



Early Childhood Education: Listening to A Child's Voices Through A/R/Tographic Journey

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Abstract

This inquiry explores the impact of child-led perspectives in art education, using the methodologies of a/r/tography and autoethnography to explore the intersection of artistic practice, personal reflection, and education. The research was inspired by a transformative experience with a 7-year-old child at a spring camp, whose imaginative storytelling of a “tire kingdom,” where car tires live secret lives, reversed traditional child-adult dynamics. The child’s insights redefined the researcher’s roles as an artist-researcher-teacher-learner, placing the child in the role of teacher and the researcher as the learner. This reversal opened up new pathways for reflection and creativity, as the child’s imaginative exploration became a catalyst for the researcher’s artistic practice. The researcher created a series of illustrations based on the child’s perceptions, which evolved into a picture book that amplifies children’s voices, illustrating the importance of recognizing children’s contributions to educational discourse. Through a/r/tography, which integrates art-making, research, and teaching, alongside autoethnography’s focus on personal and cultural reflection, this inquiry underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding the fluid relationships between children and adults and/or students and teachers. It also highlights the importance of listening to and incorporating children’s imaginative inquiries as a means of enriching educational and artistic practices. By engaging in the child’s world, the researcher not only deepened their creative and educational practice but also discovered the potential of child-led inquiry to reshape adult learning, fostering reciprocal, intergenerational dialogue and new forms of creative collaboration.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Child-led Perspective, Reshaping Adult Worldviews, A/r/tography, Autoethnography

1. Introduction

In the field of art education, there is increasing recognition of the value of interdisciplinary approaches that embrace the complexities of human experience. A/r/tography (Irwin, 2024)

and autoethnography (Poulos, 2021) are two such methodologies, offering unique ways to explore and reflect on lived experiences through creative practices.

Scholars have begun to emphasize the importance of child-led perspectives in educational theory and practice (Yoon & Templeton, 2019; James, 2003). Children's voices are increasingly acknowledged as vital contributors to educational discourse, capable of offering fresh insights that challenge conventional adult-centered paradigms (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). However, despite this growing awareness, children's ideas and imaginations are often overlooked or undervalued in formal educational settings, limiting the potential for meaningful, reciprocal learning (Thomas, 2021). There remains a gap in how educators and researchers not only listen to children but also integrate children's perspectives into their understanding of the world. This gap highlights the need to further explore how children's imaginative play and inquiry can shape and reshape adults/teachers educational and artistic practices.

This inquiry addresses this gap by examining an educational experience that unfolded during a spring camp. The researcher encountered a 7-year-old child, Max (pseudonym), who had a vivid and imaginative understanding of the world, specifically his belief in a "tire kingdom" where car tires lived secret lives. Max's storytelling served as a powerful reminder of the value of child-led inquiry. Through his eyes, ordinary objects like tires became animated with purpose and meaning, providing a glimpse into the limitless possibilities of children's imaginations.

As the researcher walked alongside Max, engaging with him in a/r/tographic inquiry, he found himself in the role of the learner, with Max acting as his guide. Max's creative exploration of the "tire kingdom" led them through a process of living inquiry, an approach central to a/r/tography that blurs the boundaries between theory and practice (Springgay et al., 2005). In these moments, the researcher recognized how child-led perspectives can open up new pathways for reflection, creativity, and understanding in art education. The interaction not only reshaped the researcher's roles as an artist-researcher-teacher-learner but also sparked personal memories of his own childhood, leading him to create a series of illustrations inspired by Max's storytelling.

These illustrations represent a form of artistic response to Max's inquiry, illustrating how his ideas prompted a visual and reflective process that the researcher further developed into a picture book. The book, which was exhibited and published, is intended to amplify the voices of children like Max and to emphasize the importance of listening to children's ideas as legitimate contributions to broader educational and artistic practices. The creative process of engaging with Max's imagination underscores the potential for children's voices to reshape the ways in which educators, researchers, and artists approach their work.

By integrating Max's insights into his own practice, the researcher was able to fully immerse himself in the intertwined roles of artist, researcher, teacher, and learner. This child-led experience provided the researcher with deep reflection on the potential of a/r/tography to foster holistic, immersive learning processes that transcend traditional boundaries between children and adults and/or students and teachers. Max's "tire kingdom" demonstrates that children offer a unique lens through which to view and understand the world (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). When their experiences are written or rewritten in the form of short "factional" stories (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015)—a blend of fact and fiction—it not only contributes to their self-development but also helps in reshaping educators, researchers, and readers.

