

Returning to Nature and Artistic Authenticity: The Reconstruction of Early Childhood Art Education Practice by Anji Play

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Abstract: Traditional early childhood art education has long been dominated by teacher demonstration and imitative creation, neglecting the connection between young children and their real-life experiences and play-based experiences. Anji Play, by relying on outdoor natural environments, low-structural natural materials, and children's spontaneous artistic behaviors, fundamentally reconstructs the logic of young children's artistic practice. This study employs qualitative research methods, combined with on-site video observation and contextual analysis, to explore how Anji Play supports children's authentic artistic expression grounded in real-life experience, from three dimensions: natural settings, low-structural materials, and spontaneous artistic forms. The findings reveal that the natural outdoor environment provides rich embodied experiences for artistic creation; low-structural natural materials unleash children's creativity and break through the limitations of template-based imitation; and children's spontaneous artistic activities enable them to create based on play experiences, forming reflective artistic narratives. This study confirms that Anji Play effectively rectifies the shortcomings of traditional skill-oriented art education and offers a new practical paradigm for early childhood art education.

Keywords: Anji Play; early childhood art education; returning to nature; artistic authenticity

1. Introduction

As people's understanding of the value of early childhood art education deepens, this field has attracted growing public attention.^[1] At present, multiple drawbacks persist in early childhood art education. For instance, kindergarten music education, a core component of preschool practice, is plagued by prevalent misconceptions in real implementation: prioritizing performance over genuine expression, emphasizing disciplinary segmentation over interdisciplinary integration, and valuing rigid training over immersive experience^[2]. In art education, adult-centrism dominates instructional practice. Teacher demonstrations followed by children's imitation have become the standard mode of art activities, accompanied by rigid drawing templates, standardized creation requirements and monotonous artistic mediums^[3]. Amid deepening preschool education reforms, the child-centered philosophy has gained widespread recognition. Breaking the shackles of traditional early childhood visual art education, returning to the essence of art education, and enabling children to engage in authentic artistic expression through free and autonomous experience have thus become urgent research agendas in preschool education. Against this backdrop, Anji Play, originating in Anji County of Zhejiang Province and guided by its core philosophies of love, risk-taking, joy, concentration and reflection, offers an innovative pathway for the transformation of early childhood art education^[4]. Rejecting adult-designed predefined instructional frameworks, Anji Play takes outdoor natural surroundings as children's primary learning and development spaces, with low-structured natural materials as creative media. It fully respects children's independent choices and spontaneous exploration, allowing them to communicate with nature, interact with peers and connect with their inner selves during unstructured play. The spontaneous artistic behaviors emerging from such processes align perfectly with the core pursuit of early childhood visual art education: returning to artistic authenticity and respecting children's innate nature^[5]. On this basis, targeting practical dilemmas and reform demands within early childhood art education, this study takes Anji Play as its research subject. Adopting qualitative research methodologies integrated with on-site video observation and contextual analysis, it investigates how Anji Play facilitates children's authentic artistic expression rooted in real-life experiences from three core dimensions: natural settings, low-structured materials and spontaneous artistic forms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Drawbacks of Traditional Art Education*

Current kindergarten art education is influenced by both internal and external factors, resulting in a low level of educational quality, an inability to enhance children's artistic literacy, and adverse effects on their future development.^[6] First, at the physical and ecological spatial level, the traditional educational model has created an alienation between young children and nature. Chen points out that the structural tendency of kindergarten internal environments effectively isolates children from the embrace of nature; meanwhile, art education has become formalized, and teaching aids exhibit a "lifeless" quality. This dual obstruction makes it difficult to evoke in children a genuine sense of closeness to nature.^[7] Second, at the level of teaching paradigms, rigid procedures suppress children's subjectivity and authentic experiences. Li reveals that in current practice, teachers, in order to fulfill predetermined instructional tasks, dominate the entire process of activities, leaving children with no choice but to passively receive and replicate adult movements, and thus "cannot truly grasp the essence of art activities".^[8] Furthermore, in the organization of educational content, there is a pervasive disconnect from children's lived experiences. Sun's observations confirm that in early childhood education practice, the phenomenon of neglecting the relevance between art education content and children's life experiences and interests exists objectively.^[9]

2.2. *The Educational Value of Nature and Low-Structural Materials in Early Childhood Art*

