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The Visual Journal as a Way to Strengthen Students' Ability to Self-Reflect

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∞ Art allows us to look within ourselves, to learn who we are and what interests us. It connects us to our thoughts, our feelings, our perceptions, and our external reality and experiences. Artistic expression enables students to think about themselves and their feelings, take the perspective of another while evaluating their artworks, set goals and organise the course of their creative work. Therefore, it is not difficult to establish a connection between artistic expression and strengthening social emotional competencies. In a study conducted in the 2023/24 school year, a case study explored whether creating a visual journal in the form of an artist's book can help students recognise their thoughts, emotions and values. In the case study, we included one class of first-year secondary school students, who participated voluntarily, as well as their teacher. We first presented the CASEL model to the students in connection with the artworks of artists whose works deal with topics related to social and emotional competencies. The mentor presented the artist's book in the form of a visual journal as a special artistic form. The students' task was to think about themselves, their wellbeing, values and actions, and to make real-time reflections on their day with the help of their own visual journal. In their spare time, the students compiled a visual journal over a few weeks, occasionally consulting with the teacher. Data were collected through an analysis of the resulting visual journals, a questionnaire for students and an interview with the teacher.

Keywords: artistic expression, secondary school, self-reflection, strengthening social emotional competencies, visual journal

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Vizualni dnevnik kot način za krepitev sposobnosti samorefleksije pri dijakih

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~ Umetnost nam omogoča, da pogledamo vase, spoznamo, kdo smo in kaj nas zanima. Povezuje nas z našimi mislimi, občutki, zaznavami ter z našo zunanjo realnostjo in izkušnjami. Umetniško izražanje omogoča dijakom, da razmišljajo o sebi in svojih občutkih, zavzamejo perspektivo drugega pri vrednotenju svojih likovnih del, si postavijo cilje in organizirajo potek svojega ustvarjalnega dela. Zato ni težko prepoznati povezave med likovnim izražanjem in krepitvijo socialno-čustvenih kompetenc. V raziskavi, izvedeni v šolskem letu 2023/24, smo s pomočjo študije primera ugotavljali, ali lahko ustvarjanje vizualnega dnevnika v obliki knjige umetnika pomaga dijakom prepoznati njihove misli, čustva in vrednote. V študijo primera smo vključili en razred dijakov 1. letnika srednje šole, ki so sodelovali prostovoljno, in njihovo učiteljico. Dijakom smo najprej predstavili model CASEL v povezavi z likovnimi deli umetnikov, ki se ukvarjajo s temami, povezanimi s socialnimi in čustvenimi kompetencami. Mentorica je kot posebno umetniško obliko predstavila knjigo umetnika v obliki vizualnega dnevnika. Naloga dijakov je bila razmišljati o sebi, svojem počutju, vrednotah in o dejanjih ter s pomočjo lastnega vizualnega dnevnika razmišljati o svojem dnevu. V prostem času so dijaki nekaj tednov sestavljali vizualni dnevnik, občasno pa so se posvetovali z učiteljem. Podatki so bili zbrani z analizo nastalih vizualnih dnevnikov, vprašalnikom za učence in z intervjujem z mentorico.

Ključne besede: likovno izražanje, srednja šola, samorefleksija, krepitev socialno-čustvenih kompetenc, vizualni dnevnik

