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Integrating visual arts and storytelling in preschool and primary education

[1]Muratbaeva Kyzburak

Osh Technological Univercity named after M.M.Adyshev,
Str. N.Isanov, 81, Osh 723503, Kyrgyzstan.
Email: mkyzburak@mail.ru

[2]Zholdosheva Cholpon

Osh Technological Univercity, Str. N.Isanov, 81, Osh 723503, Kyrgyzstan.
E-mail: cholponjoldosheva1968@gmail.com; orcid: 0009-0006-8864-0046

Abstract: This article examines how visual arts and storytelling can be integrated in preschool and primary education without reducing artistic learning to decoration or a narrow test of literacy transfer. A comparative document analysis considers five sources: UNESCO's Framework for Culture and Arts Education, NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice position statement, Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin's review of arts education research, Eisner's account of the arts and mind, and the Reggio Emilia approach as described by Edwards, Gandini, and Forman. Four dimensions were coded: child agency, artistic process, narrative/multimodal expression, and claims about transfer to other outcomes. The synthesis finds strong support for process, expression, and agency, alongside a need for caution when making causal claims about transfer. A five-stage studio-story cycle is proposed: encounter, make, narrate, revisit, and curate. The article provides an observation matrix for documenting choices and revisions without imposing a single "correct" artwork. Findings are a source-based conceptual synthesis, not classroom measurements. The model is presented for local adaptation and empirical evaluation across languages, ages, and cultural art forms.

Keywords: arts education; storytelling; early childhood; primary education; multimodal learning; curriculum integration.

Introduction

The present article addresses a question that is central to integrating visual arts and storytelling in preschool and primary education: how can educators move from broad commitments to a defensible, observable design? The problem matters because a concept can be endorsed in policy or scholarship without specifying what a teacher, learner, or analyst should do. This paper therefore brings together a bounded set of influential sources and develops a practical analytic model. Its claim is deliberately limited: it offers a transparent synthesis and a proposition for further testing, not a causal estimate or a report of participant outcomes.

The topic is especially relevant in Uzbekistan, where educational institutions work across changing linguistic, cultural, disciplinary, and technological conditions. A model imported without adaptation may overlook local curriculum, access, institutional policy, and the knowledge communities learners bring. The analysis consequently treats local context as part of the research question. It does not assume a single learner profile or present national generalizations unsupported by data.

The paper has three objectives. First, it identifies how selected sources address the dimensions most relevant to the topic. Second, it reports an explicit cross-source coding matrix so readers can inspect the basis of the synthesis. Third, it translates the pattern into a design sequence, an implementation matrix, and a set of questions for empirical follow-up. The contribution lies in connecting theory and policy to a replicable decision process.

Three research questions guide the work: (1) which dimensions receive explicit attention in the selected source set; (2) where does the comparison reveal an operational gap or tension; and (3) what design principles can address that gap while preserving the intellectual aims of the field? These questions structure the methods and results below.

Materials and methods

The corpus includes UNESCO's Framework for Culture and Arts Education (2024), NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice statement (2020), Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin's review of arts education and transfer (2013), Eisner's The Arts and the Creation of Mind (2002), and Edwards, Gandini, and Forman's account of the Reggio Emilia approach (2012 edition). These sources span policy, early-childhood guidance, research synthesis, arts education theory, and pedagogical documentation. They do not represent all cultural traditions or national curricula.

Four dimensions structured the comparison: child agency, artistic process, narrative and multimodal expression, and evidence for transfer beyond the arts. Explicit coding required direct discussion in the source; partial coding indicated a related principle without a detailed procedure. "Transfer" was coded cautiously when a source made or evaluated claims about outcomes outside artistic learning. The matrix records a single analyst's reading of five sources, not the strength or causal status of each source's evidence.

Analytic framework and procedure

The unit of analysis was a source-level statement or concept relevant to one of the four dimensions listed in Table 1. Explicit, partial, and not explicit categories were used to prevent absence of a detailed procedure from being mistaken for rejection of a principle. During synthesis, the analyst compared the coded pattern with the intended educational task, noted contradictions, and drafted a design response. Counts are descriptive bookkeeping for this selected corpus. They are not inferential statistics, prevalence estimates, or evidence of effectiveness. A replication should specify exact editions, passages, coder training, and adjudication rules.

Ethical and evidentiary boundaries

No human participants, student records, classroom observations, or unpublished institutional data were collected for this article. The worked examples and proposed tools are illustrative. Citations identify the source base; interpretations and matrices are the author's synthesis. This distinction is necessary because a useful framework can be analytically original without being mislabeled as an intervention result.

Results

Comparative document-analysis results

Table 1 presents the source-level crosswalk. "Explicit" means directly addressed in the examined source; "partial" indicates conceptual relevance without a full operational procedure; "not explicit" means that the dimension was not developed in the passages reviewed. Table values are judgments under the stated codebook, not independent ratings of source quality.