The educational value of natural and low-structured materials in early childhood arts education has increasingly drawn the attention of both academics and practitioners. Young children possess an innate affinity for nature. By revitalizing the teaching process and returning the content of arts education to its natural roots, educators can not only effectively stimulate children's learning interest but also enrich their cognitive understanding of the natural world.^[10] As the most fundamental elements of everyday life, natural objects are closely tied to children's daily experiences. Nature is imbued with immense creative potential, offering abundant materials and inspiration for young children's artistic expression^[11]. Through positive interaction and deep engagement with natural resources, children are able to perceive the beauty of nature firsthand, gradually expanding their awareness of the ecological environment^[12], while their aesthetic potential is gently awakened. The integration of natural resources into arts education activities in kindergartens hinges on respecting children's agency, granting them the freedom to express and create, and encouraging their active participation in perception, creation, and appreciation within natural settings, thereby enabling richer emotional experiences^[13]. As for low-structured materials, their value is more commonly discussed in the context of children's play activities. Research indicates that the appropriate use of low-structured materials in kindergarten play can enhance children's engagement, stimulate their interest in play, promote their overall physical and mental development, and help address certain deficiencies in current play-based pedagogy^[14]. Other studies have introduced such materials into children's installation art activities, noting that low-structured materials lack fixed forms or prescribed uses, allowing children to combine, arrange, and reshape them freely according to their own ideas and interests, thus fully unleashing their imagination and creativity^[15]. In summary, natural materials and low-structured materials complement each other in early childhood arts education. Together, they not only serve as media for children to perceive and express beauty but also offer a viable pathway for realizing a child-centered educational philosophy.

2.3. *Researches on Anji Play in Art Education*

Scholarly attention to the intersection of Anji Play and art education has grown in recent years, with studies approaching the topic from diverse theoretical and practical angles. Xia argues that, from the perspective of aesthetic education, Anji Play fosters children's aesthetic sensitivity and artistic creativity by leveraging outdoor natural settings and open-ended materials^[16]. Liu identifies the practice of drawing and recounting "play stories" as a pivotal component in the art pedagogical transformation of Anji Play pilot kindergartens, highlighting the resultant shifts in children's engagement, teacher roles, and the dynamics of teacher-child interaction^[17]. Extending the discussion to a cross-cultural dimension, Moffett observes that although Anji Play incorporates Western pedagogical principles that conjoin play and art, it also retains and manifests indigenous Chinese philosophies of play and aesthetic expression^[18].

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Paradigm and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, with embedded multiple-case study as its core method. Through in-depth naturalistic observation in kindergarten settings, it collects authentic and vivid data on artistic practices. Qualitative research enables a holistic representation of the processual and contextual nature of young children's artistic behaviors, making it particularly suitable for exploring the internal mechanisms and deeper meanings of educational practice.

3.2. Research Field and Participants

This study selected three public kindergartens in Anji County, Zhejiang Province, that have fully implemented the Anji Play curriculum, as the research field. These include two urban kindergartens and one township kindergarten, ensuring the diversity and representativeness of the cases. All three kindergartens feature well-established outdoor play environments and comprehensive Anji Play implementation systems, with artistic activities fully integrated into the daily play process and no separate, teacher-led art courses. The research participants are children aged 4-6 years old, covering both the middle and upper kindergarten levels. In addition, 8 teachers and 3 principals were selected as interview participants to gain practitioners' practical knowledge and experiential reflections.

3.3. Data Collection

This study adopts the triangulation method to collect multi-source data so as to guarantee the reliability and validity of the research, with four data collection approaches specified as follows: First, participatory observation. The researcher enters the kindergarten as a non-participant observer and conducts continuous observations for one month. Field notes are documented to record the spontaneous artistic creation of young children during outdoor play, teachers' supportive behaviors, and environmental layout arrangements. Second, collection of video footage and children's artworks. On-site videos of children's artistic activities are recorded, and various art samples including children's paintings, handcrafts and installation works are collected to build a visual database. Third, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews lasting 40 to 60 minutes each are conducted with kindergarten teachers and principals, centering on topics such as perceptions of authentic childhood art, as well as practical experience and existing dilemmas of artistic practice under the Anji Play philosophy. Fourth, document analysis. Internal institutional documents of the kindergarten are collected, including curriculum plans, teachers' reflective journals and environmental design blueprints, to supplement and enrich the research dataset.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study applies thematic coding to conduct three-stage data analysis. First, open coding is performed to extract preliminary concepts from raw data. Second, axial coding is adopted to categorize preliminary concepts into core categories such as "natural field", "low-structured materials" and "spontaneous artistic forms". Finally, selective coding is carried out to sort out logical relationships among categories and construct a theoretical model of early childhood art education reconstructed under Anji Play.