To sum up, this inquiry seeks to underscore the importance of listening to and amplifying children's voices as legitimate and valuable contributions to educational and artistic practices. It explores how engaging with children's imaginative inquiries can foster deeper reflections on the role of the artist, researcher, teacher, and learner, ultimately reshaping the ways in which educators approach education. The following sections will explore the theoretical underpinnings of a/r/tography and autoethnography, detail the personal experience involving Max's inquiry, and discuss the broader implications of validating child-led perspectives in art education.

2. Body of paper

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2.2. Methods

This inquiry employs a qualitative, art-based inquiry, with a/r/tography and autoethnography forming the methodological framework. This framework provides a dynamic, multifaceted lens for exploring how children's worldviews reshape adult perspectives within the context of art education.

A/r/tography is a form of representation that privileges both text and image as they meet within moments of *métissage* (Irwin, 2024, pp. 33-34). As a practice-based methodology (Triggs et al., 2014), a/r/tography is a coming together of art and graphy, or image and word. It is a doubling of visual and textual wherein both complement, extend, refute, and/or subvert one another (Irwin, 2024, p. 41). "Through attention to memory, identity, reflection, meditation, storytelling, interpretation, and representation, we are searching for new ways to understand our practices as artists, researchers, and teachers" (Irwin, 2024, p. 32). It emphasizes living inquiry and continuous self-reflection, making it well-suited to studying the fluid interplay of relationship, memory, and artistic practice. A/r/tography acknowledges relationships as always in process (Irwin, 2013), weaving together art, theory, and practice to allow for emergent understandings of complex phenomena. It fosters a critical, creative space for transitioning between roles as an artist, researcher, teacher, and learner, which aligns with the inquiry into relationship between children-adults, and art education.

The six renderings of a/r/tography—contiguity, living inquiry, metaphor and metonymy, openings, reverberations, and excess (Springgay et al., 2005)—provide theoretical insights and emphasize non-linear, fluid research processes. These principles guide the ongoing revision of the researcher's work, ensuring that the inquiry remains responsive to emerging reflections and discoveries.

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship with culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness (Gouzouasis & Regier, 2015, p. 72). It consists of three interrelated components: "auto" (self), "ethno" (culture), and "graphy" (writing). Thus, autoethnographic

projects describe, interpret, and represent (graphy) a group's or culture's beliefs, practices, and identity (ethno) through the lens of the self, subjectivity, and personal experience (auto) (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). "We evoke the notion of autoethnography as pedagogy" (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 397), and "embrace the notion that autoethnographies are accessible, readily readable, research texts that appeal to a broad readership and are open to interpretation. We believe that writing creative, fictionally styled, 'factional' stories enable us to reach a wider audience" (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 402). In this research, it provides a framework for understanding how personal narratives reflect broader socio-cultural phenomena. Autoethnographers use a dual perspective—focusing outward on cultural practices and inward on the self, revealing the tensions and insights that emerge from this interplay (Ellis, 2004). By reflecting on and questioning these interactions, this approach offers opportunities for discovering new insights.

Autoethnography also embraces creative, narrative-driven writing, making the research accessible to a broader audience and encouraging diverse interpretations (Sparkes, 2024). This openness fosters inclusive dialogue, especially in art education, where multiple perspectives can deepen the conversation.

Combining a/r/tography and autoethnography creates a multidimensional research approach, particularly suited for exploring relationships, intersections, and self-transformation. A/r/tography intertwines image and text, revealing the fluidity of relationships, while autoethnography uses personal stories to explore the deep connections between self and environments. This integration allows researchers to engage in continuous reflection throughout the creative, research, and teaching/learning processes, particularly within the context of art education, fostering richer dialogues between children and adults. Therefore, through a/r/tography, children's creativity is showcased, while autoethnography provides space for reflection, revealing how these creations influence and transform the researcher's worldview. Together, these methodologies form a practical and reflective framework to explore the role of children in A/R/T inquiry and how their creative processes challenge and expand adult perspectives. At the same time, this process deepens the researcher's understanding of the dynamic interaction between children and adults, demonstrating how children's creativity facilitates mutual learning and growth.

