

The Generative Basis of Imagery in Children's Painting Activities and Strategies for Aesthetic Education Practice

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Abstract: Children's painting activities serve as a vital avenue for the development of children's aesthetic perception, emotional expression, and creativity. Imagery, as a fusion of "meaning" and "image," manifests in children's paintings as psychological landscapes that combine emotions, imagination, and physical objects. From the perspective of imagery, this paper explores the fundamental conditions for its generation in children's painting, considering the psychological and behavioral characteristics of children's painting. These conditions primarily include perceptual triggers and material experiences, emotional drives and imaginative participation, situational guidance and meaning construction, as well as external expression and communicative feedback. Additionally, this paper proposes corresponding strategies for aesthetic education practice based on educational cases, aiming to provide practical pathways for implementing aesthetic education during early childhood.

Keywords: Children's painting; Imagery; Aesthetic education practice

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1. Introduction

Painting is an important way for young children to express themselves and understand the world, as well as a vital carrier for the germination of their aesthetic awareness and emotional development. In painting activities, young children often do not simply depict objects, but integrate their inner emotions, life experiences, and external objects to form "images" with personal significance. These "images" are not only psychological images but also external manifestations of young children's aesthetic perception and emotional experience, characterized by distinct childlike innocence and creativity. Currently, aesthetic education in China has established a strategic orientation of "educating through beauty, beautifying people, and cultivating essence through beauty," emphasizing the promotion of students' perceptual development and innovative abilities through aesthetic education. However, in the practice of aesthetic education for young children, there are still issues such as emphasizing skills over experience, results over process, and adult standards

over children's expressions, which hinder the comprehensive development of young children's aesthetic literacy ^[1]. The *Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6* clearly state that young children's unique brushstrokes contain rich imagination and emotions, and adults should fully understand and respect children's artistic expressions ^[2]. However, in actual teaching, young children's aesthetic experiences and image expressions are often constrained by adult standards, preventing emotions and imagination from being fully released during the painting process. Therefore, exploring the implementation path of aesthetic education in young children's painting activities from the perspective of images holds significant theoretical value and practical significance.

2. Manifestations and characteristics of images in young children's painting

Images are psychological images formed by the fusion of the subject's intentions and the object's forms, and they are also a core category in Chinese classical aesthetics with significant aesthetic educational value ^[3]. Li and Guo divided the process of young children's perception and expression of beauty in artistic activities into four stages: a preparatory stage based on the mobilization of implicit psychological components, an initial stage based on perception, an image stage characterized by active imagination and emotions, and an artistic creation stage based on free expression ^[4]. Among them, the image stage refers to the period when young children focus intently on aesthetic objects, then identify, imagine, and understand them, generating corresponding intuitive and imaginative emotional activities in the process. In young children's painting activities, the image stage manifests as the natural fusion of "intention" and "image," where young children integrate what they see with what they feel through their brushes, creating images filled with personal emotional color. For example, when young children add smiling faces to the sun or eyes to trees, it is not a mechanical reproduction of objective objects but a result of emotional projection and imagination, vividly embodying the images in their minds. This process is full of subjectivity and symbolism, with the images serving as both externalizations of emotions and symbols through which young children communicate with the world.

The images in young children's paintings are characterized by distinct intuition, emotion, and symbolism. Young children do not rely on rational analysis but organize images based on intuition and existing experiences, with painting becoming a means for them to express emotions, desires, and even confusion. Simple lines and colors often carry rich emotional meanings. These manifestations stem from three basic characteristics of images: first, their psychological and conceptual nature, as images exist in the subject's consciousness; second, their intentionality, always pointing towards certain emotions and meanings; and third, their generative and dynamic nature, evolving with changes in young children's experiences and environments ^[5]. For these reasons, painting becomes a natural carrier for young children's aesthetic education.

