Art Integration in Early Childhood: A Methodological Approach to Cultivating Creativity and Giftedness

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https://doi.org/10.17977/um065.v7.i5.2027.9

Article History
Submitted: 5 August 2026
Revised: 4 October 2026
Accepted: 24 October 2026
Published: 2 November 2026

Keywords
Art integration
Creativity
Early childhood
Educational setting
Giftedness

Abstract
Early childhood is a critical period for developing cognitive, social-emotional, and creative abilities. Art integration provides children with opportunities to express ideas and emotions, explore different perspectives, and develop imagination and problem-solving skills. This qualitative study examines teachers' and prospective teachers' perspectives on the role of art integration in fostering creativity and giftedness in early childhood and identifies activities that support these abilities. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that art integration supports imagination, emotional expression, cognitive flexibility, self-confidence, and creative problem-solving. Participants identified drawing, painting, storytelling, music and movement, drama and role-play, open-ended activities, and collaborative art projects as effective ways to promote creativity and recognize children's emerging abilities. The findings also indicate that effective art integration requires a flexible and supportive learning environment, adequate resources, teacher guidance, and family involvement. The study suggests that art should be integrated as an essential component of early childhood education rather than treated as a supplementary activity.

1. Introduction

Early childhood constitutes a critical developmental period in which children progressively develop psychomotor, social-emotional, cognitive, language, and representational abilities through interactions with their families, teachers, peers, and broader educational environments (Sharma, 2023). During these formative years, children begin to construct knowledge, develop personal identities, regulate emotions, and establish patterns of social interaction that may influence subsequent learning and development. Early childhood education (ECE), therefore, extends beyond the transmission of foundational academic knowledge and should provide environments that allow children to explore, experiment, communicate, and express themselves in diverse ways. This period is also particularly important for stimulating creativity and recognizing emerging abilities because children's interests, dispositions, and distinctive ways of thinking become increasingly observable through everyday activities (Cramond et al., 2021). Art plays a particularly important role in early childhood because it provides children with opportunities to express thoughts and emotions that they may not yet be able to articulate verbally. Drawing, painting, sculpting, music, movement, storytelling, and dramatization enable children to experiment with materials, symbols, colors, sounds, and forms while making their own interpretations of the world around them. Artistic activities can encourage children to engage in exploration, decision-making, problem-solving, and imaginative thinking. Art integration in ECE consequently represents a child-centered pedagogical approach that differs from highly structured and teacher-directed models emphasizing rote learning and predetermined outcomes (Goldberg, 2021). Through artistic exploration, children can develop fine and gross motor skills, strengthen cognitive flexibility, increase emotional awareness, and communicate personal meanings. Artistic experiences may therefore function not only as enrichment activities but also as important developmental contexts in which children's distinctive abilities and early indicators of giftedness can emerge (Anderson, 2024).

The relationship between artistic engagement, creativity, and giftedness is particularly significant because creativity is increasingly viewed as an essential component of children's learning and development. Participation in artistic activities can stimulate intrinsic motivation by allowing children to make choices, pursue personally meaningful ideas, and experience a sense of ownership over their creations (Luo, 2024). Such experiences can also encourage divergent thinking, experimentation, originality, and flexibility, which are fundamental characteristics of creative learners (Samaniego et al., 2024). Consequently, providing children with

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varied opportunities to engage in art-based learning may create conditions in which creative potential can be expressed and developed rather than constrained by standardized instructional practices. Dong and Zhang (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating diverse art-based teaching approaches to support creativity and giftedness. From this perspective, art integration should not be regarded merely as an additional component of the curriculum but as a pedagogical environment in which children can explore multiple ways of thinking, creating, communicating, and solving problems.

