

Learning with Body, Mind and Heart: Teachers' Perceptions of an Embodied Education Pathway in Early Childhood Education. An Exploratory Case Study

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Abstract: This article presents a predominantly qualitative exploratory case study of a year-long art project carried out in a pre-school in the province of Ancona, Italy. The framework combines Embodied Cognition, Embodied Education, atelier culture, and Universal Design for Learning. The data set consists of eight semi-structured questionnaires completed by eight teachers, comprising fifteen Likert-type items and three open-ended questions. Closed-ended data were analysed descriptively, whilst narrative responses underwent deductive-inductive reflexive thematic analysis. Teachers' evaluations converged on participation, creativity, peer collaboration, inclusion and professional learning, with greater variation observed in relation to verbalisation and individual differences. Five themes emerged: bodily-material ecology; creative agency, error and confidence; multimodal meaning-making; inclusion and intersubjectivity; and the primacy of process and teaching professionalism. The discussion interprets the findings through the ten principles of the Grammar of Embodied Education.



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Keywords: Embodied Education; early childhood education; creativity; art education; inclusion.

1. Introduction

In pre-school, knowledge is constructed through action, observation, touch, dialogue and the attribution of meaning to experience. A teaching approach centred solely on verbal reception or the reproduction of models only partially describes the processes in which the body, environment, emotion and relationships operate jointly. Embodied Cognition goes beyond the idea of cognition as exclusively internal and

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abstract: cognitive processes are situated, action-oriented and rooted in perceptual and motor systems (Barsalou, 2008; Wilson, 2002).

In an educational context, all the more so, embodiment is not limited to the mere quantity of movement. The value of an action depends on its congruence with the task and on the ability to make meaningful relationships perceptible and transformable (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Skulmowski & Rey, 2018). Consequently, Embodied Education translates this premise into criteria that guide the design process itself: environments, materials, timing and relationships must allow perception, action, affect and reflection to mutually constitute one another (Gomez Paloma et al., 2009; 2016; Francesconi & Tarozi, 2012;).

Art education offers a prime setting for this perspective. However, this is only the case if it is not reduced to merely copying an adult model and succeeds in mobilising physicality, imagination, emotion and language, thereby enabling the exploration of alternatives and possibilities. Even within the pedagogy of experience, aesthetic activity is capable of meaningfully organising the relationship between the organism and the environment (Dewey, 1934). The *atelier* approach also regards materials, space, observation and documentation as fundamental components of children's exploration (Vecchi, 2010).

In grounded cognition, objects and tools do not merely illustrate pre-existing content: they can externalise part of the cognitive process and make otherwise implicit relationships shareable. Manipulating, orienting, superimposing or transforming a material alters the problem accessible to the child. The epistemic function of materials also depends on *the affordances* they offer and on the possibility of observing the consequences of one's actions.

This perspective is also significant from an inclusive point of view. Indeed, Universal Design for Learning calls for the provision of multiple modes of engagement, representation, action and expression, thereby proactively reducing the barriers created by a one-size-fits-all approach (Glass et al., 2013; Meyer et al., 2014). However, an artistic activity is not automatically inclusive: it can become prescriptive when it imposes a single outcome, a mandatory technique or identical timeframes. Inclusion requires genuine opportunities for choice, support and participation.

In early childhood, movement and interactive play can reveal forms of creativity that are less dependent on verbal competence (Frith et al., 2019). Creativity should not be understood as an individual trait that can be assessed psychometrically, but as the ability to produce variations, combine elements and attribute personal meanings. Emotion, curiosity and trust take on a cognitive function: they direct attention, sustain persistence and make it possible to take the risk of making mistakes. For this reason, the final product does not exhaust the value of the experience; it materially documents a sequence of explorations, decisions and revisions.

1.1. Context and research questions

The project was carried out at the 'Beniamino Gigli' Comprehensive School in Monte Roberto, more specifically at the 'Collodi' nursery school, in the area of Pianello Vallesina in the province of Ancona, involving four age-mixed groups, nine teachers, and a total of 89 children aged between three and five. Throughout the school year, the children were introduced to works and artistic languages associated with, amongst others, Giacometti, Mondrian, Monet, Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, Kusama, Kandinsky, Haring and Pollock. The artists' images and works were used as

stimuli for conversations, physical and sensory activities, and personal reinterpretations.

