



Non-Formal Education Opportunities for the Development of Talents in Autistic Children

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Abstract

Background: Despite legislative advancements and the strategic framework set by the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria [1], significant gaps remain in the implementation of inclusive practices within mainstream schools [3]. Structured methodologies for nurturing the specific talents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are often superseded by basic integration efforts. This study investigates non-formal education (NFE) as a scalable vehicle for neurodiverse talent development, aligning with the "Index for Inclusion" principles [2].

Methodology: Adopting a qualitative exploratory design, the research evaluates visual arts and photography as primary pedagogical tools. The study was conducted through community-based workshops, utilizing the "Photovoice" methodology [4] to empower participants through visual storytelling. Data collection involved a multi-vector approach: longitudinal observation of creative processes, analysis of visual outputs, and reflective discussions focused on identifying cognitive engagement patterns.

Results: The findings indicate that visual arts serve as a robust alternative communication channel, effectively moving "beyond words" in the developmental process [6]. Photography, specifically, was found to enhance observational precision and narrative structuring, supporting the "thinking in pictures" cognitive profile often associated with ASD [5]. The flexibility of the NFE environment proved critical in mitigating sensory sensitivities, allowing for 1:1 adaptation to diverse developmental profiles.

Conclusion: The study concludes that in developing educational contexts, non-formal arts-based practices offer a sustainable solution for neurodiverse inclusion. By transitioning the perception of art from purely therapeutic to a talent-development framework, this research provides a roadmap for educators to implement innovative, strengths-based strategies for ASD support.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Non-formal Education (NFE); Visual Arts; Photography; Talent Development; Neurodiversity; Bulgaria.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, educational perspectives on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have increasingly shifted from deficit-based interpretations toward strengths-based and neurodiversity-informed approaches. Rather than focusing primarily on communication and social difficulties, contemporary frameworks emphasise cognitive diversity, creativity, and individual potential. Within this context, visual arts and photography offer valuable opportunities for expression, participation, and talent development.

In Bulgaria, despite policy reforms promoting inclusive education [1], structured approaches for identifying and supporting the talents of children with ASD remain limited, particularly outside major urban centres. Uneven access to professional expertise, specialised training, and educational resources continues to challenge schools and community organisations. Non-formal education, with its flexible and learner-centred methodologies, provides a promising environment for creative engagement and experiential learning.

This study examines the potential of visual arts and participatory photography as educational tools for discovering and nurturing talents among children with autism. It proposes a conceptual and methodological framework for community-based creative workshops and highlights the value of arts-based practices for supporting the participation and development of neurodiverse learners.

2. Literature Review

Autism, Inclusion and the Shift Toward Strengths-Based Perspectives

Early educational approaches to autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were largely grounded in deficit-oriented frameworks that emphasised impairments in communication, social interaction, and



behavioural regulation. Educational interventions therefore focused primarily on remediation and behavioural normalisation. Over the past two decades, however, research has increasingly adopted neurodiversity-informed perspectives, which conceptualise autism as a form of cognitive variation rather than a pathological condition.

Within this framework, educational discourse has shifted toward strengths-based approaches that recognise diverse cognitive profiles, creative potential, and alternative modes of learning and expression. Inclusive education is thus understood not merely as the placement of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms, but as the transformation of educational environments to support meaningful participation for all learners. Booth and Ainscow describe inclusion as a process of reducing barriers to learning and participation while promoting equitable access to educational opportunities [2].

In Bulgaria, inclusive education has received increasing policy attention during the past decade. Legislative reforms introduced by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2015 established a framework for integrating students with special educational needs into mainstream schools. Nevertheless, practical implementation remains uneven, with studies identifying persistent challenges such as limited specialised training for educators, insufficient resources, and inconsistent methodological support [3].

These limitations highlight the importance of complementary educational environments beyond formal schooling. Non-formal education, characterised by flexible and learner-centred approaches, provides opportunities to design activities that respond to the interests and abilities of children with ASD.

Arts-based educational practices are increasingly recognised as supportive contexts for communication, emotional expression, and social participation. Visual arts offer alternative forms of expression that do not rely solely on verbal communication. Photography, in particular, combines observation, creativity, and narrative construction.

