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## Image and Word as a Space of Ethical Dialogue Between Researcher and Child: Conceptual and Methodological Foundations of an Original Research Method

Obraz i słowo jako przestrzeń etycznego dialogu między badaczem a dzieckiem: koncepcyjne i metodologiczne podstawy autorskiej metody badawczej

### KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

method of visual-verbal dialogue, early education, research ethics, pedagogy of relations, child-parent-researcher

The article presents the author's method of visual-verbal dialogues as an ethical and participatory approach to working with children in early childhood education. The objective is to examine how image and word can serve as complementary tools of ethical dialogue, enabling children to co-create meaning with adults. The study addresses the lack of dialogical, partnership-based methods in research with children, where hierarchical relations often reduce their agency. The method is grounded in C.S. Peirce's semiotic triad (object-sign-interpretant) and combines art-based research (ABR) with participatory pedagogy. It has a qualitative character and is illustrated with short case studies of visual-verbal dialogues conducted in Poland, in the Pomeranian region, in 2025, across various contexts (child-parent-researcher, child-parent, child-teacher). The article introduces the theoretical and ethical foundations of the method, then presents three case studies, each mapped onto Peirce's triad, followed by analysis of their educational significance. The results show that the method supports children's language development, emotional

expression, and sense of agency. It also reveals children's needs that are difficult to verbalize, while the adult perspective contributes dimensions of care, community, and responsibility. Visual-verbal dialogues offer a practical tool for early childhood education, especially in art lessons, supporting shy or sensitive children and fostering empathy and cooperation in the classroom. The method integrates conceptual, methodological, and ethical dimensions, proving useful both in research with children and in educational practice.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

metoda dialogu  
wizualno-  
-werbalnego,  
wczesna edukacja,  
etyka badań,  
pedagogika relacji,  
dziecko–rodzic–  
badacz

Artykuł przedstawia autorską metodę dialogów wizualno-werbalnych jako etyczne i partycypacyjne podejście do pracy z dziećmi w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Celem jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób obraz i słowo mogą służyć jako komplementarne narzędzia dialogu etycznego, umożliwiające dzieciom współtworzenie znaczeń wraz z dorosłymi. Artykuł podejmuje problem braku dialogicznych, partnerskich metod w badaniach z dziećmi, w których relacje hierarchiczne często ograniczają ich sprawczość. Zaproponowana tu autorska metoda opiera się na semiotycznej triadzie C.S. Peirce'a (obiekt–znak–interpretant) i łączy założenia *art-based research* (ABR) z pedagogiką partycypacyjną. Ma charakter jakościowy i jest zilustrowana krótkimi studiami przypadków dialogów wizualno-werbalnych, przeprowadzonych w Polsce, w województwie pomorskim, w roku 2025, w różnych kontekstach (dziecko–rodzic–badacz, dziecko–rodzic, dziecko–nauczyciel). Artykuł przedstawia teoretyczne i etyczne podstawy metody, a następnie prezentuje trzy studia przypadków, zinterpretowane w odniesieniu do triady Peirce'a, oraz analizę ich znaczenia edukacyjnego. Rezultaty wskazują, że metoda wspiera rozwój językowy dzieci, ekspresję emocjonalną i poczucie sprawstwa. Umożliwia także ujawnienie potrzeb dzieci, które trudno wyrazić werbalnie, natomiast perspektywa dorosłych wnosi wymiary troski, wspólnoty i odpowiedzialności. Dialogi wizualno-werbalne stanowią praktyczne narzędzie dla edukacji wczesnoszkolnej, szczególnie w pracy artystycznej, wspierając dzieci nieśmiałe lub wrażliwe oraz rozwijając empatię i współpracę w klasie. Metoda integruje wymiar koncepcyjny, metodologiczny i etyczny, okazując się przydatna zarówno w badaniach z dziećmi, jak i w praktyce edukacyjnej.