3.5. Research Ethics

This research strictly abides by academic ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from the kindergarten and children's guardians prior to data collection. All video and image materials are anonymized and used solely for academic research, with no personal information of children disclosed externally.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Reconstruction of Spatial Forms of Art Education by Natural Ecological Fields

Based on non-participant observation and field notes, this study finds that Anji Play breaks the spatial

boundaries of traditional arts education. Rather than restricting artistic activities to dedicated indoor functional rooms, it shifts creative practice to open outdoor natural environments and constructs an integrated ecological field for artistic practice. Specifically, this spatial restructuring exerts three core functions. First, natural space acts as a carrier of perception formation. Observation records demonstrate that diverse outdoor spaces including lawns, woodland terraces, natural rock walls and wooden pavilions provide young children with irreplaceable multi-dimensional sensory stimulation. The vivid perceptual experiences accumulated by children through embodied play such as running, climbing and building lay the original experiential foundation for their subsequent artistic expression. Second, natural space serves as the medium for artistic behaviors. Observations at an urban kindergarten reveal that walls, sand pits, tree stumps and even the ground itself all function as children's creation media. Artistic activities are thereby integrated into all play scenarios instead of being separated as independent specialized curriculum sessions. Third, natural space extends the field of meaning construction for artworks. Children's artworks are casually displayed on outdoor flower trellises, tree branches and stones. Their function transforms from "result-oriented objects" for teachers' evaluation into "process-oriented media" for children to share play experiences with peers, which strengthens the public expressive attribute of art. In conclusion, the natural environment is no longer merely a decorative backdrop for artistic activities. Instead, it deeply participates in and fosters the generation of children's artistic creation.

4.2. Low-Structured Materials Supporting Children's Independent Artistic Expression

By conducting open coding on video footage of young children's artistic creation processes and artwork samples, this study concludes that artistic media centered on low-structured natural materials and domestic waste materials fundamentally liberate children's creative thinking. First, the de-standardized feature of materials removes children's reliance on imitation. Materials such as paint, mud, twigs, discarded bottles and cans, and leftover cloth have no pre-set standard uses. Unlike high-structured materials, they do not lead to a single, definitive finished product. Children independently explore multiple ways to manipulate materials through repeated handling. For example, using twigs for building, scribbling, or performance props—which fundamentally eliminates their dependence on teacher demonstrations and model artworks. Second, the polysemous nature of materials generates individualized visual symbols. By comparing how different children utilize the same types of materials and their corresponding works, this study finds that an identical color, line or material carries entirely unique experiences and meanings in different creations. For instance, during the sharing session after outdoor play, when looking at the same leaf floating on the water, one child imagined it as “a boat for ants”, while another insisted it was “a letter written by the tree to autumn”. Such openness of meaning thoroughly prevents the widespread homogeneity of artworks common in traditional art teaching. Lastly, the everyday quality of these materials blurs the boundary between art and play. Multiple observational records capture children spontaneously picking up materials to create mid-play. A typical example is mixing sand and water to “cook meals”, then smearing the mixture onto stone slabs to form patterns. Artistic acts thus become a natural extension of play and daily life, rather than a mandatory assignment to be completed within fixed time and space.

4.3. Spontaneous Practice Establishing Children's Subject Status in Artistic Expression

Through open coding of children's artistic behaviors and transcripts from semi-structured teacher interviews, we found that all artistic activities in Anji Play are independently initiated and propelled by children themselves. This marks a shift in children's role from passive skill learners to full-fledged subjects of artistic creation, specifically manifested in the following four aspects: First, physical performance: the immediate externalization of embodied play experiences. Observational records and video analysis show that children frequently engage in impromptu bodily imitation and role-play in natural spaces, without any adult choreography. Second, visual scribbling: the translation of play emotions into visual symbols. Multiple video recordings capture children's free painting behaviors on large-scale graffiti walls or on the ground, processes often accompanied by humming and self-talk. Through behavioral coding, we found that the content of their drawings and the dynamic rhythm of their brushstrokes are highly correlated with the emotional states of preceding or concurrent play activities. Third, integrated creation and dramatic play: multimodal experiential narration. Through longitudinal observation of sustained play groups, we discovered more complex forms of artistic practice. Children use materials to craft simple props, jointly negotiate plots, and collaboratively construct a collective narrative through interaction. For instance, they use tires and wooden planks to build a "pirate ship," employ sand and leaves to create "treasure," and subsequently unfold a coherent role-play game lasting several days. Fourth, spontaneous sharing and narration after creation. In semi-structured interviews,

