episodes do not negate emotion-to-form relations; they specify the mechanism by showing that affect becomes consequential for form largely through how children read judgment, comparison, and permission to try.

Artwork traces support the claim that emotional expression is fluid and context-sensitive. Recurrent motifs and dominant color tendencies appear in some children's works, but the same child's choices can shift across tasks and sessions, especially when the social climate changes or when a task increases the cost of starting (ART-02). In this case, emotion is not simply "expressed" through art; it is worked through art under conditions of social visibility.

Small-group proximity functioned as a conditional catalyst for confidence and creativity, as small-group arrangements shaped engagement by changing who could be seen, helped, compared, or overshadowed. The founder-instructor presented small groups as a strategy for specificity in mentoring.

> "We divide children into small groups of three to four so that guidance can be more specific to each child's condition." (INT-01)

In several observation episodes, small-group proximity supported peer learning through tool sharing, quick idea exchange, and informal affirmation when children commented on each other's work (FN-04). At the same time, the same proximity also intensified comparison pressure and occasional material conflict. Fieldnotes record episodes in which one child dominated shared attention and decision-making, while another remained silent or deferred to the instructor to represent the work publicly, indicating differentiated comfort with visibility even inside the same group (FN-04). The social environment therefore functioned as a catalyst only when participation was not monopolized and when the instructor actively mediated comparison into support rather than competition.

Parental involvement adds an additional layer of conditionality beyond the room. The instructor described parent communication as a mechanism for continuity between the academy and home.

> "We create a parent group to share children's progress and to discuss solutions collaboratively." (INT-01)

Documentation of progress updates and portfolio notes shows that this channel exists and is used (DOC-01), yet responsiveness varied, creating uneven reinforcement outside sessions. As a result, social support in this case is best treated as distributed and variable, not as a stable background condition.

Structured flexibility and identifiable trade-offs

Ekraf Academy's signature practices do not operate as uniformly effective "interventions". They build conditions for exploration and confidence, but they also introduce predictable constraints, such as confirmation-seeking under intensive mentoring and initiation difficulties under high-choice tasks.

Mentoring-based instruction created emotional safety while also carrying a risk of confirmation-seeking. In this case, mentoring-based instruction was repeatedly framed by the founder-instructor as a way to reduce fear of error.

> "This mentoring is very effective because children can experiment without being afraid of making mistakes." (INT-01)

Observation episodes align with the reassurance function: children often resumed work after brief pauses once the instructor normalized trial-and-error and redirected attention to process (FN-05). However, intensive mentoring also carried a cost. In several moments, children delayed continuation until they received explicit confirmation, suggesting that emotional safety can drift into dependence when guidance is interpreted as permission rather than support for autonomous judgment (FN-05). The practice therefore operates as a double-edged mechanism, simultaneously enabling risk-taking and potentially narrowing independent decision-making.

Exploration Day functioned as a choice architecture that can raise initiation costs. Exploration Day expanded autonomy by allowing children to choose media and themes. In observation, the format often coincided with higher visible engagement and a wider range of outputs (FN-06). Yet the same structure also raised the cognitive and emotional cost of starting for some children. When the choice set felt too open, several children displayed confusion, delayed initiation, or repeatedly changed plans, requiring additional structuring prompts to begin (FN-06). The mechanism is therefore not "autonomy produces creativity" but "autonomy produces variety when initiation is supported and when choice does not become a performance risk".

Art Storytelling linked visual and verbal meaning, but voice distribution remained uneven. Art Storytelling created opportunities for children to narrate intent and to treat artworks as communicative objects. In one observed moment, a child explicitly associated enjoyment with color and peer presence.

"I like drawing here. There are many colors and many friends." (FN-07)

Such utterances show that the program's social atmosphere can become part of children's meaning-making about art. However, participation in storytelling was uneven: some children spoke fluently about their work, while others relied on prompts or mirrored peer phrasing, indicating that verbal articulation is itself socially distributed and sensitive to confidence and group dynamics (FN-07). In this case, storytelling supports meaning-making, but it does not automatically equalize participation.

Portfolios, exhibitions, and competitions provided selective visibility and validation. Documentation practices and public showcases functioned as institutional devices that stabilize recognition of children's work, including periodic exhibitions (Figure 1) and selective participation in regional events (Figure 2). Institutional records indicate that some children received recognition for creativity and technique (DOC-02), while participation remained limited, reflecting constraints of readiness, selection, and resources. These visibility practices can reinforce confidence for participating children, but they also foreground the selective nature of external validation in a non-formal setting. Portfolio traces similarly show variation in consistency and expressive depth (ART-03), suggesting that "progress" is best treated as episodic tendencies shaped by mentoring intensity, peer climate, and home reinforcement rather than as a uniform trajectory.

