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Developing Early Childhood Creativity Through Arts Education: A Literature Review on Visual Arts, Music, Movement, and Drama

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is a fundamental developmental capacity in early childhood because it supports flexible thinking, imagination, self-expression, problem solving, and the ability to generate original ideas. Arts learning provides a particularly relevant context for fostering these capacities through multimodal experiences involving images, sounds, movement, and symbolic play. This study aimed to synthesize conceptual and empirical evidence on the development of early childhood creativity through four major domains of arts learning: visual arts, music, movement/dance, and drama. A systematic integrative literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and 2026 and identified through Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA. Following screening and eligibility procedures guided by PRISMA 2020 principles, 15 articles were included in the final analysis. The studies consisted of visual arts (n = 4; 26.7%), music (n = 3; 20.0%), movement/dance (n = 4; 26.7%), and drama/pretend play (n = 4; 26.7%). The findings showed that visual arts supported material exploration and symbolic representation; music strengthened improvisation and creative musical agency; movement and dance enhanced embodied expression, flexibility, and movement originality; while drama and pretend play promoted imagination, narrative construction, perspective-taking, and symbolic transformation. Across all domains, child autonomy, experimentation, improvisation, social interaction, and responsive teacher scaffolding emerged as recurring mechanisms supporting creativity. The review concludes that arts education is most effective when implemented as a process-oriented, child-centered, and multimodal learning experience rather than as reproduction-oriented instruction.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Creativity; Arts Learning; Visual Arts; Creative Movement; Drama.

INTRODUCTION

Creativity is increasingly recognized as a fundamental developmental capacity in early childhood because it enables children to generate ideas, explore alternatives, express personal meanings, and respond flexibly to unfamiliar situations. Rather than being understood merely as an innate talent, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes creativity as a dynamic competence that develops through interactions among the child, learning activities, teachers, peers, materials, and the wider sociocultural environment. A recent systematic review of 74 empirical studies conducted between 2015 and 2025 confirms that early childhood creativity is ecologically shaped by play, arts, technology, teacher–child interaction, family involvement, and cultural values (Xu et al., 2025). This ecological perspective is consistent with creative pedagogy research showing that creativity develops more effectively when children are given agency, exploratory opportunities, collaborative experiences, and sufficient freedom to construct meanings rather than merely reproduce predetermined answers (Cremin & Chappell, 2021).

Despite its developmental significance, creativity in early childhood education is not always adequately facilitated. Teachers may positively value creativity while simultaneously adopting structured activities that

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emphasize conformity, predetermined products, or imitation. Mullet et al. (2016) demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of creativity substantially influence how creative opportunities are constructed, while Tok and Sevinç (2017) similarly emphasized that educators' personal confidence in creative practice affects their capacity to foster children's creativity. In arts learning, this problem is especially important because an activity labeled "art" does not automatically constitute creative learning. For example, visual-art activities may become product-oriented exercises in which children copy teachers' models instead of experimenting with colors, forms, textures, and meanings. Indonesian studies likewise indicate that limited variation in materials and teacher-directed artistic production may restrict children's opportunities for independent exploration (Winnuly & Pamungkas, 2022; Pebrianty & Pamungkas, 2023; Aisyiah & Pamungkas, 2023).

Current research increasingly positions arts learning as a multimodal environment through which young children can construct and communicate creative ideas. In visual arts, drawing, painting, construction, and material exploration provide children with opportunities to transform imagination into symbolic representations. Cutcher and Boyd (2016) conceptualized preschool settings as communities of creative practice in which children operate as active artists, while art-based interventions have demonstrated potential for simultaneously supporting creative thinking and oral expression. More recent inquiry-based research further suggests that visual arts function not merely as decorative activities but as epistemic tools through which children formulate, revisit, and communicate emerging theories about their experiences (Probine et al., 2026). Indonesian evidence similarly identifies drawing, recycled materials, and natural-material exploration as productive media for stimulating originality, imagination, and active participation (Risdianty & Pamungkas, 2022; Winnuly & Pamungkas, 2022; Andriani & Rakimahwati, 2023).