The significance of art-based learning is further strengthened by contemporary perspectives on giftedness. Giftedness is no longer understood solely as exceptional intellectual performance or high achievement in conventional academic domains. Instead, it is increasingly conceptualized as a complex and dynamic phenomenon involving different forms of ability, potential, creativity, motivation, and developmental context (Sternberg & Kaufman, 2018). Renzulli (2000, 2000), for example, emphasizes the importance of maximizing individual potential and developing individuals who can contribute to the creation of new knowledge and artistic innovation. Early recognition of children's emerging artistic, cognitive, and creative abilities can consequently enable teachers and families to provide appropriate stimulation and support before these abilities are overlooked or constrained by conventional educational expectations (Heller & Schofield, 2008; Silverman, 2018). Artistic activities offer a valuable means of observing children's interests, persistence, originality, problem-solving strategies, and ways of representing experiences. Children's creative products and processes may thus provide educators with meaningful insights into abilities that might not be readily visible through conventional academic assessment. However, children's artistic and creative development does not occur in isolation. The quality of the learning environment both inside and outside the classroom can substantially influence how children explore and express their abilities. Teachers' interactions are particularly important because children can develop language, reflection, and metacognitive awareness when adults encourage them to explain their artistic choices, describe their experiences, and construct narratives around their creations (Halim et al., 2018). Artistic expression is also closely connected to early social interaction and contributes to the development of verbal, emotional, and creative competencies (Zakaria et al., 2021). Beyond the classroom, families and communities can extend these opportunities through imaginative play, storytelling, museum or gallery visits, music and performance activities, creative hobbies, and everyday opportunities to experiment with materials. A supportive environment across these contexts can therefore provide continuity between children's formal learning and their informal exploration.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of creativity, artistic expression, and giftedness in early childhood, there remains a need to understand more clearly how art-based learning environments can simultaneously support creative development and facilitate the early identification of gifted potential. Existing discussions frequently emphasize the developmental benefits of individual artistic activities, such as drawing, painting, music, or dramatic play, but less attention has been given to how different classroom and extracurricular experiences collectively create an environment conducive to creativity and giftedness. Moreover, the distinction between art as an instructional tool and art as a developmental environment remains insufficiently articulated. A more integrated perspective is therefore needed to examine not only whether children participate in artistic activities, but also how the characteristics of those activities, the role of teachers and adults, opportunities for interaction, and the degree of autonomy provided to children influence creative expression and the recognition of emerging abilities. Against this background, this study investigates the role of art integration in cultivating creativity and identifying giftedness in early childhood, with particular attention to the learning environments and circumstances that can support children's inherent artistic and creative abilities. The study examines how artistic expression contributes to the development of creativity and giftedness and explores the classroom and extracurricular activities that can effectively nurture these abilities. Specifically, the study addresses how artistic expression contributes to creativity and giftedness in early childhood and what forms of classroom and extracurricular artistic activities are most conducive to their development. The findings are expected to provide theoretical and practical implications for teachers, families, and ECE institutions in designing learning environments that recognize children's diverse abilities and provide meaningful opportunities for creative self-expression.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' and prospective early childhood education (ECE) teachers' perspectives on the role of art integration in fostering children's creativity and giftedness. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to examine participants' experiences, interpretations, and perceptions in their own words (Tisdell et al., 2025). The study focused on identifying how participants perceived the contribution of art integration and the learning conditions that may support children's creativity and emerging giftedness. The study was guided by two research questions concerning the contribution of artistic expression to creativity and giftedness and the classroom and extracurricular activities that may promote these abilities.

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2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected between February 15, 2025, and April 13, 2025. The participants consisted of 20 ECE teachers and 15 prospective ECE teachers, recruited through purposive sampling based on their involvement in or preparation for ECE. Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire designed to allow participants to describe their views and experiences freely. The questionnaire addressed participants' perceptions of art integration, children's creativity and giftedness, appropriate artistic activities, learning environments, and strategies for supporting children's creative development. Before completing the questionnaire, all adult participants received information about the purpose and procedures of the study and signed written informed consent forms. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study. To protect confidentiality, participants' names and school affiliations were not disclosed. Instead, each participant was assigned a unique identification code. The coding system used in reporting the findings is presented in Table 1. Data obtained during the preliminary study were excluded from the final analysis. Only responses collected during the main data collection period were included in the findings.