Across the two result sections, the key empirical point is not that Ekraf Academy "improves" children's art in a general sense, but that it configures a set of conditions under which creative visualization is negotiated. Visual reasoning, emotional regulation, and social support function as intertwined mechanisms that can either amplify experimentation and confidence or, under specific constraints, suppress initiation and increase reliance on instructor confirmation.

Discussion

Early childhood visual art learning at Ekraf Academy is best read as an interactional ecology rather than the sum of separate "cognitive", "emotional", and "social" components. What children attempt, revise, and complete is co-produced in episodes where visual reasoning is inseparable from affect and from the felt presence of others, including peer attention and instructor feedback. The analytic point is therefore to treat artmaking here as a context-sensitive process shaped by how guidance is delivered, how visible children feel in front of peers, and how uneven support beyond the classroom enters into participation and persistence.

A first contribution concerns how emotion becomes consequential for form. Although the instructor's account resonates with common interpretations that mood can be reflected in color choice, the observed episodes indicate that emotion-to-form relations are frequently mediated through peer attention and instructor reassurance rather than expressed as stable signatures. In this respect, the study qualifies readings of children's drawings that treat lines, shapes, and colors primarily as direct windows into inner states (Gil-Ruiz et al., 2025; Sundawa & Martadi,

2021). The data suggest that formal choices also index children's real-time negotiation of visibility and judgment, where reassurance can restore persistence and shift line pressure or compositional completion. Conceptually, this positions affective expression in early childhood art learning as socially mediated and interactionally negotiated, not merely internally discharged.

A second contribution is the identification of mentoring as a double-edged mechanism. Mentoring-based instruction clearly functions as emotional scaffolding that normalizes trial-and-error and enables risk-taking in experimentation, consistent with the broader emphasis in the literature on the importance of pedagogical confidence, content knowledge, and supportive teaching in early childhood visual arts (Denee et al., 2024; Leung et al., 2025; Lindsay, 2021; Vasilaki, 2024). At the same time, the Results show moments of confirmation-seeking when children delay continuation until explicit approval is received. This trade-off matters analytically because it prevents an idealized interpretation of mentoring as uniformly beneficial. It suggests that effective mentoring in creativity-oriented programs may require calibrated fading of support, where reassurance is paired with prompts that return judgment to children's own decisions, thereby protecting emotional safety without producing dependence.

A third contribution concerns structured flexibility as a form of choice architecture. Exploration Day expands autonomy and can increase output diversity, yet it also raises initiation costs for some children when the choice set becomes too open or when beginning feels socially risky. This finding reframes autonomy in early childhood art learning as conditional rather than inherently liberating. It aligns with work that emphasizes exploration as a driver of creativity (Heldanita, 2019; Mujiyem & Pamungkas, 2022), while specifying a practical boundary: openness requires initiation scaffolds that help children select a starting point, reduce decision overload, and reframe choice as play rather than performance. Such scaffolds can include structured prompts for color and material exploration that keep cognitive stimulation active without raising performance pressure (Irfani et al., 2025), and can be extended through arts–science inquiry formats that couple observation and creation (Areljung, 2023). Without such structuring, high choice can suppress participation even when children appear interested.

A fourth contribution concerns the social organization of learning in small groups. Small-group proximity can catalyze confidence by enabling tool sharing, rapid idea exchange, and peer affirmation, consistent with claims that arts integration can support social relationships and collaborative learning (Lauss & Helm, 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2023; Riana et al., 2024). However, the same proximity also intensifies comparison pressure and can produce uneven participation when one child dominates attention or materials. This duality reinforces the need to treat peer interaction not as a uniformly positive background factor, but as a mechanism that requires active mediation. In this case, the instructor's role in converting comparison into supportive norms becomes central to sustaining experimentation and to protecting quieter children from being positioned as peripheral participants.

The findings also clarify how support extends beyond the immediate learning setting in uneven ways. Parent communication channels exist and are used, yet responsiveness varies, producing differential reinforcement outside sessions. Read through an ecological lens, this pattern is consistent with the idea that children's learning opportunities are shaped by interacting systems of influence (Barus & Zahrah, 2024). The point here is not to restate ecological theory, but to show concretely that the mesosystem linkage between the academy and home is a conditional resource rather than a stable advantage. For non-formal programs, the design challenge is therefore not only to provide communication, but to anticipate uneven participation and to create low-burden, equitable pathways for parents to support children's art engagement without requiring high levels of time, confidence, or cultural capital.

