

VISUAL SYMBOLS IN ART THERAPY FOR EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND HEALING: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS *

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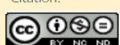
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Received 25 May 2025; Revised 5 June 2025; Accepted 6 June 2025

Abstract

This study explores the role of visual symbols in enhancing emotional expression, regulation, and social development among Chinese elementary school students through visual art therapy. Using a quasi-experimental case study design, seven students aged 6–9 participated in an eight-week art therapy intervention in a natural classroom setting. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, classroom observations, and student artwork analysis. The findings reveal that children initially relied on literal imagery but gradually developed the ability to use abstract and symbolic representations to express complex emotions. Engagement with visual symbols promoted emotional self-awareness, reduced anxiety, and encouraged positive peer interactions. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Psychology, and Cognitive Development Theory, this study underscores the significance of visual art therapy

Citation:



* Yingxin Xu, Supath Kookiattikoon and Haiyan Guo. (2025). Visual Symbols In Art Therapy For Emotional Expression And Healing: A Case Study Of Chinese Elementary School Students.

Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Development, 3(3), 1283-1297.;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.>

Website: <https://so12.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JISDIADP/>

in fostering emotional literacy and resilience. It advocates for the integration of art-based therapeutic practices into educational systems to support the holistic development of children in China.

Keywords: Visual Art Therapy, Emotional Expression, Symbolic Representation, Child Development, Chinese Elementary Education.

Introduction

Emotional expression is fundamental to children's psychological development and mental health, yet many young children lack the verbal skills and emotional vocabulary necessary to articulate their feelings. This communication gap can hinder self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social interaction, especially in cultures where emotional education is often secondary to academic achievement. In China, this imbalance is particularly pronounced; academic excellence is highly emphasized, while emotional well-being is frequently overlooked in early education (Chen, 2019). As a result, many children face growing emotional pressures without access to adequate coping tools or supportive environments.

Visual art therapy offers a promising solution. As a non-verbal therapeutic approach, it enables children to externalize internal experiences through the use of colors, shapes, and symbols. These visual symbols serve as intermediaries between unspoken emotional states and outward communication, allowing children to construct personal narratives around complex emotions (Malchiodi, 2012). Despite its proven effectiveness in Western contexts, the application of visual art therapy in Chinese schools remains underexplored, especially in relation to symbolic representation and its role in emotional healing.

This study addresses that gap by examining how visual symbols in art therapy can foster emotional expression, resilience, and social competence among Chinese elementary school students. It explores the potential of symbol-

based visual expression to help children better understand and manage their emotions, and ultimately contribute to a more balanced, holistic educational framework.

Objectives

1. To examine how Chinese elementary school students accept and apply visual symbols in their artistic expressions during art therapy.
2. To analyze the impact of engagement with visual symbols on students' emotional expression and regulation.
3. To investigate the role of visual art therapy in enhancing self-awareness, emotional resilience, and social interactions among Chinese elementary school students.

Literature Review

Visual art therapy has been widely recognized as a powerful method for facilitating emotional expression, promoting psychological healing, and supporting both cognitive and social development, particularly among children. As a non-verbal therapeutic approach, it allows individuals—especially those with limited verbal ability—to externalize internal experiences through creative expression. This chapter reviews theoretical foundations and empirical studies relevant to visual art therapy, with a specific focus on the role of visual symbols in supporting emotional expression and psychological growth.

1. Visual Art Therapy as a Tool for Emotional Expression and Healing

Visual art therapy is grounded in the idea that artistic creation serves as a bridge between inner emotional experiences and external expression. Malchiodi (2012) emphasized that visual symbols function as an alternative language, enabling children to communicate complex emotions that may be difficult to verbalize. Through color, form, and composition, children can represent feelings

of sadness, fear, or joy in ways that bypass verbal limitations. Kramer (1971) similarly asserted that the creative process in art-making promotes self-discovery, emotional relief, and catharsis. These foundational studies highlight the capacity of visual art therapy to enhance emotional literacy and self-understanding in children. Particularly for those lacking verbal fluency, visual symbols operate as mediators between the internal world and external reality, offering structure to emotional articulation. Evidence suggests that children who engage in art therapy often show improved emotional regulation and coping abilities (Malchiodi, 2012). These findings are further supported by psychological theories that link artistic expression to emotional and cognitive development.

