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Transforming the Invisible: A Reggio Emilia-Inspired Art Education Model for Disadvantaged Preschoolers

Semanur Kulan Alagöz *
Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Türkiye)

Martina Riedler**
Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University (Türkiye)

Abstract

This action research study investigates the transformative potential of a Reggio Emilia-inspired art education model for disadvantaged preschool children in the Marmara Region of Türkiye. Conducted with a cohort of 22 children aged 4–6—including refugees, children with special educational needs (SEN), and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds—the study sought to dismantle rigid, traditional educational practices that hinder developmental autonomy. Over an 11-week intervention titled "Knowing Artists", participants engaged with the works of Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, and Osman Hamdi Bey through inquiry-based studios. Drawing on Wright's (2020) application of 'dreamkeeping' and Cutcher and Boyd's (2016) framework of collaborative pedagogy, the study illustrates how replacing deficit-based instruction with the "hundred languages" of expression enhanced participants' visual literacy, communication skills, and social-emotional regulation. The findings suggest that culturally responsive, intentional art education acts as a counter-narrative to the 'symbolic violence' often experienced by marginalized children in formal schooling.

Keywords: Reggio Emilia approach, action research, early childhood education, symbolic violence, art education

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* ***Semanur Kulan*** **Alagöz,** Graduate Student, Department of Elementary Education, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkiye, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3635-5060
Email: semanurkulan.sk@gmail.com

** ***Prof. Dr. Martina Riedler*****,** Faculty of Education, Department of Art Education, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Turkiye, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1254-4020
Email: riedler@comu.edu.tr

Correspondence**:** semanurkulan.sk@gmail.com

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Introduction

The intersection of art education and social equity remains a critical frontier in educational research. For children navigating the "cumulative risk factors" of poverty, displacement, or developmental delay, the classroom often represents either a sanctuary of possibility or a site of further marginalization. In the Turkish context, while significant strides have been made in increasing access to early childhood education (ECE), persistent challenges remain regarding the *quality* of pedagogy for vulnerable populations (Oktay, 2005). Traditional, teacher-directed models often prioritize rote learning and conformity, creating what can be described as an "invisible wall" that restricts the child's agency and creative potential.

This paper presents findings from an action research study that implemented a specialized art education model based on the *Reggio Emilia approach*. Originating in post-war Italy, Reggio Emilia offers a radical alternative by conceptualizing the child not as "needy" but as "rich, strong, and powerful," possessing "a hundred languages" of expression (Malaguzzi, 1993). This study adapts these principles to a state-affiliated preschool in the Marmara Region, targeting a diverse group of disadvantaged students. By engaging with the concepts of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Wright, 2020) and "collaborative pedagogy" (Cutcher & Boyd, 2016), the research asks: *How can a culturally responsive, inquiry-based art curriculum transform the learning processes, self-expression, and visual literacy of children whom the system often leaves behind?*

Theoretical Framework

The Reggio Emilia Ethos and Intentional Teaching

Central to this study is the Reggio concept of the *atelier* (art studio) as a laboratory for cognition. Unlike traditional art instruction, which often focuses on the production of identical crafts, the Reggio approach views art as a vehicle for inquiry. Vecchi (2010), a foundational figure in the movement, argues that "aesthetic vibration" activates learning connections that purely logical approaches cannot.

However, a "laissez-faire" approach is insufficient for children who lack prior exposure to art materials. As Richards and Terreni (2022) argue, effective art education in the early years requires a balance; teachers must be "neither hands-off nor very structured" but rather engage in intentional teaching. This involves actively scaffolding learning, introducing artistic vocabulary (e.g., texture, line, mood), and creating a "rich art environment" that invites agency while applying necessary constraints to focus inquiry (Cutcher & Boyd, 2016). This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, where learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural tools.

Art Education as a Counter to Symbolic Violence

For disadvantaged children—particularly refugees and those with limited proficiency in the dominant language—schools can be sites of "symbolic violence," where the cultural capital of the home is undervalued, leading children to feel "out of place" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Wright, 2020). Art education serves as a critical equalizer in this context. It provides a non-verbal mode of communication that bypasses linguistic barriers, allowing children to demonstrate competence. Wright (2020), drawing on Ladson-Billings (1994), suggests that artist-educators can act as "dreamkeepers," offering the emotional and intellectual support necessary to heal educational injuries and restart learning journeys.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a Technical/ Collaborative Action Research design. This methodology is inherently practitioner-centered, allowing the researcher (acting as an *atelierista* or specialist art

educator) to identify specific pedagogical problems—such as student disengagement and behavioral dysregulation—and iteratively test solutions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The approach aligns with Barone and Eisner's (1997) advocacy for arts-based educational research that seeks to enhance perspectives rather than just measure outcomes.

Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at an Early Childhood Education Center in the Marmara Region of Türkiye during the 2022-2023 academic year. The participant cohort consisted of **22 children** (12 girls, 10 boys) aged 4 to 6 years. The group was characterized by significant heterogeneity and disadvantage. The cohort included children from Syria, Afghanistan, and the Congo (e.g., Nie, Fazal, Ramez, Adisa), many of whom had limited Turkish proficiency and histories of trauma (Dönmez, 2021). As McArdle and Spina (2017) argue, creative arts provide vulnerable children with a non-verbal medium to express complex inner narratives. Participants also included children with autism (Uraz) and developmental delays (Ahmet). In addirion, several Turkish students faced severe economic hardship.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through participant observation, pedagogicaldocumentation (photographs, videos, transcripts), and semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify shifts in student engagement, skill acquisition, and social interaction.

The Intervention: "Knowing Artists"

The intervention utilized the Project Approach (Cadwell, 2003), engaging children in deep inquiry into the lives and works of three diverse artists. This moved beyond biography to explore themes of emotion, identity, and culture.

Phase 1: Vincent van Gogh – Emotion and Collaborative Practice

The first phase introduced Van Gogh to explore emotional expression.

- **Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS):** Analysis of *The Potato Eaters* prompted discussions on poverty and sadness. By using open-ended questions ("What is going on in this picture?"), the educator intentionally supported visual literacy (Yenawine, 1999), allowing children to connect the art to their own lived experiences of scarcity.

- **Collaborative Mural:** A large-scale *Starry Night* mural was created. Following Cutcher and Boyd's (2016) findings on collaborative painting, this activity required children to negotiate space and materials. It transformed their practice from solitary mark-making to a "silent dance" of cooperation, where children mixed paints directly on the paper, discovering secondary colors through shared experimentation.

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Figure 1. Children collaborating on the large-scale 'Starry Night' mural, mixing acrylics directly on the paper.

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Phase 2: Frida Kahlo – Identity, Pain, and Resilience

Frida Kahlo was selected to address themes of physical difference and resilience, topics highly relevant to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the cohort.

- **Dialogue:** Discussions focused on Frida's physical pain. Children hypothesized about the arrows in *The Wounded Deer*, suggesting narratives of hurt and exclusion that mirrored their own social realities. One student, *Yahya Abdul* (pseudonym), remarked, "Maybe she wants to belong somewhere but realizes she belongs nowhere," displaying a profound level of metaphorical thinking. Inspired by the "Remida" approach to creative reuse, children built a sculpture representing "resilience" using recycled materials. This pedagogical choice underscores how alternative, non-structured materials invite children to re-examine their everyday environment and construct shared cultural meanings (Barsotti & Giudici, 2012), while providing a rich, non-verbal medium for cognitive and aesthetic inquiry (Edwards et al., 2011). This complex problem-solving process effectively moved the children from parallel play to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

- **Studio Work:** Inspired by the "Remida" approach to creative reuse, children built a sculpture representing "resilience" using recycled materials. This pedagogical choice underscores how alternative, non-structured materials invite children to re-examine their everyday environment and construct shared cultural meanings (Barsotti & Giudici, 2012), while providing a rich, non-verbal medium for cognitive and aesthetic inquiry (Edwards et al., 2011). This complex problem-solving process effectively moved the children from parallel play to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).



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Figure 2. 'Resilience' sculpture constructed from recycled materials during the Frida Kahlo project.

Phase 3: Osman Hamdi Bey – Culture and Heritage

To ground the curriculum in the local context, the final phase focused on the Ottoman intellectual Osman Hamdi Bey. This phase was crucial for validating the cultural heritage of the host country (Alakuş, 2003) and integrating it with the Reggio philosophy.

