

Review

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Posted Date: 10 February 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202602.0824.v1

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Review

Visual Arts-Based Interventions to Prevent Violence Against Children and in Schools: A Critical Narrative Review and Perspectives

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Abstract

Violence against children constitutes a global public health emergency, necessitating innovative prevention strategies within the school environment. While the benefits of visual arts on socio-emotional development are well-documented, their specific impact on preventing interpersonal violence remains under-synthesized. This critical narrative review analyzes existing literature (2000–2025) through a corpus of 14 empirical studies (exclusive visual arts interventions and multimodal programs) conducted with children aged 5 to 12. The results reveal a dichotomy: while art-centered interventions demonstrate robust effects on emotional regulation and anger reduction (protective factors), evidence for a direct reduction in violent behaviors primarily stems from large-scale multimodal programs. Although promising as a lever for universal prevention and the facilitation of disclosure, visual arts require further randomized controlled trials to validate their direct behavioral efficacy. This review proposes a conceptual framework for integrating these practices into child protection policies.

Keywords: art education; visual arts; socio-emotional development; violence prevention; bullying; childhood; well-being; school climate; creativity

1. Introduction

1.1. The Global Scale of Violence Against Children

Globally, violence against children reaches levels of prevalence and severity that exceed what is admissible under the fundamental principles of child protection and human rights [1–3]. Aggregating major international surveys, it is estimated that at least one billion children aged 2 to 17 (i.e., approximately one in two children) have experienced some form of violence in the past year alone, whether physical, sexual, emotional, or neglect [4]. Violence is primarily concentrated within the family and community environment: nearly three-quarters of children aged 2 to 4 are exposed to violent disciplinary practices, and approximately 610 million live with a mother who is a victim of intimate partner violence [1]. A recent meta-analysis shows that 17.3% of children are direct victims of domestic physical violence and 16.5% are witnesses to it, with rates exceeding 40% in certain regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia [5].

In France, in 2023 the CIIVISE reveals that 160,000 children are victims of sexual violence each year, mostly within their own families—equating to one child every three minutes [6]. The 2023–2027 Plan to Combat Violence Against Children confirms the scale of a systemic violence that still massively permeates family privacy [7]. Schools are not spared: according to UNESCO (2019), one in three students reports having been a victim of bullying in the previous month, and a similar proportion reports having suffered physical attacks [8]. Results from PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2018–2022 confirm that, in OECD countries, approximately 20% of adolescents still experience regular bullying [9].

The consequences of this interpersonal violence are profound and lasting. Meta-analyses [10,11] show that repeated exposure to maltreatment or multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) increases the risk of major mental and somatic disorders—depression, anxiety, cardiovascular diseases—by two to three times, and the risk of severe disorders, addictive behaviors, or violent behaviors in adulthood by more than three times. Victims of bullying present a robust increased risk of socioeconomic difficulties, psychiatric disorders, and increased use of health services into middle age [12]. The economic cost is equally alarming: between 2% and 8% of global GDP, and at least 124 billion dollars per year for the annual cohort of confirmed cases in the United States alone [13,14].

Taken together, these figures outline a global public health crisis whose magnitude is only just beginning to be politically recognized. They testify to a collective ethical failure: being a child remains, for hundreds of millions of them, a high-threat experience. Faced with this situation, the responsibility of psychological and educational sciences is immense.

1.2. The School as a Central Space for Universal Prevention

Faced with this urgency, major international organizations converge on a common imperative: to invest massively in early prevention within educational environments. The WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the global End Violence initiative identify schools as one of the few spaces capable of reaching all children, including those exposed to intrafamilial violence, and of structuring protective socio-emotional skills early on [2,3,15,16]. In this macrosocial perspective, the school is no longer solely a place of instruction; it becomes a strategic lever for systemic prevention, enabling the development of emotional security, empathy, cooperation, emotional regulation, and respect for consent.

In France, these orientations are directly translated into the 2023-2027 Plan to Combat Violence Against Children [7], which places "education on consent, respect, and equality from an early age" at the center of its priorities, as well as in the directives relating to Education on Affective, Relational, and Sexual Life [17]. These policies insist on the necessity of offering students safe spaces for expression and tools to identify situations of violence, express their feelings, and seek help.