Based on the above methodological framework, the researcher will employ a diverse set of research methods. In a/r/tography, the researcher will engage in living inquiry through artistic creation, teaching practice, and walking with Max. These methods will enable continuous reflection on relationships and cultural intersections while evoking our collective memory (Yoon-Ramirez, 2021; Irwin, 2024). For autoethnography, the researcher will use short "factional" stories to weave together discoveries from living inquiry into narratives, clarifying the research and inviting readers into the conversation (Cavallerio, 2022). Through this diverse set of practices, insights will gradually emerge throughout the research process.

Walking-sensing is both a physical and cognitive process, connecting bodily movement with reflection on identity and space (Yoon-Ramirez, 2021). The process of Max leading the researcher into his "secret base" (the Tire Kingdom) symbolizes an exploration of relationships, the uncertainty of outcomes, and the construction of meaning through sensory experience. This metaphorical journey explores the intersections between adults, children, and living inquiry, revealing the fluidity of relationships across ages and roles. The researcher's presence in the unknown represents both internal and external exploration, leading to new insights into adult-child relationships.

In a/r/tography, artistic creation is a constantly evolving form of inquiry (Sinner, 2021). The researcher created visual art based on Max's imagination. Specifically, Max's

descriptions and imaginings of tires in everyday life evoked similar childhood memories for the researcher. Inspired by this, the researcher created a picture book about the “Tire Kingdom.” Throughout the creative process, the researcher continuously reflects on the relationship between children and adults, and what children can teach adults. This picture book is used in the researcher’s teaching, engaging in a powerful diffraction by using a child’s perspective to communicate with younger generations.

In autoethnography, personal experiences are examined in relation to broader social contexts (Ellis, 2004). The researcher has written a creative nonfiction in the form of a short “factional” story, documenting experiences with Max. Through the story, the researcher organizes discoveries and evokes emotional resonance in readers. These stories blur the boundaries between art and education, offering complex dialogues on identity and culture. Through personal reflection, this story reveals the fluidity of relationships and the tension between child-adult worldviews, encouraging deeper reflection and dialogue in this field.

2.3. Results

This inquiry provides key insights into child-led learning, identity fluidity, and intergenerational knowledge exchange within art education. Through a/r/tography and autoethnography, it shows how engaging with a child’s imagination can reverse traditional educational roles, fostering reflections on relationships, memory, and culture. The “Tire Kingdom” exemplifies child-led inquiry, challenging adult-centered learning perspectives. His related story sparked creative engagement and highlighted the importance of imaginative play in constructing meaning. The development of the picture book based on Max’s worldview underscores the value of children’s voices in reshaping educational practices and fostering intergenerational dialogue.

A key finding is the reversal of roles, where Max became the teacher, and the researcher (teacher) became the learner, demonstrating that learning is reciprocal. Max’s imaginative thinking offered new insights into how adults approach their roles as educators and learners, blurring the lines between child- adult perspectives. The study also revealed the role of memory in shaping identity. Max’s descriptions evoked the researcher’s childhood memories, creating a dialogue between past and present, and deepening the researcher’s understanding of how personal experiences influence identity as an artist, researcher, teacher, and learner. Another outcome was the fluidity of relationships across ages and roles. Max’s storytelling showed that roles between child-adult and/or student-teacher are dynamic, prompting a rethinking of authority and knowledge-sharing in educational spaces.

These findings emphasize the importance of child-led inquiries in fostering reciprocal, dialogic learning environments. The picture book serves as a testament to the power of art in amplifying children’s voices, offering a platform for discussions on identity, creativity, and imagination. This interdisciplinary inquiry presents a holistic model for immersive teaching and learning, showing how art can enhance intergenerational dialogue and understanding.

2.4. Discussion

This inquiry, through a child-led perspective, reveals the potential for role reversals between adults and children in educational and artistic practices. This finding aligns with literature that highlights children as active knowledge creators. As Thomas (2021) points out, children are not merely passive learners; their agency in education deserves recognition. Similarly, the research by Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019) emphasizes the importance of involving children in research, suggesting that children’s voices can challenge adult-centered educational models. Max’s imaginative narration of the “Tire Kingdom” not only subverts

traditional teacher-student roles but also demonstrates how children, through their creativity, can lead adults in reflection and exploration.