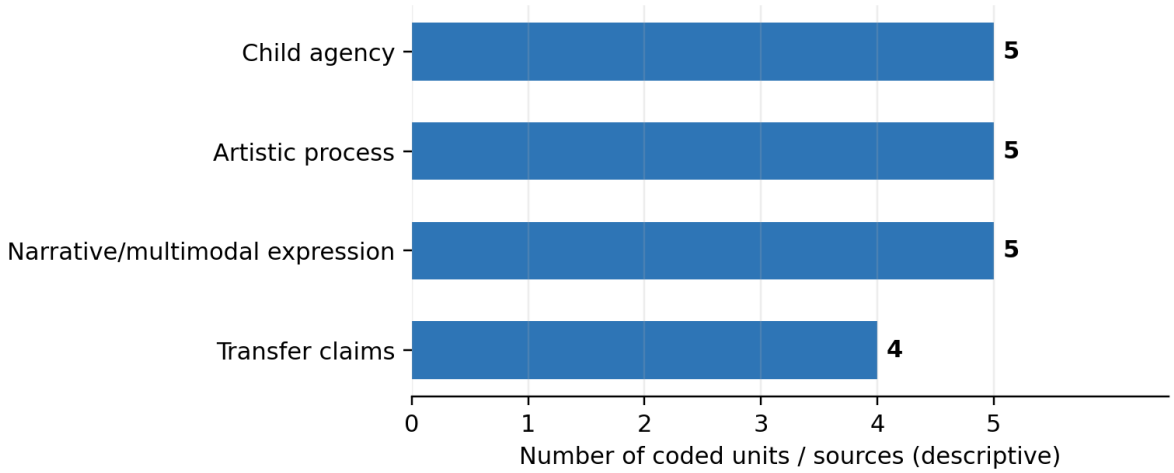
Table 1. Cross-source analytic matrix

Source	Child agency	Artistic process	Narrative/multimodal expression	Transfer claims
UNESCO arts framework (2024)	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Partial

Source	Child agency	Artistic process	Narrative/multimodal expression	Transfer claims
NAEYC DAP (2020)	Explicit	Explicit	Partial	Not explicit
Winner et al. (2013)	Partial	Explicit	Partial	Explicit
Eisner (2002)	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Partial
Reggio Emilia account (2012)	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Partial

Across-source counts are child agency: 5 of 5; artistic process: 5 of 5; narrative/multimodal expression: 5 of 5; transfer claims: 4 of 5. The pattern identifies emphasis within the selected documents; it does not measure classroom prevalence or learner benefit.

Figure 1. Descriptive source counts by analytic dimension



Note. Counts are derived from the bounded corpus and codebook described in Materials and Methods; dimensions can co-occur.

Interpretive synthesis

A drawing can function as an evolving idea, a story, a memory, or an experiment with material. When teachers ask children to explain an image, they can make visible decisions that a finished product alone conceals. Yet the process can be undermined if every artwork is judged by neatness, similarity to a model, or its usefulness for a literacy score. Integration should preserve time for exploration and attention to artistic choices while making meaningful connections to language, science, or social understanding.

The source crosswalk showed explicit or partial support for child agency in all five sources, artistic process in all five, narrative/multimodal expression in five, and explicit or partial discussion of transfer in four. This pattern does not mean arts learning cannot support other domains. It shows that claims about cross-domain benefits require separate evidence and should not substitute for arts-specific aims such as perception, composition, interpretation, and expression.

The proposed studio-story cycle begins with an encounter: children observe an object, image, sound, or local story. During making, they choose materials and test visual possibilities. In

narrating, they may dictate, speak, draw sequences, gesture, or combine modes. Revisiting invites them to explain one change and one unresolved question. Curating gives children a choice about what to display and how to contextualize it. The teacher documents process and language without taking ownership of the work.

An observation record can capture date, materials, child-initiated choice, a notable revision, the child's own explanation, and a possible next invitation. It should not diagnose ability from a single artwork. For multilingual groups, children can narrate in a preferred language, use gesture, or ask an adult to transcribe; translation should preserve the child's meaning rather than replace it with adult interpretation. Families and local artists can contribute cultural context when participation is voluntary and attribution is agreed.

Design model and practical application

Figure 2. Proposed process model



The sequence is a planning aid. Educators should adapt the steps to course aims, participant age, disciplinary norms, local resources, and applicable institutional guidance. It is not a validated instrument and should not replace professional judgment.