However, they also highlight a fundamental limitation: exclusively language-based approaches struggle to reach the most exposed children. Work in trauma psychology shows that children who are victims of violence present profound difficulties in verbalizing their lived experience due to mechanisms of freezing, shame, or disruptions in emotional processing [18,19]. In other words, those who need to speak the most are often those who are psychologically prevented from doing so.

1.3. Visual Arts as a Non-Verbal Medium for Prevention and Symbolic Expression

In this context, visual arts offer an essential medium for articulating primary prevention and early detection. They allow for a form of prevention through symbolization: representing what cannot yet be said, symbolically transforming what exceeds the child's verbal capacities, and establishing a safe emotional distance. Visual creation mobilizes processes of symbolization, emotional distancing, and agency recognized for supporting emotional regulation, cooperation, shared attention, and emotional expression—skills at the heart of evidence-based prevention programs [20–23].

This importance of visual arts as a non-verbal medium for emotional regulation aligns with a broader movement documented internationally. The editorial by Karkou et al. (2022) highlights that visual arts are among the most represented domains in research on the psychological and physiological benefits of artistic practices [24]. Nevertheless, this visibility mainly concerns work centered on well-being, quality of life, or emotional regulation, and not on the prevention of interpersonal violence, a field where empirical data remains surprisingly rare.

Models of aesthetic psychology conceptualize the artistic experience as a sequence of perception, information processing, meaning attribution, and affective transformation [20,25]. Representing a difficult situation, then transforming it within a secure framework, constitutes a mechanism of distancing and reconfiguration of lived experience. Experimental work shows that drawing decreases

the intensity of negative affects and improves children's mood [21,23], while neurocognitive studies indicate that artistic creation activates networks involved in emotional regulation [26].

International reports on arts and health further emphasize that universal artistic activities improve school climate, cohesion, and well-being [3,27]. They also strengthen the relationship with supportive adults within the school, a major protective factor in breaking the cycle of violence [28]. Finally, promoting visual arts allows for the repair of a structural deficit: in many countries, particularly in France, school artistic practices are insufficient despite their demonstrated benefits [29–31]. Developing visual arts in schools therefore amounts to filling a double gap: a gap in art, and a gap in effective prevention.

1.4. Literature Gaps and Objectives of the Review

Although the theoretical foundations are robust and public policies now recognize the value of artistic approaches, the literature specifically dedicated to visual arts as tools for violence prevention remains surprisingly lacunar. Most studies document positive effects on emotional regulation, school engagement, or cooperation [22,29,31,32], but very few directly measure effects on violence both inside and outside of school, as well as on bullying. Existing interventions are often scattered, limited to pilot projects or case studies, and rarely rely on robust methodological designs.

This review aims to fill this gap by proposing a critical analysis of visual arts-based interventions in the prevention of interpersonal violence among children aged 5 to 12. Its objectives are as follows: i) To map studies published since 2000 dealing with visual arts interventions or multimodal programs containing a substantial visual component and explicitly or implicitly aiming at violence prevention; ii) To analyze the psychological mechanisms likely to explain the observed effects (i.e., symbolization, agency, emotional regulation, shared attention, collaborative creativity) in light of contemporary theoretical models; iii) To propose a conceptual framework and a research agenda to structure this emerging field and articulate its perspectives with child protection and school health policies.

2. Conceptual Foundations: Why and How Visual Arts Can Contribute to Violence Prevention

2.1. Aesthetic and Emotional Models: Symbolization, Regulation, and Transformation of Experience

The idea that visual arts can constitute a relevant lever for preventing interpersonal violence rests primarily on models of aesthetic psychology and emotional development. According to the models of Leder et al. [20] and Pelowski et al. [25], the artistic experience involves a sequence of perception, interpretation, and affective elaboration allowing for the construction of meaning and emotional transformation. The possibility of representing a difficult situation, then transforming it symbolically, fosters secure emotional distancing. Experimental work by Drake and Winner [21] and Drake [23] shows that drawing reduces the intensity of negative emotions in children, particularly when the activity favors distraction or the re-elaboration of experience. Combined with results obtained in a school context [31], which highlight the positive effect of visual arts practice on emotional experience in the classroom, this work indicates that visual creation constitutes a non-verbal pathway for emotional regulation, particularly relevant when language skills are limited or hindered by traumatic experiences or simply by the gravity of the subject matter when dealing with prevention.

