

Children's digital citizenship: creating pedagogical research settings with youth in online Environment

La cittadinanza digitale nell'infanzia: creare un setting di ricerca pedagogica con i giovani nell'ambiente online

Seran Demiral

Istanbul Arel University | seran.demiral@boun.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to develop a potential research framework with the contribution of two young participants from Turkey, for a further investigation into digital citizenship. In this context, digital citizenship is defined as the extent to which social, political, and cultural participation occurs in online environments, focusing on the involvement of children. Preliminary investigations and observations regarding this issue indicate that young people find a space to build their identities and express themselves through digital environments more than the physical world. However, they may also refrain from sharing or posting as ways of expression. This study intends to explore the digital experiences of youth in Turkey, considering their perspectives on being challengers or abstainers in the digital realm. The goal is to develop pedagogical tools that can foster an inclusive environment and prevent the impacts of polarization on youth imaginaries.

Il contributo mira a sviluppare un potenziale *framework* di ricerca per un'indagine sulla cittadinanza digitale, a partire dal contributo di due giovani partecipanti dalla Turchia. In questo contesto, la cittadinanza digitale è definita come la misura con cui la partecipazione sociale, politica e culturale avviene in ambienti *online*, concentrandosi sul coinvolgimento dei ragazzi. Indagini preliminari e osservazioni su questo tema indicano che i giovani trovano uno spazio per costruire le loro identità ed esprimersi attraverso gli ambienti digitali più che nel mondo fisico. Tuttavia, possono anche astenersi dalla scelta di condividere o pubblicare *online* come modi di espressione. Questo studio intende esplorare le esperienze digitali di questi giovani in Turchia, considerando le loro prospettive come esseri che sfidano o che si astengono dal mondo digitale. L'obiettivo è sviluppare strumenti pedagogici in grado di promuovere un ambiente inclusivo e prevenire gli impatti della polarizzazione sugli immaginari giovanili.

KEYWORDS

Digital Citizenship | Participation | Childhood Experiences | Social and Political Engagements of Children
Cittadinanza digitale | Partecipazione | Esperienze infantile | Engagement sociale e politico dei bambini

OPEN ACCESS Double blind peer review

Volume 1 | n. 2 | dicembre 2023

Citation: Demiral, S. (2023). Children's digital citizenship: creating pedagogical research settings with youth in online environment. *Cultura pedagogica e scenari educativi*, 1(2), 36-45. <https://doi.org/10.7347/spgs-02-2023-06>.

Corresponding Author: Seran Demiral | seran.demiral@boun.edu.tr

Journal Homepage: <https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/sipeges>

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN: 2975-0113 • DOI: 10.7347/spgs-02-2023-06

Received: 10/10/2023 | **Accepted:** 06/11/2023 | **Published:** 29/12/2023

1. Introduction

This paper suggests using the research environment with young people as a pedagogical tool for community development. Within the intersection of child-oriented research understanding and social pedagogy practice for intergenerational, intercultural, and interpersonal communication (Petrie, 2019), I will describe my interaction with two young child rights activists from Istanbul and Ankara for a digital citizenship project we have been preparing, where we aim to discuss how children are citizens of today under oppressive circumstances, while people cannot fulfil their active citizenship actions.

Banks (2008) classifies citizenship into four categories: legal, minimal, active, and transformative. He declares that legal citizens only have their status as citizens, while minimal citizens conventionally vote but do not participate in other decisions concerning their lives. In this case, children are restricted to being legal citizens because they are considered incapable of voting, and are thus also called ‘partial’ citizens. However, they have the potential to become active and even transformative citizens according to Banks’s definitions.

Active citizens are those who engage in civic participation, such as protesting, expressing their views, and objecting, while still operating within existing social structures. When we consider the historical background of citizen rights, participation in political processes largely began in the early 19th century, with ‘citizens’ referring to a particular group in society. Since the 20th century, the concept of citizenship has become more inclusive, recognizing cultural rights, and accommodating multicultural communities (Banks 2008). As a post-conventional form of citizenship, transformative citizens take civic action by going beyond traditional political structures. Today’s young citizens are potentially closer to this classification due to their extensive use of social media and their integration with the digital world. Therefore, the concept of digital citizenship is crucial to discuss at this point.