The programme unfolded using a variety of tools and techniques: painting, drawing, collage, printmaking, hands-on activities, three-dimensional construction, light, shadow and immersive environments. Tempera paints, clay, fabrics, paper, natural and recycled materials, loose parts, mirrors, lenses, microscopes and projectors offered a range of possibilities for creative engagement. The teachers set up the environment to provoke reactions from the children, seeking not only to arouse their interest but, above all, to encourage their active engagement. The use of the studio as an immersive space supported the children's explorations, providing opportunities to engage with the artworks through different forms of expression, allowing freedom of choice in materials and autonomy, and stimulating self-regulation, discovery and peer interaction.

The final exhibition publicly showcased the children's work, which the teachers regarded primarily as traces of their research processes.

The study addresses three research questions: what physical, sensory, material and environmental characteristics emerge from the accounts? What changes relating to creativity, participation, expression, trust, collaboration and inclusion are perceived? How can these accounts be interpreted through the lens of Embodied Education?

Among the experiences reported by the teachers were the construction of small mannequins inspired by Giacometti, the projection and tracing of shadows, the deconstruction of images, and the exploration of points, lines and shapes. At other times, the children symbolically entered the artworks through projections, surfaces and sensory materials. These examples clearly illustrate the pedagogical and didactic logic of the programme: engagement with the artwork precedes activities in which the child can observe, act and rework the material, whilst keeping the cultural stimulus recognisable without restricting the outcome to a uniform model.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. *Design, participants and corpus*

The research is designed as an exploratory single-case study with a predominantly qualitative approach (Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis is the art project within its context; the teachers' accounts provide professional perspectives on the case. The quantitative component serves a descriptive and complementary function: there are no comparison groups, pre-post measures or standardised indicators of children's skills.

The project involved 9 teachers and 89 children across 4 classes. The data analysed comprises eight questionnaires completed by eight responding teachers, coded D1–D8. Please specify here the recruitment process, length of service and the relationship between the teachers involved and the respondents: 7 out of the 8 teachers involved are on permanent contracts with at least five years' experience. The team designed and took part in two field-based action research workshops, organised within the 'Beniamino Gigli' School, focusing on the 'atelier' culture inspired by the Reggio Children Approach.

Table 1. Aggregate characteristics of the case study and the corpus.

Characteristic	Information
Context	Nursery school, province of Ancona
Period	2025–2026 SCHOOL YEAR
Classes and age group	4 CLASSES; children aged 3–5
Teachers involved in the project	9
Children/pupils involved	89
Teachers who responded	8
Data set	8 questionnaires; codes D1–D8

The eight teachers who responded represent almost all of the teachers involved.

2.2. *Instrument and procedure*

The semi-structured questionnaire, designed by the research team based on the dimensions of Embodied Education, with particular reference to creativity, multimodality and inclusion, comprised three sections. Section A contained ten statements rated on a scale from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 5 (‘strongly agree’); Section B comprised five statements rated on a scale from 1 (‘not at all’) to 5 (‘completely’); Section C comprised three open-ended questions on activities and materials, observed changes and the educational value of art. The full questionnaire is available as supplementary material.

The questionnaires were completed in June 2026, 15 days after the end of the programme. The participants were informed of the study’s objectives.

2.3. *Data analysis*

For the Likert-scale items, frequency distributions, medians and descriptive means were calculated, without inferential tests or reliability analyses, given the small sample size, the ordinal nature of the responses and the absence of psychometric validation. Means are reported to one decimal place.

Open-ended responses were examined using reflective thematic analysis inspired by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019). The process included familiarisation, coding of units of meaning, construction and refinement of themes, selection of quotations and interpretation. The coding process combined a deductive component – guided by embodiment, creativity, multimodality and inclusion – with an inductive component, focusing on the teachers’ formulations. The analysis was conducted by three researchers and the project coordinator. The initial coding was accompanied by discussions amongst the analysts, during which units of meaning, code labels and the internal consistency of the themes were discussed. Throughout the process, analytical and reflective memos were drafted, used to document interpretative decisions, record any doubts and distinguish the teachers’ descriptions from the researchers’ theoretical elaborations. Particular attention was paid to the less convergent elements, especially responses relating to the articulation and valuing of individual differences, to prevent