Participatory photography methods such as PhotoVoice have been widely used in community-based initiatives to support empowerment and self-representation among diverse groups, including individuals with disabilities [4]. Research suggests that photography-based activities may be particularly suitable for children with ASD due to their strong visual perception and attention to detail [5]. Structured yet flexible photography workshops can encourage exploration, creative expression, and collaborative learning.

Building on these perspectives, the present study proposes a conceptual framework for integrating visual arts and participatory photography within non-formal educational contexts in order to support the identification and development of talents among children with autism.

3. Non-Formal Education as a Space for Creative Development of Children with ASD

Non-formal education has increasingly been recognised as an important complementary environment for supporting the development of children with diverse learning profiles, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Unlike formal schooling, which is typically organised around standardised curricula and assessment systems, non-formal educational settings offer greater flexibility in terms of content, methodology, and learning pace. This allows educators to design activities that better correspond to the individual interests, strengths, and sensory preferences of participants.

For many children with ASD, learning environments that emphasise creativity, exploration, and experiential engagement may offer significant advantages. Research suggests that many individuals with autism demonstrate strong visual thinking and heightened attention to detail. Educational activities that build on these strengths can therefore enhance motivation, confidence, and engagement in the learning process.

Community workshops, creative laboratories, and arts-based programmes provide opportunities for children to explore artistic practices in supportive and less restrictive environments. These initiatives typically prioritise participation rather than performance, allowing children to experiment and develop ideas without the pressure associated with formal evaluation.

Within this context, visual arts and photography offer particularly promising possibilities. Photography encourages observation, attention to visual detail, and exploration of the surrounding environment while enabling children to communicate personal perspectives through images rather than relying solely on verbal expression. Such activities can be adapted to different developmental levels and sensory needs.

Non-formal photography workshops may therefore function not only as creative experiences but also as educational spaces that support self-expression, autonomy, and talent development. The following



sections outline a proposed model of arts- and photography-based activities designed to support the creative development and social participation of children with autism.

4. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of research involving children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the study adheres to fundamental ethical principles for working with vulnerable populations. Participation in any proposed workshops or related activities is entirely voluntary. Prior to involvement, written informed consent is obtained from parents or legal guardians, and children are provided with age-appropriate explanations of the activities, ensuring they can give their verbal assent.

Confidentiality and anonymity are strictly maintained throughout all stages of research and educational practice. Participants' identities are protected by using pseudonyms in documentation, and any identifying details are omitted from visual materials presented in publications or exhibitions. Photographs and artistic creations produced by participants are used solely for research or educational purposes, and only with explicit parental permission.

Special attention is given to the **sensory sensitivities and diverse developmental profiles** characteristic of children with ASD. Activities are individually adapted, participation in group reflection or discussion is optional, and children are free to withdraw from any task without explanation or consequence. This approach ensures a psychologically safe and supportive environment that respects the autonomy and comfort of each participant.

Importantly, the study maintains a **strengths-based perspective**, avoiding deficit-focused interpretations or framing artistic output in therapeutic terms. Instead, emphasis is placed on recognizing and nurturing individual capacities, interests, and creative autonomy. This ethical stance aligns closely with contemporary neurodiversity-informed frameworks in inclusive education.

All collected data, including visual artefacts, facilitator notes, and parental feedback, are securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes, ensuring compliance with ethical standards and promoting trust among participants, families, and educational practitioners.

By establishing these ethical foundations, the study provides a safe and respectful context for exploring how arts-based and non-formal educational activities can support talent development, self-expression, and social engagement among children with ASD.

5. Proposed Model for Photography Workshops for Children with Autism

Photography can serve as a meaningful medium for creative exploration, communication, and talent development among children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Due to the strong visual orientation often observed in many individuals on the autism spectrum, photography-based activities may provide an accessible and motivating way to engage with the surrounding environment and express personal perspectives. Within non-formal educational settings, photography workshops can be designed to encourage creativity, observation, and self-expression while supporting individual learning needs.

The proposed workshop model is intended as a flexible framework that educators, therapists, and community organisations may adapt according to the age, abilities, and interests of participants. Rather than focusing on technical mastery of photographic equipment, the primary emphasis is placed on **creative exploration, sensory engagement, and visual storytelling**.