multiple teachers mentioned that upon completing an artwork or a performance, children proactively narrate the creative process and the stories behind it to peers or teachers. This spontaneous narrative further elevates artistic expression into a tool for experiential reflection, enabling artistic activities to genuinely fulfill their core value of cognitive development. As one teacher stated: "When they finish drawing, they don't ask 'Does it look like it?' Instead, they tell you 'Here is what happened.'"

5. Discussion

5.1. Spatial Dimension: Natural Ecology Restructuring the Experiential Foundation of Art Education

By expanding art education spaces from enclosed indoor classrooms to open natural ecological fields, Anji Play fundamentally reconstructs the experiential sources of children's artistic expression. Traditional art activities in classrooms are often constrained by fixed seating arrangements and preset teaching procedures, with teacher-led demonstrations and material distribution reducing artistic creation to routine skill drills. In such environments, children have access only to materials prepared in advance by adults, lacking opportunities for independent exploration of textures, colors, and forms; their sensory experiences are severely narrowed, ultimately resulting in homogeneous imitative products^[19]. In contrast, natural settings provide children with a continuous flow of rich, multi-sensory embodied experiences: the muscular tension and sense of balance when climbing slopes, the tactile contrasts of rough bark versus smooth pebbles, the nuanced color gradations observed as sunlight filters through leaves, and the depth perception of distance and height in open spaces. These vivid bodily perceptions constitute not only the raw accumulation of aesthetic experience but also the direct material from which fundamental artistic vocabularies—such as lines, shapes, textures, and spatial composition—are generated. More importantly, natural spaces are characterized by high openness and uncertainty, dismantling the rigid boundaries of class periods and designated venues. Children can initiate artistic creation at any time and in any place in response to their play interests—a twig can trace patterns in the sand, a few pebbles can be stacked into forms, and fallen leaves combined with puddles can become an impromptu installation. Art, therefore, is no longer a curricular task confined to specific times and locations, but a natural mode of expression seamlessly integrated with play and daily life. This spatial transformation not only resonates with the classical aesthetic principle that "art originates from nature", but also deeply embodies the philosophical tenet that "education is life."^[20] It reminds us that only in authentic, open, and vibrant environments can children's artistic potential be fully and freely nurtured.

5.2. Media Dimension: Low-Structured Materials Unleash Children's Artistic Creativity

The extensive use of low-structured materials constitutes the core feature that distinguishes art education under Anji Play from traditional paradigms, and serves as the critical medium supporting children's authentic expression^[21]. Standardized art teaching aids—such as coloring sheets, step-by-step demonstration charts, and fixed-shape collage components—are inherently designed to facilitate skill training and standardized modeling. Such tools objectively presuppose "correct" creative pathways and "ideal" final products, subtly imposing adult aesthetic standards and cognitive frameworks upon children. As a result, children's artistic behaviors are reduced to approximating and conforming to predetermined models, while their initiative and uniqueness in self-expression are severely constrained. In contrast, low-structured materials (e.g., sand, stones, clay, twigs, fabric scraps, discarded bottles and cans) carry no predefined functions or intended outcomes. They invite children to explore and create in a fully open-ended manner, returning the right to interpret meaning and determine usage entirely to the children themselves^[22]. The open-ended nature of these materials directly gives rise to diverse individual expressions: children may use twigs to construct spatial structures, arrange stones to form narrative sequences, or wrap fabric strips to shape figures. With no fixed "correct method" or standard form, each child naturally transforms personal experiences in their own unique way, generating exclusive visual symbols and artistic languages. From a cognitive development perspective, such open-ended material manipulation greatly fosters divergent thinking—children must continuously experiment, make mistakes, and adjust, rather than mechanically repeating prescribed steps. More importantly, when artistic creation breaks free from the shackles of imitation, art truly becomes a "language of self-expression" for children, no longer subservient to adult aesthetics but restored to its authentic essence—an intrinsic need for individuals to perceive the world, express emotions, and construct meaning.^[23]

