Understanding an Arts-Based Project with Children in Kindergarten Through the Lenses of A/r/tography

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1 Introduction

I was involved as a researcher in an arts-based project with children in four kindergartens in a medium-sized city on the West coast of Norway (Schei and Duus 2016). My agenda was to contribute to awareness of the processes that took place between groups of 5-year olds, two artists; an actress and a musician, and kindergarten teachers during twenty improvisational art meetings. As stated by D. Jean Clandinin (2013), in narrative inquiry we go to the places the participants take us. The children were at the core of my inquiry. Many of them were immigrants to Norway. Therefore, a core issue was to contribute to multicultural pedagogies and the development of language skills through arts-based activities by engaging the children in improvisational events where they had the leading roles as the initiators. Being with children draws the attention towards their rapid development when it comes to ways of being and ways of claiming space with body and voice (Schei 2012, 2013; Ødegaard 2012). This art project demonstrated children's vast ability to explore possibilities and improvise stories that change their worlds. It makes me wonder how it would have been, if they had *not* been seen as competent subjects, capable of staging themselves as courageous, equal, and democratic human beings (Bae 2009; Corsaro 2005; Dewey 2005).

I observed the children as they produced wonderful, virtual voyages with a very courageous teddy bear, Mitwa Potovanja, a protagonist created by the actress.

This is the story line:

> Deep, deep in a forest, under a small bush, there is a tiny wooden house. If you walk past this bush, you will probably not see the house right away. But if you bend all the way down on your knees, then you will see it: A little brown house with an old wooden door. And if

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you lie down on your stomach and take an extra look, you will see a sign: "Here lives Mitwa Potovanja – a travelling teddy bear." "Who is that?" you might ask. "Come with me, and you will meet him!" Actress Adele touches one of the ten children on his knee. The boy stands up and carefully lifts off a silk carpet: "Look. There he sits. Mitwa Potovanja, our travelling friend, in his red armchair. Do you see his rucksack? It is next to the armchair. Could there be anything inside?" One of the children eagerly pulls up a small, red book from the rucksack. "A passport! Yes, look, there is his passport. I think Mitwa dreams of travelling."

From my field notes:

I observe the children, the artists and the teachers as they are in the midst of their living story. I am wondering how the shy immigrant boy from Syria suddenly can take the lead in the improvisation, using the language from his new country as his own. His body language reveals confidence and vigor. He becomes *Mitwa's voice, explaining to his peers with his few Norwegian words what is necessary to put in the rucksack for this journey: most importantly the passport and the toothbrush. He seems to know down to the least detail what is necessary for such a travel, and of course, he has decided that the destination is his home country, Syria. Where does this boldness come from? What might be the power that triggers the silent boy who, according to the teachers, usually does not speak any Norwegian? All of a sudden, he now expresses Mitwa's wishes with a clear and loud voice. What kind of process am I observing?*

Throughout the art meetings, all improvisational work was spun around Mitwa's travel projects. Where does Mitwa want to go today, why, how, with whom? The children decided where Mitwa wanted to travel, what he had to carry with him in his rucksack, what travel songs he would have to sing and what music he needed to help him on his way for successful journeys to Afghanistan, Syria, Iceland, or even to the Moon. Everything was possible within the frame of 60 min and a space of 30 m^2, a few songs composed and arranged for the project, and some vital artifacts.

What I observed was children, artists, and teachers improvising with drama and music. I saw and heard their boldness and their creativity as they worked together. I organized space and time for the artists and the teachers to write their reflections in private logs immediately after each art meeting. We then sat together and they shared their experiences. I also had a special follow-up with the artists to decipher details in the process of creating improvisational art meetings. I collected a rich empirical material based on observations, field notes and photos. The actress had been in dialogue with each child both during the art meetings and afterwards, when they together summed up what had happened to Mitwa, whether his toothache was cured or his passport securely stored in his rucksack. The actress and the children made a clipbook where the art meetings became the story of Mitwa's many travels around the world. She wrote in detail what each child told her. Having the opportunity to talk with the artists and the teachers in the aftermath of each session, I became aware that there is more to learn from this empirical material than just what had happened there and then. I was curious about the children and the boldness that I had seen. After completion of the series of art meetings I invited the actress to co-author a book about what seemed to be a core issue of this project, namely the children's courage and agency. For more than 3 years we tried to understand various aspects of courage: What is courage? Who is courageous?