2. Children’s Digital Citizenship

Initially, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of understanding digitalization, particularly in relation to the blurring boundaries between the real and virtual, online and offline, as well as the digital and physical realms. For example, individuals born into the digital era have been termed digital natives, the net generation, or the digital generation (Prensky, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tappscott, 2009; Buckingham, 2006). Secondly, digital citizenship entails more than merely mirroring traditional citizenship in digital spaces; it demands the capacity to take action and encompass technological proficiency as a fundamental skill of this century (Ribble, Bailey & Ross, 2004).

The primary stages of digital citizenship are generally defined as the process of constructing identities through online spaces and engagement, alongside regular access to the digital world (Caluya, Bororica & Yue, 2018). This concept prompts a discussion about the boundaries of engagement: How much can children engage in society when they might be underestimated or only seen as future citizens? What are the limitations and potentials of engagement in social, political, and cultural contexts?

To address these questions, it is useful to consider active and transformative citizen concepts. Furthermore, in the context of youth citizenship, the idea of becoming-being and “doing” youth citizenship signifies various stages of civic participation (e.g., Wood, 2002; Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2008; McGillivray, ed., 2015). Childhood, often seen as a transitional phase toward adulthood, represents a permanent stage situated between individualization and socialization. Identity-building is a fundamental component of this process.

While becoming citizens is more related to the life course because of its dependency on age requirements, capability approaches prioritize “doing citizenship,” which unveils youth identities being shaped and reshaped through online encounters by participation and activism (Wood, 2022). In this sense, doing



youth citizenship is closer to the definition of being active citizens who are able as well as willing to criticize, express opinions, and take action if necessary. That requires practicing agency regarding awareness of rights and responsibilities, which is also the core of citizenship in traditional meanings. Similar to its relation to knowledge of self-awareness, another fundamental aspect of digital citizenship is literacy skills. Even though the distinction between digital literacy and competency is the subject of another debate, it should be noted that the information society defines individuals based on their tendencies and competencies (Drotner, 2005). Hence, our identities, collective agencies, socialization practices, and relationships are shaped by digital environments.

For younger generations, they predominantly come together to engage with each other, creating a collective public space with the potential for digital socialization, peer interaction, and peer-to-peer learning (e.g., Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Their performative action and communicative action, as the fundamental acts of practicing citizenship (Rovisco, 2019), take place in digital spaces as representations within everyday life practices (Brubaker, 2009; Cover, 2016). Additionally, the shift from “one-to-one” to “one-to-many” digital communication (Thumim, 2012) has blurred the boundary between private and public spaces in virtual environments. Considering the differences and similarities between physical and virtual spaces, as well as private and public domains, and other relevant descriptors for analyzing children’s digital interactions, I have outlined the digital citizenship experiences of children.

This proposed study is adult-initiated, drawing inspiration from Hart’s description (1992) and Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (1969). The core participation ladder reveals both the limitations and roadblocks to citizen action (see Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Demiral, 2021). However, it also serves as a starting point for rebuilding genuine participatory practices among individuals and communities. For example, Horelli (1998) outlines various stages for enabling children’s meaningful involvement in environmental planning. First, it is crucial to adapt planning processes to include children. Then, by actively listening to children, their perspectives can be taken into consideration. Subsequently, children’s direct involvement in the planning process becomes essential. Finally, collaborating with children marks the completion of the journey towards realizing their participation. It’s important to note that the case Horelli discusses is a top-down illustration.

In this paper, I aim to provide a contrasting example of a bottom-up approach, involving child contributors rather than mere participants. While this study is adult-initiated, I will reverse the typical roles of adults and children.

3. Collaboration for a Participatory Research

In our research, children will take on the role of decision-makers in the planning process, while the adults, including myself, will act as participants rather than initiators. To this end, I have begun collaborating with two teenagers: Duru, whom I met via email conversation during the pandemic in 2020, and Gamze, whom I encountered just before the pandemic in an early 2020 child participation project (Erdiller-Yatmaz, Erdemir & Demiral, 2023), where I served as a researcher.