Table 1. Participant Coding System

Participant Group	Participant Code
Teacher 1	T1
Teacher 2	T2
Teacher Candidate 1	TC1
Teacher Candidate 1	TC2

2.3. Data Analysis

The open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (see Figure 1). The analysis involved several stages: organizing the responses, identifying meaningful statements, assigning initial codes, comparing related codes, grouping codes into categories, and developing broader themes relevant to the research questions. The researchers repeatedly reviewed the coded data to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns across participants' responses. Relevant participant quotations were retained to illustrate the themes and maintain a clear connection between the findings and the original responses. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the coding and emerging themes were reviewed by researchers and professionals familiar with qualitative research and early childhood education. Intercoder agreement reached 86%, indicating a high level of agreement in the coding process. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through comparison and consensus before the final themes were established. The final themes were then organized according to the research questions and supported by selected direct quotations from participants. Data concerning ECE programs and policies were also considered as contextual information for comparison and interpretation.

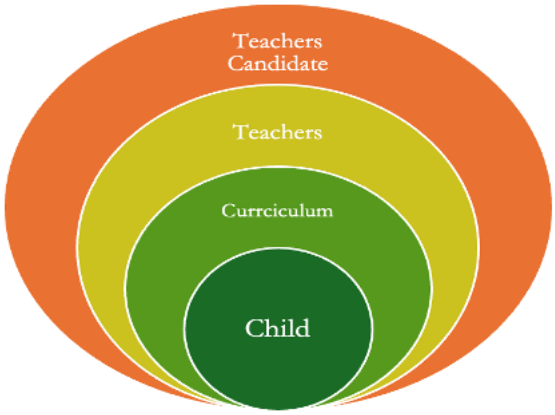


Figure 1. Qualitative Data Analysis Process

3. Results and Discussion

The intercoder reliability between the professionals and researchers involved in the thematic coding process was 86%, indicating substantial agreement. The finalized themes and subthemes were incorporated into the findings, while data on ECE programs and policies were used for comparison. Selected participant quotations were also included to support the credibility of the findings.

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3.1. Theme 1: Enhancing Early Childhood Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

3.1.1. Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers generally perceived art integration as an important means of developing children's creativity and giftedness. Their responses emphasized imagination, emotional expression, problem-solving, sensory exploration, curiosity, diverse thinking, self-confidence, and social interaction. These subthemes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Teachers' Perspectives on Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

Subtheme	Purpose
Imagination and Expression	Encourage creative thinking and artistic expression.
Emotional and Idea Expression	Help children communicate feelings and ideas through art.
Problem-Solving	Develop creative and flexible approaches to challenges.
Sensory and Aesthetic Development	Encourage exploration of colors, textures, sounds, and forms.
Self-Confidence	Strengthen confidence through creative achievements.
Curiosity and Exploration	Encourage experimentation and discovery.
Diverse Thinking	Develop flexible thinking through different art forms.
Social Skills	Promote cooperation and interaction through collaborative art.

Teachers particularly emphasized imagination and emotional expression. As one teacher stated, “At an early age, when imagination is highly active, artistic stimulation helps children express ideas in unique ways” (T5). Another explained, “Art allows children to channel their emotions safely and creatively” (T12). Teachers also associated artistic activities with creative problem-solving, as reflected in the statement, “Children exposed to creative arts are more adept at finding innovative solutions to challenges” (T7). These findings support Kamal and Gabr (2024) showing that art-based activities can promote imagination, emotional expression, and creative problem-solving. Although less frequently emphasized, teachers also recognized the contribution of art to self-confidence and social development. One participant noted, “Through painting and crafting, children gain confidence in their unique abilities” (T9), while another stated that “Collaborative art projects build a child's capacity to interact and adapt socially” (T20). Thus, teachers viewed art integration not only as a means of creative expression but also as a context for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Morizio et al., 2022).

3.1.2. Teacher Candidates' Perspectives

Teacher candidates similarly viewed art integration as beneficial for creativity and giftedness, particularly in relation to imagination, diverse perspectives, identity development, problem-solving, and self-expression. Their responses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' Perspectives on Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

Subtheme	Purpose
Diverse Perspectives	Encourage children to appreciate different interpretations.
Identity Development	Enable children to explore and express their identities.
Creative Problem-Solving	Encourage innovative thinking through open-ended activities.
Imagination	Develop imaginative capacities through artistic experiences.
Holistic Development	Support cognitive, emotional, and social development.
Understanding Children	Use artistic expression to understand children's thoughts and emotions.
Self-Expression	Support communication and self-esteem through art.