2 Unpacking Courage

Mitwa was the link between all involved. He was a catalyst for storytelling, one that could catch the children's attention. He was living magic with soul from the moment the children let him become so. He touched something deep in everyone, something identifiable. The children immediately identified with the teddy bear on several levels. The one who carried Mitwa could *be* him by taking control of what he felt and thought. It was also possible for the rest of the group to enter the same identification through their physical participation in the narrative. They acted as if they *all* became Mitwa at the same time. He came alive, he became a source of courage, and the children became equally courageous. Rapidly and seamlessly, the children and staff also jumped into other roles, as Mitwa's rivals or enemies when it was necessary. Individually, they were not so brave, but in the narrative they had access to the courage that was created communally.

Since the children knew that what was happening in the improvisation story was fictional, they could be completely free to plan for a trip to Iceland or the Moon. Mitwa always supported the children in their choices, and never said, "No, it will be too expensive!," "It will be too dangerous!," or "There may be creepy animals!" This is part of the constitution of play in itself, and of the fiction contract, the tacit agreement between everyone in the room that this is not really reality. Mitwa rather encouraged the children to explore the world and experience as much as possible. He spoke to the children, but also to everyone else in the room. Together with Mitwa, they all became so brave that they dared to seek out dangerous situations. If the story needed it, they allowed Mitwa to lose his courage so that they could be brave for him. Thus, Mitwa became the symbol of strength needed to dare a leap into the unknown (Schei and Duus 2016, p. 47).

The children revealed their embodied knowledge of courage through the competent ways they acted as initiators of the story line, as decision-makers when they had to decide upon what they found to be important matters, as whether they needed to find a dentist in Afghanistan to cure Mitwa's toothache, or what they had to do if they had too little time to reach the airport. The children always had reasonable solutions. The creativity and directedness would not have happened if it were not for the artists, who had carefully framed the art meetings with a narrative world, well-chosen artifacts and songs, and their highly focused presence, creating a safe space for the children to play along with each other.

3 Retelling and Thinking with Stories

Being involved and working alongside the participants for a long time allowed my inquiry space to evolve as I unpacked the various narratives: The children and their unstoppable urge to create stories, the artists and their belief in improvisation as a means of unleashing the children's competences, the contributing teachers who

enthusiastically co-composed the travelling stories, and me; the researcher – I had ongoing conversations with all the participants, I produced field notes and read the artists' and teachers' logs from 20 art meetings. And then the book project started, with weekly conversations and workshops with the actress. When the book was finished in 2016, the two of us had been living with this project since 2011. Together we had retold the stories from the art meetings again and again, and by telling and reliving the stories, new meanings arose. It was a reflective research process of restorying our experiences and giving them new meanings, in line with what Connelly and Claninin describe in their article *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry* (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 9). We were surprised by how the narratives revealed so many layers of understandings of the children's self-staging in the improvisations.

3.1 The "I"

Narrative inquiry is a slow process that seems to not end, even if the research project is over. Therefore, some questions remain important: What narrative am I telling? The one about the children being creative together with some visiting artists who invite them to play along and be absorbed with imaginary stories about a teddy bear called Mitwa Potovanja? A lot of research is carried out on visiting artists and their roles and influence in relation to children in kindergarten and school (Holdhus and Espeland 2013). No, it is not that story.

Nor is it the one about supportive teachers contributing with enthusiasm, seeing each child's needs and yet; being almost invisible "extras" in the art meeting that unfolds? The importance of the teacher is sometimes ignored. That is also documented in research and not the topic here.

It could be the story about the actress and her thorough and delicate preparatory work: Arranging the room, placing the teddy bear neatly in the center of attention, all her strategic arrangements to enable the improvisation to move forward without any disturbing breaks? That is a best-practice story, and not the one focused on here. Instead, I want to highlight what made me listen to the children's voices and how I came to identify the many layers of meaning in their creative processes. My background is that of a performer of classical song, and of a music teacher, educator, and researcher. In this research, I have more and more been asking myself questions like: Whose story is it? Who is telling? Who am I, coming from the outside to disentangle and recompose something that can be defined as new knowledge? What turning points can be identified from the researcher's perspective? Where, in my empirical material, are the cracks that can let the light in, and reveal where new knowledge is hidden?

Let me borrow some vital questions from Somerville (2016), speaking from the post-human perspective. That is not my position, yet, while reading the article: *The post-human I: Encountering data in new materialism*, I gradually became aware that the questions she asked of her empirical material were the same questions I have asked during my process.