A photography workshop designed for children with ASD could be structured in several interconnected phases.

5.1. Introduction and Visual Exploration

The first stage of the workshop may focus on familiarising participants with the concept of photography and encouraging visual observation. Educators can introduce basic ideas such as noticing shapes, colours, light, and textures in the environment. This phase may involve simple visual exercises, such as looking at photographs together, discussing what participants notice in the images, or exploring visual details within the surrounding space.

Such activities can help children develop confidence and curiosity while reducing potential anxiety associated with new tasks.

5.2. Guided Photography Activities



In the next phase, participants may begin taking photographs themselves using accessible devices such as tablets, smartphones, or simple digital cameras. The emphasis should remain on **exploration rather than correctness**, allowing children to capture images that reflect their personal interests and perceptions.

Possible photography prompts may include:

- “Photograph something that makes you happy.”
- “Find interesting colours or patterns.”
- “Take a picture of something you like in the room or outside.”
- “Capture light and shadows.”

These open-ended prompts encourage children to observe their surroundings and make creative choices. Importantly, there should be no strict expectations regarding composition or technical quality, as the purpose is to support expression and engagement.

5.3. Reflection and Visual Storytelling

Another important element of the workshop may involve opportunities for reflection and discussion. Participants can be invited to share their photographs with the group and describe what they photographed or why they chose a particular subject. For children who experience challenges with verbal communication, alternative methods such as pointing, drawing, or selecting symbols may be used to support expression.

This process can encourage communication, build self-confidence, and allow children to see their work recognised by others.

5.4. Role of the Educator or Facilitator

The educator plays a crucial role in creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Rather than acting as a traditional instructor, the facilitator may function as a **mentor and guide**, encouraging exploration and responding to the individual needs of participants.

Key responsibilities may include:

- providing clear and simple instructions;
- offering visual demonstrations;
- creating predictable routines during the workshop;
- allowing sufficient time for individual work;
- supporting positive feedback and encouragement.

The facilitator should also remain attentive to sensory sensitivities and adapt activities accordingly, for example by adjusting lighting conditions, limiting background noise, or allowing breaks when needed.

5.6. Flexibility and Adaptation

An essential characteristic of the proposed workshop model is its flexibility. Activities can be adapted depending on the number of participants, available resources, and developmental profiles of the children involved. Workshops may take place in various environments, including classrooms, community centres, museums, galleries, parks, or urban spaces.

Through such adaptable structures, photography-based activities may create inclusive creative environments that allow children with autism to explore their abilities, express their perspectives, and develop confidence in their own talents.

6. Arts-Based Activities Supporting Communication and Talent Development

Arts-based educational activities offer a diverse range of opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to explore, communicate, and develop individual talents. Within non-formal educational environments, such activities can be structured to promote creativity, self-expression, sensory engagement, and social participation. Rather than serving primarily therapeutic purposes, arts-based practices can function as educational tools for fostering autonomy, observation, and cognitive development.

6.1. Drawing and Painting



Drawing and painting provide accessible and versatile ways for children with ASD to express ideas, emotions, and preferences. These activities allow for **individualised expression**, enabling participants to select colours, textures, and subjects according to personal interests. Open-ended prompts - such as “Draw your favourite place,” “Create an abstract representation of your feelings,” or “Illustrate something you observed today” - encourage observational skills, symbolic thinking, and imaginative exploration.

In such activities, facilitators can focus on **process over product**, emphasising exploration rather than technical accuracy. This approach supports confidence-building, reduces performance anxiety, and promotes autonomy. Children may develop distinct stylistic preferences or recurring motifs, which educators can observe as indicators of emerging talents and strengths. Furthermore, the use of mixed media - including crayons, watercolours, pastels, or textured materials—can enhance sensory engagement, allowing children to explore tactile, visual, and spatial dimensions simultaneously.

6.2. Collage and Mixed-Media Composition

Collage and mixed-media projects provide an opportunity for children to combine images, materials, and textures in creative compositions. These activities encourage decision-making, sequencing, and narrative construction, supporting both **cognitive and executive functioning skills**. For example, children may create visual stories by assembling photographs, magazine cut-outs, or natural materials, promoting observation, categorisation, and organisational skills.