Both Duru and Gamze are individuals I have encountered in previous child participation projects. Initially, Gamze participated as one of the field study’s attendees. However, as our aim was to establish a child-to-child network, and owing to her willingness to contribute more to children’s human rights, she became involved in subsequent stages of our projects. In 2022, we decided to collaborate for future endeavours. Her involvement holds immense significance for me, especially given her unique circumstances. She was previously enrolled in a specialized high school focusing on informatics and technology, indicating her strong interest in ICT and the digital realm. However, she recently transitioned to homeschooling due to various issues within traditional education and peer relationships. Even her experiences within different educational settings could serve as intriguing topics for future studies. I invited her to contribute



not only her expertise and enthusiasm for this particular project but also her extensive activism experience. Since the age of eight, she has been involved in protests advocating for animal rights and environmental issues.

Similarly, Duru, a young musician deeply interested in environmental concerns, presents an opportunity to analyse the impact of social media interaction in a collaborative project such as this. Currently, our discussions revolve around our evolving roles and mutual learning across various topics during our encounters. We delve into the transformation of research participants into contributors or partners and the establishment of research partnerships (Demiral & Çiçek, 2023). Being a student at a private school, she has encountered her own set of challenges within educational settings, a topic we have extensively debated. Both individuals, currently 16 years old, hail from middle-class families in two central cities of the country: Istanbul, the economic and cultural capital with a population of twenty million, and Ankara, the formal capital located in the heart of Anatolia.

They are not only enthusiastic about collaborating with me on this project but are also passionate advocates for their rights, demonstrating awareness of children's human rights. Furthermore, they hold environmental issues and feminism in high regard. Firstly, I had online meetings with each of them separately, maintaining a group conversation with the three of us via social media. Then, I sent them my plan outline and asked them to revise it according to their ideas and wishes. Later on, the three of us met to start our research journey. Currently, we continue to work on our project through text messaging, emails, and online chats. In this context, I will share the outcomes of our meetings through a critical discourse analysis, explaining the stages we discussed, including interpersonal communication, the similarities, and differences between physical-digital encounters, as well as how we express our thoughts, feelings, and self-understanding via social media platforms, in alignment with their interests and tendencies.

4. Initiative for Youth-Led Research in Online Environments

In order to explore children's digital citizenship experiences, I had prepared an initial plan regarding digital literacy skills and online engagement before discussing it with my young partners. The plan was based on five stages: information access, socialization process, freedom of expression, private-public distinctions, and virtual-real experiences. The first stage was related to literacy skills, while the following two were meant to understand the social and political engagements of children. Finally, the last two stages focused on the liminal experiences of children, indicating their experiences outside of the internet and online environments. From the outset, I contemplated collaborating with young people, but I had concerns about their willingness to participate due to their busy school term schedules. This remains a question in my mind; therefore, we will try to organize everything according to their schedules during the school term. However, we have already begun reshaping our research settings in several meetings.

The essential categories of our interviews encompass various purposes for internet platform usage: exploring both the positive and negative aspects of social media, addressing resilience against cyberbullying and online deception, practical utilization of digital platforms, and the broadening access and audiences within the realms of arts and politics. For example, I initiated a discussion on digital literacy skills, focusing not only on information access but also on strategies to avoid misinformation. During these discussions, the children demonstrated their resilience and digital expertise as fundamental attributes for becoming competent users in the digital media landscape. To illustrate, I will share some dialogues from our interactions.

Duru expressed her opinion about the advantages of social media by saying: "From my perspective, social media is a useful thing. I can easily share my music with more people". She is a musician steadily progressing in her career through her social media presence. Her experience is an effective example of our study. Without being asked, she shared a specific incident from her journey.



However, the more people I reach, the more risks I encounter. ever since my videos started appearing on the Explore page, cyberbullying has increased. For example, I shared a video with my friends, including my two closest friends, playing *Fade to Black* solos together, and one of the comments was “I wish you knew how to play.” We don’t respond to negative comments, but our supportive friends have started responding on our behalf. Another comment was from someone who had finished university, an adult, I mean, and he said, “Make your account private so that you don’t embarrass yourself in front of people who know music.” Why should I bother with someone who wrote a negative comment just to criticize?

In her account, Duru highlighted three critical points: first, criticism should be constructive and supportive, but the comments she received were offensive and harmful; as she underlined, even from adults who are expected more mature than her peers. Second, she noted the sense of solidarity among her friends, leading our conversation towards the theme of community-building through digital platforms. Lastly, she emphasized the overarching issue that social media is a shared space where everyone is susceptible to attacks or bullying, and a lack of digital competency can lead to real-life consequences. Digital platforms offer limited escape from negative situations. Gamze further expanded on this issue by supporting Duru’s reaction:

They write such comments because they lack any musical background and they write to those who put effort into it. They are not worth considering. Everyone should look at themselves. To be honest, being in Duru’s shoes... it would feel bad. You put in effort and work hard, and then someone random comes and makes such comments... It’s better not to pay attention. It’s best to ignore them.