> Each time I view the very short video of only 42 s I see, hear and know something different (…) Each time I transcribe the video, it is an exercise in close concentration beyond an elusive search for meaning in an engagement that has no other meaning than the continuing pleasure that the playful intra-action generates. (Somerville 2016, p. 1166)

Somerville raises the question of how we can think with data differently, "not only in the search for meaning after the event, but at the site of its production as well" (Somerville 2016, p. 1170). That is my purpose as well.

3.2 Is It Really a Jigsaw Puzzle?

I thought that I could understand the various components of the improvisation story as a jigsaw puzzle where each piece would contribute importantly to the whole puzzle. But jigsaw puzzles have a solution, a correct answer, a beginning and an end. I believe that the jigsaw metaphor has to be replaced by something else, something that can describe an open-ended process of interconnected pathways, crossroads, and "turning points."

I need metaphors to help me understand what the unwrapping of narratives can be understood as. *Rhizome* is a biological concept; it originally means "mass of roots." It was first introduced by philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari as a metaphor with many interpretations. One understanding is that it can be used to talk about complex interconnectedness. "It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 385). Irwin et al. (2006) uses "rhizomatic" to describe a multidimensional dynamic map with many beginnings and ends, a complex network of causal roads, suggestive paths, associative bridges, and mythic passages. On this map everything is entangled, a starting point can be anywhere. It means that stimuli and effects flow in multiple directions, and allows an evolving art project like ours, with multiple components, to be researched, reexamined, and reassembled. Clandinin (2013) uses the metaphor of puzzle, but she calls it a *continuous* puzzle. This way of understanding the puzzle of narratives points to ways of thinking about *experience* (Dewey 2005). Leaning on Clandinin, Connelly, and Rosiek (Clandinin 2006, 2013; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007; Connelly and Clandinin 1990), who argue that new understandings evolve from reading and rereading field notes, going through conversations again and again, and coming alongside that which is the subject of inquiry, I find that the children had been given a space to compose new beginnings. They could travel to the homeland their families had left, but they could also decide when and how they wanted to return to their new home country. By describing smell, food, sound, and landscape in Syria, the Syrian boy taught me how he carries such memories with him. He gave me an important insight into his world. By dwelling on details, for example when another boy double-checks if Mitwa really carries his passport in the rucksack, I understand that the passport has played an important part in his experiences so far, especially as it is connected

to airports. The children very often added police controls in their stories, and the child who carried Mitwa proudly took out the passport from the rucksack and handed it over to the police. The puzzle pieces were put together, and I learned how rich their experiences were, despite being only 5 years old. They were brave, competent children who visited their past.

The rhizome metaphor constitutes a link to a/r/tography, described by Irwin et al. as "a living inquiry of unfolding artforms … and text that intentionally unsettles perception and complicated understandings through 'rhizomatic relationality'" (Irwin et al. 2006, p. 79). I use a/r/tography to describe artistic and educational practices, following Irwin and others (Irwin 2013; Irwin et al. 2006; Leblanc et al. 2015; Springgay et al. 2005; Sullivan 2005). Clandinin emphasizes that we all live in stories, stories that are temporal and cultural, stories that are uniquely our own, yet connect us with others. All these stories become inter-woven and intertwined – they have dynamic rhizomatic relationships to each other. "Our stories are always in relation, always composed in between, in those spaces between time and people and generations and places" (Clandinin 2013, p. 30).

This way of puzzling together narratives connects with what Connelly and Clandinin point to as the methodological turn in research into arts-based *experiences*. A/r/tography as a methodology of situations "provides a reflective and reflexive stance to situational inquiries" (Irwin et al. 2006, p. 71). They point out the shift from *who* an artist, researcher, or educator is, to *when* a person is an artist, researcher, or educator, and *when* an experience is art, research, or education. It is a method of situations, and every situation can emerge as complex if it is unwrapped and examined in research. This method allows us to conceptualize components of a project and thereby better understand the multiple roles of the artist, often as a facilitator, mediator, and contributor to a particular community. "Learning/creating/inquiring in, from, through, and with situations occurs in the in-between spaces – those spaces that make connections that are often unanticipated," writes Irwin et al. (2006, p. 72).

Aesthetic experiences are more than doing activities that are called creative or artistic. Art can be an entrance to the exploration of artifacts, of sounds, materials, and tastes. My inquiry into the various stories that derived from the art improvisations with the 5-year olds helped me understand the importance of stories as ways of making aesthetic experiences meaningful.