Music offers another important pathway for creativity because young children can manipulate sound, rhythm, melody, movement, and silence without being constrained by conventional verbal expression. Barrett et al. (2019) showed that practitioners' beliefs regarding music influence the quality of musical experiences available in early childhood settings, while Barrett et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of embedding meaningful music-making throughout the preschool day. Experimental and observational perspectives have moved beyond reproductive singing toward improvisation and sound exploration. Peñalba et al. (2021), for example, demonstrated how sensorimotor musical environments facilitate discovery and musical creativity among toddlers, whereas MacGlone et al. (2021) introduced the concept of creative musical agency to explain children's spontaneous and responsive actions during group improvisation. Nevertheless, recent findings suggest that early childhood teachers frequently value creative musical activities despite having limited specialized preparation in music pedagogy (Trujillo Galea & Juárez Ramos, 2024). Comparable concerns regarding the management of creative music learning have also been reported in Indonesian early childhood contexts (Hartanti & Sasongko, 2021).

Movement and dance extend creativity into the embodied domain. Creative movement allows children to transform ideas, emotions, narratives, and environmental stimuli into bodily actions. Empirically, Alper and Ulutaş (2022) found that an 11-week creative movement program produced significant improvements in both creative thinking and movement creativity among children aged five to six years. Movement-and-song learning has similarly been shown to enhance children's creative performance (Rahayu et al., 2021), while culturally oriented dance learning can simultaneously develop imagination, movement flexibility, expression, and cultural literacy (Hartono et al., 2022). However, Labib and Pamungkas (2024) observed an important theory–practice discrepancy: although early childhood dance theory emphasizes exploration, classroom implementation may remain directed toward performance outcomes and competition rather than children's creative processes.

Drama represents a complementary artistic medium because role-play, improvisation, storytelling, and symbolic transformation situate creativity within social and imaginative contexts. Creative drama enables children to explore alternative identities, perspectives, situations, and possible solutions. Erdem et al. (2017) found that early childhood educators perceived drama as supporting holistic development, whereas Mages (2018), in a study involving 155 preschool children, demonstrated that theatre-in-education provided highly engaging learning experiences and supported developmental outcomes comparable to conventional preschool programming. Ho (2020) further showed that drama improvisation creates aesthetic spaces in which children can exercise intuitive creativity and negotiate adult–child power relations. This interpretation corresponds with Chylińska and Gut's (2020) theoretical argument that pretend play constitutes creative

action because children do not simply generate divergent ideas; they actively explore, evaluate, negotiate, and transform emerging possibilities. Experimental evidence from Indonesia also indicates that pretend play can significantly improve early childhood creativity (Murdianti & Kaloeti, 2019).

Although these studies provide substantial evidence for arts-based creativity, the literature remains fragmented by artistic domain. Visual-art research primarily discusses materials, drawing, and representation; music studies concentrate on sound exploration and improvisation; movement studies focus on bodily creativity; and drama research emphasizes imagination, role-play, and narrative processes. Consequently, the field lacks an integrative synthesis explaining what these four art forms collectively reveal about the mechanisms of creativity development in early childhood. Existing reviews often examine creativity broadly, a particular art form, or specific developmental outcomes rather than systematically comparing visual arts, music, movement, and drama within one analytical framework. Recent ecological reviews also identify continuing limitations concerning interactions among developmental contexts, cultural transferability, and the integration of different creativity-supporting environments (Xu et al., 2025). A second gap concerns the conceptualization of creativity itself. Many studies operationalize creativity through isolated indicators such as fluency, originality, imagination, artistic products, or motor creativity. Yet arts-based creativity is inherently multimodal, involving cognitive, affective, sensory, bodily, social, symbolic, and cultural processes. Treating individual artistic activities separately may therefore obscure the common pedagogical mechanisms through which artistic experiences generate creative development.

Accordingly, this literature review aims to critically synthesize recent theoretical and empirical evidence concerning the development of early childhood creativity through four major domains of arts learning: visual arts, music, movement/dance, and drama. Specifically, the review examines the forms of creativity stimulated by each art domain, identifies pedagogical conditions that facilitate or inhibit creative expression, compares their developmental contributions, and constructs an integrative understanding of arts-based creativity in early childhood education. The novelty of this review lies in its cross-art, multimodal perspective. Rather than treating artistic disciplines as separate instructional subjects, the study conceptualizes visual representation, musical improvisation, embodied movement, and dramatic imagination as interconnected pathways of creative meaning-making. This perspective shifts the discussion from merely asking whether arts activities improve creativity toward explaining how different artistic modalities activate complementary creative processes and under what pedagogical conditions these processes can be optimized.