Introduction

Art serves as a bridge that connects us not only to ourselves, but to the world around us. In the educational process, art serves various roles, including being an important opportunity for interdisciplinary education that can reduce the fragmentation of the school curriculum and transform teaching methods, thereby optimising the learning process (Birsa, 2018) while also fostering the development of creative and critical thinking (Bojc & Potočnik, 2024). Additionally, inclusive arts education promotes a sense of belonging and provides opportunities for self-expression and creative exploration, particularly for students with disabilities (Mareza et al., 2024). By engaging with art, we are able to tap into a collective consciousness that transcends time and space, drawing inspiration from the shared experiences of humanity. Through art, we gain a deeper understanding of the diverse perspectives that shape our reality, fostering empathy, compassion and a sense of interconnectedness with our fellow beings. Hence, the intrinsic link between art and social-emotional learning is inherently organic. Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.; Elias et al., 1997; Tacol et al., 2019). Drawing from the findings of Edgar and Morrison (2021), it is evident that artistic creation plays a pivotal role in fostering self-awareness among students. This process empowers them to nurture a heightened perception of autonomy and emotional adeptness. Moreover, within the artistic milieu, a culture of collaboration nurtures discussions that prioritise inclusivity and the celebration of diversity. Individuals engaged in artistic endeavours characteristically grasp the significance of delineating personal goals, engaging in self-reflection and embracing accountability, thus maintaining superior benchmarks for both their personal growth and artistic pursuits (Edgar & Morrison, 2021). As per research by Farrington et al. (2019), it is evident that arts education has shifted from being a component of a well-rounded curriculum to serving as a mechanism for improving school engagement, academic achievement and social-emotional growth. The inherent value of arts education emerges from the blending of these functions and is supported by the widely held cultural perspective that art functions as a medium for expressing both emotions and ideas. Haralovich (2023) emphasises the strong connection between the objectives of SEL and art education, underscoring the capacity of art classrooms to address SEL and art competencies in their curriculum concurrently. This dual focus enables the utilisation of aesthetic experiences to blend students' emotions

with their creative expressions, thus fostering holistic development in educational settings (Haralovich, 2023). Hetland et al. (2013) emphasise the significance of eight studio habits of mind (craftsmanship, persistence, envisioning, expression, observation, reflection, exploration and understanding the art world) as crucial cognitive processes in art creation, underscoring the importance of these habits in art education and their potential for positive outcomes through active engagement in the arts. While these habits include various important skills, they typically do not encompass socio-emotional skills like self-concept, emotion regulation and empathy (Kastner et al., 2021). Kastner et al. (2021) demonstrated in their research that effectively designed visual arts programmes have the capacity to produce positive transfer effects that reach beyond traditional arts education and into socio-emotional domains. In the study (Kastner et al., 2021), courses were built upon psychological theories and instructional psychology strategies intended to enhance socio-emotional skills. Moreover, these programmes integrated traditional art principles and studio habits of mind. By engaging students in tasks like observation, envisioning and creating expressive drawings, the courses provided a unique interdisciplinary approach that combined authentic visual arts engagement with psychological perspectives.

By connecting studio habits of mind with the development of socio-emotional skills, individuals can utilise the creation of an artist's book in the form of a visual journal as a means to enhance their personal and creative growth. A visual journal offers a unique platform for individuals to express their thoughts, emotions, experiences and observations in a vivid and personalised manner. The utilisation of visual journals in the pedagogical process is multifaceted and versatile. Visual journals play a crucial role in enhancing visual thinking (Guglietti, 2023) and visual literacy (Loerts & Belcher, 2019), promoting risk-taking in a safe environment to encourage artistic creativity (Willcox, 2017), both within the realm of teacher education (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008) and in visual arts-based research practices (Leavy, 2020).

Hofsess (2015) emphasises the significance of documenting fleeting moments, exploring diverse directions and embracing non-linear structures in visual journaling, culminating in a more authentic representation of lived experiences. This expressive medium incorporates various visual elements, such as drawings, sketches, paintings, collages and photographs, to convey metaphorical meanings through imagery, as highlighted by Bertling (2019). Moreover, the inclusion of written text in visual journals transforms them into multimodal texts or ensembles, encompassing textual elements, visual images and design elements as integral components of this expressive form (Serafini, 2014).

In art pedagogical practice, there is a common focus on teaching the

visual language through practical art activities, while the development of social-emotional skills is neglected. However, art education lessons provide an opportunity to enhance the development of these skills during the planning and execution of art activities at various levels of education (e.g., Potočnik & Rapuš Pavel, 2024).

Based on these findings, we can pose the question of whether creating a visual journal can help students recognise and express their thoughts, emotions and values while simultaneously contributing to the development of their social-emotional skills within art education.