Teacher candidates emphasized that artistic activities provide opportunities for children to explore different perspectives and express their identities. They also recognized the importance of open-ended artistic activities in stimulating imagination and problem-solving. However, compared with practicing teachers, teacher candidates placed relatively less emphasis on the broader pedagogical functions of art, such as supporting structured learning, understanding individual children's needs, and developing social skills. This finding suggests that while teacher candidates recognize the expressive and creative value of art, further pedagogical preparation may be needed to strengthen their understanding of art as a tool for holistic child development and early recognition of gifted potential. Both groups recognized art integration as an important context for developing creativity and giftedness. Teachers tended to emphasize broader developmental outcomes, whereas teacher candidates focused more strongly on expression, imagination, identity, and creative exploration. These findings highlight the importance of providing children with varied artistic experiences while ensuring that educators understand how such experiences can support creativity, holistic development, and the recognition of emerging abilities.

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3.1.3. General Evaluation of Subthemes from the First Theme

From the candidate teachers' perspectives, art integration in ECE provides opportunities to develop creativity, self-awareness, imagination, and innovative problem-solving. The participants viewed art not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for exploration, reflection, and identity formation. One candidate teacher stated, "Exploring different artistic interpretations promotes cognitive flexibility" (TC5), while another explained, "Art helps children define who they are and how they see the world" (TC8). Participants also emphasized the role of creative projects, storytelling, and visual art in encouraging children to move beyond conventional ways of thinking and express their ideas freely. As TC13 noted, "Creative art projects push children to think and express beyond conventional ideas." Similarly, TC10 stated that "Using storytelling and visual art inspires children to imagine freely."

Candidate teachers also highlighted the importance of integrating art into everyday learning. According to TC6, "Integrating art into daily learning boosts curiosity and motivation." These perspectives suggest that art integration can support cognitive flexibility, imagination, curiosity, and children's ability to construct and communicate personal meanings. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that artistic activities can encourage diverse perspectives and creative thinking (Ampartzaki, 2023), while integrating art into daily learning can enhance children's motivation and curiosity (Halverson, 2021). Thus, art may be considered not merely a supplementary activity but as a pedagogical approach that supports children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

3.1.4. Strategies for Fostering Creativity Through Art Integration

The teachers also identified several strategies for creating learning environments that support children's creativity through art integration. These strategies included providing a supportive environment, encouraging self-expression, using open-ended questions, providing diverse art materials, and incorporating artistic activities into children's exploration and learning. The main strategies are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Teacher's Views on Strategies to Foster Creativity Through Art Integration

Subtheme	Purpose
Creating a Supportive Environment	Provide a space where children can express ideas freely and imaginatively.
Self-Expression through Art	Enable children to express emotions, thoughts, and experiences through different artistic media.
Drama and Theatre Activities	Support emotional development and communication through guided artistic experiences.
Open-Ended Questions	Encourage curiosity, critical thinking, and active engagement during artistic activities.
Imagination and Problem-Solving	Foster innovative thinking and creative solutions through artistic exploration.
Diverse Art Materials	Stimulate creativity through exposure to different textures, colors, and media.
Exploration of Children's Inner World	Encourage reflection and self-awareness through artistic representation.
Artistic Activities for Attention and Memory	Support focus and memory through meaningful visual and hands-on experiences.
Art-Related Responsibilities	Develop initiative, collaboration, and leadership through individual and group artistic tasks.

The findings indicate that teachers perceived the learning environment as an important condition for developing children's creativity through art. Providing freedom of expression, varied materials, open-ended questions, and opportunities for exploration can encourage children to experiment and develop their own ideas. These strategies reinforce the view that effective art integration depends not only on the type of artistic activity provided but also on how teachers create opportunities for children to explore, communicate, and make creative decisions.

3.2. Theme 2: Encouraging Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

3.2.1. Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers emphasized that an appropriate learning environment is essential for fostering creativity and giftedness through art integration. They highlighted the importance of providing children with freedom to express ideas, diverse artistic materials, open-ended activities, and opportunities for hands-on exploration. Artistic activities such as drawing, coloring, storytelling, singing, drama, and imaginative play were viewed as effective ways to stimulate imagination, communication, problem-solving, and self-confidence. As one teacher stated, "Through drawing and coloring, children can freely express their ideas and emotions" (T2). Another noted that "Art activities stimulate children's imaginations and develop their creative potential" (T6).

