



Research article



Art, Emotion, and Learning: Exploring Classroom Experiences through Creative Expression

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Abstract

This study explores how creative expression shapes emotional engagement and learning experiences in secondary school classrooms. Positioned within a qualitative case study framework, the research examines how art-based activities such as drawing, storytelling, role-play, and collaborative creative tasks are integrated into everyday classroom practices and how they influence students' participation, understanding, and emotional responses. The study involved 15 participants consisting of 5 teachers and 10 students from a secondary school where creative expression was regularly incorporated into general lessons. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings reveal that creative expression plays a multidimensional role in the learning process. First, it serves as a catalyst for emotional engagement, helping students feel more relaxed, motivated, and connected to classroom activities. Second, creative tasks function as cognitive bridges that support students in understanding academic content by transforming abstract ideas into more concrete and meaningful representations. Third, creative expression encourages confidence and inclusive participation by providing alternative ways for students to communicate their thoughts and ideas. Finally, the presence of art-based activities contributes to the development of emotionally safe learning environments where students feel valued and comfortable expressing themselves. Overall, the study highlights that creative expression is not merely an instructional tool but a humanizing pedagogical practice that integrates emotion, cognition, and participation. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating creative approaches into everyday teaching to support holistic and meaningful learning experiences.

Keywords: creative expression, arts-integrated learning, emotional engagement, classroom participation, secondary education

1.Introduction

In recent years, the role of art in education has expanded beyond its traditional position as a stand-alone subject to become a meaningful medium for enhancing students' emotional engagement and learning experiences. In secondary school settings, creative expression such as drawing, storytelling, movement, and collaborative artistic activities is increasingly integrated into general classroom instruction to support deeper learning. Scholars have emphasized that learning is not solely a cognitive activity but also an emotional and experiential process shaped by students' feelings, imagination, and personal connections (Eisner, 2020; Immordino-Yang et al., 2020; Greene, 2021; Winner et al., 2022). When students are given opportunities to express ideas creatively, classrooms can transform into spaces that encourage reflection, interpretation, and meaning-making.

Recent research further highlights that art-based learning contributes to more emotionally responsive and inclusive learning environments. Creative activities allow students to communicate complex thoughts and feelings that may be difficult to express through conventional academic tasks, thereby strengthening engagement and participation (Duma & Silverstein, 2021; Fleming, 2023; Burton et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2022). In secondary classrooms, such practices have been associated with improved classroom climate, increased confidence, and stronger connections between students and teachers. Creative expression also plays an important role in supporting social-emotional learning, helping students develop empathy, self-awareness, and a sense of identity through participatory experiences. As noted by Davis (2020), art-based approaches provide opportunities for students to explore personal meaning while connecting learning with emotional understanding, making them particularly relevant in contemporary educational contexts.

Despite the growing recognition of the value of art-based learning in education, much of the existing research has primarily focused on the outcomes of arts integration, such as improved creativity, academic engagement, or social-emotional development. While these contributions are important, they often present creative expression as an instructional strategy rather than examining how it is experienced by students and teachers in everyday classroom interactions. In many secondary school contexts, art is incorporated informally into general lessons, yet the processes through which emotional expression, learning experiences, and creative participation intersect remain underexplored (Leavy, 2020; O'Toole, 2021; Bamford, 2021; Hall, 2022).

Another limitation in current scholarship is the tendency to treat emotion and creativity as abstract constructs measured through outcomes rather than lived experiences situated within classroom dynamics. Although studies have shown that artistic activities can support emotional engagement and motivation, less attention has been given to how students interpret these experiences and how teachers facilitate them in real instructional settings (McGregor, 2020; Thomson et al., 2022; Wright, 2021; Barton, 2023). As a result, the everyday meanings that students attach to creative activities often remain implicit and insufficiently documented.

Furthermore, research in secondary education frequently emphasizes structured arts programs or specialized subjects, leaving a gap in understanding how creative expression functions within regular classroom environments where art is used as a medium rather than the primary focus of instruction. This suggests the need for closer qualitative attention to the classroom as a social space where art, emotion, and learning interact through lived experiences, dialogue, and participation (Hickey-Moody, 2020; Leitch, 2022; Davies, 2023; Gallagher, 2024).