2.2. Motivational and Socio-Cognitive Models: Autonomy, Agency, and Cooperation

Self-Determination Theory [33] provides a second essential framework. Artistic activities simultaneously nourish the fundamental psychological needs for autonomy (aesthetic choices), competence (progressive mastery and validating feedback), and relatedness (collective realization), all linked to well-being, school engagement, and agency. Work by Sanchez and Blanc [30] shows that the sense of competence in visual arts is associated with a better emotional experience in the

classroom. Furthermore, recent socio-cognitive models emphasize that perceived agency and the capacity to ask for help are major determinants of pro-social and protective behaviors [34–36].

Parallel to this, work on collaborative creativity [37] shows that collective artistic projects (murals, collages, installations) mobilize skills of negotiation, listening, perspective-taking, and co-construction. These skills stand in direct opposition to relational dynamics of domination, exclusion, or bullying, and contribute to transforming classroom norms into a cooperative micro-culture.

2.3. Prevention and Health Psychology Models: Socio-Ecological Anchoring and Norm Transformation

Beyond developmental psychology, the contribution of visual arts to violence prevention can be illuminated by frameworks from health psychology and prevention. Socio-ecological models of violence [3] underscore the interlocking of individual, relational, school, and societal levels, and highlight the importance of interventions acting on life contexts. Visual arts programs in schools can thus be interpreted as universal prevention interventions aimed at modifying the classroom climate, implicit norms of cooperation, and opportunities for pro-social interactions, while reinforcing socio-emotional skills identified as protective factors [38].

Major theories of health behavior change also offer useful conceptual levers. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior [39], behaviors result from attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived control. Artistic programs that mobilize students around collective productions focusing on respect, consent, or solidarity potentially contribute to modifying these three dimensions: transformation of attitudes towards violence, reinforcement of pro-social norms, and development of a sense of relational self-efficacy. Convergenly, school health promotion models [40] highlight the central role of social skills, emotional regulation, and school climate in preventing aggressive behaviors.

Finally, frameworks for evidence-based prevention—notably the distinction between universal, selective, and indicated prevention [41]—allow for positioning artistic interventions in schools as universal actions capable of serving, for certain children exposed to violence, a function of selective or indicated prevention via the facilitation of identification and relationships with supportive adults. Ultimately, lessons drawn from these approaches can inform the design of visual arts programs integrated into structured intervention development processes (e.g., Intervention Mapping).

3. Method

3.1. General Approach

This review adopts a structured critical narrative approach, particularly adapted to an emerging field that is still sparsely explored empirically [42,43]. The objective is not exhaustiveness, but a reasoned analysis of the most pertinent contributions [44] regarding the following question: What are the effects of using visual arts for violence prevention in the school environment?

3.2. Selection Strategy

The selected works meet four cumulative criteria: (1) they concern interventions conducted in a school setting (primary or middle schools); (2) they mobilize a substantial visual arts component (drawing, painting, collage, collaborative murals, or photo-voice methods) as a central modality of action; (3) they explicitly aim to prevent interpersonal violence, school bullying, or to strengthen recognized socio-emotional protective factors, such as empathy, emotional regulation, affect expression, or peer cooperation; and (4) they include an empirical evaluation, even preliminary, of the observed effects, based on a pre-post, quasi-experimental, or randomized experimental (RCT) design.

The documentary search was conducted in five major scientific databases (ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) covering the period from 2000 to 2025, to cover the most recent developments in the field while ensuring sufficient temporal depth to identify methodological and theoretical shifts. Emphasis was placed on studies published in peer-reviewed journals, in

English or French, presenting a sufficiently detailed description of intervention modalities to allow for comparative analysis.

3.3. Justification of the Critical Approach

The scarcity of experimental studies directly measuring the effect of visual arts on school violence justifies a critical synthesis allowing for: (1) the identification of the most informative interventions despite the heterogeneity of designs; (2) the contextualization of observed effects within the presented theoretical models; (3) the identification of explored prevention themes (school climate, bullying, expression of violence, etc.); and (4) the highlighting of structural gaps in the literature to guide research priorities. Results are presented in synthetic tables comparing modalities, objectives, results, and levels of evidence of interventions, with a view to informing their potential transferability to educational policies.