- **The "Tortoise Trainer" Detective Game:** To analyze *The Tortoise Trainer*, the researcher staged a "crime scene" where the tortoises had "escaped" into the school garden. Children donned detective hats and used magnifying glasses to find clues, integrating science (testing water sources) and math (mapping). This activity exemplifies Dewey's (1934) notion of "art as experience," where learning is an active, embodied process that roots aesthetic inquiry into the democratic fabric of everyday life (Riedler, 2024).

- **Ebru (Marbling) Art:** Children engaged in *Ebru*, a traditional Turkish technique. The fluid nature of the water required patience and gentle control, acting as a meditative exercise for high-energy students.

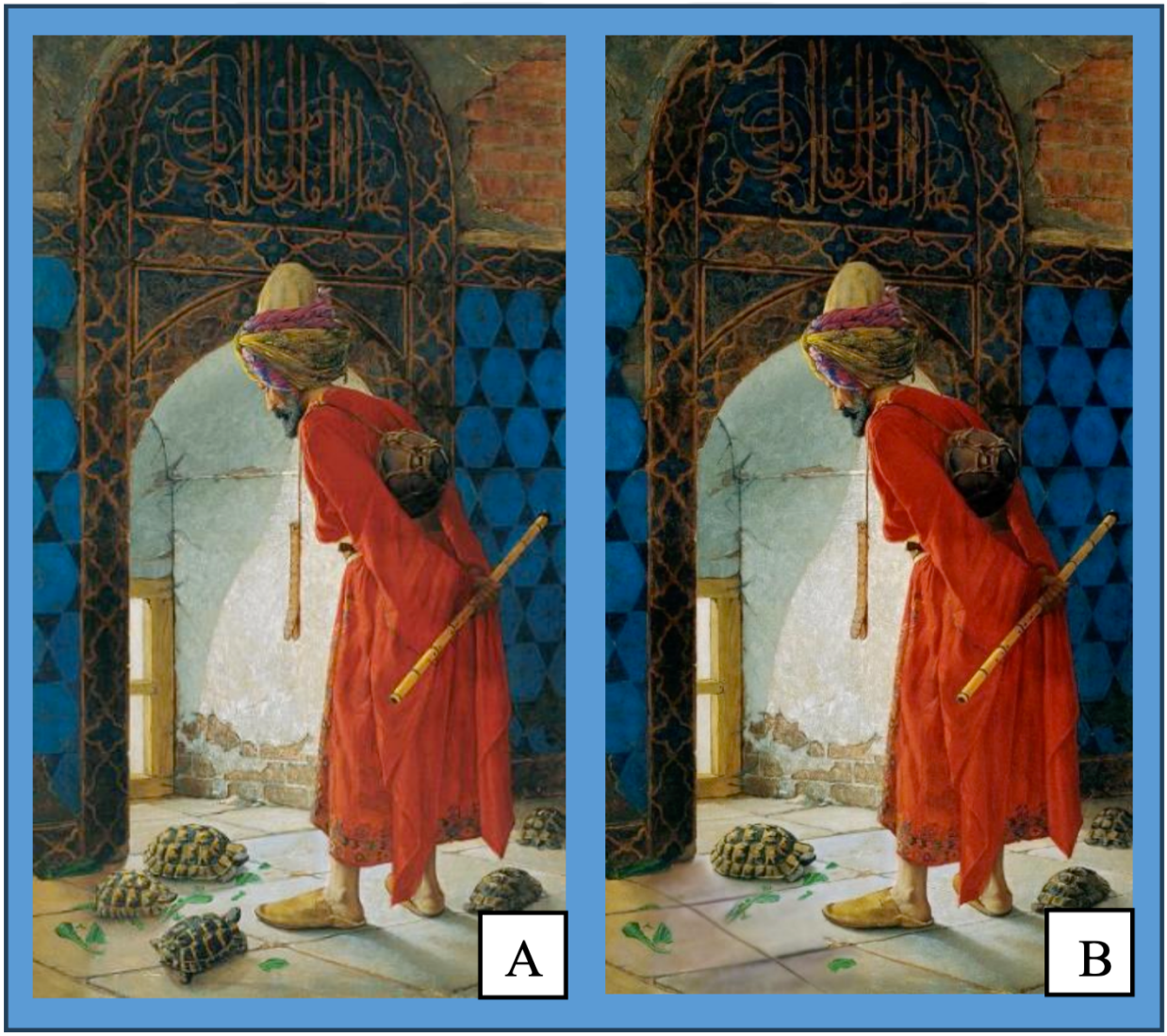


Figure 3. Students acting as detectives to find the 'escaped' tortoises from Osman Hamdi Bey's painting.