This inquiry combines a/r/tography and autoethnography as an interdisciplinary research framework. As Irwin (2024) explains, this reveals the fluidity of relationships and provides space for artistic creation and reflection. In Max's story, this fluidity is reflected in the researcher's shift in identity from teacher to learner, highlighting the reciprocal dynamic between education and artistic practice. Carrie Leana et al. (2009) believe that promoting collaborative job crafting can enhance the quality of care in early childhood education. In this inquiry, the researcher's ideas align with Leana et al.'s views but also make new advancements. The interpretation of collaborators and their roles is more flexible, and intertwining roles can further enhance the quality of collaboration.

Under Max's guidance, the researcher not only re-examined educational practices from the child's perspective but also amplified the child's voice through artistic creation by producing a picture book based on Max's "Tire Kingdom." This aligns with the ideas of Jaana Brinck et al. (2022), who suggest that participatory design in early childhood education can help dismantle traditional power structures, allowing children to take on more active roles in the design of teaching. What makes this study go a step further is that both the child and the researcher unconsciously and naturally engaged in a collaborative exploration. This subtle intergenerational dialogue is important in art education because art requires natural expression, which is often brought into moments of the unknown (Irwin, 2024).

This inquiry demonstrates the leading role of children in art education and validates the potential of a child's perspective in reshaping educational processes. By integrating a/r/tography and autoethnography, it provides theoretical support for children's agency in education and offers a practical framework for future early childhood education through artistic and interdisciplinary approaches. This child-led inquiry fosters a reciprocal and dynamic learning environment, breaking traditional boundaries between child-adult.

3. Conclusion

This inquiry highlights the potential of child-led perspectives in reshaping adult roles in art education practice. Through Max's storytelling, the researcher experienced a reversal of teacher-student roles, emphasizing the importance of listening to and valuing children's voices. By integrating the methodological framework, the research reveals the fluidity of relationships between children and adults, demonstrating that these interactions can foster reciprocal learning and creativity. The picture book created based on Max's worldview not only amplifies children's contributions to educational discourse but also serves as a reminder of the power of child-led inquiry to reshape adult perspectives. This study advocates for a more inclusive and dialogic approach in art education, recognizing children as active knowledge creators and promoting deeper intergenerational collaboration and understanding.

Finally, this inquiry concludes with a short "factional" story written by the researcher and a picture book. This serves as a new beginning, inviting readers to generate more questions, processes, open-ended results, and reverberations:

"Follow me quickly," Max said excitedly.

"Slow down, Max. I can barely keep up with you," I gasped, trying to catch up with his running ahead of me. In that moment, I kept thinking, "Why am I doing such a boring thing with him? I just want to sit on a bench and rest for a while."

If you do not know what I am talking about, do not worry, the story starts here...

During my time as a spring camp teacher in Vancouver, Canada, I had an unforgettable interaction with a 7-year-old child named Max (a pseudonym). I clearly remember, during outdoor activities, I led a group of children to play on the playground of the Gray Point Community Center. Everything was going smoothly, and I was about to sit down on a white bench to rest. However, a boy named Max in our group suddenly grabbed my shirt and dragged me somewhere. At that time, I tried to break free from him because I just wanted to sit down and rest for a while, but he was too strong compared with his peers. Although, I'm, an adult, stronger than him, if I resisted him with greater force, I might hurt him, so I ultimately chose to compromise.

I followed him, not knowing where he was taking me. I just hoped he would find his playmates so I could enjoy the rare sunshine.

"Oh, a car." I saw an ordinary car. Was he trying to make me notice the car that couldn't be more ordinary parked in the lot?

"Don't talk. You'll scare them away," he said.

"What? How?" I was very confused.

"Shh! Keep quiet!" Max whispered to me, though his volume was not low at all.

He excitedly pulled me to the car, "Squat down!" he said. We began to inspect the tires of this car. However, to be honest, a thought that now seems absurd and ridiculous suddenly popped into my mind. Having been in Canada for only three months at that time, everything is still unfamiliar to me. I wasn't focused on appreciating these tires. Instead, I worried whether what we were doing could be considered spying. After all, people here are very conscious of their privacy. I was concerned that such behavior might get me sued and eventually deported back to my home country. Of course, 7-year-old Max had no idea what I was worrying about. He continued telling me a secret about the kingdom of tires.

"When humans are not paying attention, the tires grow arms and legs and run to propel cars. Humans can't see these limbs, so they all think the tires roll to move the car, but they're wrong."

"What's so special about these tires?" I asked nonchalantly. Inside, I was already curious.

"They're not tires," he shouted at me. "They're donut people."

"An interesting and invented term," I muttered to myself.