3. The generative basis of images in young children's painting activities

3.1. Perceptual triggering and material experience

Children aged 2–4 are in the scribbling stage, exploring the relationship between actions and traces through random scribbling; children aged 4–7 enter the symbolic stage, beginning to represent objects with shapes. These two stages are critical periods for the rapid development of young children's perceptual abilities ^[6]. According

to the characteristics of preschool children's painting creation activities, helping young children store a large number of generative and creative aesthetic images in their brains and accumulate rich representations enables them to express and create with concrete images. This accumulation process relies on multi-sensory perceptual triggering ^[7]. Young children interact with their surroundings through various perceptual channels such as seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling, acquiring vivid and lively perceptual experiences. Observing leaves swaying in the wind, touching fabrics of different textures, and listening to the sound of raindrops falling—these perceptual experiences form rich emotional and image memories in young children's minds, serving as a repository of materials for the generation of aesthetic images ^[8]. Additionally, independent experience with painting materials facilitates the externalization of images. Materials such as paint, clay, colored pencils, and paper are not only tools for creation but also media for extending young children's perception and expressing images. Through actions like smearing, kneading, and tearing and pasting, young children explore the characteristics and expressive possibilities of materials, gradually establishing a connection between images and visual representations. This direct interaction with materials prompts young children to transform their inner images into concrete forms and continuously adjust and enrich the expression of images during the creation process.

3.2. Emotional drive and imaginative participation

Emotion is the internal driving force behind young children's painting. Emotions such as joy, curiosity, and loneliness often manifest through color choices and compositions. Imagination endows the painting with meanings that transcend reality, transforming ordinary objects into emotional symbols. Young children not only reproduce what they see but also construct an emotional world of their own. During the painting process, teachers should create an emotionally immersive environment, stimulating young children's emotional engagement through music, stories, games, and other means ^[9]. At the same time, they should provide space for imagination to unfold, avoiding the use of standards like "drawing realistically" to limit expression. The following is an educational case selected from Xu Wei's *Research on Teacher-Child Interaction in Kindergarten Painting Teaching Activities* ^[10].

Case 1: Small Class Painting Teaching Activity "Colorful Balloons"

The teacher observed the children's painting and provided guidance based on what was observed. Upon seeing a child coloring the entire sheet of paper with various colors instead of drawing balloons as instructed, the teacher took the child's drawing from their hands.

Teacher: What is this you've drawn? Your usual painting skills aren't like this. Redraw it for me.

Child: (Eyes turning red, dare not speak, sitting motionless.)

Teacher: Redraw it! Why aren't you moving? (Seeing that the child remained motionless, the teacher took the child's drawing paper, pulled the child up, and made them sit on a small stool by the door to draw.)

Child: (Tears falling, silently, redrew a picture under the teacher's guidance that the teacher considered nice.)

From the perspective of the generation of aesthetic imagery, a child's act of coloring the entire sheet of paper can be seen as an intuitive expression and exploration of colors during the stage of active perception and emotion. This process could naturally lead to the preliminary integration of imagery and the externalization of emotions. However, in the aforementioned case, the teacher's intervention, which was

based on the criterion of “drawing realistically,” essentially interrupted the natural progression of the child’s development from perception to imagery and weakened the educational function of painting as a carrier for emotional symbols and meaning construction. This reflects a bias in the current evaluation orientation in teaching. When teachers focus solely on the formal aspects of the artwork, they tend to overlook the emotional investment and imaginative exploration of children during the creative process, thereby affecting the integrity of their expressive intentions and aesthetic experiences. Based on this, teachers should support children in completing the holistic process from perception to imagery and from emotion to expression in their painting, on the basis of observation and understanding.

3.3. Situational guidance and meaning construction

Situation serves as the psychological field for the generation of imagery. “Situation” refers not only to a relatively objective setting but also to the blending of subjective and objective emotions, playing a role in stimulating motivation, driving emotions, and suggesting induction ^[11]. In collective painting instruction, teachers can create appropriate activity situations to arouse strong learning motivation and creative emotions in young children, prompting them to spontaneously engage in painting activities. The teacher’s role is not to instill imagery but to provide an aesthetically charged environment and help children clarify and formalize their vague feelings through dialogue, storytelling, nature observation, and other methods ^[12].

3.4. Externalization of expression and communication feedback

Paintings are external manifestations of young children’s aesthetic imagery, allowing their emotions and thoughts to be seen ^[13]. The expression of imagery is both the endpoint of the psychological process and the starting point of the meaning cycle. By observing and listening to children’s descriptions of their paintings, adults can understand their inner worlds and provide emotional responses ^[14]. This process not only makes learning visible and assessable but also enhances children’s confidence in expressing and communicating through art. Teachers should emphasize the sharing of artworks, encouraging children to narrate the content of their paintings, listen to their emotions and ideas, and understand the symbolic meanings within. Through dialogue and empathy, teachers can help children gradually enrich the connotations of their imagery and deepen their expressions.