2. Social Cognitive Theory and Cognitive Development

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory underscores the role of modeling and observational learning in shaping children's behaviors and self-efficacy. In the context of art therapy, children are exposed to their peers' use of symbols and visual expression, which encourages them to experiment with their own creative approaches. Peer modeling fosters not only artistic exploration but also emotional confidence and social connection. Collaborative art-making activities reinforce empathy, shared understanding, and adaptive social behaviors. Kohut's (1971) Self-Psychology also supports the idea that children require empathic relationships to develop emotional cohesion. Art therapy, in this sense, provides a reparative space where children can safely externalize unmet emotional needs and receive validation from therapists or peers, thus contributing to emotional stability and self-integration.

Cognitive development theories further explain how symbolic thinking emerges and matures. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes guided interaction as critical to learning and emotional growth. Within structured art therapy, facilitators help children move from literal depictions of feelings—such as drawing a storm for anger—to more abstract and metaphorical symbols. This progression supports both emotional

differentiation and cognitive sophistication. Reflecting on artwork alongside peers or instructors further deepens emotional insight. Similarly, Piaget's (1977) Cognitive Development Theory emphasizes that as children move from the preoperational to the concrete operational stage, they increasingly use symbols to represent abstract experiences. Art therapy accelerates this developmental shift by offering opportunities for symbolic experimentation. For instance, a child might initially depict sadness with a single tear but later evolve to using layered colors and abstract forms to convey more complex emotional landscapes. This evolution illustrates both emotional maturation and enhanced symbolic reasoning.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives show how art therapy contributes to children's emotional, cognitive, and social development. Through social modeling, guided support, and creative autonomy, children expand their capacity for emotional expression and resilience. Art therapy thus emerges as a holistic approach to child development, offering a safe and structured medium for self-exploration, social learning, and symbolic articulation.

3. Empirical Evidence Supporting Visual Art Therapy

A growing body of research validates the effectiveness of visual art therapy in improving children's emotional well-being, cognitive flexibility, and resilience. Malchiodi (2012) found that art therapy participants demonstrated notable improvements in emotional expression and problem-solving, suggesting that creative expression fosters psychological adaptability. Artistic engagement allows children to explore difficult emotions within a non-threatening, structured framework. Niu and Sternberg (2001) further showed that participation in visual arts enhances cognitive flexibility, which supports better emotional regulation and abstract thinking. Reynolds and Lim (2007) revealed that creative activity is associated with reduced cortisol levels—an indicator of stress—highlighting the physiological benefits of art therapy. Participants in their study reported greater

relaxation and emotional clarity, confirming the therapeutic value of artistic engagement in reducing anxiety and emotional distress.

Symbolic imagery is particularly effective for helping children navigate emotional challenges. McNiff (1992) observed that children often use recurring symbols—such as suns, bridges, or spirals—to convey hope, transformation, and emotional safety. These metaphors facilitate emotional processing by helping children frame their experiences narratively. Malchiodi (2006) also noted that children who had experienced trauma frequently expressed their pain through symbols like stormy skies or broken figures. Such representations provided a structured outlet for processing negative emotions, gradually transforming internal turmoil into manageable narratives. This symbolic externalization enhances coping mechanisms and provides emotional distance without suppressing the affective content.

Moreover, symbolic communication through visual art allows deeper interactions between children and adults. Therapists, teachers, and parents can interpret children's symbolic representations to better understand their emotional states and guide them toward more adaptive responses. Visual symbols also align with narrative therapy approaches, enabling children to reframe and reinterpret their emotional experiences through creative storytelling. These outcomes are closely tied to developmental psychology frameworks, reaffirming the critical role of visual representation in emotional and cognitive maturation.

4. Visual Art Therapy in the Chinese Context

Despite its established success in Western countries, visual art therapy is still emerging in China. Research suggests that mental health issues among Chinese children are on the rise, largely due to academic pressure and rapid social change (Chen, 2019). However, educational systems in China often prioritize academic performance over emotional education, leaving children with few structured opportunities to develop emotional literacy. Visual art therapy

presents a culturally adaptable, non-verbal alternative for emotional expression that can be integrated into school environments.

Nonetheless, the field faces challenges. There is a shortage of trained art therapists, limited institutional support, and lingering cultural stigma around mental health—particularly in school settings. Expanding visual art therapy in China requires addressing these barriers through policy support, public awareness, and educator training. Schools provide ideal platforms for structured, emotionally supportive programs. With appropriate adaptation, visual art therapy can offer Chinese children essential tools for emotional resilience and self-awareness, contributing meaningfully to holistic child development.