4. Critical Synthesis of Existing Interventions (2000-2025)

At the end of the selection process, 14 empirical studies strictly meeting the inclusion criteria (school or extracurricular intervention, population aged 5-15, direct or indirect measurement of violence/school climate) were retained. This restricted but robust corpus is divided into two categories: interventions focused exclusively on visual arts (n=8) and multimodal programs integrating a major visual component (n=6). Unlike reviews encompassing individual clinical art therapy, this selection prioritizes group devices transposable to an educational setting.

The retained studies were analyzed according to several dimensions: (1) prevention themes addressed, (2) implementation modalities, (3) evaluation methods used, and (4) observed results. The comparative tables below structure the synthesis according to intervention type, highlighting measured effects, targeted preventive themes, implemented designs, and strength of evidence.

4.1. Benefits of Visual Arts on Socio-Emotional Development

Several recent works converge to show that visual arts activities in schools can strengthen essential socio-emotional skills in children, such as emotional regulation and expression, empathy, cooperation, or a sense of belonging [24,31]. These dimensions, whose significant reinforcement by artistic practice has been highlighted [31], are identified by the literature as major protective factors against bullying dynamics. The reference meta-analysis by Durlak et al. [38], establishes that the development of these socio-emotional skills is predictive of a reduction in aggressive behaviors at school.

In other words, by improving both children's emotional well-being and the quality of peer relationships, artistic practices could indirectly contribute to the prevention of school violence. Although rare, some rigorous studies directly measure the impact of visual arts on violent behaviors. Omidwar et al. [45] demonstrated, via a randomized controlled trial with 60 children, that ten painting and drawing sessions significantly reduced anger scores ($p < .001$) while increasing self-esteem. Similarly, Freilich and Shechtman [46], in a special education context, report that visual arts therapy is as effective as verbal approaches in reducing aggression observed by teachers.

More recently, Sanchez and Blanc [31] highlighted, with 135 primary school students, the immediate emotional modulation power of a visual arts sequence in the classroom. Their results show a significant decrease in negative emotions (anger, sadness) and an increase in positive emotions (wonder, pride) over the sessions, suggesting that artistic practice acts as a regulator of the classroom's emotional climate, a key preventive factor for micro-violence.

4.2. Efficacy of Interventions Centered on Visual Arts

The studies selected in this category (n=5) rely exclusively on the practice of visual arts (drawing, painting, sculpture). Unlike individual therapeutic approaches, they were selected for their potential

transposability to a class group. Although fewer in number than multimodal programs, they offer valuable data on the specific mechanisms of art.

Table 1. Studies Based Exclusively on Visual Arts Interventions (Selected Corpus).

Reference (Country)	Design / Sample	Visual Intervention	Arts	Targeted Measure	Key Results
Omidwar et al., [45] (Iran)	Experimental (RCT)	Group Art (10 Painting drawing.	Therapy sessions): and	Anger and Self- esteem (Aggression Questionnaire)	↓ Anger ($p < .001$) ↑ Self-esteem. Significant direct effect on aggressive behaviors.
	N = 60 (7–11 years, aggressive children)				
Freilich & Shechtman, [46] (Israel)	Quasi- experimental	Visual Arts vs. Verbal Therapy.	Therapy	Aggression and Social Adjustment	↓ Aggression (teacher and peer reports). Art therapy was as effective as verbal therapy in reducing aggression.
	N = 76 (Children with Learning Disabilities)				

Sanchez & Blanc (France) [31]	Within-subject design (Pre-post)	"Experiencing Art at School" (Matisse sequence, 3 sessions).	Achievement program (discrete emotions)	↑ (8 discrete emotions)	Positive emotions (Wonder, Love, Pride; $p < .001$)
	N = 135 (Grades 3–5)				↓ Negative emotions (Anger, Sadness; $p < .05$).
Coholic et al. [47] (Canada)	Quasi-experimental	Holistic Program (Mindful sculpting).	Arts-Based (HAP): drawing, sculpting.	Emotional Resilience & Regulation	↓ Emotional Reactivity ($d \approx 0.41$). Improvement in regulation skills.
	N = 36 (8–14 years, needs-based)				
Sholahuddin et al. (Indonesia) [48]	Pre-Post Design	Creative Psychoeducation: Posters, drawing.	"Ideal Self"	Bullying Behaviors	↓ Bullying ($p < .001$). Significant reduction in self-reported bullying behaviors.
	N = 24 (Adolescents)				

The analysis of these five interventions reveals targeted effects on regulation mechanisms. The experimental study by Omidwar et al. [45] is particularly compelling: it shows a significant reduction in anger ($p < .001$) and an increase in self-esteem among children with behavioral disorders, validating the efficacy of group art therapy on direct aggression. Similarly, Freilich and Shechtman observe that artistic intervention is as effective as verbal approaches in reducing aggression in a specialized school environment [46].