Findings

The implementation of the Reggio Emilia-inspired model yielded significant transformations across three key domains.

From Silence to Voice: Transformation of Communication

For non-verbal and refugee children, the art studio became a primary site of communication, countering the "symbolic violence" of a language-dominant classroom (Wright, 2020).

- **Case Study - Ahmet:** A student with developmental delays who had been non-verbal for the entire academic year spoke his first words during a reflection session. Pointing to his projected drawing from the "Happy/Sad Memory" activity, he articulated words like "Mom," "Dad," and "Home." The projection of his work gave him the status required to break his silence.

- **Case Study - Nie:** An Afghan refugee with limited Turkish language skills used her drawings to narrate stories of her homeland, effectively bypassing linguistic barriers to participate in the classroom community.

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Figure 4. Nie's drawing depicting a narrative from her homeland, used to bridge the linguistic gap.

Visual Literacy and Critical Thinking

Children transitioned from passive naming of objects to sophisticated interpretation of symbolism. During the *Tortoise Trainer* activity, the children demonstrated deductive reasoning and sustained focus (extending from 5 minutes pre-intervention to over 40 minutes). They began using aesthetic vocabulary ("texture," "shadow," "balance") to critique each other's work, moving away from the "right/wrong" binary of traditional schooling.

Social-Emotional Regulation and Collaboration

The collaborative nature of the projects fostered a shift from parallel play and conflict to cooperative learning. Students initially prone to aggression found positive leadership roles within the studio. The "drama" of the artists' lives (Vincent's sadness, Frida's pain) cultivated a culture of empathy. Children began using the artists' stories as a framework for understanding their peers' emotions, intervening in conflicts with words rather than physical force.

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Caption: Figure 5. Collaborative problem-solving during the construction of the 'Remida' sculpture.

Discussion

The Atelier as a Space of Equity

The findings underscore the vital role of the *atelier* in promoting equity. In a traditional classroom, success is often defined by linguistic or logical-mathematical ability—areas where disadvantaged children may have deficits due to environmental factors. The atelier, with its "hundred languages," democratizes success. A child like Ahmet can demonstrate intelligence and complexity through clay or paint in ways they cannot yet do through speech. This restructuring of the competence hierarchy is essential for building the self-esteem of marginalized students (Vecchi, 2010).

The Teacher as "Dreamkeeper"

The transformation observed in students like Ramez (who moved from disruption to engagement) highlights the role of the educator as a "dreamkeeper" (Wright, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1994). By providing high-quality materials and "intentional teaching" (Richards & Terreni, 2022)

rather than just supervision, the educator signaled to the children that they were worthy of complex, beautiful experiences. This helped heal the "educational wounds" inflicted by deficit-based models.

Culturally Responsive Reggio Emilia

A critical insight from this research is the importance of cultural adaptation. The inclusion of Osman Hamdi Bey alongside European masters was crucial. It validated the local culture and demonstrated that Reggio principles can be adapted to the specific cultural heritage of the students. The engagement levels during the *Ebru* activities were notably higher, suggesting that children connect deeply when the content reflects their own cultural "funds of knowledge" (Alakuş, 2003; Moll et al., 1992).

Conclusion

This action research provides compelling evidence that a Reggio Emilia-based art education model is a highly effective intervention for disadvantaged preschool students. By shifting the pedagogical focus from "deficit" to "potential," the model unlocked capabilities in children that traditional methods had suppressed. The transformation of non-verbal and aggressive behaviors into creative expression and collaboration demonstrates that art is not a luxury for the privileged, but a fundamental developmental right.

The study recommends the integration of flexible, project-based art curricula into national preschool programs for disadvantaged areas and emphasizes the need for specialized *atelieristas* who can facilitate deep inquiry. When children are viewed as "rich and powerful," they rise to meet that image, regardless of their socioeconomic starting points.

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Ethical Statement: The study was conducted following standard ethical research practices. The ethical approval for this research was provided by the Ethics Committee of Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities (date and number: 31/10/2022 - 2200251627).

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