Duru then shared her discovery: “The same people who make negative comments seem to follow each other; they know each other.” She continued to recount her experiences:

The same person repeatedly commented on many of my videos. So, I responded with something like, “Thanks to your comments, my video now reaches more people.” They could not write anything after that. With every negative comment, I end up reaching more people. This is something I really like. One hundred comments in response to those negative comments. I don’t do anything; people defend me. I really like it. I feel the support of the people. Our friends are great, but if a stranger comes and defends me, saying, “They played really well, why are you criticizing?” it makes me happy.

This case serves as an example of both the positive and negative aspects of social media, cyberbullying, resilience in the face of such challenges, and how one can utilize social media to their advantage rather than being distracted or harmed. As we delved into the details and compared experiences from various individuals, including their peers and friends, we also explored the differences between cyberbullying and in-person bullying, contemplating which might have a more significant impact on someone’s well-being.

In the beginning, both Gamze and Duru believed that real-life experiences are more powerful and could potentially be more dangerous due to their physical nature. However, Duru later pointed out that “they [children] can be more easily harmed through social media (...), you’re more exposed to danger in the digital world.” This is because online harassment can become systematic and frequent. Concerning the distinctions between the virtual and the physical, they both concurred that “face-to-face physical interaction is preferable.” Duru even provided a specific example: “In a video call, if a friend starts crying, I don’t know what to do from afar, but in real life, I can hug them, offer a tissue.”

On top of expressing emotions and maintaining relationships, we also discussed the various styles of digital expressions, from emojis to GIFs. These forms of communication can be especially useful for conveying specific emotional situations. People can express their feelings or reactions by using GIFs or short related videos that resonate with their experiences. Given that young people today have digital devices, applications, and platforms as their digital companions (Thulin, Vilhelmson & Schwanen, 2020), it is



essential to understand how communication has evolved. However, when I explored the potential for developing new communication tools through digital technologies, a surprising turn of events occurred as both Gamze and Duru began to voice complaints about the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of emojis, particularly concerning age differences. During our discussion, they both shared their difficulties with emojis, as they noticed that the same emojis could be used for different purposes. Duru, in particular, pointed out that her parents used laughing or smiling emojis to convey their enjoyment and appreciation, while her peers used the same emojis to criticize or convey the opposite sentiment. This highlighted how the sense of humor varies across generations and how peer groups within the same age develop their own cultures.

For a similar issue, Gamze criticized her generation, noting that the usual crying emoji [😭] is often used to tease people rather than to express genuine sadness. She emphasized, “Because in our generation, even making fun of emoji usage is a bit forced, some people actually use it to make fun.” Gamze drew attention to her generation’s tendency not to take things seriously and to engage in frequent teasing and bullying. On one hand, she appreciated how social media had allowed her to connect with like-minded individuals, expand her horizons, learn about new ideas, and support causes such as LGBT+ and feminism topics, animal rights, and environmental activism. She valued the sense of solidarity that had developed among people. On the other hand, she raised concerns about echo chambers, where individuals only interact with those who share similar viewpoints, limiting exposure to diverse ideas and hindering personal growth. She also expressed frustration with cancel culture and the offensive use of language and emojis. While sharing all her concerns and worries, she recommended to design a research survey and subsequent emoji-focused workshop.

We could conduct a survey by dividing people into age groups and showing them the same emoji, and then see if it changes based on age, gender, or the region they live in. We could ask them for their emotions and request something entirely created by them. It might be better for it to be something they generate themselves. We could ask them to identify their feelings using emojis in response to a scenario, where they choose the appropriate emoji, or we could prepare a post and ask them how they would react to it.