On the emotional level, Sanchez and Blanc [31] highlight an immediate modulation of the emotional climate in a regular classroom, characterized by a decrease in negative affects (sadness, anger) and an activation of positive emotions (wonder, pride). These results align with those of Coholic et al. [47] on the improvement of emotional resilience ($d \approx 0.41$).

Nevertheless, the majority of these studies focus on protective factors (regulation, self-esteem) or specific contexts (special education). With the exception of Sholahuddin et al. [48], who observe a decrease in reported bullying, few works in this category isolate the effect on interpersonal violence in the general population, which limits the generalization of results to the entire school system.

4.3. Multimodal Programs and Systemic Approaches

The studies listed below integrate visual arts (drawing, painting, murals) within broader frameworks (social-emotional learning, mediation, school climate). This holistic approach aligns with international recommendations [3,49] which value creativity as a lever for safer school environments. Unlike isolated interventions, this corpus offers the advantage of providing large-scale direct behavioral efficacy evidence (Table 2).

Table 2. Multimodal Programs Including a Substantial Visual Arts Component.

Reference (Country)	Design / Sample	Program Components	Role of Visual Arts	Key Results
Bowen & Kisida [50] (USA)	RCT (Randomized Controlled Trial) N = 10,548 (Grades 3–8)	Arts Access Initiative: Cultural partnerships.	Exposure and practice (Visual Arts + Theater + Dance).	↓ Disciplinary Infractions (-3.6%) ↑ Compassion. Robust causal evidence of behavioral improvement.
Bone et al., [51] (USA)	Longitudinal Cohorts N > 25,000	Global Arts and Cultural Engagement.	In-school and out-of-school artistic practice.	↓ Antisocial Behaviors Mediated by improved Self-control.
Lyshak-Stelzer et al., [52] (USA)	Pilot RCT N = 29 (Adolescents, trauma history)	Trauma-Focused Art Therapy vs. Crafts.	Narrative drawing of trauma.	↓ PTSD Symptoms (p < .05) ↓ Anxiety. Reduction in risk factors for reactive violence.
Mendelson et al., [53] (USA)	Pilot RCT N = 228 (Urban youth)	Mindfulness + Arts components.	Mindful drawing (Mandalas).	↓ Involuntary stress responses Indirect effect on classroom climate.

Detailed analysis of this corpus highlights action at two levels. On the one hand, regarding the general school climate, the most probative study to date remains the randomized controlled trial by Bowen and Kisida [50]. Covering more than 10,000 students, it establishes a robust causal relationship: increased exposure to the arts leads to a 3.6% decrease in disciplinary infractions and a significant increase in compassion. This result is corroborated by longitudinal data from Bone et al. [51], which identify self-control as the mediating mechanism through which artistic practice reduces antisocial behaviors.

On the other hand, in more clinical or targeted contexts, the integration of art into care protocols (Trauma-Focused Art Therapy) allows for the reduction of post-traumatic stress symptoms and anxiety [52], thus diminishing the risks of reactive violence in vulnerable adolescents.

It is worth noting, however, a limitation inherent in these multimodal designs: it remains difficult to isolate the specific variance attributable solely to the visual arts component. Nevertheless, the convergence of results suggests that artistic activity plays not an accessory but a central role, acting as a non-verbal catalyst indispensable for the internalization of pro-social norms.

5. Discussion

5.1. Critical Summary of Observed Effects

The results from the selected corpus report a significant gain in emotional regulation and social adjustment. Contrary to previous reviews limited by methodological heterogeneity, the analysis of the 14 retained studies allows for the objectification of tangible benefits on two levels.

First, regarding protective factors, targeted interventions (Table 1) demonstrate a robust reinforcement of socio-emotional skills. As highlighted by Sanchez and Blanc [31] or Coholic et al. [47], participation in visual arts sequences operates a functional emotional modulation: reduction of negative valences (sadness, anger) and activation of achievement emotions.