Theoretically, the Discussion offers two refinements that extend common creativity frameworks without overclaiming developmental stages. First, the study proposes social-evaluative mediation as a mechanism through which affective states translate into observable formal decisions in children's artworks, emphasizing that children's expressive choices are

shaped by how they interpret peer attention and instructor feedback. Second, the study specifies structured flexibility as a design logic that can both enable and inhibit creativity depending on initiation supports and perceived performance risk. Within this view, stage-based models of creativity such as Wallas's preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification can be interpreted as iterative moves that are externally scaffolded within learning arrangements rather than as internally uniform sequences (Amir et al., 2024). The empirical value of the case lies in showing how institutional design makes such iteration easier or harder under everyday constraints.

Practically, the results suggest that non-formal early childhood art programs can be strengthened by aligning three design priorities. Programs need routines that protect emotional safety while preserving children's authority to decide, which implies mentoring that reassures but gradually transfers evaluative control back to the child. Programs also need flexible tasks that keep choice meaningful but not paralyzing, which implies initiation scaffolds such as limited option sets, exemplars used as invitations rather than standards, and prompts that lower the perceived cost of starting. Finally, programs need social arrangements that support participation equity, which implies explicit norms for peer feedback, instructor mediation of material conflicts, and storytelling formats that distribute voice rather than amplifying already confident speakers (Sudarti et al., 2023).

These claims should be interpreted within the study's boundaries. The case is based on a short field period and an institutional narrative centered on a single key informant, with observational and artifact evidence used to specify mechanisms and conditions rather than to infer longitudinal change. The findings therefore offer analytically transferable insights, not generalized developmental claims. Future research can strengthen and test these propositions by extending observation periods, incorporating multiple sites, and including children's and parents' perspectives as primary data sources, including systematic attention to how peer comparison, reassurance, and initiation supports vary across contexts and resources.

Conclusion

Creative visualization at Ekraf Academy can be understood as an interactional ecology in which visual reasoning, affective responses, and social evaluation collectively shape children's artistic decisions. Rather than reflecting stable emotional expressions, children's choices in color, line pressure, and compositional completion evolved through dynamic interactions with peers and instructor feedback. These findings suggest that expressive outcomes are not solely individual achievements but are contingent upon how children interpret visibility, attention, and evaluation within the learning environment. By foregrounding these interactional processes, the study reframes early childhood art learning in non-formal contexts as a negotiated process of participation and meaning-making, extending current perspectives that often conceptualize creativity primarily as individual skill development.

The study also demonstrates how pedagogical design at Ekraf Academy produces structured flexibility characterized by several trade-offs. Mentoring practices supported experimentation by reducing fear of error but occasionally encouraged confirmation-seeking when guidance was interpreted as evaluative permission. Similarly, the "Exploration Day" format expanded artistic variety while increasing initiation costs under conditions of high choice, indicating the importance of scaffolding children's entry into open-ended tasks. Small-group proximity facilitated peer learning yet simultaneously intensified comparison pressures when participation levels varied. Taken together, these findings offer analytically transferable design principles for creativity-oriented programs: maintaining emotional safety while sustaining children's evaluative agency, providing scaffolds for task initiation under open-ended conditions, and actively mediating peer interaction to distribute participation more equitably. Although limited to a short field period and a single institutional case, the study highlights mechanisms that future comparative and longitudinal research could examine across diverse formal and non-formal early childhood learning contexts.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

Imam Machali: Conceptualization and Methodology. Bintang Shafa Masnaini Z: Formal Analysis and Writing original draft. Tiara Permata Bening: Supervision and Validation. Waode Asri Fahma Rishanda: Investigation and Writing-Review & Editing.

Funding Statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Additional Information

No additional information is available for this paper at this time.

References

Alsaqabi, B. K., & Alazmi, K. A. (2024). The crucial role of art education in cognitive, emotional development, and academic success among students: A comprehensive review. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 29*(1), 44–48. https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2901064448

Amir, K., Yuliyanto, A., Rochim, A. A., Gunawan, & Ecih. (2024). Improving students' creative thinking skills through the Wallas method in learning mathematics in elementary school. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Elementary Education*, 262–269. http://proceedings.upi.edu/index.php/icee/article/view/3707

Anggraeni, E. P., & Pamungkas, J. (2023). Sarana dan prasarana lembaga dalam menciptakan potensi pengembangan seni anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 7*(1), 85–93. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i1.2864

Areljung, S. (2023). Five ways of integrating arts and science: A framework for planning and analyzing arts-science education in early childhood. *Studies in Art Education, 64*(1), 9–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2022.2154522

