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Nature-Based Art Learning: A Strategy to Develop Aesthetic Experience and Ecological Awareness in Children Aged 5–6 Year

Seni Yuliarini*, Joko Pamungkas
Department of Early Childhood Education, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, 55281, Indonesia

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** Corresponding author:*

E-mail: seniyuliarini.2024@student.uny.ac.id

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A B S T R A C T

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a crucial role in fostering children's holistic development, including aesthetic experience and ecological awareness. This study explores the role of nature-based art learning as a strategy to develop both aspects in children aged 5–6 years. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study involved 46 children and 4 teachers at Kelompok Bermain Alam Uswatun Khasanah, Sleman. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation during art sessions involving ecoprint and jumputan techniques with natural materials. Instruments were validated through expert judgment, and data accuracy was ensured through triangulation. Analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model. The results revealed that direct interaction with natural materials such as leaves, flowers, seeds, and plants not only enhanced children's visual expression and aesthetic appreciation but also fostered ecological awareness. A total of 38 out of 46 children could articulate the meaning behind their artwork, while 31 demonstrated ecological understanding through inquiry and responsible behavior toward nature. Teacher reflections emphasized that this approach was more contextual and meaningful than conventional methods. These findings support the integration of nature-based art into the ECE curriculum and recommend further teacher training and quantitative studies to broaden the insights.

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a fundamental role in laying the foundation for holistic child development. Early childhood, often referred to as the golden age, is a critical period during which all aspects of development: cognitive, social-emotional, physical-motor, language, and the arts, grow rapidly and are closely interconnected (Solang et al., 2024). Therefore, innovative and developmentally appropriate learning strategies are crucial for optimizing this critical stage of growth (Widianingsing, 2024).

One of the strategic approaches in early childhood education is through art-based learning, which has been proven to support the holistic development of children. According to Anggraini & Yuwono (2022), Nasution & Lubis (2025), Saefurrohman (2024), through art, young children are able to express their thoughts and emotions, develop both fine and gross motor skills, and stimulate imagination and creativity. Cognitively, art fosters problem solving and critical thinking abilities, while affectively, it cultivates empathy, self-confidence, and emotional regulation. Furthermore, art also enhances psychomotor skills through hand-eye coordination during the process of art-making (Lestari et al., 2024; Pasaribu et al., 2024). Thus, art plays a vital role in nurturing the overall potential of young children.

Aesthetic experience in early childhood is an internalization process of beauty, harmony, and meaning through interaction with the surrounding environment. At the age of 5–6 years, children begin to develop sensitivity toward form, color, texture, and pattern. These experiences not only support perceptual development but also enhance children's ability to appreciate artworks and express emotions creatively. A study by Tian & Isa (2024) highlights that aesthetic experiences facilitate children's transition from simply producing art to responding to aesthetic phenomena, a crucial process in building reflective awareness and deep appreciation for the world around them.

Furthermore, D'Olimpio (2022) emphasizes that aesthetic education bridges intellectual and emotional development, stimulates imagination, and enhances the ability to perceive beauty in various forms of artistic expression. Thus, integrating aesthetic experiences through art for children aged 5–6 not only nurtures appreciation of beauty but also broadens their thinking, emotional range, and self-reflection, all of which are critical in shaping individuals who are creative, sensitive, and environmentally conscious. Unfortunately, many traditional art learning approaches still place too much emphasis on uniform final products rather than deep sensory exploration and process-based experiences, thereby limiting children's opportunities to fully develop their aesthetic sensibilities. Many art activities remain product-oriented, limiting children's freedom of expression, often reduced to monotonous coloring tasks and reliant on artificial materials such as colored paper, synthetic paints, and plastics (Tarsono & Abiha, 2023).

The development of ecological awareness from an early age is increasingly urgent in the context of the global environmental crisis. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation have intensified the need to cultivate ecological consciousness from a young age. In Indonesia, efforts to instill environmental awareness in early childhood education (ECE) remain limited. Utara et al. (2024) state that children's ecological awareness is built upon three dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, and actions. However, current eco-friendly educational practices in preschools are still far from optimal. Furthermore, most learning programs have yet to explicitly integrate environmental education into children's daily activities (Priadi & Fatria, 2024). Also in the modern era, children are increasingly disconnected from the outdoors and spend more time on digital devices, which leads to limited sensory experiences and a weakened understanding

of the surrounding environment (Finnigan, 2024; Ho et al., 2024). This condition may hinder aesthetic experiences and diminish children's sense of care for nature, even though ecological awareness is crucial for future sustainability (Mousavi et al., 2024).