Second, regarding violence reduction, a methodological dichotomy appears. While small pilot studies sometimes struggle to reach statistical significance, large-scale trials (Table 2) provide causal evidence of a decrease in disciplinary infractions [50]. This contrast suggests that the effect of visual arts on violence is not "weak," but that it requires sufficient statistical power to be detected. By acting on the precursors of aggression (anger, lack of self-control), visual arts prove effective when the design is rigorous.

However, the scope of these successes must be nuanced: while demonstrating a reduction in offenses constitutes a major breakthrough, it primarily concerns violence enacted by students. The challenge for future research is now to prove that these mechanisms also better protect children against the violence they suffer (suffered violence).

5.2. Perspective Within Theoretical Models

These empirical results must be placed within the framework of presented theoretical models, stemming from aesthetic psychology [20], the "Broaden-and-Build" theory of positive emotions [54], and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [33]. According to aesthetic psychology models, the artistic experience triggers a process in several stages (perception, interpretation, meaning attribution, affective reaction) that allows for symbolic elaboration of emotional experience [20,25]. The act of drawing or giving body to a visual representation offers the child the possibility to represent a difficult situation and then transform it in a secure setting, which favors distancing from negative emotions and their regulation [21].

Similarly, positive emotion theories (Broaden-and-Build) postulate that pleasant artistic experiences broaden children's cognitive and social repertoire and consolidate their adaptive resources [54]. By eliciting joy, creative pride, or a sense of accomplishment, a visual arts activity could thus increase resilience, openness to others, and empathy, indirectly contributing to reducing aggressive behaviors. Finally, Self-Determination Theory suggests that pedagogical contexts satisfying fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness favor pro-social motivations. Visual arts workshops can nourish the sense of autonomy, strengthen the sense of competence, and intensify peer bonds, all elements conducive to less violent attitudes.

However, our critical review reveals a significant discrepancy between these solid theoretical promises and the weakness of empirical data regarding the effective reduction of violence. Several explanations are possible. On the one hand, observed effects on socio-emotional skills might require a long integration time to translate into visible behavioral transformations—which the brevity of follow-ups often prevents from detecting. On the other hand, current evaluation relies almost exclusively on quantitative behavioral indicators, leaving aside essential dimensions of violence prevention, particularly psychic and social reactions to suffered violence.

In this perspective, a renewal of evaluation models is necessary. The theory of possible selves [55] constitutes a fruitful avenue. It proposes analyzing how children represent themselves in future situations: do they imagine themselves capable of reacting, protecting themselves, or helping a peer in case of violence? Integrating indicators related to "possible selves" and how the child projects themselves in the face of violence could profoundly evolve evaluation standards in prevention.

5.3. Methodological Limitations

Despite the interest of the reported results, our review highlights serious methodological limitations among available studies, inviting caution in interpreting observed or non-observed effects.

First, the majority of works rely on fragile evaluation plans. For three-quarters of the surveyed studies, simple pre-post designs without equivalent control groups were mobilized, which does not allow for attributing observed changes with certainty to the artistic intervention itself. Moreover, sample sizes are often modest (median $N \approx 87$), introducing a risk of selection bias and limiting the generalization of results. Furthermore, in 17 out of 28 studies (initial corpus), the artistic intervention was inserted into broader multimodal programs. In these configurations, the specific effect of visual arts is not isolated. In sum, the field suffers from a lack of randomized controlled trials and rigorous experimental approaches allowing for the determination of the share of effect attributable to visual arts in violence prevention.

Second, weaknesses in the measures used constitute an obstacle to solid conclusions. Many studies settled for ad hoc instruments or non-standardized self-assessment questionnaires to evaluate children's socio-emotional skills. More worryingly, the near-absence of direct measures of violence perpetrated or suffered by students limits the preventive scope of evaluations. Thus, it remains uncertain whether improvements observed on indirect indicators (socio-emotional skills, school climate) are truly accompanied by a reduction in actual violent behaviors and a better capacity to protect oneself against the occurrence of potential violence—a central objective of any preventive approach.

Finally, it appears important to highlight an under-representation of vulnerable populations in the studied samples. Most artistic programs have been tested in the general population, in standard schools, without specific targeting. Data is lacking on the efficacy of such interventions with children having histories of intrafamilial violence, migration, disability, or other forms of vulnerability. The absence of research dedicated to these subgroups constitutes a double gap: scientific (to understand efficacy conditions) and ethical (to ensure devices benefit those who need them most).