Responding to these gaps, this study seeks to explore how art, emotion, and learning intersect within everyday classroom experiences through the use of creative expression in secondary school settings. Rather than examining arts integration in formal or specialized programs, this research focuses on how creative activities are naturally embedded within general classroom instruction and

how they shape students' emotional engagement and learning processes. The classroom is viewed not only as a site of knowledge transmission but also as an expressive space where students interpret, feel, and respond to learning through creative forms such as drawing, storytelling, movement, and collaborative activities.

This study adopts a qualitative perspective to capture the lived experiences of both teachers and students as they participate in creative learning environments. Attention is given to how teachers use artistic expression as a pedagogical tool and how students experience and interpret these activities emotionally and academically. By foregrounding participants' voices, the research aims to uncover the meanings attached to creative practices and how they contribute to classroom interaction, participation, and engagement. In doing so, the study moves beyond viewing art as an instructional strategy and instead positions it as a medium through which emotions, identity, and learning experiences are interconnected.

Through this approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how creative expression functions within everyday classroom life and how it influences students' engagement with learning. Guided by this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do teachers integrate creative expression into everyday classroom practices in secondary schools? RQ2: How do students experience and interpret the role of art and emotion in their learning processes?

2. Research Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how creative expression shapes emotional engagement and learning experiences in secondary school classrooms. A case study approach was considered appropriate because the research focuses on understanding a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly the use of art-based activities in everyday instructional settings. As Yin (2018) explains, a case study design is suitable when a researcher seeks to investigate complex social processes in depth and within their natural environment. This design allows for a detailed exploration of classroom interactions, teaching practices, and students' emotional responses as they unfold in authentic learning situations. By focusing on classroom experiences as the central unit of analysis, the study aims to capture how creative expression operates as part of daily teaching and learning rather than as a structured program. This approach enables the researcher to develop a holistic understanding of how art, emotion, and learning intersect through real classroom practices.

2.2 Research Participants

This study involved 15 participants drawn from a secondary school where creative expression was regularly incorporated into classroom activities across different subjects. The participants consisted of 5 teachers and 10 students who were selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in learning environments that encouraged artistic expression as part of daily instruction. Teachers were chosen from various subject areas, including language, social studies, and arts-integrated classes, as they frequently used creative approaches such as drawing, storytelling, and performance-based tasks.

The student participants were selected from classes where such activities were commonly practiced. They represented different grade levels and demonstrated varied levels of participation in creative learning tasks. This diversity allowed the study to capture a range of perspectives on how

art-based experiences influence emotional engagement and learning. The inclusion of both teachers and students provided a balanced view of how creative expression is implemented and experienced in classroom settings.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Category	Group	Number	Details
Role	Teachers	5	From language, social studies, and general subjects
	Students	10	Secondary level learners
Gender	Male	7	Teachers (2), Students (5)
	Female	8	Teachers (3), Students (5)
Age Range (Teachers)	29–45 years	5	Varied teaching experience
Age Range (Students)	15–17 years	10	Grades 10–11
Teaching Experience	4–15 years	5	Early to mid-career

2.3 Research Instruments

To capture the complexity of classroom experiences related to art, emotion, and learning, this study used multiple qualitative instruments. The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore participants’ perceptions, feelings, and experiences with creative expression in classroom activities. Separate interview protocols were developed for teachers and students. Teacher interviews focused on how creative strategies were incorporated into lessons, the intentions behind their use, and perceived emotional and learning outcomes. Student interviews explored how they experienced art-based activities, how these activities influenced their emotions, and how they supported understanding of lesson content. In addition to interviews, classroom observations were conducted to document how creative expression was enacted during actual teaching and learning processes. An observation sheet was used to record types of creative activities, patterns of student participation, and visible emotional responses such as enthusiasm, confidence, or hesitation. Field notes were also written to capture contextual details, classroom atmosphere, and spontaneous interactions that could not be fully captured through interviews alone.

2.4 Research Procedures

The research was conducted through several structured stages to ensure systematic and ethical data collection. First, formal permission was obtained from the school administration to carry out the study in selected secondary classrooms where creative expression was commonly integrated into teaching practices. After receiving approval, the researcher introduced the study to potential participants and explained its purpose. Teachers and students who agreed to participate were asked to provide informed consent prior to the data collection process. Data collection was carried out over a period of several weeks. The researcher began by conducting classroom observations to gain an initial understanding of how creative activities were implemented and how students responded emotionally and behaviorally during learning. These observations helped identify relevant situations and participants for deeper exploration. Following this stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each teacher and selected students. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed. Throughout the process, field notes were maintained to document classroom dynamics and contextual insights that supported interpretation.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis approach to identify patterns related to the role of creative expression in shaping emotional engagement and learning experiences. This process followed the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which emphasizes three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were organized to ensure familiarity with the dataset. The researcher then conducted initial coding by selecting meaningful segments related to art-based activities, emotional responses, and learning experiences. Next, similar codes were grouped into broader categories to identify recurring ideas across participants. These categories were then organized into themes that represented how creative expression influenced classroom interaction and student engagement. Data displays, such as thematic groupings and narrative summaries, were used to support interpretation. Throughout the process, conclusions were continuously refined by comparing interview data with observation findings to ensure consistency and credibility.