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Teachers also emphasized the value of creating a supportive environment in which children can experiment without fear of failure (See Table 5). One participant explained, “Art enables children to experiment, explore, and find their voice without fear of failure” (T8). Collaborative and experiential activities were also considered important because they allow children to develop social and emotional skills while engaging in creative expression. These findings suggest that effective art integration depends not only on the artistic activities provided but also on the learning environment, materials, teacher guidance, and opportunities for children's active participation. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the role of art in children's cognitive, emotional, and communicative development (Lukaka, 2023; Zakaria et al., 2021).

Table 5. Early Childhood Teachers' Strategies for Fostering Creativity Through Art Integration

Subtheme	Purpose
Supportive Environment	Provide freedom for children to express ideas and explore creatively.
Self-Expression	Enable children to communicate emotions, thoughts, and experiences through art.
Drama and Role Play	Develop communication, imagination, and emotional expression.
Open-Ended Activities	Encourage curiosity, critical thinking, and creative exploration.
Diverse Art Materials	Stimulate exploration through different colors, textures, and media.
Problem-Solving through Art	Encourage children to develop creative solutions through artistic activities.
Exploration and Reflection	Support children's self-awareness and understanding of their experiences.
Collaborative Activities	Develop cooperation, communication, and appreciation of others' ideas.

3.2.2. Teacher Candidates' Perspectives

Teacher candidates similarly emphasized the importance of a free and supportive environment for developing creativity and giftedness (See Table 6). Their recommendations focused on providing diverse materials, encouraging self-expression, using open-ended questions, integrating hands-on activities, and connecting artistic experiences with children's everyday lives. They also emphasized the importance of allowing children to choose materials and themes that interest them. These strategies were perceived as ways to strengthen children's imagination, confidence, creative thinking, and problem-solving abilities. For example, TC3 emphasized the importance of allowing children to express themselves freely, while TC7 highlighted the value of open-ended questions in stimulating critical and creative thinking. TC15 further suggested that activities connected to children's everyday experiences could increase engagement. Teacher candidates also viewed storytelling, role play, and other practical activities as effective ways to encourage imagination and creative expression.

Table 6. Teacher Candidates' Strategies for Supporting Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

Subtheme	Purpose
Freedom of Expression	Encourage children to express ideas and feelings confidently.
Rich Artistic Environment	Provide diverse materials and media to stimulate exploration.
Creative Problem-Solving	Encourage children to use art to explore and solve problems.
Self-Expression	Support communication and creative thinking through artistic expression.
Open-Ended Thinking	Stimulate critical thinking, imagination, and creativity.
Authentic Activities	Connect artistic learning with children's everyday experiences.
Practical Learning	Promote engagement through hands-on artistic experiences.
Diverse Perspectives	Encourage appreciation of different ideas and forms of artistic expression.

Both teachers and teacher candidates emphasized that creativity and giftedness are more likely to develop when children are given freedom, diverse materials, meaningful artistic experiences, and opportunities to explore their own ideas. Teachers placed greater emphasis on the learning environment and children's holistic development, whereas teacher candidates particularly highlighted freedom, authenticity, hands-on learning, and diverse artistic resources. These findings suggest that art integration is most effective when children are positioned as active participants rather than passive recipients of predetermined artistic tasks.

3.3. Theme 3. Strategies to Increase Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

3.3.1. Teacher Perspectives

Teachers emphasized the importance of flexible and innovative approaches to art integration in fostering children's creativity and giftedness. Their strategies included using open-ended questions, diverse artistic methods and materials, drama and role-play, interdisciplinary activities, outdoor learning, music and movement, careful observation, and collaboration with families. These approaches were perceived as providing children with opportunities to explore ideas, experiment with different forms of expression, and develop creative solutions. The main strategies are summarized in Table 7.