## Introduction and Theoretical Context

Contemporary approaches to research involving children are increasingly moving away from perceiving them as passive objects of inquiry or incomplete participants in the research process. Instead, children are recognised as subjects with a voice, agency, and a unique cognitive perspective. Although they may still be only loosely rooted in culture, it is precisely this distance that makes their voices highly original and valuable, as they remain culturally unpredictable (Karczmarzyk, 2011). Although childhood has long remained marginal within anthropological, cultural, and sociological research, in recent years Poland has seen a gradual increase of interest in the child as an active participant in social life and in research processes. Nevertheless, conducting studies involving children requires particular sensitivity and caution, given the vulnerability of young participants and their weaker position in relation to adults (Maciejewska-Mroczek & Reimann, 2017).

As noted by Farrell (2005), research with children necessitates a heightened ethical awareness focused on safeguarding participants' agency and emotional security, including their right to remain silent, withdraw, or choose how they wish to communicate. Ethical standards therefore require not only formal consent, but also conditions that enable children to exercise real autonomy and experience emotional comfort within the research interaction.

In this context, the research relationship cannot be based on an asymmetry of power but should be grounded in trust, respect, and the genuine inclusion of the child in the process of meaning-making (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Ethical sensitivity and openness to the child's perspective form the foundation of the research method proposed in this article, in which image and word become equal tools of dialogue, not instruments of control or evaluation.

This method emerges from the author's many years of research and practical experience in the field of children's creativity, visual communication, and qualitative inquiry. These experiences have led to the development of an original research method based on dialogue with the child.

The author's earlier research focused, among other things, on the analysis of children's drawings, the development of their interpretative competencies, and the role of visual-verbal narratives in children's cognitive processes. By studying children's drawings (Karczmarzyk, 2014), exploring meanings constructed by children and adults in relation to Polish (Karczmarzyk, 2020a, 2020b) and European paintings, and analyzing emancipation in art, the author continued theoretical reflections on the potential of visual creativity as a form of dialogue, a space for the emergence of children's subjectivity, and a tool of emotional-symbolic cognition. These explorations ultimately

led to the development of the original research method referred to here as the visual-verbal dialogue.

An important point of reference for this method is participatory pedagogy (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018), which emphasises the active involvement of children in the process of knowledge creation. Equally important is the tradition of art-based research (ABR), a methodological approach in which art becomes not only a tool but also a mode of inquiry, communication, and dissemination of research outcomes (Leavy, 2018; Sullivan, 2005). Within this framework, creating images, collective drawing, storytelling, and reflection on artistic works become spaces for exchanging meanings and co-constructing sense between the child and the adult. Dialogue, understood not as the transmission of information but as the shared creation of meaning, becomes the ethical and methodological foundation of this approach.

Education as a practice of freedom assumes that the learner (or research participant) is a co-participant in the process, not its object (Freire, 2000, p. 72). In this view, the child is not merely a source of data but a partner in the research process, an individual whose perspective, voice, and interpretations hold equal value to those of the adult researcher. Such a relationship requires not only a methodological shift but also an ethical and epistemological acknowledgment that knowledge is created in relation, not within hierarchy. The method of visual-verbal dialogue, as a form of co-constructing meanings, embodies this principle, opening space for encounter, co-experience, and mutual learning.

## Research Methods and Tools

The study was based on three qualitative case studies involving 3 children (aged 7–8), 2 parents, and 1 teacher conducted in Poland, in the Pomeranian region, in 2025, across various contexts (child–parent–researcher, child–parent, child–teacher). Data were collected through drawings, verbal dialogues, and researcher’s field notes. Each case included three phases: creating the image, talking about the image, and joint interpretation. Visual materials (drawings) were scanned and archived, while children’s and adults’ utterances were transcribed verbatim.

The article addresses the problem of the lack of ethical and partnership-based methods of communication with children in early education. In school practice, the hierarchical relationship between adult and child often prevails, in which the child is primarily a recipient rather than a co-creator of the process. This leads to asymmetry, silencing of the child’s voice, and a limitation of their creative potential.