The research questions were:

- What is the attitude of students towards the creation of a visual journal?
- What themes and content do students explore in their visual journals?

Method

Participants

The study was conducted during the 2023/24 academic year by a collaborative team comprising two secondary school visual arts teachers and a university researcher. The case study aimed to examine how creating an artist's book as a visual journal can facilitate secondary school students in identifying their thoughts, emotions and values. A convenience sample of 30 first-year secondary school students participated in the study, consisting of 23 female and 7 male students. Among these, 17 students (11 female, 6 male) submitted visual journals, while 24 students (16 female, 8 male) completed a questionnaire. The art educator, who has 26 years of teaching experience and holds a degree in art education, is also recognised in the art community.

Instruments for Data Collection

Data were collected using a two-pronged approach: a questionnaire and interviews. After completing the artist's book (visual journal), a questionnaire comprising 13 open-ended questions was administered to the students. These questions explored their attitudes towards creating the visual journal, their experiences during the design process, the impact of the journal on their well-being, and their willingness to continue creating journals in the future. The questionnaire also aimed to uncover specific aspects that the students wished to emphasise and interpret regarding each theme. Additionally, an interview was conducted with the art educator to gain insights into their perspective on the students' engagement with the visual journals.

Research Design

The case study was embedded within the visual arts curriculum and spanned from March to June 2024. The art teacher introduced the task during the initial class, where students were guided to create a visual journal informed by the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) model of social-emotional competencies. During art classes and in their own time, the students expressed their daily experiences and feelings related to specific themes through artistic materials and brief texts (Table 1).

The research employed a qualitative approach, emphasising the exploration of concepts, experiences and individual perspectives. The student responses were systematically coded and aggregated into categories (e.g., Mesec, 2023). The analysis of the visual journals focused on understanding the significance of the depicted motifs and the application of various artistic techniques and methods, along with the interplay between visual and verbal communication modes. A visual research strategy was adopted, recognising the direct and tangible means of comprehending the participants' experiences (e.g., Patton et al., 2011).

Table 1

Content addressed within the case study

Week	Topic	The discussed artists and their artworks in relation to social-emotional competencies	Content guidelines for students' artistic responses in a visual journal
1-2	Self-awareness	Frida Kahlo	Students are attentive to recognising and naming their own emotions: they explore how their emotions influence their behaviour; identify their own strengths – where they are successful, where they excel; and reflect on self-confidence and self-efficacy.
3-4	Self-management	Jean-Michel Basquiat	Students reflect in a visual journal on how they regulate their emotions during everyday events and experiences: what they do when overwhelmed by a wave of feelings; how they react; how they regulate their thoughts (e.g., thoughts before a test, before stressful situations); how they regulate their behaviours; how they cope with stress; what their self-discipline is like; how they motivate themselves to perform various tasks; how they set goals; and how they organise their work.
5-6	Social awareness	Marjetica Potrč	Students direct their attention in a visual journal towards experiencing the world around them with an emphasis on taking the perspective of others: how a particular event or situation was perceived by someone else; the perspective of a classmate, parent, teacher, friend or coach; what empathy means; whether they had the opportunity to develop empathy during this time, how and what triggered empathy; whether anything happened that enabled them to accept and positively evaluate diversity – interacting with someone who feels, thinks, etc., differently from them; and what respect for others means.

Week	Topic	The discussed artists and their artworks in relation to social-emotional competencies	Content guidelines for students' artistic responses in a visual journal
7-8	Relationship skills	Hayao Miyazaki	Students present their experiences in a visual journal through the development of their communication skills: how they establish and maintain positive and stable relationships with various individuals and groups; how they listen to others; how clearly they convey their thoughts to others; how they collaborate with others; how they manage conflicts, seek help and offer assistance to others when needed; how they resist negative pressure from others; how they establish relationships with others; and how skilled they are in teamwork.
9-10	Responsible decision-making	Marina Abramović	Students present their experiences in a visual journal through the aspect of responsible decision-making: the problems they faced and how they solved them; whether they made constructive and respectful decisions regarding their behaviour and social interactions based on personal, moral and ethical responsibility; and how they evaluated the consequences of various actions (e.g., can you realistically evaluate what was good and how you could have behaved more responsibly?), reflecting on personal, moral and ethical responsibility.