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Table 7. Strategies of Early Childhood Teachers to Promote Creativity and Giftedness Through Art Integration

Subtheme	Purpose
Open-Ended Questions	Encourage children to explore ideas and develop critical and creative thinking.
Flexible Artistic Approaches	Provide opportunities for children to express creativity beyond conventional methods.
Diverse Artistic Methods and Materials	Enrich children's creative experiences through different techniques and media.
Drama and Role Play	Develop imagination, communication, and self-expression.
Art, Science, and Mathematics Integration	Encourage children to represent and explore concepts creatively.
Outdoor Activities	Provide opportunities to observe, explore, and express experiences from natural environments.
Music and Rhythm	Stimulate imagination, memory, movement, and creative expression.
Teacher Observation and Guidance	Enable teachers to recognize children's interests and provide appropriate feedback.
Family Collaboration	Extend artistic exploration and creative learning beyond the classroom.

Teachers particularly emphasized the value of open-ended questioning and flexible artistic approaches. As T5 explained, “I always ask children open-ended questions and encourage them to expand their ideas.” Similarly, T12 stated, “I do not impose rigid communication patterns on children.” These approaches allow children to explore different possibilities rather than simply reproduce predetermined outcomes. Teachers also highlighted drama, role-play, music, and outdoor activities as ways of encouraging imagination and self-expression. For example, T14 noted that “Role-playing and dramatization are highly effective in enhancing children's communication skills,” while T11 explained that outdoor activities encourage children to observe their surroundings and express their experiences in their own ways.

Teachers also described the value of interdisciplinary and experiential learning. Integrating art with science and mathematics can give children opportunities to represent abstract concepts visually and develop creative problem-solving skills (Tsiouri, 2025). Music, rhythm, and movement were similarly perceived as supporting emotional development and creative expression (de Julián & Pérez, 2022). Importantly, teachers emphasized that observation and constructive guidance are necessary to identify children's interests and emerging abilities. Collaboration with families was also considered important because creative exploration can continue beyond the classroom through activities at home. These findings suggest that creativity and giftedness are best supported through flexible, varied, and child-centered artistic experiences rather than through a single instructional method (Wang et al., 2025).

3.3.2. Teacher Candidates' Perspectives

Teacher candidates emphasized experiential and integrated learning as important strategies for supporting creativity through art. They highlighted outdoor educational activities, access to art facilities, drama, storytelling, and integration with science and mathematics. They also emphasized family involvement in extending children's creative experiences beyond school. As TC5 stated, “Taking children on an educational excursion to a novel environment facilitates the enhancement of language skills through observation and reflection on their experiences.” In the context of art integration, such experiences provide opportunities for children to observe their surroundings and transform their observations into creative expressions.

Teacher candidates also recognized the value of drama and artistic facilities. TC8 noted that “Art facilities enable children to convey their thoughts through artistic endeavors,” while TC3 explained that dramatic activities can support creative thinking and expression. They further emphasized parental involvement, particularly through shared storytelling and creative activities at home. However, some strategies, including open-ended questioning, flexible environments, and creative use of everyday materials, were mentioned less frequently. TC9 nevertheless emphasized that “A flexible and supportive environment is crucial for fostering children's expression of their thoughts without restrictive limitations.” Both teachers and teacher candidates emphasized the importance of flexible, experiential, and varied approaches to art integration. Teachers placed greater emphasis on observation, interdisciplinary activities, and family collaboration, whereas teacher candidates particularly highlighted outdoor experiences, artistic facilities, drama, and experiential learning. The findings indicate that effective art integration requires opportunities for children to explore, question, experiment, and express ideas across different settings. Such an approach can strengthen creative thinking while also providing teachers and families with opportunities to recognize children's distinctive interests and emerging potential.

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3.4. Theme 4. Art Integration Program

3.4.1. Teachers' Perspectives

ECE teachers consistently viewed art integration programs as valuable for fostering children's creativity, self-expression, imagination, and emotional development. They emphasized that drawing, painting, music, movement, crafts, storytelling, and role-play provide children with opportunities to communicate ideas and emotions beyond verbal language. One teacher explained, "Integrating visual arts into daily activities allows children to explore and represent their thoughts and feelings freely. It's not just about creating products, but about the process of discovery" (T4). Similarly, T9 noted that art encourages children to observe their surroundings and express unique perspectives through colors, shapes, and textures.