the strong overall positivity of the corpus from obscuring internal variations and nuances. The final themes were defined through successive revisions, verifying their relevance to the research questions and their recognisability in the collected testimonies. To enhance traceability, the initial codes were organised into a matrix linking units of meaning, source document, provisional theme and interpretative note. The themes were reviewed to verify their internal consistency, mutual distinction and correspondence with the entire corpus. Quotations were selected for clarity and illustrative value, without equating textual frequency with analytical importance. From a reflective perspective, agreement amongst coders was not taken as an automatic criterion of validity; where present, comparison and discussion amongst analysts served to make interpretative choices explicit. The teachers participated on a voluntary basis and authorised the use of anonymised responses and quotations. No names or personal data relating to the children were collected, nor were any recordings made or assessments administered to the children.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive quantitative results

In Section A, participation, creativity, collaboration, inclusion and implications for teaching practice received the highest score from all respondents. Verbal language development had the lowest median score (4), whilst emotional expression, autonomy and observation remained high. In Section B, the greatest variability concerned storytelling skills and the valuing of individual differences. The profile therefore shows strong overall consensus and greater variation in the more specific outcomes.

Table 2. Distribution of items in Section A (n = 8).

Item	M	Md	Distribution
Active participation	5.0	5	5=8
Creativity/personal expression	5.0	5	5=8
Verbal language development	4.3	4	4=6; 5=2
Peer collaboration	5.0	5	5=8
Experimental autonomy	4.8	5	4=2; 5=6
Inclusion of diverse needs	5.0	5	5=8
Observation and curiosity	4.9	5	4=1; 5=7
Expression of emotions/experiences	4.6	5	4=3; 5=5
Consistency with objectives	4.9	5	4=1; 5=7
Impact on teaching practice	5.0	5	5=8

Table 3. Distribution of items in Section B (n = 8).

Item	M	Md	Distribution
Interest in works/stimuli	4.8	5	4=2; 5=6
Storytelling ability	4.1	4	3=2; 4=3; 5=3
Appreciation of differences	4.4	5	3=2; 4=1; 5=5
Links between subject areas	4.8	5	4=2; 5=6
Less visible skills	4.6	5	4=3; 5=5

The unanimity across several items must be interpreted in the context of the instrument's structure: the statements were phrased positively and concerned broad objectives, which were easily endorsed by those who had participated in the project. The more specific items, relating to narrating and valuing differences, however, yielded less uniform responses. This lack of uniformity suggests a distinction should be made between general endorsement of the proposal and the observation of specific manifestations in children.

3.2. Thematic analysis

The analysis yielded five highly relevant interconnected themes. *Body-material ecology*. The teachers describe a system comprising the body, materials, tools and space. In the experience inspired by Giacometti, the children constructed mannequins, assigned postures, observed the cast shadow and transformed the silhouette into a graphic mark. Other accounts refer to immersive environments, mirrors, lenses, clay and different surfaces. Properties such as texture, resistance, absorption and reflection are explored through action; the body is not a motivational addition, but a mode of inquiry.

The sequences described illustrate transitions between different dimensions: a posture becomes a shadow, the silhouette becomes a trace, and the trace can be transformed into an image. Similarly, mirrors and reflective paper alter perception, whilst clay and recycled materials offer resistance that requires adjustments to the gesture. The environment thus functions as part of the cognitive system: it preserves marks, produces effects and allows for the comparison of successive actions.

Creative agency, error and trust. The works are presented as provocations to be re-interpreted. 'Loose parts' and non-predetermined materials allow participants to choose objectives, experiment with connections and produce alternatives. The teachers report a greater willingness to draw and engage with new materials, less fear of making mistakes and satisfaction with the process. Agency also emerges in the relationship with real constraints. Materials are not neutral: they can give way, absorb, reflect or break, forcing a change to the initial plan. In some accounts, error loses its punitive function and becomes information about the behaviour of the material. Confidence is therefore not described as mere well-being, but as a willingness to begin, persevere and demonstrate a personal solution.

Multimodal construction of meaning. Bodily, visual, plastic, graphic and verbal languages are intertwined. Some children appear to have transferred artistic references into their everyday lives, recognising shapes 'like Kusama' or silhouettes 'like Haring';

microscopes and magnifying glasses have linked aesthetic and scientific observation. However, the lesser uniformity of linguistic items suggests that we should not assume that multimodality automatically produces narrative development: it can offer experiential content for conversations that require intentional mediation.