Taken together, contemporary evidence suggests that creativity in early childhood is most effectively cultivated when arts education prioritizes exploration over imitation, process over standardized products, child agency over excessive adult direction, and multimodal expression over narrowly prescribed activities. Visual arts allow children to think through materials and representations; music develops exploratory and improvisational agency; movement translates imagination into embodied expression; and drama expands symbolic, narrative, and interpersonal possibilities. An integrated review of these domains is therefore necessary to provide a stronger conceptual and empirical foundation for designing arts-based pedagogies that position young children not merely as recipients of artistic instruction, but as active creators of ideas, meanings, movements, sounds, images, and imagined worlds.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic integrative literature review to examine how arts-based learning contributes to the development of creativity in early childhood, with particular attention to four artistic domains: visual arts, music, movement/dance, and drama. An integrative review was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to combine theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence derived from different methodological traditions while producing a new conceptual understanding of a research field (Torraco, 2016; Snyder, 2019). Unlike a conventional narrative review, which may depend substantially on author-selected literature, the present study applied explicit procedures for searching, screening, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing studies. Such procedural transparency is essential for strengthening the rigor, traceability, and reproducibility of literature-based research (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The reporting process was also informed by the principles of PRISMA 2020, particularly with regard to identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of relevant publications (Page et al., 2021).

The literature search focused on peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA. Multiple databases were used to reduce database-specific publication bias and obtain evidence representing both international and Indonesian early childhood education contexts. A structured literature search, according to Booth et al. (2016), should combine clearly defined concepts, alternative keywords, and predetermined eligibility criteria. Accordingly, combinations of the following English and Indonesian keywords were employed: “early childhood creativity,” “creativity in early childhood education,” “arts learning,” “visual arts,” “drawing,” “music education,” “creative music,” “creative movement,” “dance,” “drama,” “pretend play,” “seni rupa,” “musik anak usia dini,” “gerak dan tari,” “drama anak,” and “kreativitas anak usia dini.” Boolean operators AND and OR were applied to refine combinations of population, intervention, and outcome terms.

Studies were considered eligible when they met five principal criteria: (1) published between 2016 and 2026; (2) published as peer-reviewed journal articles; (3) investigated children in early childhood or preschool educational contexts; (4) examined at least one of the four artistic domains visual arts, music, movement/dance, or drama in relation to creativity or closely associated creative processes; and (5) provided sufficient conceptual or empirical information for analysis. Articles were excluded when they focused exclusively on older children or adults, discussed arts without addressing creative development, were published as theses, proceedings, books, editorials, or non-peer-reviewed materials, or contained insufficient methodological and outcome information. Establishing explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria is important for minimizing arbitrary study selection and strengthening the credibility of review findings (Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Following database identification, duplicate publications were removed, after which titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. Potentially eligible studies were subsequently subjected to full-text assessment. The screening and eligibility procedures resulted in a final corpus of 15 articles, which constituted the objects of analysis in this review. Consistent with PRISMA 2020 recommendations, the selection process was organized sequentially to ensure that the rationale for inclusion and exclusion could be transparently documented (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

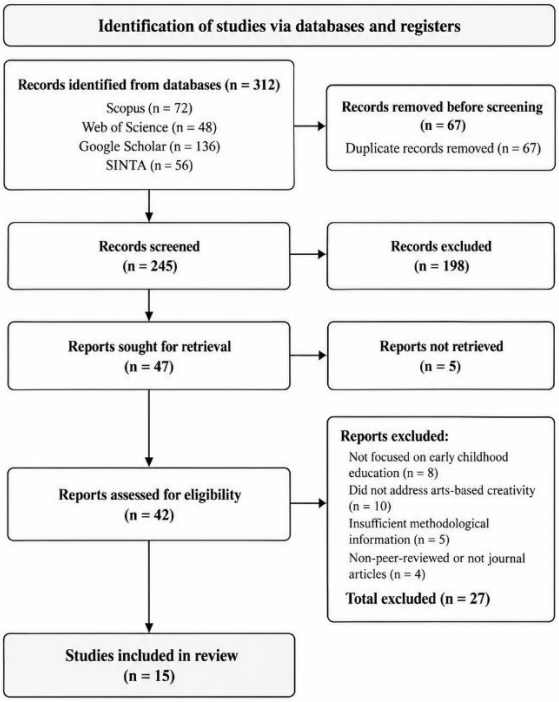


Figure 1. Prisma 2020 Flow Diagram of study selection

Data from the 15 selected articles were extracted into an analytical matrix containing author and year, country, research design, participants, artistic domain, learning intervention or activity, creativity indicators, main findings, and pedagogical implications. Methodological quality was considered through the clarity of the study objectives, appropriateness of research design, participant description, data-collection procedures,

analytical transparency, and correspondence between evidence and conclusions. Such critical appraisal is necessary because integrative reviews should not merely accumulate findings but evaluate the strength and relevance of the available evidence (Torraco, 2016; Snyder, 2019).