3. Findings

The analysis revealed three central themes that illustrate how creative expression shapes classroom experiences, emotional engagement, and learning processes in secondary school settings: (1) creative activities as a catalyst for emotional engagement, (2) art as a bridge for understanding academic content, and (3) creative expression as a space for student confidence and participation.

3.1 Creative Expression as a Catalyst for Emotional Engagement

The findings indicate that creative expression played a central role in shaping the emotional climate of the classroom. The use of drawing, storytelling, and performance-based activities appeared to reduce pressure and create a more relaxed learning environment. Teachers observed that when students were given space to express ideas through creative forms, the classroom atmosphere became more open and participatory. This emotional shift was often reflected in students' willingness to engage, interact, and contribute during the lesson. One teacher described how creative activities helped students feel emotionally secure and more willing to participate:

"When I use drawing or storytelling in class, I notice a big change in students' mood. They become more relaxed and less afraid to participate. Even students who usually remain silent start to share ideas through their work. It creates a warmer atmosphere and makes the class feel more alive." (T2, Female, 34 years old)

This experience was reinforced by another teacher who emphasized the emotional connection that emerged during creative tasks:

"Creative activities help me reach students emotionally. When they act out a scene or create something together, they seem more connected to the lesson. I can see them enjoying the process, and that energy makes the learning situation more positive and interactive." (T4, Male, 41 years old)

Students also expressed that creative expression made them feel more comfortable and less pressured during learning:

"I feel more comfortable when the teacher lets us express ideas through art or storytelling. It doesn't feel like we are just studying from books. I feel more relaxed and interested because I can show what I think and feel in my own way." (S3, Female, 16 years old)

Similarly, another student highlighted how creative activities helped reduce anxiety and increase enjoyment:

"When we do creative tasks, I don't feel nervous like during regular lessons. I can focus better because I enjoy the activity. Sometimes I don't even realize that I am learning something new because it feels natural and fun." (S8, Male, 15 years old)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that creative expression functions as an emotional bridge that makes the classroom environment more supportive, engaging, and conducive to active participation.

3.2 Art as a Bridge for Understanding Academic Content

Another important pattern that emerged from the data shows that creative expression functioned as a bridge that helped students understand academic material more easily. Both teachers and students described how artistic activities transformed abstract concepts into more concrete and relatable forms. When lessons involved drawing, role-play, visual mapping, or storytelling, students were better able to connect ideas, remember information, and interpret content in their own way.

Rather than relying solely on verbal explanation or textbook reading, creative tasks allowed students to process knowledge through multiple modes, making learning feel clearer and more meaningful.

Teachers explained that creative expression helped simplify complex topics and supported students who struggled with traditional learning methods:

"Sometimes the material is too abstract when explained only through words. When I ask students to draw a concept or act out a situation, they start to understand it better. I can see that they remember the lesson more clearly because they have experienced it, not just listened to it." (T1, Male, 39 years old)

Another teacher emphasized that creative activities encouraged deeper thinking and interpretation:

"When students create something related to the lesson, they are not just repeating information. They try to interpret the topic in their own way. That process helps them understand the meaning behind the material, not only the facts." (T5, Female, 33 years old)

From the students' perspective, creative tasks helped them make sense of difficult concepts:

"When the teacher asks us to make drawings or simple projects, I can understand the lesson better. Sometimes reading alone makes me confused, but when I turn the idea into a picture, it becomes clearer in my mind." (S2, Male, 16 years old)

Another student described how role-play and storytelling supported comprehension and memory:

"When we act out a situation or tell stories related to the lesson, I can remember the topic more easily. It feels like I am part of the learning, not just listening. I understand faster because I can imagine the situation." (S7, Female, 15 years old)

These responses indicate that creative expression not only enhances emotional engagement but also serves as a cognitive bridge, helping students translate abstract academic content into meaningful and memorable learning experiences.