Methodology

This study adopted a quasi-experimental case study design to explore the role of visual symbols in emotional articulation and healing among Chinese elementary school students. The research was conducted in a naturalistic classroom setting and involved seven students aged 6 to 9 years, selected from a class of 30. Due to the constraints of the school environment, random assignment was not feasible, making this a non-randomized intervention study.

To capture both measurable and nuanced changes, a mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection:

Quantitative instruments included pre- and post-intervention questionnaires designed to assess students' emotional awareness, understanding of visual symbols, and ability to express emotions through art.

Qualitative data were collected through systematic classroom observations and artwork analysis, focusing on behavioral engagement, emotional expression, and peer interaction.

The intervention consisted of eight weekly art therapy sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. Sessions were designed around specific therapeutic themes

such as “*Drawing My Safe Place*” and “*Expressing Emotions Through Symbols*.” These activities guided students in using color, shape, and metaphorical imagery to explore personal feelings and emotional states.

To ensure data quality and consistency:

All research instruments were reviewed by three independent experts in psychology and art therapy.

Inter-rater reliability was established for observational data through coding comparison between two trained observers.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to. Parental informed consent was obtained, and participants’ confidentiality and psychological safety were safeguarded throughout the study. No identifying information was disclosed in any reports.

This methodological framework allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of visual art therapy on children’s emotional development. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Psychology, and Cognitive Development Theory, the study provided a structured lens through which to analyze how guided symbolic art-making can enhance emotional literacy, resilience, and self-expression among young learners.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study aligned with the three research objectives, illustrating how visual symbols in art therapy facilitated emotional articulation, regulation, and psychological growth among Chinese elementary school students.

1. Acceptance and Application of Visual Symbols in Artistic Expression

At the outset of the intervention, students predominantly relied on literal and simplistic imagery—such as stick figures, basic color blocks, or facial expressions—to represent emotions. Their use of visual symbols was limited,

often reflecting a lack of confidence and understanding of symbolic expression. However, as the sessions progressed, participants demonstrated a growing acceptance and purposeful application of visual symbols in their artwork.

Post-intervention observations revealed that students began using more abstract forms and metaphorical imagery to represent complex emotional states. For instance, bridges, spirals, broken shapes, and layered color compositions emerged as recurring motifs for emotions such as transition, confusion, or sadness. This evolution indicated not only a cognitive shift toward symbolic thinking (as supported by Piaget, 1977), but also an increased willingness to use art as a means of emotional exploration. The creative process became more expressive and individualized, reflecting students' growing comfort with ambiguity and personal meaning-making.

2. Influence of Visual Symbols on Emotional Expression and Regulation

The use of visual symbols significantly enhanced the participants' capacity for emotional expression and regulation. Pre-test questionnaire responses showed difficulty in identifying and naming feelings, while classroom behaviors reflected emotional avoidance or anxiety around creative failure. As the intervention progressed, students began selecting colors and shapes to symbolize a broader range of emotional states—moving from static depictions of “happy” or “sad” to dynamic compositions that conveyed layered feelings such as confusion, fear, or hope.

Observational data and post-test responses confirmed this transformation. Children increasingly demonstrated adaptive emotional strategies, such as revising artwork after setbacks or using visual metaphors to externalize internal conflicts. This change reflects the development of emotional regulation skills, in line with Gross's (1998) Emotion Regulation Theory. Furthermore, students became less reliant on external validation and exhibited

greater autonomy in their expressive choices, illustrating a move toward intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, as outlined by Deci and Ryan (1985).

3. Enhancement of Self-Awareness, Emotional Resilience, and Social Interaction

Visual art therapy fostered notable improvements in students' self-awareness and emotional resilience. Participants became more attuned to their internal emotional states and more confident in expressing them symbolically. This internal growth was accompanied by behavioral changes: students who were initially hesitant to engage became active participants, showing initiative in artistic tasks and openness in discussing their feelings through their artwork.

In terms of social development, students exhibited increased peer engagement and collaboration over time. Those who initially avoided group work began sharing materials, exchanging feedback, and initiating conversations about their drawings. This shift aligns with Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, as children benefited from observing and modeling peers' expressive strategies. The art therapy sessions created a socially supportive environment, fostering trust and reducing emotional isolation—conditions supported by Cohen and Wills' (1985) Social Support Theory.