Finally, the data were synthesized using thematic analysis and cross-study comparison. The analysis involved familiarization with the extracted findings, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of thematic categories, and interpretation across the four artistic domains. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that thematic analysis requires coherent movement from coding to meaningful interpretive patterns rather than simple frequency counting. Accordingly, findings were organized around emerging themes such as exploration and originality, imagination and symbolic representation, creative musical agency, embodied creativity, dramatic imagination, child autonomy, teacher facilitation, and learning-environment support. Cross-domain synthesis was then conducted to determine both the distinctive contribution of each art form and their shared mechanisms in stimulating early childhood creativity. This procedure enabled the review to move beyond descriptive summary toward an integrative conceptual explanation of how arts learning can function as a multidimensional pedagogical pathway for fostering creativity during early childhood.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Characteristics of the Included Studies

The systematic selection process resulted in 15 articles that met the predetermined eligibility criteria. The studies were classified into four major domains of arts learning: visual arts, music, movement/dance, and drama/pretend play. Of the 15 studies, four articles (26.7%) addressed visual arts, three (20.0%) investigated music-based learning, four (26.7%) focused on movement or dance, and four (26.7%) examined drama, role-play, or pretend play. Although the studies differed considerably in research design, participant characteristics, learning duration, and creativity measures, a relatively consistent pattern emerged: arts experiences that provided children with opportunities for exploration, improvisation, autonomous choice, symbolic transformation, and self-expression were more closely associated with creative development than highly structured, reproduction-oriented activities.

Table 1. Characteristics and Main Findings of the 15 Articles Included in the Review

Study	Arts Domain	Design/Focus	Main Conceptual or Empirical Finding
Probine et al. (2026)	Visual arts	Collaborative, inquiry-based research	Material exploration and visual representation enabled children to develop, revise, and communicate ideas through multimodal inquiry.
Leung et al. (2025)	Visual arts	Survey of early childhood teachers	Teachers rated fostering creativity as a major purpose of visual arts education (M = 3.64, SD = 0.69), exceeding knowledge-oriented purposes (M = 2.83, SD = 0.56).
Goodman et al. (2022)	Visual arts	Play-based intervention/drawing analysis	Children's formal drawing characteristics changed over six months, illustrating developmental change in artistic representation.
Mendoza Straffon et al. (2024)	Visual arts	Parent–child study; n = 68 dyads	General parental support did not significantly predict drawing skill, but scaffolding was positively associated with children's drawing development.
MacGlone et al. (2021)	Music	Mixed-methods action research	Group improvisation revealed *Creative Musical Agency*, expressed through spontaneous musical initiation, response, experimentation, and interaction.
Barrett et al. (2019)	Music	Practitioner survey	Educators regarded music as developmentally valuable, but differences in beliefs and confidence influenced the musical opportunities provided to young children.
Acker and Nyland (2024)	Music	Project-based early childhood music study	Children functioned as creative musical collaborators rather than passive performers when music-making allowed co-construction and experimentation.

Alper and Ulutaş (2022)	Movement/ dance	Experimental creative-movement program; n = 40	The creative movement intervention improved both children's creative thinking and creativity expressed through movement.
Zahrani et al. (2026)	Movement/ dance	Qualitative study	Dance activities facilitated movement improvisation, personal expression, confidence, cooperation, empathy, and self-control.
Khuluqi et al. (2026)	Movement/ dance	Literature-based synthesis	Movement exploration in dance was identified as a mechanism for flexibility, generation of new movement ideas, imagination, and self-expression.
Creative Dance Curriculum study (2026)	Movement/ dance	Practice-based empirical study	Creative dance enhanced dance creativity and epistemic curiosity, with perceived teacher autonomy support functioning as an important mechanism.
Grau et al. (2026)	Drama/ pretend play	Longitudinal study; n = 230	Creativity increased from M = 2.23 (SD = 1.18) to M = 3.43 (SD = 1.51); quality of fantasy play was positively associated with later creativity.
Brown (2017)	Drama	Process-drama analysis	Drama provided opportunities for dialogue, imaginative transformation, collaboration, and creative problem-solving.
Bal (2026)	Creative drama	Mixed-methods intervention; 17 experimental and 21 control children	Sixteen drama sessions over eight weeks improved humor skills and social interaction, with gains largely maintained at follow-up.
Vasilopoulos et al. (2026)	Pretend play/drama	Mixed-methods early childhood study	Educators described pretend play as dependent on imaginative engagement, child agency, supportive environments, and appropriate adult participation.