So, Gamze started to create research methods and ideas aimed at establishing a pedagogical environment that would enable diverse individuals to better understand each other’s perspectives and identify the sources of differences among them. In addition to exploring the varying perceptions of emojis across different age groups, I also inquired about their Facebook usage. It came as no surprise that they rarely used Facebook, primarily maintaining accounts for other platforms like Spotify, as they considered Facebook to be intended for ‘older people.’ Despite acknowledging the issue of ageism, this perception underscored their desire for a dedicated space where they could freely interact with their friends. While they criticized their peers for making fun of various things, they also observed the seriousness of platforms more commonly used by older generations. Furthermore, they expressed a general sense of insecurity regarding Twitter, primarily because it is predominantly associated with “political purposes”.

Political socialization begins in early childhood and encompasses various aspects, including contextual understanding of societal influences and the gradual acquisition of political knowledge, which manifests through everyday interactions from theory to practice (Waniganayake & Donegan, 1999). According to the children, Twitter serves as a specific platform for this purpose. They also mentioned that Twitter has been referred to by its new name, ‘X,’ and is seen as a source of “official information”. Thus, they use X more as a source of news rather than a communication tool. Throughout all the interviews, it became evident that different platforms serve distinct purposes, prompting questions about why Instagram is less politically oriented and why younger people prefer TikTok over other platforms. Duru’s interpretation of these issues was linked to both content (the nature of shared content) and the form/design of the interface (how the interface influences users):



I think it's related to the accessibility of sharing, people can use Instagram more easily. I don't think there are many kids on Twitter because it seems like an important platform, so they can't use it to make fun of things as much. They turn to TikTok. It could also be related to the interface, Twitter looks like a place where some articles are published, like a website. Instagram is not like that, since photos and videos go to the main page, people can share more easily. I think it's related to the design.

Gamze expressed a more critical perspective regarding TikTok users, emphasizing their lack of critical media literacy and highlighting the dangers of misinformation and manipulation through social media:

The pages that pop up on TikTok, believing it's true right away is partly due to laziness. Nobody thinks of researching. It's also because they want to believe. It's a perception game. If someone believes it's true, we also prefer to believe. In election polls, for example, if someone who supports Candidate A conducts a survey and Candidate A scores high, it's normal because the survey is conducted based on the audience of that person.

Beyond formal or traditional politics, citizenship action finds expression in civic engagement (Rovisco, 2019). These young individuals acknowledged this aspect through their discussions about the general characteristics of social media platforms, their hesitations about sharing their opinions, and the reactions they offer to current events. Evidently, they utilize digital tools and social media platforms pragmatically to cultivate themselves, enhance their skills and interests, and are enthusiastic about organizing workshops and activities with their peers to foster a pedagogical research environment. In addition to being consumers in the digital world and primarily experiencing youth socialization in digital spaces (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017), these two co-researcher children aspire to create a space for their peers and younger children to collaboratively generate ideas and content that promote freedom of expression.

While reevaluating and discussing people's preferences regarding social media platforms, they proposed Discord as the primary space for our meetings and activities during our project. They chose it due to its privacy requirements, stating, "People can't just enter any room; they need an invitation. It's good for security. It's a platform that's open for use in a trusted way". Although they also criticized certain individuals on this platform and mentioned experiences with bullying, they tended to emphasize its positive aspects because it is a platform where people with shared interests, such as music, culture, literature, and more, come together to discuss and share their passions. In Gamze's words: "It allows people from the same community, with the same hobbies, to come together for various topics like movies, music, books, and more. It's more user-friendly compared to other social media platforms." Prior to meeting with Duru and Gamze, I hadn't considered organizing something via Discord, despite knowing and efficiently using it for my own interests, much like them. So, they played a pivotal role in selecting the platforms, applications, content, and activities for our collaboration.

Furthermore, they suggested taking on specific roles through a division of labor. Duru mentioned that she could create rooms on Discord to initiate our workshops with children, based on the content we had been discussing. She described the advantages of the platform, such as:

It has a role section, not just tags. For instance, there could be a green role for those interested in music, and it would be displayed as such. Similarly, there could be a blue role for those involved in theatre. In fact, people can introduce themselves by selecting a role, like a biography. If we open a room on Discord, we can have separate chat channels, each with emoji titles. Then, people can share photos, write messages, and have voice and video calls. We can open chat rooms under many topic headings, and in one of them, we can address cyberbullying. People can share their experiences with each other and realize they are not alone.