By the conclusion of the program, most students had developed not only improved self-expression but also stronger interpersonal communication skills, highlighting the comprehensive psychological benefits of visual art therapy in a school-based context.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of visual art therapy in supporting the emotional and social development of Chinese elementary school students. By examining the acceptance and use of visual symbols, their influence on emotional regulation, and their role in fostering

resilience and social engagement, this study contributes meaningful insight into the intersection of art, symbolism, and childhood emotional growth.

First, the progression from literal to symbolic artistic expression among participants demonstrates how visual symbols serve as cognitive and emotional tools for young children. This aligns with Piaget's (1977) cognitive development theory, which emphasizes the importance of symbolic function during the transition from preoperational to concrete-operational stages. Through repeated exposure and guided facilitation, students learned to use art not merely as decoration but as a narrative language of emotional meaning. Their increasing comfort with abstraction suggests a deepening emotional intelligence and psychological maturity.

Second, the use of symbols was shown to enhance students' ability to recognize, express, and regulate complex emotions. As observed in the post-intervention phase, students developed personalized strategies for emotional articulation—some used recurring motifs to explore difficult feelings, while others turned to color and spatial arrangements as tools for self-regulation. These developments reflect Gross's (1998) emotion regulation model, confirming that structured symbolic expression can lead to healthier coping mechanisms and increased emotional resilience in children.

Third, visual art therapy also proved to be a socially integrative experience. Students began the program with varying degrees of social withdrawal and communication hesitation. By the end of the intervention, they had established peer relationships built on mutual creative exchange and empathy. This evolution supports Bandura's (1986) view of social modeling, as well as Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on guided interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development. When supported by both teachers and peers, students not only internalized emotional vocabulary but also practiced emotional communication in socially meaningful ways.

These outcomes carry important implications for China's educational and mental health systems. Traditionally, emotional education in Chinese schools has been undervalued in favor of academic performance (Chen, 2019). However, this study suggests that art-based interventions can fill a critical developmental gap. By offering a safe, non-verbal avenue for expression, visual art therapy allows children to process inner experiences, build emotional competence, and develop stronger social bonds—skills essential for long-term well-being and academic success.

In conclusion, visual art therapy—particularly through the use of visual symbols—proves to be an effective, culturally adaptable approach for enhancing emotional expression, regulation, and resilience among young children in China. The intervention fostered not only individual self-awareness but also social connection, thereby contributing to holistic psychological development. As visual art therapy becomes more recognized and institutionalized within Chinese educational settings, it holds promise as a sustainable and inclusive strategy for promoting children's mental health and emotional literacy.

Recommendation

1. Practical Recommendations

To better support children's emotional development through visual art therapy, primary schools and community-based educational institutions in China should integrate structured art therapy sessions into their extracurricular or mental health programs. Teachers, counselors, and art educators should receive training in visual symbolism and therapeutic facilitation to ensure interventions are developmentally appropriate and emotionally safe. Art therapy activities should be flexible, culturally sensitive, and tailored to the emotional maturity of different age groups, allowing children to freely explore and express their inner worlds. Furthermore, creating inclusive classroom environments that encourage

symbolic expression without fear of criticism will promote deeper emotional engagement and resilience.

2. Educational Policy Recommendations

Educational authorities at municipal and national levels should formally recognize visual art therapy as a valid and evidence-based approach for addressing children's emotional needs. Policies should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between school psychologists, visual arts educators, and curriculum developers to embed art-based emotional learning into the school system. Funding should be allocated to develop pilot programs in urban and rural schools, with particular attention to underserved populations who may lack access to psychological services. Additionally, art therapy training programs should be developed at teacher colleges and universities to cultivate a new generation of art therapists and emotionally literate educators.

3. Research Recommendations

While this case study yielded valuable insights, future research should expand to include larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies are recommended to track the long-term emotional, social, and academic benefits of art therapy. Researchers should also explore comparative studies between different age groups and cultural contexts to identify developmental patterns in symbolic expression. Moreover, future studies may incorporate biometric tools (e.g., heart rate variability, cortisol levels) alongside qualitative artwork analysis to deepen the understanding of physiological-emotional changes in response to visual art therapy. Finally, exploring the integration of digital media and technology (such as virtual art platforms or AI-assisted symbol recognition) may open new avenues for innovation in art-based therapeutic practices.

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