The characteristics presented in Table 1 demonstrate that creativity was not restricted to the production of an artistic object. Rather, it was expressed through multiple modalities, including generating visual forms, experimenting with musical sound, constructing novel movement sequences, transforming objects and roles symbolically, producing narratives, and negotiating ideas with peers.

Results for Visual Arts Learning

The synthesis of the four visual-arts studies revealed that material exploration, representational freedom, and pedagogical scaffolding constituted the dominant mechanisms supporting creative development. Visual arts allowed young children to externalize ideas that might not yet be easily communicated through conventional language. Drawing, painting, construction, and experimentation with materials therefore functioned not simply as products of creativity but as processes through which children developed and reorganized their thinking. The empirical results reported by Leung et al. (2025) are particularly informative. Early childhood teachers rated the development of children's creativity as a stronger purpose of visual arts education (M = 3.64, SD = 0.69) than transmitting knowledge (M = 2.83, SD = 0.56), demonstrating substantial recognition of the creative function of art learning. However, the literature also indicated that positive beliefs alone were insufficient. Children's opportunities to generate original visual representations were shaped by the extent to which educators permitted experimentation rather than requiring predetermined products. Mendoza Straffon et al. (2024), involving 68 parent–child dyads aged 3.0–6.9 years, further showed that generic adult support did not automatically predict children's drawing ability. Instead, scaffolding emerged as a meaningful supportive component. This distinction suggests that creativity is not maximized either by unrestricted freedom or by intensive adult direction; rather, effective support provides resources and prompts while maintaining children's ownership of the creative process. Probine et al. (2026) similarly demonstrated that visual materials could operate as tools for children's theorizing, reflection, and meaning-making.

Results for Music-Based Learning

The music studies showed that creativity emerged most clearly when children were permitted to improvise, initiate musical actions, modify sound patterns, and interact responsively with others. MacGlone et al. (2021) conceptualized these behaviors as *Creative Musical Agency* (CMA). Their multimodal analysis of children's group improvisation showed that musical creativity involved more than producing technically

accurate sounds; it involved choosing, initiating, transforming, and responding to musical possibilities. The study therefore shifts the conceptual focus from musical reproduction toward musical authorship. Children demonstrated creativity by initiating unexpected sounds, responding creatively to the contributions of peers, and using gesture, gaze, rhythm, and sound within a shared musical interaction. The coding process in the study produced fair inter-rater agreement for Creative Musical Agency (κ = .21) and moderate agreement for Socio-Musical Aptitude (κ = .50), illustrating both the complexity and the observable nature of children's spontaneous musical creativity.

Barrett et al. (2019) further demonstrated that educators' beliefs about music influenced the quality and variety of musical experiences available within early childhood settings. Similarly, Acker and Nyland (2024) positioned children as creative collaborators, indicating that project-based music experiences can facilitate children's participation in the construction of musical meaning. Across the music studies, therefore, improvisation, collaborative creation, and responsiveness emerged more consistently than teacher-led reproduction as conditions conducive to creative development.

Results for Creative Movement and Dance

Movement and dance provided the clearest embodiment of creativity through movement fluency, bodily experimentation, improvisation, flexibility, and transformation of ideas into physical expression. Among the reviewed studies, the work of Alper and Ulutaş (2022) provided particularly direct empirical evidence. Their study involved 40 preschool children aged 5–6 years and evaluated an organized Creative Movement Program. Children participating in creative-movement activities demonstrated positive development in both creative thinking and movement creativity, indicating that the benefits of creative movement extended beyond motor performance alone.

Recent creative-dance research similarly suggests that dance activities can increase both creativity performance and children's motivation to explore. A 2026 practice-based investigation of a Creative Dance Curriculum found that improvements in dance creativity occurred alongside increased epistemic curiosity, while children's perceptions of teacher autonomy support represented an important explanatory mechanism. This finding indicates that instructional style matters: movement becomes creatively productive when children are permitted to investigate multiple movement solutions rather than reproduce a teacher's choreography.

Qualitative evidence from Zahrani et al. (2026) likewise showed that young children expressed diverse and personally generated dance movements through improvisation. The creative process was accompanied by increased confidence and positive social-emotional behaviors. Across the movement literature, therefore, the essential variable was not dance participation by itself, but the degree of movement exploration and autonomy embedded in the activity.