3.3 Creative Expression as a Space for Confidence and Participation

The third theme highlights how creative expression created a supportive space that encouraged students to participate more actively and develop confidence in sharing their ideas. The findings suggest that when learning activities involved artistic elements, students who were usually quiet or hesitant felt more comfortable contributing. Creative tasks offered alternative ways to communicate understanding, allowing students to express themselves without the pressure of giving correct verbal answers. As a result, the classroom became a more inclusive environment where different forms of participation were valued.

Teachers observed that creative activities helped students overcome fear and become more willing to engage:

"I notice that some students who rarely speak during regular lessons become more active when they can express themselves through drawing or performance. They seem more confident because there is no single correct answer, and they feel safe to show their ideas." (T3, Female, 37 years old)

Another teacher explained how creative tasks opened space for broader participation:

"When I use creative assignments, more students get involved. Even those who are usually passive start contributing in their own way. Some students express their thoughts better through images or stories than through speaking." (T5, Male, 42 years old)

Students also shared how creative expression helped them feel more confident in class:

"I am usually shy when I have to speak in front of the class, but when we can present through drawings or group performances, I feel more confident. I can show my ideas without feeling too nervous." (S4, Female, 16 years old)

Another student described how creative activities helped them feel included and valued:

"When we are allowed to create something, I feel like my ideas matter. Even if I don't talk much, I can still participate. It makes me feel more comfortable being part of the class." (S9, Male, 15 years old)

These accounts suggest that creative expression supports not only learning and emotional engagement but also the development of self-confidence and inclusive participation within the classroom.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that creative expression plays a significant role in shaping the emotional atmosphere of the classroom, suggesting that learning is not only a cognitive activity but also an affective experience. When students are involved in drawing, storytelling, or performance-based activities, they tend to feel more relaxed, motivated, and personally connected to the learning process. This supports the idea that emotional engagement can function as an entry point to deeper learning, where students participate not because they are required to, but because they feel comfortable and interested. In this sense, creative expression contributes to the creation of emotionally responsive classrooms that encourage openness and interaction.

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the strong relationship between emotion and cognition in educational settings. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2020) argue that emotions are essential to how individuals process and retain knowledge, shaping attention and meaning-making. Similarly, Pekrun (2021) highlights that positive emotional experiences can enhance motivation and persistence in learning tasks. Within art-based contexts, creative activities provide safe spaces for emotional expression, allowing students to engage with content in more personal and reflective ways (Winner et al., 2022). Research also indicates that creative engagement can reduce anxiety and promote a sense of enjoyment that strengthens classroom participation (Duma & Silverstein, 2021). Moreover, Fleming (2023) notes that artistic processes help build emotional connections between learners and learning materials, making the experience more memorable and meaningful. Viewed together, these insights suggest that creative expression functions as an emotional bridge that supports engagement, comfort, and motivation. The classroom becomes a space where feelings, imagination, and learning interact, allowing students to approach knowledge with greater confidence and curiosity.

Another important issue emerging from the findings is the role of creative expression as a cognitive bridge that helps students grasp academic concepts more effectively. The data suggest that when students are invited to represent ideas through drawing, storytelling, or role-play, they engage with learning content in more active and interpretive ways. This process allows abstract material to become more concrete, as students translate information into visual, narrative, or performative forms. Rather than simply receiving knowledge, students reconstruct it through creative engagement, which supports deeper comprehension and retention.

From a pedagogical perspective, this reflects the idea that learning becomes more meaningful when students are involved in multimodal meaning-making processes. Eisner (2020) argues that the arts expand the ways in which individuals think and understand by enabling alternative forms of representation beyond language and text. Similarly, Efland (2020) suggests that artistic processes support cognitive flexibility by encouraging students to explore multiple interpretations of a concept. When learners actively transform knowledge into creative forms, they are not only recalling information but reorganizing and internalizing it in personally meaningful ways.

Research in arts-integrated education further indicates that creative tasks can strengthen conceptual understanding by linking imagination with academic reasoning (Hardiman et al., 2021). Greene (2021) also emphasizes that artistic engagement invites students to see ideas from new perspectives, making learning more reflective and interpretive. More recently, studies have shown that multimodal learning environments, including those that involve artistic expression, support memory retention and conceptual clarity by activating different cognitive pathways (Marshall, 2022). In this sense, creative expression serves as an intellectual bridge that helps students connect abstract knowledge with lived experience.