Table 2. Operational design and evidence to collect

Stage	Tool or evidence	Analytic purpose
Make	Materials and child-initiated choice	Process documented
Narrate	Speech, drawing, gesture, or sequence	Multiple modes recognized
Revisit	One revision and child explanation	Learning process visible
Curate	Display and attribution choice	Consent and ownership respected

Extended analytical implications

An arts-integrated lesson needs a clear artistic intention. Children might investigate line, texture, color, spatial arrangement, rhythm, or material transformation. Without that intention, visual arts can become an illustration task in which students copy a teacher's example and the subject content remains the only valued outcome. A story can provide a reason to make, but children should still encounter meaningful artistic choices. Teachers can model techniques and vocabulary while leaving more than one valid path through the materials and narrative.

Storytelling can unfold through more than speech or print. A child may sequence images, use gesture, arrange objects, dictate a caption, or combine modes. These forms can make participation possible for children who are multilingual, emergent readers, or still developing spoken language. Adults should document the child's own explanation and avoid assigning meanings to an image without checking. A drawing may be exploratory rather than a fixed symbol, and a child can revise its meaning during conversation.

The claim that arts instruction improves performance in another domain needs careful evidence. Arts participation may support engagement or offer a different route to express understanding, but positive association does not establish causal transfer. Studies differ in activity, duration, teacher expertise, and outcome measure. The article therefore recommends valuing the intrinsic learning of arts alongside any interdisciplinary connection. Programs should describe outcomes at the level actually observed rather than convert a rich creative experience into a claim of generalized cognitive benefit.

Developmentally appropriate planning depends on the age and context of learners. Preschool children often benefit from sensory exploration, short invitations, repeated materials, and adult language that follows their attention. Primary learners may be ready for more deliberate revision, peer interpretation, and comparison of artistic choices. These are not rigid age rules; language, disability access, prior experience, and cultural practice shape participation. Teachers should observe individual responses and adjust time, materials, and support accordingly.

Cultural sustainability matters when the story or art form belongs to a community tradition. Educators should identify the source of a tale, acknowledge contributors, and avoid presenting sacred or community-specific knowledge as generic classroom material. Local artists and families can help interpret context when they choose to participate, and their labor should be respected. Children can compare contemporary and traditional forms without ranking one as more authentic. Attribution and consent should be part of the learning design.

Documentation can support assessment while protecting children's ownership. A portfolio may include a dated work sample, the child's words, a photograph of a stage in the process, and a teacher note describing a question or decision. The record should be selective rather than a continuous surveillance archive. Families should understand how images will be used, especially if work is displayed publicly or stored digitally. Children should be invited to decide which work represents them and what they want others to know about it.

Teacher questions influence the quality of reflection. Open questions such as "What did you change?" or "What would you like someone to notice?" invite children to explain process. Questions that imply a correct story or adult interpretation can close down meaning. Teachers can introduce vocabulary after listening, allowing instruction and child agency to coexist. In multilingual settings, questions and responses can move across languages, with translation support that keeps the child's meaning central.

A pilot evaluation could observe a sequence of studio-story sessions and code child-initiated choices, revisions, narrative modes, and opportunities to respond to peers. Separate measures should assess artistic process, language participation, and any targeted curriculum connection. Researchers should include educator and family perspectives and avoid scoring aesthetic quality against a single cultural standard. Such a design can test feasibility and describe learning processes; claims about long-term transfer would require longitudinal and comparison evidence.

Discussion

The model connects arts and storytelling through process rather than through a worksheet that adds a picture to a pre-existing story. Children may create an image before words, retell a story through changing scenes, or revise a narrative after encountering material resistance. This reciprocal relation supports multiple entry points for learners. Teachers still need to teach vocabulary, composition, listening, and material techniques; agency is not the same as leaving children without instruction.

Planning should specify an arts-learning intention, a narrative or inquiry connection, open-ended materials, and at least one opportunity for revision. Assessment can value exploration, choice, and explanation while avoiding a single aesthetic norm. Documentation should include children's own words and preserve consent for public display. If a program claims that an arts

activity improves reading or mathematics, it should define the outcome and use an appropriate study design rather than relying on enthusiasm or anecdotes.

Further analytical interpretation

Arts integration needs a clear artistic intention. Children may investigate line, texture, rhythm, space, or material transformation. Without such intention, art becomes decoration and subject content remains the only valued outcome. A story can give a reason to create, but learners should still encounter meaningful artistic choices. Teachers can model techniques and vocabulary while leaving more than one valid path through the materials and narrative.

Storytelling can unfold through speech, sequence, gesture, objects, or image. These modes can support multilingual learners and children who are emergent readers or developing spoken language. Adults should document the child's own explanation and avoid assigning a meaning without checking. A drawing may be exploratory rather than a fixed symbol; the child can revise its meaning during conversation.

Claims that arts instruction improves performance elsewhere require appropriate evidence. Arts participation may support engagement or offer another route to express understanding, but positive association does not establish causal transfer. Programs should value arts-specific outcomes such as perception, composition, interpretation, and expression alongside any interdisciplinary goal. Transfer claims need defined outcomes and a study design capable of testing them.