Results for Drama and Pretend Play

Drama and pretend play demonstrated particularly strong links with imagination, symbolic transformation, narrative construction, perspective-taking, flexible thinking, and collaborative meaning-making. In contrast with visual arts, where creativity often became visible through physical products, dramatic creativity was primarily observed through children's ability to transform roles, objects, situations, narratives, and interpersonal relationships.

The longitudinal findings of Grau et al. (2026) provide notable empirical evidence. In a sample of 230 children, mean synthetic creativity scores increased from 2.23 (SD = 1.18) during the first measurement wave to 3.43 (SD = 1.51) at Wave 5. Three developmental creativity trajectories were identified: Accelerated Growth (22.3%), Gradual Growth (72.6%), and Early Peak and Recovery (5.1%). Importantly, the quality of fantasy within pretend play was positively associated with subsequent creativity (r_s = .43 at Wave 4). Children in the Accelerated Growth trajectory also demonstrated superior flexibility and originality on selected divergent-thinking measures compared with children displaying gradual creativity growth.

Creative drama produced benefits beyond conventional creativity measures. Bal (2026), using an experimental group of 17 preschool children and a control group of 21, implemented 16 creative drama sessions across eight weeks. The experimental group demonstrated greater gains in humor skills and social interaction, and much of the improvement was maintained during follow-up. These outcomes are theoretically relevant because humor generation, role transformation, and dramatic improvisation require incongruity detection, flexible association, imagination, and alternative perspective construction processes closely connected with creative cognition.

Cross-Domain Synthesis

Despite differences among the four art forms, the findings revealed substantial convergence in the processes through which arts learning supported creativity.

Table 2. Cross-Domain Synthesis of Creativity Development Through Arts Learning

Creative Process	Visual Arts	Music	Movement/Dance	Drama
Exploration and experimentation	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Imagination	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Originality/idea generation	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Flexibility	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Symbolic representation	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Improvisation	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Child agency/autonomy	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Social collaboration	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Emotional/self-expression	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Teacher scaffolding	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓

Note. ✓✓✓ = strongly represented across the reviewed evidence; ✓✓ = moderately represented; ✓ = present but less dominant. The symbols represent qualitative cross-study synthesis rather than statistical effect sizes.

Table 2 reveals that originality, imagination, agency, experimentation, and self-expression appeared across almost all artistic modalities. However, each domain provided a distinctive route to creativity. Visual arts primarily enabled material and representational creativity; music supported auditory, temporal, and improvisational creativity; movement/dance facilitated embodied and kinesthetic creativity; and drama activated symbolic, narrative, and interpersonal creativity.

An especially important result concerned child agency. Across the four domains, studies consistently showed that creative development was stronger when children were able to make choices, test ideas, improvise, transform materials, or negotiate meanings. By contrast, artistic activities organized primarily around imitation or the reproduction of a teacher-defined product offered fewer opportunities for divergent expression. This result suggests that the effectiveness of arts education depends less on the presence of an art activity itself and more on the pedagogical architecture of the activity.

Table 3. Distribution of the 15 Reviewed Articles by Arts Domain

Arts Domain	Number of Studies	Percentage
Visual Arts	4	26.7%
Music	3	20.0%
Movement/Dance	4	26.7%
Drama/Pretend Play	4	26.7%
Total	**15**	**100.0%**

As shown in Table 3, evidence was relatively evenly distributed among visual arts, movement/dance, and drama, each accounting for 26.7% of the corpus, whereas music accounted for 20.0%. This distribution should not be interpreted as indicating the relative effectiveness of each art form because the review was qualitative and integrative rather than meta-analytic.

Integrated Conceptual Finding

The most important finding generated from the cross-study analysis was that early childhood creativity through arts learning can be understood through an integrated developmental sequence:

Artistic stimulus → exploration → child choice and experimentation → imagination and symbolic transformation → production of multiple possibilities → expression/improvisation → reflection and social interaction → creative development.

This framework demonstrates that artistic learning does not develop creativity automatically. The critical mechanism is the creative process embedded within arts participation. When arts learning provides open-ended materials, flexible tasks, opportunities for improvisation, responsive teacher scaffolding, peer interaction, and autonomy, children can generate rather than merely reproduce ideas.