While discussing the platform's features, she also emphasized how people would feel when they come together to share similar experiences, illustrating how social engagement in online spaces can foster resil-



ience and solidarity. Additionally, Gamze expressed her eagerness to utilize simple video games to enhance engagement and trust among participants. In the outline I prepared earlier, there was an idea of playing a video game during our activities; however, I did not suggest any specific games. Gamze took on the responsibility by showing interest in this idea, in addition to her willingness to provide scenarios for the young participants, work on them, and create artworks together using digital apps.

During our discussion of games, she also provided examples related to video games preferred by boys and girls. She stated, “For example, among girls, *The Sims* is common, and among boys, there’s *CS: GO*.” When I asked why she classified them in this way, she clarified, “Female streamers, especially, play war and horror games,” emphasizing that there was no gender dichotomy. However, Duru added, “I’ve never had a male friend who played *The Sims*.” According to Gamze, simulation games like *The Sims* require care and attention, which is why girls tend to be more interested in them. In our discussions, they drew attention to another aspect by pointing out that game marketing reflects gender stereotypes.

As demonstrated in this example too, we delved into societal issues within each topic, sharing our critical views and opinions step by step. Through our collaborative work, brainstorming sessions, and the exchange of experiences and knowledge, our relationship evolved into one of equals. We now aim to expand this interaction by inviting other children to join us.

5. Our Proposed Plan to Develop a Pedagogical Research

As indicated above, these two young individuals are socially active and culturally motivated to develop their capabilities. Duru has a specific interest in music and has been a good reader, previously managing a social media account for her book reviews. Gamze, on the other hand, is passionate about technology-related issues, with a background in computer education from her former school. She is particularly aware of social justice and minority rights. However, both of them have hesitations about being actively engaged users on digital media due to the negative aspects we have discussed.

Both are eager to confront the challenges they have faced and advocate for better conditions, not only for themselves but also for those who are oppressed for various reasons. On the other hand, both of them hold back from putting themselves in the public eye due to a lack of trust or a fear of being misunderstood by others. This dichotomy between being a challenger or abstainer is a key aspect that I would like to explore in our research. The remainder of our plan has been shaped by their insights and aspirations.

Engaging in digital citizenship involves active participation in various cultural and social projects, which enables individuals to assume the role of active citizens, actively performing citizenship. However, the concept of digital citizenship also introduces a divide between educators and learners. Essential prerequisites such as access to alternative forms of communication and technological integration within educational strategies are fundamental for all involved parties (Redecker, 2017).

For learners, effective communication, content creation, responsible usage, and problem-solving skills are imperative. In our study, the young individuals leading the project find themselves at the intersection of being learners and educators/mentors. They embrace a critical approach to social pedagogy, assuming contributing roles within a research setting, while navigating the transition to adulthood. This transitional phase indicates the emergence of new, incomplete identities within both digital and physical spaces, transcending conventional boundaries.

In my role as the project coordinator, I have outlined our plan as follows: we will commence with an opening meeting to establish trust, and an Emoji workshop will serve as an icebreaker, allowing us to explore various choices and expressions among ourselves. Next, we will create and explore social networks through Discord channels, with small groups within our larger community of children delving into focused discussions on specific topics. In this context, we aim to construct solidarity networks using art-related productions in games and various applications. Gamze and Duru have their own ideas for activities and will employ relevant tools and apps, sharing their experiences with others.



What is often missing or underestimated in educational settings is creativity, and the diversity of perspectives and understandings is crucial in the context of social pedagogy to address the “complexity of human relationships” (as discussed by Ucar in 2013) and transform it into actionable change. This is particularly important for transformative citizenship practices in this new era where digitalization remains a central issue in childhood studies and related pedagogical areas. White & Le Cornu (2010) highlight that digital citizenship not only involves belonging to a social environment but also equipping individuals with tools for a learning community. As a modest initiative, our intention is to foster community building in a collective and inclusive manner through the preparation of this project.

Acknowledgement

I extend my gratitude to Gamze Özdemir and Duru Çiçek for their willingness to participate in this proposal. In an unconventional manner, I have used their real names to underscore their contributions to this field study preparation with their permission and desire. I am also open to further analysis and writing processes with them if they have the time and willingness to take on the role of co-researchers in the subsequent practical stages. I am thankful for the trust and support of their parents, who have allowed us to collaborate. While we are just beginning our journey, I am optimistic about what we can achieve when we work together.

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