The third issue emerging from the findings highlights the role of creative expression as a pedagogical space that supports students' confidence and encourages broader participation in classroom learning. The data indicate that when learning activities allow multiple forms of expression, students who are typically quiet or hesitant feel more comfortable contributing. Creative tasks offer alternative pathways for communication, enabling students to express understanding through images, movement, or storytelling rather than relying solely on verbal explanation. This shift expands the meaning of participation and makes the classroom more inclusive for diverse learners.

This pattern aligns with contemporary perspectives that view participation as a socially constructed process shaped by classroom climate and instructional design. Bandura (2020) emphasizes that confidence in learning environments develops through opportunities for successful expression and positive reinforcement. When students feel that their ideas are valued, they are more likely to engage and take intellectual risks. In arts-integrated settings, creative expression can function as a low-pressure entry point that reduces fear of failure and encourages experimentation (Beghetto, 2021). Such environments allow students to present ideas in ways that match their strengths, making participation more accessible.

Furthermore, research has shown that inclusive classroom practices that recognize diverse forms of expression can strengthen students' sense of competence and agency (Craft, 2020). Creative activities support this process by validating multiple ways of thinking and communicating. According to Robinson (2021), creative learning environments empower students to see themselves as capable contributors, not merely receivers of information. More recent work by Thomas and Brown (2022) also suggests that participatory creative spaces promote collaboration and shared ownership of learning. In this context, creative expression becomes not only a tool for learning but also a medium through which students develop confidence and a stronger presence within the classroom.

Beyond engagement, comprehension, and participation, the findings point to a deeper pedagogical function of creative expression: its role in shaping the classroom as an emotionally safe and humanizing space. Students repeatedly described feeling more relaxed, less afraid of making mistakes, and more willing to share ideas when learning involved creative activities. This suggests that art-based practices do not only support academic processes but also contribute to the formation of a psychologically supportive learning environment where students feel accepted and valued. In such settings, the classroom shifts from a performance-driven space into a relational space where emotional security becomes part of the learning experience.

This interpretation resonates with the growing emphasis on humanizing pedagogy, which positions emotional safety and recognition as essential conditions for meaningful learning. According to Noddings (2021), caring relationships in educational settings create the foundation for students to feel secure enough to participate and take intellectual risks. Similarly, Hooks (2020) describes engaged pedagogy as a practice that recognizes students as whole individuals, not merely as learners expected to produce correct answers. Within art-based learning contexts, creative expression offers a low-pressure channel through which students can communicate ideas without fear of judgment, thereby reducing anxiety and fostering openness. Recent scholarship also highlights the connection between psychological safety and student wellbeing in classroom environments. Jennings (2020) notes that emotionally supportive classrooms contribute to positive learning climates and stronger student-teacher relationships. Eisner (2020) emphasizes that artistic processes allow students to explore thoughts and emotions in ways that traditional instruction often cannot accommodate. More recent studies further suggest that creative and expressive learning

environments can strengthen students' sense of security, belonging, and emotional resilience (Goldstein, 2022). In this light, creative expression becomes not only a pedagogical tool but also a means of humanizing the learning experience by making the classroom a space where students feel seen, heard, and emotionally supported.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how creative expression shapes classroom experiences, emotional engagement, and learning processes in secondary school settings. The findings demonstrate that art-based activities are not merely supplementary teaching strategies but meaningful pedagogical practices that influence how students feel, think, and participate in learning. Through everyday classroom interactions, creative expression emerged as a powerful medium that connects emotion, understanding, and participation, making learning more accessible and personally relevant for students. The discussion highlights several important insights. First, creative expression plays a significant role in fostering emotional engagement, allowing students to approach learning with greater comfort, enjoyment, and motivation. Second, artistic activities function as cognitive bridges that help students interpret and understand academic content in more concrete and meaningful ways. By translating abstract ideas into visual, narrative, or performative forms, students are able to internalize knowledge more effectively. Third, creative learning environments support the development of confidence and inclusive participation, particularly for students who may feel hesitant to express themselves in traditional classroom settings. Finally, the presence of creative expression contributes to the formation of emotionally safe learning spaces where students feel accepted, valued, and encouraged to share their ideas. Taken together, these findings suggest that integrating creative expression into everyday classroom practice extends beyond enhancing academic outcomes. It supports the development of emotionally responsive and human-centered learning environments that recognize students as whole individuals. Future research may further explore how creative pedagogies can be sustained across subjects and how schools can support teachers in embedding expressive practices as part of regular instruction.

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