Accordingly, the combined evidence supports a multimodal model of early childhood creativity. Creativity should not be regarded solely as cognitive divergent thinking or measured exclusively by the number of ideas generated. The reviewed studies indicate that children's creativity is simultaneously visual-material, auditory-musical, bodily-kinesthetic, symbolic-narrative, emotional, and social. Such a finding explains why arts education represents a particularly appropriate pedagogical context for creativity development during early childhood.

Overall, the 15-study synthesis provides convergent conceptual and empirical evidence that visual arts, music, movement, and drama constitute complementary rather than competing pathways for creativity development. Visual arts facilitate thinking through images and materials; music facilitates improvisational and relational creativity; movement enables embodied exploration; and drama expands imaginative and symbolic possibilities. Across all four domains, exploration, autonomy, imagination, improvisation, and supportive adult scaffolding emerged as the central conditions connecting arts learning with creative development.

Discussion

The findings of this literature review demonstrate that arts learning provides a multidimensional pedagogical pathway for developing creativity in early childhood. Across the 15 reviewed studies, visual arts, music, movement/dance, and drama consistently offered children opportunities to explore, generate alternatives, transform ideas, improvise, and communicate personal meanings. This finding reinforces the contemporary view that creativity is not simply an innate individual ability but develops through interactions among personal agency, social relationships, materials, cultural resources, and pedagogical environments (Mullet et al., 2016; Cremin & Chappell, 2021). Thus, the contribution of arts education lies not merely in exposing children to artistic activities, but in creating conditions in which children can become active producers of ideas.

The visual-arts findings particularly highlight the importance of material exploration and representational freedom. Drawing, painting, construction, collage, and open-ended materials enable children to convert abstract ideas into observable forms and subsequently modify those ideas through interaction with materials. Probine et al. (2026) describe visual materials as resources for inquiry and theorizing rather than merely tools for producing aesthetically pleasing products. Similarly, Leung et al. (2025) reported that early childhood educators regarded the development of creativity as a stronger objective of visual arts education than knowledge transmission. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing exploration of natural, recycled, and flexible materials as productive contexts for originality and imagination (Winnuly & Pamungkas, 2022; Risdianty & Pamungkas, 2022; Aisyiah & Pamungkas, 2023; Andriani & Rakimahwati, 2023). Importantly, Mendoza Straffon et al. (2024) further demonstrated that adult scaffolding, rather than generic adult involvement, was positively associated with children's drawing development. This suggests that effective visual-art pedagogy requires a balance between guidance and autonomy.

Music produced a comparable pattern, although creativity was manifested primarily through auditory experimentation, improvisation, and interpersonal responsiveness. MacGlone et al. (2021) conceptualized this process as Creative Musical Agency, in which children demonstrate creativity by initiating, modifying, and responding to musical ideas. This interpretation is supported by Ramón and Chacón-López (2021), who found that musical improvisation can promote children's creative thinking. Barrett et al. (2019) similarly showed that early childhood educators strongly value music as a creative and expressive resource, although many practitioners lack formal musical preparation. Related research indicates that exploratory music-making, sensorimotor engagement, and group improvisation provide children with opportunities to develop musical ideas beyond imitation (Peñalba et al., 2021; Acker & Nyland, 2024; Trujillo Galea & Juárez Ramos, 2024). Consequently, music appears most conducive to creativity when the teacher moves beyond rehearsing predetermined songs and allows children to manipulate rhythm, sound, tempo, gesture, and silence.

Movement and dance extend this creative process into an embodied and kinesthetic dimension. The empirical evidence reviewed in this study showed that creative movement can simultaneously support divergent thinking and movement creativity. Alper and Ulutaş (2022), for example, found that a structured creative-movement program improved both creative thinking and creative movement among preschool children. Related studies demonstrate that movement exploration encourages children to produce alternative bodily responses rather than reproduce standardized choreography (Rahayu et al., 2021; Hartono et al., 2022; Zahrani et al., 2026). This distinction is pedagogically important. Labib and Pamungkas (2024) observed that

dance instruction may theoretically emphasize creativity but become performance-oriented in classroom practice. When children are required primarily to reproduce adult-designed movements, an activity remains artistic but may offer relatively limited opportunities for creative decision-making. Conversely, when children are invited to interpret music, stories, emotions, objects, or natural phenomena through movement, dance becomes a form of embodied problem solving.