In response to these challenges, nature-based art learning emerges as a promising and innovative pedagogical solution. Nature-based art learning is an approach in which children create artworks using materials directly sourced from the natural environment, such as leaves, twigs, stones, sand, seeds, dried flowers, and other organic objects (Afwanni et al., 2024). This approach emphasizes not merely the final artistic product but rather the process of exploration, discovery, and direct interaction with natural textures, shapes, and colors (Makarau et al., 2022). Natural materials offer rich, diverse, and unstandardized sensory experiences, in contrast to conventional art media that are often limited and uniform. Through this learning process, children are encouraged to observe, touch, feel, and use their imagination to transform natural objects into creative expressions.

Previous studies have demonstrated the relevance of nature-based art learning to the development of aesthetic experiences and ecological awareness in early childhood. Research by Fajrie et al. (2024) reported a significant difference before and after the implementation of a natural material-based art learning model, showing improvements in children's learning motivation and the aesthetic quality of their artworks. Safura et al. (2024) found that the use of natural media in art activities effectively enhances children’s creativity. They explained that allowing children the freedom to select and combine natural materials triggers unexpected and original ideas. Similarly, a study by Kurlillah & Yuandana (2024) revealed that art activities using natural materials, such as ecoprinting, improved the creativity of 5–6-year-old children at TK Negeri Pembina Bangkalan by 73% (N-Gain = 0.7368). Furthermore, Ruswanti & Hasibuan (2024) added that using natural materials in learning activities such as ecoprinting as a form of simple science experimentation also improved cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills in young children.

Most existing studies focus on a single dimension such as creativity, motor skills, or cognition without simultaneously assessing aesthetic experience and ecological awareness in a holistic manner. This study addresses this gap by designing an integrated learning approach that combines art education and natural material exploration for children aged 5–6 years, and by evaluating its impact on two key domains: aesthetic experience and ecological awareness, through reflective observation methods. The study aims to explore the role of nature-based art learning as an effective strategy to enhance both aesthetic experience and ecological consciousness in young children.

2. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to describe and explain phenomena as well as address various issues related to events that occur,

both based on actual conditions and through the analysis of relationships between variables within those phenomena (J.R. Raco, 2010). The research was conducted at Kelompok Bermain (KB) Alam Uswatun Khasanah, located in Gamping District, Sleman Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta. The research subjects consisted of four classroom teachers and 46 kindergarten children aged 5–6 years. The study took place in April 2025. The flow of the research is illustrated in the diagram shown in Figure 1. Indicators of aesthetic experience and ecological awareness shown in Table 1 and 2.

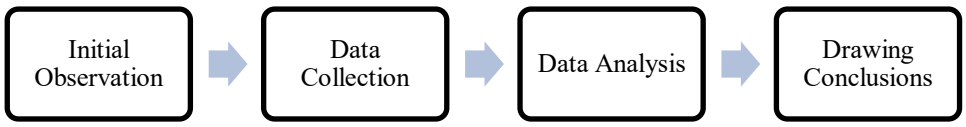

Figure 1. Research Flowchart

Table 1. Indicators of Aesthetic Experience

Aspect	Indicator	Observed Behavior Description
Visual Expression	• Expresses ideas through images, colors, or patterns • Uses a variety of media or materials in art • Shows originality or personal style in art	• The child independently selects colors and patterns in creating an ecoprint artwork • The child uses leaves, flowers, and natural dyes to create visual compositions • The child creates unique patterns different from their peers
Aesthetic Reflection	• Comments on the beauty of their own or others' artwork • Shows satisfaction with their own artistic creation • Can explain the art-making process in simple terms	• The child expresses opinions about color, shape, or arrangement in artworks • The child smiles, feels proud, or shows their work to the teacher/peers • The child describes the steps taken to create the ecoprint

Table 2. Indicators of Ecological Awareness

Aspect	Indicator	Observed Behavior Description
Environmental Knowledge	• Recognizes different types of plants in the surroundings • Understands the benefits of protecting the environment	• The child can name leaves or flowers used in the ecoprint activity • The child explains why it's important to care for plants or not to litter
Attitude Toward Nature	• Shows love and care for living things • Avoids damaging plants unnecessarily	• The child handles leaves and flowers gently during the ecoprint activity • The child only picks leaves permitted by the teacher
Eco-Friendly Actions	• Uses natural or recycled materials in art and play • Practices throwing waste in the appropriate place	• The child uses natural materials instead of synthetic or plastic ones for ecoprint • The child disposes of leftover leaves/materials in the proper trash bin

Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. The validation of the interview guideline instrument and the observation instrument

was conducted through expert judgment. To ensure data accuracy, triangulation techniques were applied by using multiple data collection methods. Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis in this study involved interpretation and subjective assessment of the data obtained (Haryoko et al., 2020).