4. Practical strategies for promoting the generation of aesthetic imagery in early childhood art education

4.1. Creating an immersive art education environment

In collective painting instruction, teachers should create appropriate activity situations to form natural scenes that blend with the context, stimulating strong learning motivation and creative enthusiasm in young children, fostering unconscious psychological tendencies, and thereby triggering emotional engagement and the emergence of imagery. Specifically, teachers should provide a rich, open, and aesthetically meaningful physical and psychological environment, including diverse painting materials, the introduction of natural objects, visually harmonious color spaces, and a relaxed and free emotional atmosphere. The daily environment itself should become a “perceptible image,” subtly inspiring children’s aesthetic perception and expression desires. For example, teachers can decorate classroom walls with an artistic ambiance, displaying classic paintings or outstanding artworks by the children themselves, allowing them to be subtly influenced

by beauty. At the same time, elements such as music and stories can be used to create situations related to the painting theme, such as playing soft and soothing music and telling interesting stories related to the painting content, creating a space full of imagination and creativity for children, further stimulating their creative inspiration and aesthetic emotions.

4.2. Implementing emotionally driven experiential teaching

Design activities that integrate multi-sensory participation, with children's emotional experiences as the core. Combine painting with music, bodily rhythms, and storytelling to guide children in connecting their feelings through multi-sensory perception. Through outdoor sketching, object observation, and other activities, help children accumulate imagery materials in real experiences. Teachers should emphasize emotional interaction during activities rather than just focusing on the final results of the paintings. Contemporary embodied cognition theory emphasizes that cognition and emotion are deeply rooted in physical experiences. Teachers should design activities that allow children to perceive with their bodies before creating with paintbrushes.

4.3. Respecting and interpreting children's personalized imagery

Each child's painting imagery is unique, and each painting is a unique expression of their inner world. Teachers should avoid judging the similarity of paintings based on adult standards but instead encourage children to narrate the content of their paintings, listen to their emotions and ideas, and understand the symbolic meanings within. Additionally, teachers can use open-ended questions like "What scene in life does this color remind you of?" to help children organize and express the emotions and imagination behind their paintings. At the same time, teachers can also record children's interpretations of their paintings with simple text or audio, accumulating these materials into growth archives to understand the individual context and development process of children's imagery expression. Through such dialogue and empathy, teachers can help children gradually enrich the connotations of their imagery and deepen their expressions.

4.4. Promoting cross-form art integration activities

The expression of imagery should not be limited to paintbrushes. Around the same emotional theme or life experience, which means "linkage" or "integration" activities involving painting, crafts, drama, poetry, and other art forms can be carried out, encouraging children to express themselves in diverse ways. For example, sculpting the story in a painting out of clay or using bodily movements to interpret the emotions conveyed in the painting. When children attempt to extend the imagery in their hearts from painting to crafts, movements, or sounds, they will form a more three-dimensional and rich understanding of this imagery. The connection between different art forms not only broadens children's expression channels but also makes the imagery itself more vivid and full. This integration helps children experience and express imagery from multiple perspectives, thereby promoting the integration and transfer of aesthetic experiences.

4.5. Establishing a performance-centered evaluation approach

In evaluating children's painting activities, the focus should shift from judging skills and visual effects to observing children's engagement and mental activities during the creative process. Teachers should focus on observing children's emotional engagement, imagination development, and expression intentions during painting and dynamically grasp the development of their aesthetic imagery generation and aesthetic

ability through continuous observation records, artwork interviews, and growth archives. In this process, it is essential to fully respect children's self-expression and reflection, encourage them to share their creative ideas and feelings, and listen with an open and accepting attitude. This not only deepens teachers' understanding of children's inner worlds and provides more supportive guidance but also promotes the coordinated development of children's self-confidence, expressiveness, and aesthetic emotions. At the same time, evaluation should also focus on the natural interactions and collaborations that occur during joint creation, understanding the development of children's social interaction and collaboration abilities, thereby providing more comprehensive support for children's all-around growth.

5. Conclusion

The generation of imagery in children's painting activities is a dynamic process that integrates emotions, perceptions, imagination, and form. Aesthetic education practices should be grounded in the physical and mental development characteristics of young children, with emotions serving as the bond, experiences as the pathway, and respect as the principle, establishing a balance between free expression and appropriate guidance. Through conscious environmental creation, activity design, and evaluation support, painting can not only become a window for children to express their emotions but also sow the seeds of beauty in their hearts, helping them grow into well-rounded individuals with rich emotions, flexible thinking, and creativity.

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