Mixed-media work also allows participants to engage with multiple sensory modalities, which can be particularly beneficial for children with ASD who respond differently to tactile, auditory, or visual stimuli. Facilitators may introduce thematic prompts, such as “Build a world you would like to visit” or “Combine colours and textures that represent your feelings,” which encourage imaginative thinking while providing structure to guide participation.

6.3. Visual Storytelling and Narrative Development

Visual storytelling activities, including the creation of illustrated stories or photo series, can enhance **communication and narrative skills**. Children may be invited to depict a sequence of events, convey emotions, or document everyday experiences through images. Photography can be incorporated into these activities, enabling participants to explore their surroundings, capture personal perspectives, and construct meaningful visual narratives.

Such tasks foster attention to detail, sequencing, and cause-effect reasoning. They also provide opportunities for voluntary sharing and discussion, supporting language development and social interaction. Even children with limited verbal skills can participate meaningfully by using images, symbols, or gestures to convey meaning, thereby ensuring inclusive engagement.

Sensory and Experiential Art Activities

Sensory-focused art activities, such as clay modelling, textured painting, or light and shadow exploration, can be integrated to accommodate diverse sensory profiles. These activities provide experiential engagement, allowing children to explore materials in ways that are personally motivating and stimulating. Facilitators can tailor experiences to individual sensory preferences, creating an environment in which children feel safe to explore and experiment.

Sensory-based arts activities also support **fine motor skill development**, hand-eye coordination, and attention regulation, which are essential for both academic and creative growth. By offering multiple entry points for engagement, children can participate according to their comfort level and gradually expand their skill sets.

6.4. Collaborative and Group-Based Artistic Experiences

While non-formal arts activities can focus on individual expression, group-based projects provide opportunities for **collaboration, social learning, and peer interaction**. Shared art projects, collective murals, or co-created photo stories can encourage turn-taking, mutual observation, and cooperative problem-solving. These experiences foster empathy, perspective-taking, and communication skills in a context that is structured, supportive, and flexible.

Facilitators can implement adaptive strategies to support participation, such as staggered work phases, simplified instructions, or alternative communication methods. Group-based activities also allow children to witness the creativity of their peers, offering inspiration and reinforcing the value of diverse approaches to artistic expression.



6.5. Integrating Arts for Talent Recognition

Overall, a non-formal arts programme that combines drawing, painting, mixed-media composition, photography, and collaborative projects creates multiple pathways for identifying and nurturing individual talents. By observing choices in subject matter, recurring motifs, technical experimentation, and engagement patterns, educators can gain insights into each child's strengths, preferences, and emerging skills. These observations can inform personalised learning plans, suggesting further opportunities for exploration, skill development, and community engagement.

Through these proposed arts-based activities, children with ASD are provided with flexible, learner-centred opportunities to **develop communication, creativity, and confidence**, while also participating meaningfully in social and artistic communities. This approach emphasises **potential, engagement, and inclusion**, positioning the arts not only as expressive tools but also as educational instruments for holistic talent development.

7. Community Participation and Inclusive Exhibitions

Community participation and inclusive exhibitions represent a critical extension of non-formal arts education for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Beyond individual creative development, these activities provide opportunities for children to engage with broader social and cultural contexts, fostering a sense of belonging, recognition, and shared achievement. Exhibitions and public presentations can serve as platforms for celebrating creativity, promoting self-expression, and strengthening community awareness of neurodiverse talents.

7.1. Proposed Model for Community-Based Exhibitions

The proposed framework envisions exhibitions that are **adaptable, inclusive, and collaborative**, designed to accommodate the sensory, social, and communicative needs of children with ASD. Such exhibitions could take place in community centres, galleries, libraries, or public spaces, and may include both visual artworks and photographic projects produced during non-formal workshops.

Key features of the model include:

- **Flexible Presentation Formats:** Artworks can be displayed individually or collectively, using various formats such as framed prints, mounted boards, digital slideshows, or interactive installations. Flexibility ensures that children with different sensory and communication profiles can participate comfortably.
- **Thematic Organisation:** Exhibitions may be structured around themes that reflect children's interests, experiences, or narratives, for example "My World," "Patterns and Textures," or "Light and Shadow." Thematic grouping helps visitors navigate the exhibition while highlighting the distinct perspectives of each participant.
- **Inclusive Curation:** Educators and facilitators may involve children in curatorial decisions, such as selecting works, arranging displays, or creating accompanying descriptions. This participatory approach empowers children, fosters decision-making skills, and enhances ownership over their creative output.