3. Result and Discussion

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at KB Alam Uswatun Khasanah, during an art learning session using natural materials through ecoprint batik and tie-dye (jumputan) techniques with natural dyes, it was found that the children demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm when directly interacting with various natural materials such as textured leaves, smooth twigs, dried flowers, and seeds. The process of selecting, touching, and combining these materials provided opportunities for creative and sensory exploration. During this art-based learning process, teachers observed an increase in the use of vocabulary related to aesthetics. Children began to use terms such as “soft,” “colorful,” and “patterned” to describe their visual experiences. One teacher shared that a child remarked, “This color is so beautiful and looks like a real butterfly,” when describing their work.

Furthermore, the activity also provided a space for reflection. Children were encouraged to explain the meaning behind their creations, promoting symbolic and imaginative thinking. For example, one child explained their artwork by saying, “This is rain because the leaves are thick and lush.” This expression revealed a connection between the child's visual expression and their personal experience with nature, indicating a growing sense of aesthetic appreciation through the use of natural media. The use of natural materials in art activities also had an impact on the children’s ecological awareness. Teachers reported that direct interaction with these materials sparked critical questions from the children about the origins of the materials. One teacher shared that a child asked, “Which tree did this leaf fall from, Miss?” a moment that became an educational opportunity to explain the life cycle of trees and the importance of environmental care.

Beyond cognitive engagement, some children also displayed behaviors that reflected ecological understanding. Several children were observed taking home leftover natural materials to show their parents. This behavior illustrated emotional involvement and a desire to preserve nature beyond the school context. One empathetic remark came from a child who hesitated to pick a leaf, saying, “I feel sorry for the tree, it might get hurt.” Such expressions indicate the development of environmental empathy nurtured naturally through art activities involving nature. According to the teachers’ reflective observations, out of 46 children involved in the activity, 38 were able to express both visual and emotional meanings in their artwork, demonstrating a high level of aesthetic engagement. Additionally, 31 children showed signs of ecological awareness through their ability to explain the origins of the materials used and their responsible attitudes toward their use. To

support these findings, the following images illustrate the children's aesthetic and ecological development observed during the activity:

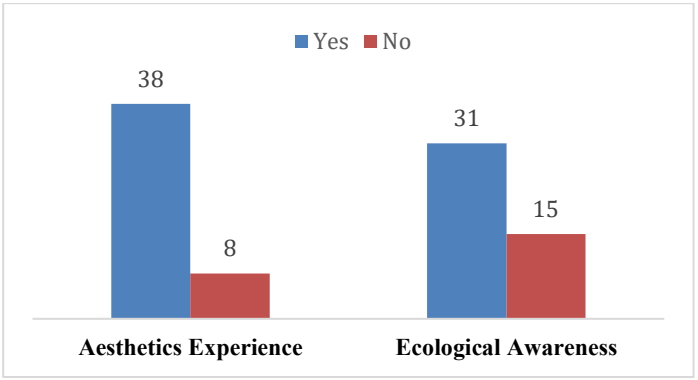

Figure 2. Observation Results on Children

This chart illustrates that although not all children have reached optimal integration between the aesthetic and ecological dimensions, the majority have shown positive development in one or both of these aspects. This reinforces the assumption that nature-based art learning can serve as an effective strategy to simultaneously foster both aesthetic sensitivity and ecological awareness. Reflections from teachers indicate that art learning using natural materials is perceived as a richer and more meaningful experience compared to conventional methods, such as drawing on whiteboards or using only paper and crayons. One teacher stated, “This learning model is much richer than just drawing on a whiteboard.” This view is supported by previous research. For instance, Sumiati (2024) found that nature-based art activities particularly ecoprint batik in early childhood education not only enhance ecological awareness but also improve children’s fine motor skills.

Figure 3. Art Learning using Natural Materials Through Ecoprint Batik Activities

Furthermore, a study by Ruswanti & Hasibuan (2024) revealed that ecoprint activities help improve children’s problem-solving skills through exploratory engagement with natural colors, textures, and shapes. The teachers involved in this study emphasized that the nature-based approach cultivates children's sensitivity to

their surrounding environment, while also fostering creativity and perseverance throughout the artistic creation process.

Figure 4. Art Learning using Natural Materials Through Tie-Dye (Jumputan) Batik Techniques with Natural Colorants

Aesthetic Enrichment through Natural Material Exploration

Observations and teacher reflections indicate that children's interactions with the textures, colors, and natural forms such as textured leaves and smooth twigs enhance the quality of their aesthetic experience. The children were not merely producing art but also engaging in reflective personal interpretation. For example, one child associated the arrangement of leaves with “rain” because they were “dense.”

