

## A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE IN ART EDUCATION: AUTISM AND PAINTING

Assist. Prof. Dr. Eylem TATAROĞLU

---

### ABSTRACT

**A**rt is, in itself, a process of to experience. The children who grew up with art become peaceful and struggling adults who have no difficulty to express themselves. Art plays a big part in people's improving themselves, liberalization and taming their souls with all disciplines in itself. That's why, art education is essential, even compulsory for everyone.

As is known, although art education is called with different names in formal education, it consists of aesthetics, art criticism, art history and the spiral education of performance discipline which is aimed at material knowledge and developing more methods. Considering that art education which is the component part of compulsory education is essential for everyone and everyone is equal, its "special" part can be more emphatically felt in the education of handicapped children or children with various obstacles. It is necessary that not only physically or mentally handicapped, autistic children or children with loss of sense such as sight, hearing etc., the ones who has to stay in hospital permanently, but also gifted children are a part of the education. It is a necessity that those children and youngsters, as well as others, take the art education by firstly equality and then right of education. The subject of this research is autistic children and youngsters. When we look at the history of art education in Turkey, how and how qualified art education is given to those children? Is the art education given enough, considering the healing feature of art? The aim of the research, besides theoretical informations and compilations, is to emphasize the contribution of art activities made with those children and to call educators' attention to those children with a special case in any possible curriculum change and to advice them by giving informations about experiences.

This research which is about autistic children's experiences with art consists of the art school support given by the Rectorate of Başkent University to the summer school programme of Ankara Branch of the Autism Foundation. Variably 20 children took part in the research; the research was structured with ceramic and painting classes and classes went on for one and a half month. In this process, the instructors collected data by qualitative data collection methods such as meeting and corporate data collection and gained experiences with the children.

It is thought that this research will have many contributions not only in special education but also to the contents of visual arts training which aims at improving various skills in formal training going on till higher education.

**Key words:** Autism, Visual Arts Training, Painting.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Art, an important part of general education, aims at enriching the person's world of emotion and consideration; showing the ways of expressing his/herself, his/her emotions, opinions, dreams; introduce him/her the nature with its all living and non-living creatures, history and natural environment, how to understand and perceive the society s/he is living in, how to discover his/her gifts and so, it aims at making him/her a balanced individual” (Peşkersoy, Yıldırım, 2010, p.7).

Although the exact number is not known in our country, according to World Health Organization, there are around nine million handicapped people and 3-3,5 million of them are in the period of education. Yet, considering the handicapped people who have provided for education, we can only talk about 32.242 handicapped people (information from the Ministry of Education). Despite the fact that the special and gifted children are included in this number from the schools of Ministry of Education, there is not an exact information about their number.

Special education is provided by the Ministry of Education. Moreover, there are schools founded by private enterprise's attempts. Private schools which have started to be founded in 1980s perform their work by taking opening permission from Ministry of Education and Social Services and Child Protection Agency, but only the ones taking opening permission as a school from the Ministry of Education can give diploma to students (Sekizinci Beş Yıllık Kalkınma Planı Özel İhtisas Komisyonu Raporu, p. 43).

The datum above is such as to prove that the number and the diversity of the handicapped children whose disorder level and therefore educability were evaluated are really high. This research is notable in terms of emphasizing the importance of art education for those children and proving the positive effects of visual arts education on handicapped, especially autistic children.

The next frame will contain the description of autism; the features and the necessity of visual arts and theoretical information, experiences and analyses about autistic children's being educated via visual arts in the frame of ceramic and painting education.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAME

**2.1. Autism and Its Description:** Autism can be described as a disorder which is identified with behavioral symptoms related with higher cortical functions which lifelong effects socialization, language, communication and many other areas of activity and interests. It is possible to see all autistic behavior characteristics from the mildest to the most severe forms in autistic spectrum because the severity of clinical symptoms can differ from person to person (Fazlıoğlu, Yurdakul, 2009, p.16).

Autism was named as “Early Childhood Autism” by Leo Kanner, a child psychiatrist in 1943 for the first time (Darica, Gümüşçü, p.3). There have been a number of theories to explain autism since autism was identified. However, it is admitted that autism emerges depending on many reasons, not only one. The theories propounded in this subject can be classified in four as Psychogenic, Behavioral, Organic, Conceptual:

**2.1.1. Psychogenic Theory:** According to psychogenic theory, autism is claimed to be the behavior of a psychological retraction emerging as a result of greeting the child with some behaviors perceived cold and negatory especially in mother-child relationship.

**2.1.2. Behavioral Theory:** The promoters of behavioral theory propounds that autism is a group of behaviors which was established by punishment and reward system and learned or formed by a bunch of coincidental possibilities. According to this idea, autism is the whole of atypical and special behaviors that the child learns in his environment or via communicating his environment.