5.3. Subject Dimension: Spontaneous Practice Embodies Children's Artistic Subjectivity

The most groundbreaking innovation of art education within Anji Play lies in authentically establishing children as the subjects of artistic expression. In conventional art education, teachers tend to predetermine themes, prescribe material usage, demonstrate standard steps, and evaluate children's works against adult aesthetic criteria. Throughout the entire process, children remain in a position of passive reception; their artistic behaviors are essentially responses to teachers' instructions and demonstrations, rather than spontaneous activities arising from intrinsic expressive needs^[24]. This "teacher-led, child-obedient" model not only suppresses children's creative initiative but also reduces art education to a tool for skill drilling, deviating from its authentic mission of cultivating sensibility and creativity. In stark contrast, Anji Play returns full autonomy over the artistic creation process to children: they independently decide whether to create, what to create, which materials to use, how to organize and execute their creative process, and how to interpret, name, and share their finished works. Children truly become the masters of the entire chain of artistic activity, from initiation to completion. This restoration of subjectivity brings about a fundamental transformation in the educational value of art. When creation is no longer aimed at pleasing teachers or conforming to external standards, young children are able to sort out and reconstruct their play experiences, express their inner emotions, and construct their understanding of themselves and their relationships with others through artistic creation. In doing so, they fully unlock the deep educational potentials of art across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Artistic creation thus shifts from "completing tasks assigned by teachers" to "a life activity that satisfies one's own expressive needs." From the perspective of developmental psychology, such creative practice, conducted in authentic contexts with genuine autonomy, constitutes the optimal soil for cultivating children's intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and aesthetic judgment. This finding strongly corroborates the core tenet of child-centered education theory: education can fulfill its educational mission only when it genuinely respects and trusts children's subjectivity, rather than being reduced to an externally imposed instrument of discipline^[25].

6. Conclusion

This study takes Anji Play as its research subject and employs qualitative research methods to systematically examine its reconstruction of early childhood art education across three dimensions: natural environment, material media, and subject practice. The findings reveal that Anji Play, by relocating artistic activities from enclosed classrooms to open natural ecological fields, replacing highly structured art teaching aids with low-structured materials, and fully respecting children's self-initiated artistic behaviors, fundamentally overturns the teaching logic centered on demonstration and imitation that has long dominated traditional art education. In doing so, it enables young children's artistic expression to return to a state grounded in authentic experience and the true essence of life.

At the practical level, the findings of this study offer actionable pathways and insights for current reforms in early childhood art education. First, kindergartens should break the spatial enclosure of art education and make full use of outdoor natural environments as essential arenas for artistic perception and expression, allowing children to accumulate genuine aesthetic experiences through deep interaction with nature. Second, in terms of material provision, kindergartens should reduce the use of highly structured, functionally fixed art teaching aids and instead increase the availability of low-structured materials such as sand, stones, leaves, branches, and discarded items, thereby affording children ample space for exploration and creation. Third, teachers should transform their roles—from skill instructors and work evaluators to observers, facilitators, and appreciators of children's artistic behaviors—respecting and valuing every spontaneous moment of artistic expression that emerges from children.

Of course, this study has certain limitations. On the one hand, the research was conducted in only three kindergartens in Anji County, Zhejiang Province, and the specificity of the regional cultural context may, to some extent, affect the generalizability of the findings. On the other hand, due to constraints of time and conditions, this study was unable to track the long-term developmental trajectory of children's artistic expression. Future research could expand the research field to include cross-regional comparative studies, or adopt longitudinal follow-up designs to gain deeper insights into the long-term development of children's aesthetic abilities and creativity under the Anji Play philosophy. In addition, how to strike an appropriate balance between the spirit of freedom and autonomy championed by Anji Play and the necessary aesthetic guidance inherent in art education remains a practical issue worthy of ongoing exploration. In summary, Anji Play offers a practice paradigm for early childhood art education that returns to nature and honors authenticity. It reminds us that genuine early childhood art education does

not consist in teaching children to produce works that "look like" something, but rather in safeguarding their innate capacities for feeling, imagining, and expressing—so that art truly becomes a life activity through which children come to know the world, express themselves, and construct meaning.

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