Results

The data obtained from the student survey questionnaire were coded, categorised and ultimately analysed to identify overarching themes (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2
Implementation of coding

Theme	Category	Code
Support in the development of social and emotional competencies	Recognition of one's feelings, behaviours and relationships	Feeling of anger and sadness; missing a loved one; poor recognition of one's emotions; experiencing stress or loneliness; responding in stressful situations; methods of calming down; connecting with the environment; social circle; belonging.
	The advantages of creating a visual journal	Drawing as a means of relaxation; assistance in solving personal problems; seeking new connections within the artwork; wellbeing after drawing; relaxation while drawing; joy in creating; dedicating time to oneself and one's emotions; assistance in releasing tension; a method of calming; better self-understanding; a space and time to get to know oneself better; visualisation of one's thoughts; learning about oneself; clearer perception of events and situations; greater awareness of one's actions; a means of expression; analysis of one's actions; therapeutic value.

Theme	Category	Code
The power of artistic expression	Expressing one's feelings through artistic media	Choosing colours based on feelings; expressing oneself through symbols; the expressive power of colour; selecting colours that emphasise distress and concern; depicting perspectives and emotions through forms; the expressive power of artistic materials and techniques.
	Recognition and enhancement of one's artistic creativity	Creative expression of feelings; various methods of artistic expression; self-confidence in artistic expression; surprise at one's own creativity; astonishment at the ability to draw one's emotions; the advantages of choice-based artistic expression.

Table 3*Representative student statements*

Theme	Representative student statements
Support in the development of social and emotional competencies	"I became aware that a certain feeling had been troubling me for a long time. I realised that I truly miss my older sister. So, I drew myself at a desk full of notebooks, surrounded by my loved ones whom I miss."
	"It is a journal that reflects my thoughts on life in the first year. It also illustrates my feelings of stress, love and how I cope with stress. My relationships with my parents and classmates are also depicted. Some emotions are conveyed through words, so there are also poems written."
	"I think I have overestimated my circle of friends. I was convinced that many people considered me a friend, just as I consider them friends. After reflecting and drawing, I realised that this is not entirely true. I let many people in closer, but they do not reciprocate. I believe that I am much more lonely than I seem."
	"I thought that the design process would stress me out much more, and when I first learned about the project, I had in mind that it wouldn't be so bad. I thought about what I would express in it, and I hoped to finally pour out my relationship with food, but in the end, I hardly included any of that at all. However, I feel that I am now much less 'closed' about it. It definitely helped me with the 'healing' of this issue, which I think surprised me the most."
The power of artistic expression	"I created a collage from black paper with the words 'time is running' written on it. With this, I wanted to emphasise that people truly do not understand time and that, regardless of history, time has not taught us anything."
	"On one side, there is a foil (internal, grey) from a chewing gum wrapper, with a little grass and flowers at the bottom. The grey foil represents the sky and our thoughts. It also represents how it seems to me that we all have to be the same, that we are flat on this side and think the things we are supposed to think. When you turn the page over, there is the exterior – the coloured wrapper of the chewing gum, with much more grass and flowers along the edge. This represents how the world is more colourful and beautiful – more flowers – when we express ourselves, share our opinions, and are who we are."
	"What I liked the most was that we could create entirely on our own, with anything, on anything. I also appreciated that we were given themes that allowed me to connect my feelings with the drawings I created. I was surprised overall by my drawing, my abilities and the products that resulted from it."
	"I liked everything very much and found it interesting. Before starting, I bought a black notebook and white chalk. I didn't think I would discover so many ways to draw and create on black paper."