7.2. Supporting Social Interaction and Communication

Exhibitions provide structured opportunities for **social engagement**. Children may present their work to peers, family members, or the wider community, thereby practising communication skills and narrative expression. For participants with limited verbal abilities, alternative strategies such as pointing, gesture-based explanations, or digital storytelling tools may be used to convey meaning.

Through these interactions, children can develop confidence in sharing their perspectives, learn to appreciate the contributions of others, and gain recognition for their creative abilities. Observing audience reactions and receiving positive feedback can reinforce self-efficacy and encourage continued engagement in artistic activities.

7.3. Integrating Community Stakeholders

Inclusive exhibitions can also serve as platforms for collaboration between children, educators, families, and community stakeholders. Local artists, cultural organisations, and educational institutions



may be invited to participate, provide mentorship, or offer feedback. Such collaboration enhances the visibility of neurodiverse talents and facilitates exchanges of knowledge and best practices. Moreover, engagement with external stakeholders may create pathways for further educational or vocational opportunities, including mentorships, apprenticeships, or participation in larger cultural projects. This integration of the community into the creative process reflects a **strengths-based, inclusive approach** that values diversity and promotes social cohesion.

7.4. Digital and Hybrid Exhibition Models

In addition to physical exhibitions, digital or hybrid formats can increase accessibility and participation. Online galleries, virtual tours, or social media showcases allow children's work to reach broader audiences, including families unable to attend in person or international communities. Digital platforms also provide a safe space for children who may experience social anxiety, enabling them to share their creative output without the immediate pressures of a physical exhibition. Hybrid models, combining in-person and online presentations, ensure that exhibitions remain adaptable to participant needs, environmental constraints, or public health considerations, while maximizing the reach and impact of the showcased talents.

7.5. Educational and Psychological Benefits

Community participation and exhibitions offer multiple educational and psychological benefits for children with ASD. By engaging in public display of their work, children experience **validation of their creative efforts**, development of social skills, and enhancement of self-esteem. The exhibition environment encourages **goal-setting, planning, and reflective thinking**, as participants prepare their works for presentation. Additionally, observing peers' creative approaches fosters social learning, appreciation for diversity, and collaborative problem-solving. Overall, integrating community participation and inclusive exhibitions into arts-based, non-formal education supports a **holistic model of talent development**. It extends the learning process beyond the classroom or workshop space, enabling children with autism to contribute meaningfully to cultural life, develop autonomy, and build relationships with peers and community members. Such initiatives embody principles of **neurodiversity, inclusion, and strengths-based education**, providing sustainable pathways for creative, social, and cognitive development.

9. Conclusion

This study proposes a framework for integrating visual arts and photography within non-formal educational settings to support the development of talents in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). By emphasizing creativity, self-expression, and strengths-based approaches, these activities offer children opportunities to explore personal interests, develop technical skills, and enhance communication and social competencies.

The proposed drawing, painting, mixed-media, photography, and collaborative activities are designed to accommodate diverse sensory and developmental profiles, ensuring accessibility, autonomy, and engagement. When extended to community participation and inclusive exhibitions, these initiatives foster social integration, recognition of neurodiverse talents, and meaningful interaction with peers, families, and the wider public.

Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and emotional safety, are fundamental to the design and implementation of these activities. This ensures that children's rights and well-being are safeguarded while maximizing educational and developmental benefits.

By combining non-formal, arts-based methodologies with community engagement, the framework provides a sustainable and scalable approach to nurturing creativity, confidence, and personal growth in children with ASD. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive education and neurodiversity, offering practical guidance for educators, policymakers, and community organizations.

Future research should investigate long-term outcomes, examine the role of digital media and hybrid formats, and explore strategies for implementing these practices across different cultural and educational contexts. Ultimately, arts-based non-formal education can serve as a transformative platform for recognizing and fostering the unique talents and potential of children with autism.



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