Teachers also recognized the contribution of music, movement, and storytelling to children's cognitive and emotional development. These activities were perceived as supporting imagination, coordination, emotional expression, and understanding of narratives (Tsortanidou et al., 2022). However, teachers identified practical challenges, particularly limited materials and insufficient time. As T6 stated, "Although art activities are powerful, their implementation requires sufficient materials and time allocation." This suggests that the effectiveness of art integration depends not only on teachers' willingness to implement creative activities but also on adequate institutional support and resources (Wang et al., 2025).

3.4.2. Teacher Candidates' Perspectives

Teacher candidates similarly expressed strong support for art integration as a means of promoting creativity, communication, imagination, and holistic development. They viewed art as more than an extracurricular activity and emphasized its potential to support children's learning across different domains. TC2 stated, "Art activities provide young children with meaningful experiences to express themselves and develop their imagination." TC11 further emphasized that art can function as a communication medium, particularly for children who are still developing verbal abilities.

Teacher candidates also highlighted the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in implementing art-based activities. They noted that activities should reflect children's interests and developmental needs and should provide sufficient opportunities for exploration. TC10 cautioned that "Limited materials or overly structured lessons may restrict children's creative exploration." These findings indicate that successful art integration requires teachers to balance structure with children's freedom to explore and express themselves. Both teachers and teacher candidates recognized art integration as a valuable approach for nurturing creativity and giftedness, while also acknowledging the need for adequate resources, teacher flexibility, and supportive learning environments.

3.5. Implications

The findings have several implications for early childhood education practice. First, ECE institutions should position art integration as an integral component of learning rather than as a supplementary or occasional activity. Teachers can incorporate drawing, painting, music, movement, storytelling, drama, and other creative activities across learning areas to provide children with multiple forms of expression. Second, teachers need opportunities for professional development that strengthen their ability to design open-ended, child-centered artistic activities and recognize children's emerging creative and gifted potential. Third, schools should provide adequate artistic materials, time, and flexible learning spaces to enable meaningful creative exploration. Finally, collaboration with families should be encouraged so that opportunities for artistic expression can continue beyond the classroom. These implications are particularly relevant because the findings indicate that the benefits of art integration depend not only on the activities themselves but also on the environment and support available to children and teachers.

3.6. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study relies on the perspectives of ECE teachers and teacher candidates; therefore, the findings primarily reflect educators' perceptions rather than children's direct experiences of art integration. Second, the qualitative nature of the study means that the findings provide contextual insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions. Third, some aspects of art integration, such as the availability of materials, time allocation, and institutional support, may vary across educational settings, which may influence the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Finally, the study focuses on participants' reported perspectives and does not directly measure changes in children's creativity or giftedness following participation in specific art integration programs. Future research could therefore incorporate children's perspectives, classroom observations, longitudinal designs, and empirical assessments of creative development to further examine the effectiveness of art integration in early childhood education.

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4. Conclusion

This study shows that art integration can create meaningful opportunities for young children to develop creativity and reveal their emerging potential. In relation to the first research question, artistic expression supports creativity and giftedness by giving children space to imagine, experiment, express emotions and ideas, solve problems, and explore different ways of seeing and understanding the world. Regarding the second research question, the findings indicate that activities such as drawing, painting, storytelling, music and movement, drama and role-play, open-ended questioning, outdoor exploration, and collaborative art projects can provide effective opportunities for creative learning. However, the value of these activities depends greatly on the environment in which they take place. Children need supportive adults, freedom to explore, varied materials, and opportunities to connect what they experience at school with their experiences at home and in the community. This is particularly important because creativity in early childhood is shaped not only by classroom activities but also by interactions among children, teachers, families, and the wider learning environment. Therefore, art integration should not be treated simply as an additional classroom activity. Rather, it can become a meaningful part of early childhood education when teachers and families create spaces where children feel safe to explore, make mistakes, express themselves, and develop their own ideas.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

No funding support was received.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics and Consent Declarations

The study followed relevant ethical principles for research involving adult participants. Formal ethical clearance was not required for this study because the institution classified the study as low-risk educational research that did not require formal review. Nevertheless, ethical safeguards were applied throughout the research process. All adult participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants' names and institutional affiliations were not disclosed and were replaced with unique identification codes to maintain confidentiality. The collected data were used exclusively for research purposes and reported anonymously.

Data Availability

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

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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ISSN: 2797-3174