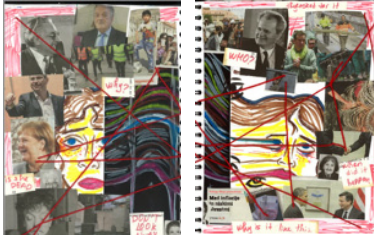
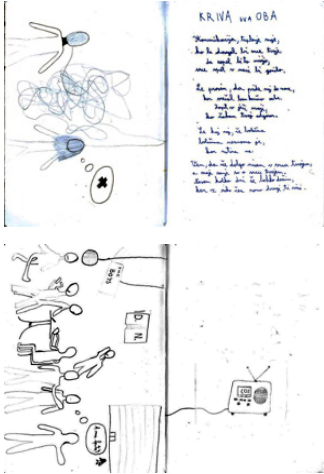
At the conclusion of the study, an interview was conducted with the teacher. From the responses provided, we identified four key insights articulated by the teacher, which were derived from her observations of the students.


- Engagement levels: Initial observations indicated passive reception among students during the first week. However, by the second week, a marked increase in active participation was noted, with students beginning to draw meaningful connections between their artistic expressions and the competencies highlighted in the artworks of established artists.
- Emotional expression and peer interaction: Students exhibited progression from hesitation in discussing their personal works to a growing comfort and willingness to share. This shift facilitated the establishment of a trusting atmosphere where students felt safe expressing emotions without fear of judgement. The acceptance of individual artistic expression, regardless of technical ability, became a cornerstone of the classroom culture.
- Positive reception and motivation: Throughout the project, students maintained a positive attitude towards the visual journal assignment, viewing it as a personal outlet for exploring their feelings. Despite the challenges of increasing academic pressure, students regarded the journal as both a filter for their experiences and a safe space for emotional exploration.
- Artistic freedom: Students were provided with a broad range of artistic materials and techniques, allowing autonomy in their creative processes. The teacher encouraged the exploration of different artforms and methods, which contributed to a richer understanding of self-expression.

The potential for future implementation of the visual journal task was affirmed by the teacher, who appreciated its positive impact on self-awareness, emotional expression and respect for individuality among the students. One particularly memorable moment was when many of the students became emotionally moved during a discussion about Marina Abramović, highlighting the power of art to evoke deep feelings and foster community within the classroom. The teacher believes that the visual journal assignment serves as a powerful tool for enhancing students' emotional and creative development.

Seventeen students consented to have their visual journals utilised for analytical purposes. We selected specific examples and descriptions from these journals that pertain to the topic under investigation. The five chosen examples were analysed through the lens of artistic expression and their relationship to the addressed themes (Table 4).

Table 4
Examples of students' visual journals

Topic	Visual journal	Student's interpretation of the artwork
Self-awareness		"Here, I felt that it was most important to fully express my emotions. Everything was mixed up, nothing was right, and in that moment, I was completely chaotic, as there was too much of everything."
Self-management	 <p><i>(I need to calm down and think about what I like. I love flowers on trees. Magnolia.)</i></p>	"In this theme, I actually did something similar to the first theme, as I focused more on myself and my actions. However, I drew more things that bring me joy and comfort when I look at them or think of them."
Social awareness		"I made an effort to draw more connections, more people, as well as certain events that the public should not learn about."
Relationship skills		"My relationships with women I like, puberty, classmates, time is the best medicine. It depicts classmates with attributes and our most common activities."

Topic	Visual journal	Student's interpretation of the artwork
Responsible decision-making		"I drew the head of a person who has turned to stone. I watched the spiders weaving their webs, without hesitation, without decisions, just instinct, yet they still make these instinctual decisions correctly. Meanwhile, we have three birds that must decide where they will go for the winter, where they will build their nests... all these decisions are made so simply. I also drew water, which knows where to carve its path to be the best for itself. I observe all this - this stony head, and the longer it takes for me to decide where I will weave my web, how I will build my nest, the more I turn to stone and the harder it becomes for me to make a decision."