The incorporation of artistic references into play and everyday life suggests, in the teachers' view, that the artworks have become resources for classifying and interpreting what was being observed. Meaning is not constructed through a single code: a gesture may precede a word, an image may support a narrative, and conversation may reorganise the experience. This complementarity distinguishes multimodality from a mere succession of activities: languages gain value when they allow us to revisit the same issue from different perspectives.

Inclusion and intersubjectivity. The variety of materials and languages is associated with different entry points into the activity, the emergence of less visible skills, and the participation even of children who are not particularly inclined towards drawing. The accounts highlight the sharing of materials, the observation of others' solutions, and dialogue amongst peers.

Inter-subjectivity complements the individual dimension. Children do not merely work alongside others: they observe solutions, negotiate the use of tools and exchange words and gestures. In this sense, creativity appears to be socially supported.

Priority of the process and teaching professionalism. The respondents regard the final artefact as secondary to the explorations and decisions that precede it. The teacher's role shifts from demonstrating a uniform outcome to setting up environments and prompts, observing and facilitating further engagement. The unanimous agreement on the professional benefits indicates that the project was also experienced as an opportunity for learning and on-the-job training.

This process-oriented approach also alters the criteria for assessing the quality of the final exhibition. An exhibition consistent with this approach should showcase not only selected artefacts, but also photographs of the stages, attempts, variations, the children's own words and their choice of materials. The documentation thus serves a dual purpose: it communicates the process to families and the local community, and provides teachers with material to reflect on the planning process from a retrospective perspective.

3.3. Integration of closed and open data

Table 4 integrates the two levels of analysis, linking the trends emerging from the items with the examples and interpretations developed in the open-ended responses.

Table 4. Integration of evidence.

Dimension	Quantitative evidence	Qualitative evidence
Participation/creativity	Maximum scores for participation and creativity.	Selection, reinterpretation and creation of alternatives.
Multimodality/language	High levels of interest and connections across different areas; greater variety in storytelling ability.	Integration of gesture, images, materials, conversation and storytelling.

Dimension	Quantitative evidence	Qualitative evidence
Inclusion	High scores for inclusion and less visible skills.	Differentiated entry points into the activity, sharing and dialogue amongst peers.
Professionalism	Unanimous agreement on the educational benefits.	Focus on the process, observation and preparation of the learning environments.

4. Discussion

The results described so far attribute a structural character to physicality: postures, gestures, traces, lighting, tools and materials enable the exploration of relationships between space, form, volume and representation. Materiality opens up creative possibilities, but does not in itself guarantee inclusion: accessibility and participation require an awareness of barriers, flexible timings and differentiated support.

4.1. *The ten principles of the Grammar of Embodied Education*

A substantial resonance can be recognised between the findings of this study and the ten principles of the Grammar of Embodied Education (Damiani et al., 2025). *First person.* The child is the subject of the experience: they observe, choose, formulate hypotheses and attribute meaning to the effects of their own actions. *Embodied.* Body and mind operate as a unity; gesture, posture and perception do not merely accompany the task, but constitute its cognitive tools. *Emotion and cognition.* Curiosity, wonder, pleasure and hesitation guide attention and perseverance. The reduction in the fear of making mistakes, as reported by the teachers, can be interpreted as an epistemic condition that allows unexpected outcomes to be explored rather than avoided.

The Synaptic Self. Confidence, skills and expressive identity are regarded as malleable configurations, modifiable through meaningful experiences; this encourages us not to pigeonhole children into categories of those who ‘can’ or ‘cannot’ draw. *Transformative inclusion.* The diversity of materials and languages becomes inclusive when it alters the shared context: it offers different entry points, graduated support and opportunities to tailor levels of engagement, rather than retroactively adapting a uniform pathway. *A culture of complexity.* Materials, relationships and outcomes do not follow entirely linear trajectories; designing means embracing interdependencies, ambiguities and transformations without compromising educational intent.