The proposed method of visual-verbal dialogues responds to this gap: it gives the child the opportunity to participate as a full-fledged subject, opens a space for

self-expression through image and word, and supports the adult/researcher in creating a relationship based on trust, partnership, and attentiveness. Research question was: How can we build an ethical dialogue with a child in grades I–III that integrates image and word while respecting the child’s subjectivity?

## Visual-Verbal Dialogue as a Research Method

The method of visual-verbal dialogue, developed by Author, serves as a tool for deepening relationships, communication, and self-reflection in art education and in education through art. The aim of this method is to create a safe space of encounter, whether between child and researcher/adult, student and teacher, or child and parent, by using the languages of image and word. The essence of the process lies not in the formal quality of expression but in authenticity, trust, and relational depth, which form the foundation of the method (Karczmarzyk, 2020b).

The method finds its theoretical grounding in the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce (Peirce, 1991). From this perspective, it also draws on broader semiotic and interpretative traditions relevant to educational research, including Umberto Eco’s understanding of semiosis as an open and culturally situated process of meaning-making (Eco, 1979), Roland Barthes’ reflections on the relational and symbolic nature of images (Barthes, 1977), as well as contemporary approaches to visual and social semiotics that emphasize context, dialogical interpretation, and the embodied dimension of meaning construction in learning processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt et al., 2016).

The method reflects the triadic concept of the sign in its structural framework:

1. Object – the invitation to shared activity and dialogue (e.g., child–parent, student–teacher),
2. Representamen – the gesture, word, or image: a sign that conveys meaning,
3. Interpretant – the participant’s individual reading of the sign, which gives it sense and anchors it in a personal context (Peirce, 1991).

In workshop practice, this triad is realized in three stages:

1. Creating the image (visual phase),  
Participants create a drawing in silence and concentration. This process is not subject to evaluation, the image is treated as a “trace of inner dialogue,” a form of non-verbal expression and a record of experiences and intuitions (Karczmarzyk, 2019a).
2. Talking about the image (verbal phase),  
After completing their drawings, participants talk about their works. They may give them a title, share a metaphor, or provide an emotional commentary,

either orally or in writing. This stage functions as a translation, moving from intuition into the language of words.

3. Shared interpretation (relational phase),

Participants exchange reflections, ask questions, and listen to each other's interpretations. This stage creates a space for building mutual understanding, where the meaning of the sign takes shape in relations, to oneself, to others, to lived experience, and to the world (Karczmarzyk, 2020a).

In this way, dialogue understood as co-creation of meaning rather than the transmission of information becomes both an ethical and methodological act. Within this method, the pressure of evaluation is entirely removed – both in artistic and verbal terms. The child's creativity is not interpreted from an expert's perspective, nor is it judged formally. The drawing does not have to be "beautiful" or "accurate," and there are no "better" or "worse" answers. This allows the child to speak freely, at their own pace and readiness, without fear of judgment or ridicule.

Secondly, the method creates space for emotions and personal narratives. The participant may express what matters to him/her – perhaps indirectly, through metaphor, color, symbol, or a story tied to the drawing. Inner experiences are not forced into the open but may be gently externalized and verbalized at one's own rhythm and in one's own words. The drawing functions as a mediator in the communication process, enabling the child to express emotions that might be difficult to articulate verbally.

Thirdly, the method respects the child's right to silence, to stop speaking, or to refuse to interpret their own drawing. Such an attentive and accepting stance on the part of the researcher builds trust and fosters a relationship based on balance rather than dominance. Thus, the research process ceases to be a form of control and becomes an ethical encounter in which the child is acknowledged as a subject and a co-creator of meaning.

Through these elements, the method of visual-verbal dialogue realizes fundamental ethical values in research with children: voluntariness, psychological safety, respect for privacy and dignity, and careful accompaniment rather than direction. This approach aligns with the principles of relational pedagogy, art-based research, and participatory research models, where the researcher's role is to listen and co-create space rather than to extract "correct" answers. The method of visual-verbal dialogue may be applied in different relational configurations: child–researcher–parent, child–teacher, or child–parent. The article presents examples of both family and school variants.