Barus, R. W., & Zahrah, W. (2024). Exploration of children's activities in the Deli River slum area, Medan. *Konstruksi: Publikasi Ilmu Teknik, Perencanaan Tata Ruang dan Teknik Sipil, 2*(4), 149–158. https://doi.org/10.61132/konstruksi.v2i4.544

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589–597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Denee, R., Lindsay, G., & Probine, S. (2024). Visual arts self-efficacy: Impacts and supports for early childhood teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 52*(6), 1035–1045. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01489-5

Gil-Ruiz, P., Martinez-Verez, V., Ospina Toro, W., & Castañeda Marulanda, W. (2025). Children's drawing and graphic development: An empirical study of the developmental stages according to Lowenfeld. *Education Sciences, 15*(6), Article 681. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060681

Hairiyah, S., & Mukhlis, M. (2019). Pengembangan kreativitas anak usia dini melalui permainan edukatif. *Jurnal Kariman, 7*(2), 265–282. https://doi.org/10.52185/kariman.v7i2.118

Hallam, D. J., Gallagher, M. L., & Owen, D. K. (2022). "I'm not the best at art": An exploration of children's growing sense of artistry within an outdoor, arts-based intervention. *Thinking Skills and Creativity, 44*, Article 101038. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2022.101038

Hayes, N., Maguire, J., & O'Sullivan, C. (2021). Professional development in arts education for early childhood education: A creative exchange model. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 53*(2), 159–174. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-021-00290-y

Heldanita, H. (2019). Pengembangan kreativitas melalui eksplorasi. *Golden Age: Jurnal Ilmiah Tumbuh Kembang Anak Usia Dini, 3*(1), 53–64. https://doi.org/10.14421/jga.2018.31-05

Huang, L., Leung, S. K. Y., Li, J. W., & Wu, Z. (2024). How does comprehensive art education facilitate children's creativity? A mixed-methods study in China. *Early Education and Development*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2024.2404822

Irfani, F., Shofia, V., & Lestari, Y. I. (2025). Stimulasi dini yang efektif untuk meningkatkan kecerdasan kognitif anak usia dini. *JCRD: Journal of Citizen Research and Development, 2*(1), 604–613. https://doi.org/10.57235/jcrd.v2i1.4813

Lauss, J., & Helm, C. (2025). The role of the arts in the classroom: Does integration of the arts promote social relationships in the classroom? *Education Sciences, 15*(1), Article 14. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15010014

Leung, S. K. Y., Wu, J., & Ho, T. H. (2025). Early childhood visual arts education: Teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and challenges. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 34*, 351–363. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-024-00859-w

Lindsay, G. (2021). Visual arts pedagogy in early childhood contexts: The baggage of self-efficacy beliefs, pedagogical knowledge and limited pre-service training. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 46*(1), 80–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120979061

Mayar, F., Uzlah, U., Nurhamidah, Rahmawati, R., & Desmila. (2022). Pengaruh lingkungan sekitar untuk pengembangan kreativitas anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 6*(5), 4794–4802. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v6i5.2665

Moula, Z., Palmer, K., & Walshe, N. (2022). A systematic review of arts-based interventions delivered to children and young people in nature or outdoor spaces: Impact on nature connectedness, health and wellbeing. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, Article 858781. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.858781

Muhammad, A., Rahmah, A. Z., & Zahra, S. A. (2023). Pengaruh kurangnya sarana dan prasarana sekolah terhadap perkembangan anak. *Jurnal Sentra Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 2*(1), 43–51. https://doi.org/10.51544/sentra.v2i1.3551

Mujiyem, & Pamungkas, J. (2022). Penerapan metode dan strategi pembelajaran seni pada anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 6*(6), 6198–6207. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v6i6.3112

Nadlifah, Zahriani Jf, N., & Latif, M. A. (2022). *Perkembangan kognitif AUD: Teori dan aplikasinya*. CV Multiartha Jatmika.