For the theme of self-awareness, we selected a piece that includes two drawings created with a ballpoint pen. Both drawings are coloured with coloured pencils. The first drawing depicts vertical shapes intertwined with lines, resembling a forest. At the centre of the composition, the word "chaos" is written in large red printed letters. The second drawing illustrates a single tree in autumn colours (with leaves in shades of yellow-green, orange, brown and yellow). At the bottom of the trunk, the word "alone" is added (in large printed letters in black on a red background). In her interpretation of the work, the student highlighted her current emotional state.

For the theme of self-management, we selected a pencil drawing that subtly represents a magnolia branch featuring three blooms in varying stages of openness. Accompanying the drawing is a note that functions as a reminder for the author on how to attain a sense of calm. In her interpretation, the student underscores the significance of consciously directing her attention towards her own wellbeing and the elements that contribute to her joy and comfort.

For the theme of social awareness, we selected two pages of a journal that function cohesively as an interconnected entity. Each page features a central drawing created with coloured markers and pastels, depicting two faces on a white background, which are compositionally linked by colourful lines against a black backdrop. Surrounding both drawings is a collage of photographs that portray well-known political figures and leaders, including Franjo Tuđman, Slobodan Milošević, Angela Merkel, Aleksandar Vučić, Borut Pahor and Barack Obama. In the lower left section of the composition, there is a photograph of the American writer and human rights activist Kurt Vonnegut, an advocate for social justice. Additional photographs of workers, tourists, children and money are included. These photographs are interconnected by a red thread, accompanied by inscriptions in red lettering (such as "why", "don't look

away", "who", "why is it like this", "they asked for it", etc.). In her interpretation, the author indicates the existence of connections between individuals and events that may not be recognised by the general public. While the selected photographs linked by the red thread convey a socio-critical message, both drawings, which can be interpreted as self-portraits, evoke feelings of sadness and concern.

For the theme of relationship skills, we selected four pages from a visual journal that feature very simple pencil drawings. These pages were chosen because they incorporate a poem entitled *We Are Both to Blame*, which is a love poem that suggests conflict within a relationship. The accompanying drawing depicts two figures, recognised as male and female, between which a network of lines resembles communication noise. Above the female figure, a speech bubble is included, marked with an "x". The second drawing illustrates several undefined figures and their interrelationships. In his interpretation, the student emphasised his relationships with others, highlighting a more challenging romantic relationship, on the one hand, and a supportive friendship, on the other.

For the theme of responsible decision-making, the author utilised various drawing media, including a ballpoint pen, a pencil and coloured markers. In the right-hand section of the composition, a face with large eyes is depicted, featuring concentric circles within them. From the pupils, flowers extend on long stems. The gaze is directed upward towards a spider's web, accompanied by three stylised blue clouds. The composition is further enhanced by the presence of birds grouped into three clusters: in the first, they appear to be conversing; in the second, they are flying; and in the third, they are nesting. The birds are illustrated in a cartoon style, and the negative space of the drawing is filled with black. In her comprehensive interpretation, the student highlighted the complexity of making decisions in her life in relation to other living beings whose life paths are guided by instinct.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the students participating in the study used the visual journals as a powerful medium for expressing their emotions and thoughts. Additionally, the visual journals provided the students with a space for self-reflection, allowing them to engage more deeply with their inner experiences and understand their emotional responses. By channelling their feelings through artistic expression, the students articulated a deeper understanding of their emotional landscapes. For instance, one student noted, "I became aware that a certain feeling had been troubling me for a long time", highlighting

the visual journal's role as a tool for introspection. Through visual imagery and symbolic representations, students not only identified and processed their emotions, but also confronted underlying issues that may have remained obscured in their daily lives. Visual journals, along with other creative arts, have also proved effective in reducing stress, as indicated in other research (e.g., Martin et al., 2018; Mercer, 2010).

The emphasis on positive coping strategies, as shown by the students using drawings to express joy and comfort, suggests that the act of creating art fosters a sense of control and agency. This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting the importance of emotional regulation within educational settings (CASEL, n.d.). The students' reflections underscore the significance of artistic practices in calming their minds and providing space for grappling with personal challenges.