Against the absolutism of knowledge. Works are not models to be reproduced, but stimuli to be interpreted; comparing different solutions reveals the plurality of viewpoints and removes error from the correct/incorrect dichotomy. *Technology as an opportunity.* Projectors, light sources, mirrors, lenses and microscopes broaden perception and action when they are consistent with the educational objective, without becoming attractions separate from the task at hand. *Narrative and sharing.* Conversations, photographs, intermediate activities and a final exhibition make gestures, hypotheses and emotions communicable; verbal language reflects on the experience

without subordinating bodily, visual and plastic languages. *The mind expands*. cognition is distributed amongst the child, the environment, tools and relationships: surfaces, materials and contributions from peers become active components of the process of meaning-making.

Taken together, the ten principles outline an intentional but non-prescriptive approach to planning. The teacher retains responsibility for selecting materials, setting up environments, observing participants and posing follow-up questions, whilst refraining from predetermining a single outcome or a single mode of engagement. Professional observational skills are also crucial to ensure that sensory richness and openness do not result in overload or merely superficial participation. From this perspective, the exhibition documents trajectories of inquiry rather than merely finished artefacts.

4.2. Limitations and prospects

The corpus is limited to eight teachers from the same setting, who were directly involved in the project. It does not include independent observations, the children's own voices, individualised data or pre-post measurements. The results should therefore be interpreted as situated professional interpretations.

Future studies could incorporate systematic observations, documentation of processes, analysis of children's work and conversations with children and families.

5. Conclusions

The accounts describe a process in which the body, materials, emotions and relationships were perceived as components in the construction of knowledge. The teachers portray the children as individuals who observe, manipulate, transform and compare interpretations, rather than as mere executors of models. The assessments focus on participation, creativity, collaboration, inclusion and professional outcomes, but differ in terms of how they are articulated and the attention paid to individual differences.

The case study proposes a project-based approach which is ultimately grounded in the ten principles of the Grammar of Embodied Education: the centrality of the first person; the unity of body and mind; the integration of emotion and cognition; the plasticity of the self; transformative inclusion; a culture of complexity; pluralism of knowledge; the intentional use of technology; storytelling and sharing; and the extension of the mind into the environment and relationships. These principles shift the criterion of quality from uniform control over the end product to a focus on the conditions that enable exploration, meaning-making and participation. From this perspective, educating with the body, mind and heart means recognising that every gesture, every emotion and every mark left on the material can become knowledge: not knowledge to be reproduced, but an experience to be lived, shared and transformed.

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Appendix

Interview/questionnaire for nursery school teachers

Experience of an art project with pre-school children

Introduction for teachers

Dear teacher,
the purpose of this questionnaire is to gather your experiences regarding the implementation of an art project with pre-school children. Your responses will be used for categorical analysis and case study purposes. There are no right or wrong answers: what matters is your professional and experiential perspective.

Optional details about the teacher / class

Teacher code: _____

Class/predominant age of children: mixed-age class

Project period: September–June

Section A — Questions using a Likert scale

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

Response scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	The art project encouraged the active participation of the children.					
2	The artistic activities stimulated the children's creativity and personal expression.					
3	The project contributed to the development of verbal language through the description of images, artworks or artistic creations.					
4	The activities on offer encouraged collaboration and interaction amongst peers.					
5	The project enabled the children to experiment with materials, techniques and tools independently.					

6	Art proved to be an effective means of including children with different educational needs.					
7	The artistic activities fostered observation, concentration and curiosity in the children.					
8	The project has improved the children's ability to express their emotions, experiences and preferences.					
9	The design of the artistic activities was consistent with the educational objectives of the nursery school.					
10	The experience also had a positive impact on the teachers' teaching practice.					

Section B — Statements with agreement indicators

For each statement, please indicate your level of agreement.

Response scale: 1 = Not at all; 2 = Slightly; 3 = Somewhat; 4 = Very; 5 = Completely

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	During the project, the children showed an interest in the works of art, images or visual stimuli presented to them.					
2	The art activities helped the children to describe what they saw, did or imagined.					
3	The project celebrated individual differences, allowing for different paces, methods and styles of expression.					
4	The activities enabled the children to link art to other areas of experience, such as language, the body, emotions, nature or storytelling.					
5	The artistic programme brought to light skills in the children that are less readily apparent in other educational contexts.					

Section C — Open-ended questions

- 1. Could you briefly describe the art project carried out, outlining the main activities, the materials used and the children's role?**
- 2. What significant changes, learning outcomes or behaviours did you observe in the children during or after the project?**
- 3. In your opinion, which words or expressions best describe the educational value of art in nursery school?**