"What?"

"Nothing, Max, I said it's interesting."

Next, he seriously explained why he knew so much about the "Kingdom of Tires." Because he often played with tires, the residents of the "kingdom" considered him a harmless, good kid. Thus, he had the privilege to sign a "Visibility Agreement" with the leaders of the "kingdom." Only those who signed this agreement could see the real lives of the tires. As I expected, he also had me sign an agreement, so I pretended to sign a document in the air.

Gradually, as I immersed myself in the world of making believe he created, I realized that I had truly discovered another side of ordinary things. I remember Max sharing his "years of research results" with me. He looked like a focused researcher. Watching him converse with the tires, I constantly imagined scenes of Jane Goodall studying chimpanzees. Was Max a cross-species biologist? At that moment, I felt he was my mentor, guiding me in a living inquiry in the "wild."

Max's words suddenly evoked memories of my childhood. It was a beautiful encounter between one soul and another. It was a more complex interweaving of different roles. When I was a child, I had similar thoughts while sitting in a car. Inspired by his story, I went home and created a series of illustrations based on his imagination. During the creation process, I used Max's way of using brushstrokes, colors, and perspectives. I tried to recall Max's voice—to learn from him and be imaginative and creative like him.

I submitted this series of illustrations to the Bologna Illustration Exhibition and published a physical picture book. This result is a collaboration between the child and me. I used a/r/tography in my inquiry. I played multiple roles, and so did the child.

Spring camp ended, and Max and I didn't exchange contact information. But I'm grateful I met Max this spring. He ignited my inspiration. Maybe we'll never meet again, or maybe when he grows up, we'll pass each other unnoticed on the street. But the only thing I'm sure of is that he'll grow up quietly somewhere, and I'll continue moving forward in places he cannot see...

Figure 1: The Tire Kingdom 1, created by the author

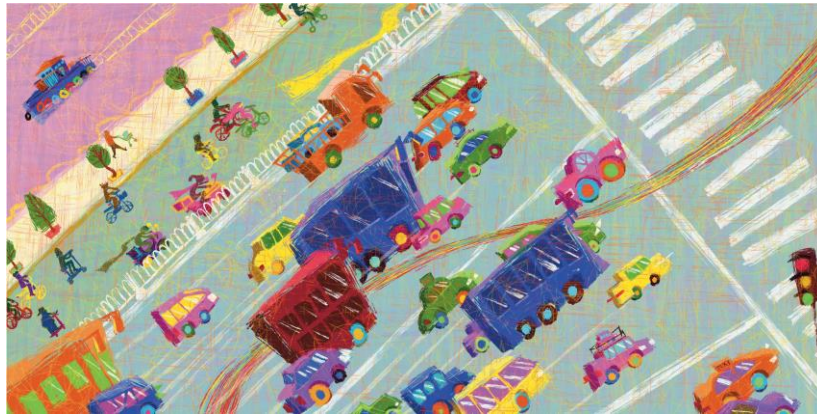


Figure 2: The Tire Kingdom 2, created by the author



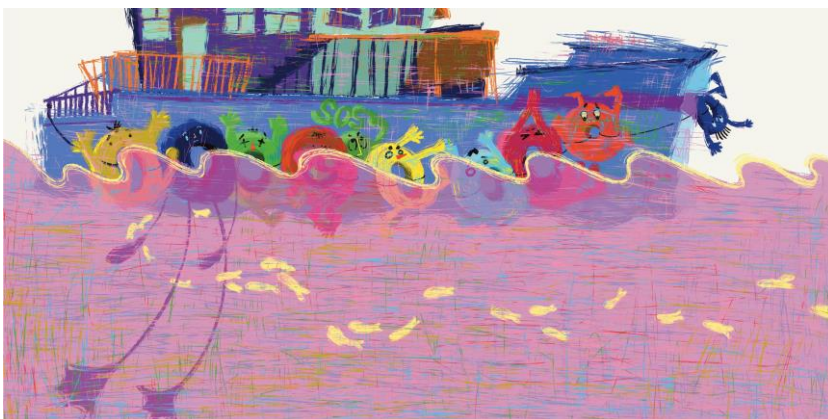
Figure 3: The Tire Kingdom 3, created by the author



Figure 4: The Tire Kingdom 4, created by the author



Figure 5: The Tire Kingdom 5, created by the author



Acknowledgment

This spring, I am grateful to have met Max.

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