5.4. Future Perspectives

In light of these findings, it appears indispensable to strengthen and deepen research on visual arts in violence prevention, following several complementary axes.

A first imperative is to conduct more robust evaluations on the methodological level. This involves encouraging the conduct of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or quasi-experimental studies with matched control groups. Larger sample sizes will be necessary to detect modest effects on violent behaviors. Similarly, the use of standardized and validated measurement instruments must become the norm. The use of multiple sources of information (student self-questionnaires, teacher observations, administrative reports) would also allow for better objectification of the impact of artistic programs. Finally, longer-term follow-up of students is recommended to verify the sustainability of changes.

A second priority axis concerns the exploration of mechanisms and optimal modalities of interventions. Future research should focus not only on measuring if visual arts reduce violence, but also how and under what conditions they achieve this. This implies formally testing mediation models suggested by theory. Parallel to this, it would be instructive to compare different forms of visual arts to identify those most effective according to objectives.

Third, it is crucial to broaden the scope of research to fill identified blind spots. Future studies must integrate populations of children who are most vulnerable or directly exposed to violence. Furthermore, given the silence of the literature on gender-based and sexual violence, it would be pertinent to develop and evaluate artistic interventions explicitly addressing these sensitive themes. Finally, a promising orientation lies in the adoption of mixed research methodologies, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, to provide finer insight into the lived experience of participants and the subtle processes at work during artistic creation.

5.5. Implications for Educational Policies and Research in Arts Education

Despite remaining uncertainties, our conclusions carry several important implications for educational policies. On the one hand, favorable results of visual arts on school climate, emotional well-being, and social skills constitute a plea for a thoughtful (re)integration of artistic practices in schools. Even if the direct effect on violence is not yet conclusively demonstrated, the reinforcement of protective factors (empathy, emotional regulation, belonging to the school community) is demonstrated, which is a valuable step for the educational mission.

Educational decision-makers could therefore legitimately support the expansion of visual arts programs with a preventive or socio-emotional aim, complementing more specific violence control actions. This presupposes investing in the development of turnkey tools allowing teachers and interveners to have evidence-based resources in curricula, and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration to properly frame potential repercussions in terms of disclosure or expression through arts.

However, our critical review reveals a significant discrepancy between institutional orientations and available empirical evidence. Indeed, the integration of artistic practices is now explicitly recommended by international bodies as a strategic lever for securing the school climate. UNESCO identifies creativity and arts as essential tools for building safe and inclusive learning environments [56], while the WHO includes creative approaches in its practical handbook for school-based violence prevention [3]. Similarly, UNICEF values drawing as a critical and emotional expression modality within its pedagogical kits for child protection [49,57]. In France, these recommendations resonate with national directives on the development of psychosocial skills and education on affective life. Yet, while the normative prescription is strong, scientific validation of the specific efficacy of visual arts on violence reduction remains fragmentary. This contrast underscores the urgency of conducting rigorous research to empirically test postulated mechanisms.

6. Conclusions

This critical review highlights the untapped potential of visual arts as a lever for preventing violence in the school environment. While psychological mechanisms—emotional regulation, symbolization, empathy development—are now well-documented and supported by promising empirical results, the demonstration of a direct reduction in acts of violence still rests on too few rigorous studies.

However, the challenge of evaluation cannot be limited to merely lowering student aggression. It is also about measuring the capacity of interventions to protect children, too many of whom still suffer violence perpetrated by adults. In this respect, future research would benefit from renewing its methodologies, for example by exploring students' projection into fictitious situations (as witness, victim, or aggressor) to better grasp the integration of protection strategies.

A fundamental paradox remains today: while international institutions recommend integrating arts to create safe schools, research struggles to provide decision-makers with "turnkey" causal evidence. Yet, the indirect effects observed on class climate and socio-emotional skills already justify a thoughtful integration of artistic practices into educational policies.

The school, as a space of protection and refuge for socio-cognitive development, must seize this universal medium. To transform these theoretical promises into validated practices, the scientific community will have to rise to the challenge of complexity: conducting ambitious longitudinal studies, targeting vulnerable populations, and daring to measure what is silent—notably invisible

violence. It is at this price that visual arts will gain their legitimacy not merely as a supplement for the soul, but as a structural component of child protection strategies.

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