Planning should account for age, language, disability, prior experience, and cultural practice rather than apply rigid developmental expectations. Preschool children may benefit from sensory exploration and repeated materials; primary learners may be ready for deliberate revision and peer interpretation. These are possibilities, not rules. Teachers observe each learner and adjust time, material, and support.

Cultural sustainability matters when stories or art forms belong to a community tradition. Educators should identify sources, acknowledge contributors, and avoid treating sacred or community-specific knowledge as generic classroom material. Families and local artists can contribute context when participation is voluntary and attribution is agreed. Children can compare forms without ranking one as more authentic.

Documentation should record process while respecting ownership. A portfolio can include a dated sample, the child's words, a process image, and a teacher note. Families should understand public display and storage practices; children should be invited to choose what represents them. A future pilot can observe child-initiated choices and revisions while separately measuring artistic, language, and curriculum outcomes.

Table 3. Evidence trace supporting the coding decisions

Source or scene	Evidence anchor	Reason for interpretation	Analytic use
UNESCO arts framework	Arts and culture education	Supports participation and process	Policy
NAEYC DAP	Developmentally appropriate practice	Supports child agency	Development
Winner et al.	Evidence on arts transfer	Supports cautious transfer claims	Evidence boundary
Eisner	Arts as forms of knowing	Supports arts-specific aims	Artistic process
Reggio Emilia account	Multiple modes and documentation	Supports narrative and agency	Multimodal

Reproducibility and operational codebook

A replication should define the educational setting and the unit of analysis before reviewing materials. In this article, sources are coded for explicit or partial support, while art-specific and cross-domain claims remain separate. A single policy statement cannot establish classroom quality, and a research review cannot describe every local tradition. Analysts should retain evidence notes and state whether a source addresses preschool, primary education, or broader arts learning.

A classroom pilot should document the artistic intention, materials, adult prompts, child-initiated choices, revisions, narrative modes, and display decisions. Separate measures should assess arts-specific learning and any claimed literacy or science transfer. Child and family consent is necessary for public images and stored work. Researchers should not equate a polished final product with learning or use one cultural aesthetic as a universal standard.

The table below defines the four comparison dimensions and boundary cases. A source may address several dimensions, and a partial code does not indicate rejection. Counts describe selected source coverage only. They should not be treated as causal evidence that a particular arts integration method improves academic achievement.

Table 4. Operational definitions and boundary cases

Dimension	Operational rule	Boundary / exclusion
Child agency	Source gives children meaningful choice or authorship.	Choice among identical templates is partial.
Artistic process	Source values making, exploration, or revision.	Finished product only is partial.
Multimodal narrative	Source supports story or meaning across modes.	Illustration used only as decoration is partial.
Transfer claims	Source addresses evidence for outcomes beyond arts learning.	Aspirational benefit without evidence is partial.

Implementation and evaluation considerations

The studio-story sequence also offers a way to plan progression across several sessions. In an initial session, children may explore materials and name properties. Later, they can use selected materials to represent a character, event, or scientific process. A third session can invite revision after peer questions or a new source. This temporal structure helps teachers observe development in decision-making rather than judge a single finished artifact. The child should retain the right to reject a suggested revision or explain a different intention.

Educator prompts can be planned as a progression from noticing to interpretation: What do you see? What did you choose? What changed? What might another viewer notice? These questions support observation and narrative without imposing a single meaning. Teachers can add discipline vocabulary after listening to the child's explanation. In a multilingual setting, the child may answer in a preferred language or through drawing and gesture, with adult documentation that distinguishes the child's words from the teacher's inference.

Program evaluation should include the conditions that make arts integration possible. Relevant information includes access to an art space, material variety, preparation time, educator confidence, class size, and opportunities for children to revisit work. A weak outcome may reflect inadequate time or resources rather than a flaw in the learning model. Recording these conditions gives administrators useful evidence about implementation while keeping claims about child outcomes appropriately cautious.

Limitations and future research

This is a conceptual comparison of five sources and does not measure child development, classroom participation, or transfer effects. The sources vary in age, method, and cultural setting. The studio-story cycle requires adaptation for disability access, available materials, staffing, and language policy. Future work should pilot it with educators and families, document children's

process over time, and compare arts-specific outcomes separately from literacy or wellbeing outcomes.

Conclusion

Visual arts and storytelling can be integrated through a cycle that preserves artistic process, child choice, narration, revision, and careful documentation. The analysis supports strong arts-specific aims while urging caution about unsupported transfer claims. The observation matrix and studio-story cycle provide practical structures for local experimentation. Their feasibility and outcomes should be evaluated with culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate research.

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