## Main Part. Analysis of the Research Material

### CASE 1. Our Shared Saturday (triad: child–parent–researcher; Grade II, child aged 8)

#### 0) Framework and Invitation (researcher)

The researcher introduces:

I invite both of you to draw something you enjoy doing together. There are no good or bad drawings. You may share as much as you wish. You may also stop at any time.

The child and parent accept the rules: no evaluation, no pressure, allowance for silence.

#### 1) Creating the Image (visual phase)

The child draws himself and his father on bicycles, with ice cream on a bench in the background.

The parent draws the same situation: a path in the park, the sun, two figures.

The process takes place in silence. The researcher observes but does not interfere.

Representamen: the bicycle, the park, shared time.

#### 2) Talking About the Images (verbal phase)

First, the child speaks:

Researcher: What title would you like to give your drawing?

Child: Saturday with Dad.

Researcher: What is most important in this drawing?

Child: That nobody is in a hurry.

Next, the parent's voice, always expressed in the "I" form:

Parent: I titled my drawing Park. For me, it is important that we can rest together.

#### 3) Shared Interpretation (relational phase)

Researcher: Would you like to say something to each other about your drawings?

Child: I like that Dad also drew the bench, because that's where the ice creams were.

Parent: I like that you drew us riding bicycles together. You see, both of us showed that being together matters.

Interpretant: a shared image of "calm" and "closeness", defined by the child and complemented by the parent.

#### 4) Documentation and Ethics

The researcher records the exact words of the child and parent, scans both drawings, and notes the atmosphere of the meeting (pauses, emotions, gestures). The child has the right to refuse transcription of words or to withdraw from interpretation.

5) Mapping onto Peirce's Triad

Object: the shared experience of Saturday.

Representamen: the child's and parent's drawings (bicycle, park, ice cream).

Interpretant: "calm and being together" – a meaning co-constructed in conversation, first by the child, then expanded by the parent.

CASE 2. My Place of Peace  
(Grade II, child aged 8, parent present)

1) Creating the Image

The child draws a little hut in the mountains, with a cat and a lake.

At the same time, the parent draws a garden with a swing and trees, where the family spends time together.

2) Talking About the Images

Child: This is a place where I can be alone and rest.

Parent: For me, it's important that we have our garden, where we can be together.

3) Shared Interpretation

Child: I like that there's a cat here, because he's always nearby.

Parent: I see that you also need quiet and solitude, even when we are close.

Interpretant: the dialogue between the child's need for individual peace and the parent's need for togetherness.

4) Mapping onto Peirce's Triad

Object: the experience of a soothing space: child's solitude versus family togetherness.

Representamen: the drawings (hut in the mountains with a cat and a lake; garden with a swing and trees) and the spoken words.

Interpretant: "peace and closeness": a meaning co-constructed in dialogue: the child emphasizes quiet and the cat's presence, while the parent expands the meaning toward family togetherness.

CASE 3. What I Like in Our Classroom  
(Grade I, child aged 7, teacher present)

1) Creating the Image

The student draws a shared desk with children, crayons, and the teacher: an image of community and safety.

The teacher adds a symbolic element to the drawing, an open classroom door, representing invitation, hospitality, and a sense of belonging.

2) Talking About the Images

Student: It's best when we're together, because no one laughs at others, we just draw.

Teacher: I drew the door so that you all know everyone has a place here, and the classroom is open to all.

3) Shared Interpretation

Student: I would like it to always be this way, that no one laughs at others.

Teacher: What you say is very important. I also want you to feel safe and for everyone to be themselves.

5) Mapping onto Peirce's Triad

Object: the student's classroom experience, the desire for acceptance and absence of ridicule.

Representamen: the drawings (desk, crayons, teacher, door) and the words spoken by the student and teacher.