Additionally, the results indicate the critical role of effective communication and collaboration within artistic contexts. Engagement in the arts has been confirmed as being instrumental in developing communication skills (Corbisi-ero-Drakos et al., 2021). The students in the present study reported a transition from initial reluctance to increased openness in sharing personal experiences with peers. This shift reflects a growing sense of trust and a supportive classroom environment where individual voices are validated. By fostering such a culture, art education transcends mere skill acquisition, evolving into a practice that nurtures healthy relationships both within and beyond the classroom.

Moreover, artistic expression in visual journals facilitated the students' creative reflection on social and emotional competencies. This is supported by an exploratory study by Oller et al. (2021), which underscores the importance of linking students' learning experiences in and out of school. Their findings suggest that personalised learning environments enhance students' reflective capacities by fostering connections across various contexts. Consequently, through visual journaling, students not only articulate their emotions but also develop essential social competencies, thus enriching their overall educational experience.

Conclusions

The present study highlights the integral relationship between the practice of visual journaling and the cultivation of social-emotional competencies among secondary school students. The artistic process not only allows them to express and explore their emotional realities, but also serves as a conduit for enhancing their interpersonal skills.

Artistic freedom is a fundamental aspect of creative expression that empowers individuals to explore and convey their unique perspectives, emotions and experiences without the constraints of conventional norms or expectations. Within the context of visual journaling, artistic freedom serves as a catalyst for self-exploration and innovation, encouraging students to take risks and experiment with various styles and techniques.

Our study does, however, have some limitations. The sample size was small, as it included only one class of first-year secondary school students, meaning that the results cannot be generalised to a broader population. Additionally, the research was not designed as a longitudinal study; rather, it lasted only four months, which limits the ability to assess long-term effects. If the study had been conducted over the course of an entire academic year, it might have provided a clearer picture of the impacts of incorporating visual journals on the development of students' thoughts, emotions and social-emotional skills.

Nevertheless, the findings of the research indicate the educational potential of incorporating visual journals into educational practice. Specifically, the incorporation of visual journals into educational frameworks could offer several potential benefits:

- **Emotional Expression:** Visual journals may provide students with a valuable platform for expressing their thoughts and emotions, which could foster greater emotional awareness and regulation.
- **Self-Reflection:** Engaging in visual journaling might encourage students to reflect on their inner experiences, aiding them in identifying and articulating their feelings more clearly.
- **Stress Reduction:** The creative process associated with visual journaling has the potential to reduce stress effectively, which could contribute to better overall mental health.
- **Communication Skills:** As students grow more comfortable with sharing their visual journals, they may develop important communication skills that enhance their ability to interact with peers and educators.
- **Supportive Environment:** This practice could foster a sense of trust and community within the classroom, creating a space where students feel safe to share personal experiences.

Thus, the inclusion of visual journals has the potential to promote emotional development and create a more engaging and supportive learning environment conducive to student growth.

Based on the potential benefits outlined, further research on the incorporation of visual journals in educational practice should consider several

guidelines. Studies should involve a broader and more diverse sample of students across various age groups and cultural backgrounds in order to enhance the generalisability of findings related to emotional expression and self-reflection. Longitudinal research designs are necessary to explore the long-term impacts of visual journaling on emotional development, stress reduction and communication skills. Comparative studies that assess the outcomes of visual journaling against other expressive arts practices could clarify its unique contributions. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, should also be employed to gain deeper insights into students' experiences with visual journals. Further research should also focus on teacher education in the area of social-emotional learning and the development of various successful strategies that can successfully integrate artistic activities with social-emotional learning in secondary schools, in addition to visual journals. While our study primarily examined the benefits of visual journals for students, future research could investigate the impact of teachers creating their own journals on their practice. Evidence suggests that such journaling provides valuable resources for self-understanding and resilience, enabling educators to more effectively navigate the challenges they face within the public school system (Kulinski, 2023).

Ethical statement

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education of the University of Ljubljana.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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