4 The Bricolage of New Knowledge

There are moments of learning that I wish to share: Children's narratives within the general story of immigration are often concealed and unknown. In kindergarten, the children are situated in the midst of new relations. They are not always given the possibility to articulate themselves due to their lack of language skills, and therefore they are vulnerable. This art project was initiated by the municipality, wanting to give power and self-confidence to children in a particularly difficult situation in a new homeland, and contribute to the strengthening of their language skills with the

help of arts-based approaches. The artists succeeded in their effort to let the children get in the foreground and create the plot of the improvised story. It meant that the children were given the power to describe Mitwa's feelings and wishes with their own experiences as tools. It seemed that the children were empowered by their affiliation with Mitwa, and that the devotion triggered the words. It was apparent that this identification made it possible to use their new language and speak for Mitwa, speak *as* him. They spoke with a clear, calm, and loud voice, and they used the Norwegian language with confidence. This is the phenomenological moment, the moment when they all become Mitwa – at the same time. *They* made the artifact come alive and hence; everyone became courageous. Of course, such boldness contributes to faster language learning (Abbs 2007; Bae 2009; Barone 2008; Kulset 2015; Schei and Ødegaard 2017).

When the children experienced that the artists and their teachers played along with them and supported their creative and improvisational play, they were triggered to open up their own arena and allow the artists and the teachers to enter and join. The artists were responsive and empathetic. They played their roles so well that in the moment of improvisation the differences between them and the children seemed to be erased. They contributed as equals. The teddy bear could become the beloved artifact for all of them because they were all living in the same story. The artists and the teachers were not pretending to join the plot. They had direct access to the here and now of the 5-year olds, their imaginative, spontaneously thinking, speaking, and acting processes. The children improvised without limits, quite unlike grown-ups, who tend to look in the virtual mirror and judge everything as a performance (Scheff 2003, 2005). This allowed the adults to enter the game. Now all of them were creative, using the same artifacts as tools and as hubs for creativity. They packed the rucksack with reindeer and firetrucks and whatever their imagination allowed them to, enjoying the freedom of fiction.

It made me understand that the space of artistic and playful improvisation has its own rules, inherent rules that belong to those who are present, rules that function as tacit agreements. Some tend to talk about children and the arts as if art is not a matter for children. Art is a cultural phenomenon, though it is multifaceted and it is understood and interpreted in numerous ways (Terrini 2014). Being aware that we are constantly in the midst of debates about what art is, who defines art, who an artist is, whether art can be measured and whether children's play with creative expressive forms can be defined as art, and who wields the power of definition, it is reasonable to use the rhizome metaphor here also, and be conscious about these matters. By taking different positions: the researcher's position, the artist's position, the educational position, and the child's position; I learn that children and adults can be seen as equal in creating and experiencing art, but of course in different ways.[1] Children say, "I am playing an artist! Now I am an artist. This is my work of art." For artists, teachers and researchers this may be problematic because of the quality judgements that rule. As an artist, I am acutely aware of the quality norms that gov-

[1] See live arts/arts alive: https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/36051/

ern the arts. From this project, though, I learned that the right to create is owned by everybody who is contributing, even if the so-called "art" would not be considered art from the outside.

5 Concluding Comments

Elaborating what had happened between the artists and the children was more than converting field notes into a text book. I realized that the "I" should turn out to be important in aftermath of the project. I, as a person, have countless experiences and stories that go far beyond what I as a researcher have. By adopting a rhizomatic position where I include my autoethnographic narrative, I allow also the "I" to be listened to. I can identify with the children, the artists, and the teachers; and I can use myself as a researcher in a contiguous relation, similar to how Irwin et al. (2006) describes it in the article *The Rhizomatic Relations of A/r/tography*. Finding meanings in the rhizome, the continuous dynamic puzzle of artistic creation in kindergarten is comparable to what happens when we use a GPS to find the direction in unknown terrain. The direction we need to move in changes as *we* move, every move will lead us to a new starting point. From the new position, the direction and the landscape seem changed, and we are given the opportunity to examine the terrain from this new perspective, and find new meanings, new bearings. The concept of rhizome is helpful to understand the evolving process of understandings, and how any understanding is just one among countless possibilities.

There are dramatic turns in this matrix. The in-between knowledge from the project is the understanding of how my narrative thinking evolved, and also the increasingly rhizomatic and multi-dimensional character that this puzzle takes on, as I examine it from various positions. To introduce these findings with linear and causal language would invite misunderstandings, because everything is entangled – crisscross – and the connections are symbolic, cultural, social, communicative, formal, humorous, childish, courageous, aesthetic, intuitive, theoretical, and explicit – at the same time.

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