The strongest symbolic dimension was evident in drama and pretend play. Pretend play enables children to transform an object into something else, inhabit alternative roles, construct hypothetical situations, and negotiate narratives with peers. Chylińska and Gut (2020) argue that pretense is inherently creative because children both explore and evaluate alternative possibilities. This theoretical proposition is supported by Murdianti and Kaloeti (2019), whose quasi-experimental study involving 34 children found significant changes in creativity following pretend-play activities, including significant experimental–control differences at posttest and follow-up. Mages (2018) similarly demonstrated the developmental potential of theatre-based experiences, while Ho (2020) emphasizes improvisational drama as a space for intuitive creativity. More recent findings from Grau et al. (2026), Brown (2017), Bal (2026), and Vasilopoulos et al. (2026) further indicate that fantasy, dramatic improvisation, narrative transformation, and role negotiation provide important conditions for developing flexible and original thought.

A particularly important cross-domain finding is therefore that art form alone does not determine creative outcomes. The decisive factor appears to be the pedagogical structure surrounding the artistic experience. Across visual arts, music, dance, and drama, creativity was most apparent where activities incorporated openness, experimentation, choice, uncertainty, collaboration, and opportunities to transform existing ideas. This interpretation aligns with creative-pedagogy research identifying learner agency, possibility thinking, dialogue, playfulness, risk taking, and teacher facilitation as central conditions for creativity (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). Teachers' own beliefs are also influential, because perceptions of creativity determine whether they tolerate multiple solutions or prioritize uniform outcomes (Mullet et al., 2016; Tok & Sevinç, 2017). In early childhood contexts, Kaynak-Ekici et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate how intentionally designed learning invitations can create environments in which children investigate materials and possibilities rather than merely execute instructions.

These findings support a shift from product-oriented arts instruction toward process-oriented creative pedagogy. In a product-oriented classroom, children may be expected to produce identical drawings, sing exactly as modeled, reproduce fixed dance sequences, or follow predetermined dramatic scripts. Such practices can develop technique but provide fewer opportunities for originality. Process-oriented learning, by contrast, values experimentation and multiple legitimate outcomes. Hartanti and Sasongko (2021), Rahayu et al. (2021), and Hartono et al. (2022) similarly indicate within Indonesian educational contexts that creative arts experiences become more developmentally meaningful when children participate actively in generating rather than simply reproducing artistic responses. Conceptually, the findings also broaden the definition of early childhood creativity. Creativity should not be confined to cognitive divergent-thinking scores. The reviewed evidence indicates that creativity in young children is multimodal: visual-material in art, auditory-temporal in music, bodily-kinesthetic in dance, and symbolic-narrative in drama. These modes intersect with emotional expression, social negotiation, curiosity, communication, and problem solving. This explains why no single artistic modality should be considered inherently superior. Rather, each offers a distinctive representational system through which children can explore and communicate possibilities.

Accordingly, the principal contribution of this review is an integrative model in which exploration, agency, imagination, improvisation, social interaction, and responsive scaffolding operate as shared mechanisms linking arts learning with creativity development. Visual arts provide a medium for thinking through materials; music facilitates thinking through sound; dance enables thinking through the body; and drama promotes thinking through symbols, roles, and possible worlds. Taken together, these findings suggest that early childhood arts curricula should integrate multiple artistic modalities rather than treat them as isolated enrichment activities. Such integration can create a richer ecology of creativity in which children are positioned not as passive recipients of adult-designed artistic knowledge but as active authors of images, sounds, movements, narratives, and meanings.

CONCLUSION

This literature review confirms that arts-based learning represents an important pedagogical pathway for developing creativity in early childhood. Based on the synthesis of 15 peer-reviewed articles, the reviewed evidence was distributed across visual arts (n = 4; 26.7%), music (n = 3; 20.0%), movement/dance (n = 4; 26.7%), and drama/pretend play (n = 4; 26.7%). Although the studies differed in design, participants, and measurement approaches, their findings consistently showed that creativity develops more effectively when children are given opportunities to explore, improvise, make choices, transform ideas, and express meanings through multiple artistic modalities.

Conceptually, each art form contributed through a distinctive creative pathway. Visual arts facilitated material exploration and symbolic representation; music promoted improvisation and creative musical agency; movement and dance strengthened embodied expression, flexibility, and movement originality; while drama and pretend play supported imagination, narrative construction, perspective-taking, and symbolic transformation. Empirically, several studies reported measurable improvements in creative thinking, movement creativity, artistic representation, fantasy play, and social interaction.

Overall, the findings indicate that arts education should be implemented as a process-oriented, child-centered, and multimodal learning experience. Effective creativity development depends not merely on participation in art activities, but on the presence of autonomy, experimentation, responsive teacher scaffolding, and meaningful social interaction.

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