**2.1.3. Organic Theory:** Recently, it is proved that autism has a biological sources and is accepted that some anomalies in the brain causes autism. Recent researches emphasize that there is a disorder about the development of cerebellum and it is considered that the structure of brain will be examined more detailed, depending on the advancement of technology.

This theory arguing that autism emerges as a result of that brain cannot perform some of its functions depending on an organic reason is assimilated nowadays. The theory contains the inability in the learning and attention and perception process of the child. The failure in biological evolution before and after the birth and some cases with negative impacts especially in the first three months of pregnancy can be the factors for increasing the risk for autism. Furthermore, it is found that there are abnormal findings in the blood of both autistic children and their parents, according to the genetical tests.

**2.1.4. Conceptual Theory:** The theory of Frith suggests that the basic problem in autistic people is inborn inadequacy in mental comprehension and this inadequacy prevents to make logical deductions. This inadequacy forces the child to develop through a different direction, so this emerges different autistic symptoms (Darıca, Gümüşçü, p.9-12).

**2.2. Characteristics of Autistic Children:** The characteristics of the autistic children are different from one another. Because of their different development features, they are evaluated in a spectrum from the mildest to the most severe. While some symptoms of autism are seen extremely in a child, it is normal to see them rarely or never in another child. Some symptoms of autism can disappear in time or turns into different symptoms.

**2.2.1. Mental Development Features:** Researches about autistic children stresses that 40% of those children have IQ level 40-50 (severe and moderate mental retardation), 30% of them have IQ level 50-70 (mild mental retardation) and 30% have IQ level 70 and more.

**2.2.2. Language Development Features:** Most of the children making a normal progress can learn the spoken language without experiencing any difficulty and start to speak efficiently. It has been observed that autistic babies shows no reaction towards talking to or calling them. Some of the autistic children keep silent been 0-2 age period. However, some of them can learn a few words as their peers (Fazlıoğlu, Yurdakul, 2009, p.37).

Two main symptoms of autism are language and communication problems. It is possible that conversation skills do not improve in approximately 40% of autistic children. Although conversation skills are improved, they are rarely or never used functionally. Their imitating skills are poor. They can have difficulties in distinguishing objects. Some autistic children speaks echolalically. The child speaking like this repeats what s/he hears immediately or later like a parrot. Some of the autistic children can start to speak even in puberty. Autistic children talks about themselves as third-person singular.

**2.2.3. Social-Emotional Development Features:** The inadequacy in imagination and imitation in autistic children causes their playing skills not to develop. It is possible that an autistic child does not play with a toy in accordance with its target. Autistic people have difficulties in contacting with their peers.

**2.3.4. Motor Development Features:** Kaner has stated that autistic children have a motor development. It is observed that there are differences from their peers in the development of motor skills in those children with a normal physical appearance. Although they seem to be able to having most skills around the normal time, it is possible that some of the skills such as paper cutting, putting cubes into a box can be developed lately.

That's why, it is important to include exercises supporting the development of basic movements in curricula prepared for autistic children (Fazlıoğlu, Yurdakul, 2009, p.37-41).

**2.3. Visual Arts/ Painting and Autism:** Visual arts education with the aims of providing the students to develop creative behaviors that they can use in every area; bringing them in cooperation, sharing, taking responsibility, respecting others, self respect is a necessity for autistic children in terms of improving skills in the areas mentioned above.

It will definitely be inducing and beneficial to support imagination and visual perception with art activities during the treatment process of this illness which is known with the feature of not being able to develop imagination. Moreover, one of the principles of visual arts (Peşkersoy, Yıldırım, 2010) is to accept that every child had a different perception, information, intuition, emotion and experience. More importantly, visual arts are grounded on the discipline that every child is creative (p.11).

Approaching the subject more deeply, we can say that visual arts education is essential for all of the students. Özsoy (2003) explained this situation as “it should be known that all of the students deserve the education and intelligence provided by visual arts training without regarding their talents, inabilities or pasts” (p.51).

The main target of the autistic children's education is to provide them to gain all of the needed skills and decrease behavior disorders as much as possible. A great deal of researches indicate that education must continue in the triangle of family, educator and child. The success of an autistic child's education is closely related to the consistency between the behaviors and attitudes in two different environment such as school and house (Gümüşçü, Pişkin, 1992, p. 242-244). According to this information, the importance and necessity of visual arts must be comprehended and the healing effect of art must be known by families. Autistic children spend spend as much time, even more with their families as they do in special education institutions or other activity schools; therefore, the family factor in education should not be despised, as with other children.