These findings are in line with the study by Jazariyah et al. (2023) and Kartika et al. (2023), which demonstrated that nature-based art learning models are effective in stimulating early childhood aesthetic sensitivity through activities such as collage, batik, and natural painting. In the context of neuroaesthetic theory, direct sensory engagement with natural textures and colors activates regions of the brain associated with visual perception and emotional response, thereby deepening children’s aesthetic appreciation and reflective capacity. This strengthens the cognitive and emotional foundation for the development of aesthetic awareness through direct encounters with nature.

Progressive Development of Ecological Awareness

Another key finding reveals that direct interaction with natural materials fosters ecological awareness in young children. Questions such as “Which tree did this leaf fall from?” indicate emerging curiosity and an understanding of the origins of natural materials. This aligns with the principles of Arts-Based Environmental Education (AEE), which integrates art and environmental understanding, enabling children to observe and interpret the natural world meaningfully.

A study by Sumiati (2024) reported increases in both ecological awareness and fine motor skills through ecoprint activities using natural materials findings that are consistent with those observed in this field study. Moreover, a publication by the Walshe et al. (2023) emphasized that nature-based art enhances children's emotional connection to the environment and supports the development of ecological agency from early childhood.

Expressions of environmental empathy such as "I feel sorry for the tree, it might get hurt" and the initiative to bring home leftover natural materials reflect the internalization of sustainability values. These behaviors signify early stages of eco-capabilities, in which children begin to develop moral capacities and act based on their ecological understanding.

The Synergy of Aesthetics and Ecology in Holistic Learning

This study successfully demonstrates that nature-based art learning bridges two essential developmental domains simultaneously: aesthetic and ecological. While previous literature such as Kartika et al. (2023) and Ramadhani et al. (2024) highlighted positive impacts in each domain individually, this research presents integrative empirical evidence. Out of 46 children, 38 were able to express aesthetic understanding, and 31 demonstrated ecological awareness through reflective discussions about materials and their consequences clear indicators of integrated holistic learning outcomes.

This learning model closely aligns with the principles of Forest School/Earth School, which emphasize outdoor artistic engagement as a long-term process to cultivate multidimensional ecological sensitivity. It also resonates with the Attention Restoration Theory, which posits that direct contact with nature restores attention and creates cognitive space for creativity and aesthetic reflection.

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings of this study provide a strong foundation for early childhood educators to adopt nature-based art learning as a regular strategy within educational processes. The periodic curation of natural materials such as leaves, twigs, small stones, and seeds can enhance children's connection to their environment while enriching their artistic experiences. Through repeated interaction with natural materials, children not only develop aesthetic sensitivity but also gradually and organically build ecological awareness.

Reflection on both aesthetic and ecological experiences should also become an integral part of learning evaluation. Teachers play a vital role in facilitating dialogues that encourage children to express the meaning behind their work, their feelings toward textures or colors, and their understanding of the origins of the materials used. This process not only deepens interpretation but also strengthens children's cognitive and emotional connection to the natural world.

To ensure the success of this approach, teacher training is essential. Educators must be equipped with the sensitivity to recognize the affordances or educational potentials of various natural materials so they can guide children's exploration in a reflective and meaningful way.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study presents several limitations that should be considered. The descriptive qualitative approach employed, while offering in-depth insights into the processes and meanings behind nature-based art learning, has inherent limitations in terms of generalizability. Additionally, the limited sample size, drawn from a single early childhood education institution, restricts the representativeness of the findings for broader populations.

Therefore, it is highly recommended that future research adopts a quantitative approach using standardized instruments to simultaneously measure aesthetic experience and ecological awareness. Such a quantitative approach is expected to yield broader, more objective, and comparable data across diverse populations.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies are necessary to examine the long-term impacts of this educational approach on the development of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors in early childhood. Research of this nature would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of nature-based learning strategies in consistently instilling ecological values from an early age.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that nature-based art learning holds significant potential in fostering both aesthetic experience and ecological awareness among children aged 5–6 years. Through direct interaction with natural materials, children not only enhance their ability to express themselves visually and appreciate beauty but also develop an early understanding of natural cycles and exhibit empathetic behavior toward the environment. The learning process, integrated with exploration and reflection, proves to create contextual, enjoyable, and meaningful experiences.

Observations and interviews indicate that most children were able to articulate the meaning behind their artwork and showed responsible ecological behavior. Teachers also observed that this learning strategy enriched classroom activities far more than conventional methods. Therefore, nature-based art learning can be considered a relevant and effective approach to addressing current challenges in early childhood education, especially in shaping children’s creativity and environmental care from an early age. Moving forward, systematic efforts are needed to integrate this approach into the early childhood curriculum, along with teacher training to optimally facilitate both aesthetic and ecological reflection experiences.

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