Nuraeni, C., Nuroniah, P., & Hendriawan, D. (2025). Persepsi guru PAUD terhadap implementasi kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di pendidikan anak usia dini. *Aulad: Journal on Early Childhood, 8*(1), 216–227. https://doi.org/10.31004/aulad.v8i1.982

Nurlina, & Bahera, B. (2024). Belajar melalui bermain: Seni sebagai sarana pembelajaran bagi anak usia dini. *Ceria (Cerdas Energik Responsif Inovatif Adaptif), 7*(2), 222–232. https://journal.ikipsiliwangi.ac.id/index.php/ceria/article/view/22294

Palupi, D. I., Rahmani, E., Yusnita, E., Gustina, H., Pertiwi, H., & Chalid, N. (2022). Pengembangan kreativitas sebagai pembentukan karakter anak usia dini. *EDUKASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran, 4*(1), 7–12. https://doi.org/10.62775/edukasia.v4i1.88

Pratiwi, S. R., Sukmayadi, Y., & Nugraheni, T. (2023). Art learning for children as a social-emotional learning program. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 7*(5), 5883–5894. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i5.5227

Primawati, Y. (2023). Pengembangan kreativitas seni rupa anak usia dini. *Journal of Early Childhood Studies, 1*(2), 1–10. Retrieved from https://journal.nubaninstitute.org/index.php/jecs/article/view/31

Riana, N., Ertati, Aprilina, S., & Parera, S. F. (2024). Implementasi stimulasi seni pada Kurikulum Merdeka di TK ABA An-Nur. *Bouseik: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini, 2*(2), 122–132. https://doi.org/10.37092/bouseik.v2i2.905

Ruiz-del-Pino, B., Fernández-Martín, F. D., & Arco-Tirado, J. L. (2022). Creativity training programs in primary education: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Thinking Skills and Creativity, 46*, Article 101172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2022.101172

Samaniego, M., Usca, N., Salguero, J., & Quevedo, W. (2024). Creative thinking in art and design education: A systematic review. *Education Sciences, 14*(2), Article 192. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14020192

Sarasehan, Y., Buaraheng, S., & Wahyuni, I. W. (2020). Pengembangan seni rupa tiga dimensi untuk meningkatkan kreativitas anak melalui media playdough. *Nanaeke: Indonesian Journal of Early Childhood Education, 3*(1), 28–36. https://doi.org/10.24252/nananeke.v3i1.13557

Sitanggang, A., Anggraini, E. S., Syarefi, F. A., & Rambe, L. A. (2024). Problematika pengembangan kreativitas anak melalui pada TK Al-Quran dan Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah Al-Mukhlisin. *Madani: Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin, 2*(9), 547–550.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE.

Stevens-Ballenger, J., & Wilson, E. (2024). Arts integration in an early childhood education setting: The role of the teacher. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 25*(26), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25n26

Sudarti, S., Yuniarti, Y., & Yulita, K. (2023). Efektivitas metode storytelling menggunakan hasil karya untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berbicara anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 7*(3), 3755–3763. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i3.4593

Sumyati, S. (2023). Implementasi bermain eksplorasi dalam mengembangkan kreativitas anak usia 5–6 tahun di TK Taman Kanak-Kanak Islam Al-Hidayah Bandar Lampung tahun pelajaran 2022/2023. *Tarbiyah Jurnal: Jurnal Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, 1*(2), 1–11.

Sundawa, M. M., & Martadi. (2021). Pendidikan seni bagi anak usia dini: Menggambar sebagai media katarsis afeksi anak di TK PKK Tanjungharjo 1 Bojonegoro. *Jurnal Seni Rupa, 9*(3), 198–209.

Suprapti, E., & Pamungkas, J. (2022). Peningkatan keterampilan seni terhadap potensi anak usia dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 6*(6), 6215–6224. https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v6i6.3316

Telaumbanua, K., & Bu'ulolo, B. (2024). Manfaat seni rupa dalam merangsang kreativitas anak usia dini. *Khirani: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, 2*(1), 123–135. https://doi.org/10.47861/khirani.v2i1.920

Terreni, L. (2017). Visual arts education for young children in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Childhood Studies, 41*(4), 50–59. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v41i4.16718

Vasilaki, V. (2024). Pre-school teachers' views on the impact of visual arts education on early childhood education. *Innovare Journal of Education, 12*(4), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.22159/ijoe.2024v12i4.51710

Wakayama, I. (2018). Current research issues of Japanese visual arts education for early childhood on global innovative society. In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* (Vol. 169, pp. 71–76). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/icece-17.2018.17

Waruwu, D. S., Br. Barus, E. F., Pane, S. K. F., & Anggraini, E. S. (2024). Analisis pembelajaran seni rupa di TK Melatih Putih Medan Tembung. *JICN: Jurnal Intelek dan Cendikiawan Nusantara, 1*(3), 4502–4509.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Zaidah, V. M., & Ariyati, T. (2024). The art of growth: Understanding the impact of creative arts on children's development in early education. In *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Humanities and Social Science (ICHSS 2023)* (pp. 16–19). https://www.programdoktorpbiuns.org/index.php/proceedings/article/view/252