Special education experts are of the same opinion on that autistic children's some behavioral problems are caused by inability of self-expression. Visual art education will not only decrease behavioral problems by letting them express themselves, but also increase the quality of education by providing effectivity and permanence of learning (Bayraktar, 2007, p.82). There are important results of this research done by Bayraktar, in terms of displaying the contributions of the class to children:

\* Autistic children who are not able to express themselves verbally can use visual arts class to express themselves. Hence, an appropriate place, time, material and environment must be provided for autistic children and they must be let to reach mental satisfaction by self-expression.

\* In autistic children with aggressive behaviors before visual arts education, it has been observed that those behaviors disappear (p.83)

It must be emphasized that visual art activities done with autistic children has been painting activities based on a few themes. In this research, there are two-dimensional painting activities of visual arts and three-dimensional ceramic activities with a few themes as in painting. From this point of view, during a period of

approximately 6-8 weeks, children had many experiences with instructors at the point of production such as utilization of university's various studios, living in that environment, adaptation to a new atmosphere.

### **3. METHOD**

In addition to general screening model, this research has been made with qualitative research methods in which the data is collected by observation and meeting.

### **4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION**

It has been found out that ceramic activities, especially plasticizing the clay, breaking off, squeezing it with fingers and pasting are effective in development of fine motor skills, since fine motor skills are lacking in autistic children.

Besides the lack of fine motor skills, autistic children have some communicative problems. Extreme aggressive behaviors such as hitting, biting hand or scratching his/her face (Darıca, Pişkin, Gimmick, 1986, p.81), screaming are considered as problematic behaviors. After ceramic activities, especially plasticizing the clay, it has been found out that the frequency of repeating these problematic behaviors decreased.

### **5. RESULT AND SUGGESTIONS**

In this project carried out in cooperation of Başkent University and Autism Foundation, both painting and ceramic education has availed for the development of psychomotor skills and solving the adaptation problems of autistic children.

It has been observed that the children who were timid or even reluctant at the beginning became more willing and cheerful to go ahead in time.

The habit of working in painting classes by depending on a topic in time. In addition to this, it has been observed that there are some students going on painting with the same theme in every subject.

It was seen that when they saw their works in the gallery of our university, despite crowd, they paid a rather comfortable visit with looks knowing their works. This situation has been interpreted by researchers as that they are conscious of themselves and they can distinguish their works from others'.

## 6. RESOURCES

1. Bayraktar, E. (2007), Görsel Sanatlar Eğitiminin Otistik Çocuklar Üzerindeki Etkileri, Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Gazi Üniversitesi.
2. Darıca N., Pişkin Ü., Gümüüşü Ş. (...), Otizm ve Otistik Çocuklar, Basım Grafik, Ankara.
3. Fazlıoğlu Y, Yurdakul M. (2009). Otizm -Otizmde Görsel İletişim Tekniklerinin Kullanımı- , Morpa Kültür Yayınları LTD. Ş. , İstanbul.
4. Galatalı A.(1985) Eleştirim, Hacettepe Üniversitesi güzel sanatlar yayınları I-II
5. Okul Öncesi Eğitim-İlköğretim-Özel Eğitim, Sekizinci Beş Yıllık Kalkınma Planı, Özel İhtisas Komisyonu Raporu, Yayın No: DPT: 2598-ÖİK:609, Ankara, 2001.
6. Özel İhtiyaçları Olan Çocuklar İçin Eğitim Binaları, TC Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü, MEB Basımevi, Ankara, 1994.
7. Özsoy, V.(2003), Görsel Sanatlar Eğitimi –Resim-İş Eğitiminin Tarihsel ve Düşünsel Temelleri, Gündüz Eğitim ve Yayıncılık, Ankara.
8. Peşkersoy E., Yıldırım O. (2008), Görsel Sanatlar Dersi (1-8. Sınıflar) Öğretmen Kılavuz Kitabı, Kelebek Matbaacılık, İstanbul.
9. Tataroğlu E., S. Aktaş, (2012), 1. Kıbrıs Uluslararası Eğitim Araştırmaları Kongresi konferansı dahilinde "1. Kıbrıs Uluslararası Eğitim Araştırmaları Kongresi (CICER'12)" bildiri kitapçığındaki "OTİZM VE SANAT EĞİTİMİ: SERAMİK VE RESİM DERSLERİYLE ÖZEL BİR DENEYİM", Girne, KKTC.
10. Ulusal Eğitim Bilimleri Kongresi Bildirileri 4, Anadolu Üniversitesi, Eskişehir, Anadolu Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Yayınları No: 51, 1999.
11. Ulusal Özel Eğitim Kongresi, Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Ev Ekonomisi Yüksekokulu, Çocuk Sağlığı ve Eğitimi Bölümü, Özel Eğitim Anabilim Dalı, Ya-Pa Yayınları, Ankara, 1992.