Interpretant: the shared meaning emerging from dialogue, the classroom as a space of acceptance, openness, and mutual respect.

## Analysis of the Three Case Studies

The analysis of the three case studies demonstrates that the method of visual-verbal dialogue can function within various relational configurations: child–parent–researcher, child–parent, and child–teacher. In each of these settings, a different dimension of encounter emerges:

- In the child–parent–researcher triad (CASE 1) – the researcher creates the framework and safeguards the process, enabling both the child and the parent to equally express their experiences.
- In the child–parent relationship (CASE 2) – the dialogue unfolds between the child's need for individual peace and the parent's need for togetherness.
- In the child–teacher relationship (CASE 3) – meaning centers around the classroom experience as a community of acceptance and safety, in which the child and teacher co-create a valuable educational space.

In all cases, drawing and spoken word reveal aspects that would be difficult to express directly: the child's needs and experiences, as well as the adult's perspective, introduced into the dialogue with care and responsibility. The analysis through Peirce's triad (object–sign–interpretant) shows that meaning always emerges between participants, in the shared process of interpretation. The method of visual-verbal dialogue,

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therefore, not only supports the development of children's language and expression but also strengthens their sense of agency and self-understanding. At the same time, it builds bridges of understanding within family and educational relationships, transforming the process of drawing and conversation into a space of authentic encounter.

### The Ethical Dimension of the Method: Partnership, Privacy, and Responsibility

In research with children, it is essential that ethics are not reduced merely to formal parental or guardian consent. Full ethical procedures were applied, including informed consent from parents or legal guardians, assent from the children, the right to withdraw at any stage, and full anonymisation of all materials. The study followed international guidelines for ethical research with minors (Farrell, 2005; Graham et al., 2013). Equally important is the child's conscious inclusion in the process: presenting the research goal in a way that is understandable, ensuring voluntary participation, and guaranteeing a genuine possibility of withdrawal at any moment. As Ann Farrell (2005) notes, children are increasingly recognised as competent subjects of their own experiences, something that requires particular attentiveness and respect from the researcher.

The method of visual-verbal dialogue assumes that the child not only expresses themselves but also co-decides on the course of the process. Consent must not only be given but also understood; the child has the right to stop working, to remain silent, or to refuse interpretation of their drawing. It is the child who sets the rhythm and boundaries of the encounter. Equally important is the protection of privacy and a responsible approach to the content revealed in drawings. The image is treated as an open form of expression that does not require a "correct" reading. The researcher's task is to listen attentively and accompany the child in the process of self-interpretation without imposing meanings or making judgments.

Nevertheless, ethical challenges may arise: the risk of overinterpretation, the temptation to draw on one's own psychological knowledge or adult intuition, or the unconscious exertion of pressure through the atmosphere of the meeting. For this reason, the method requires restraint, readiness to "not know," and leaving space for the child's own voice. Ultimately, its goal is not to extract data but to create a safe space of encounter in which the child feels like a person: not an object of research. Partnership, privacy, and responsibility form the foundation here: meaning is born in relationship, and the well-being of the child remains the highest value.

## Innovations and scientific recommendations

### Practical Possibilities of the Method, Dilemmas, and Potential

The author's method of visual-verbal dialogue also finds concrete justification in educational, artistic, and therapeutic practice. According to its structure, the object becomes the invitation to joint action – an intentional gesture that opens the space for relationship. The representamen takes the form of an image, word, or action – a sign rooted in the participant's personal experience. The interpretant, in turn, is the individual reflection, the way of reading and attributing meaning to what has been created, spoken, or seen. Dialogue, structured in this triadic way, ceases to be a mere exchange of messages, it becomes co-creation of meaning, an experience of presence and community.

During the process of visual-verbal dialogue, the child is not “researched” but actively co-creates the research, with their perspective being primary. It is precisely this relational dimension that gives the method its potential – close to the ideas of pedagogy based on attentiveness, empathy, and dialogue (Karczmarzyk, 2020a; Eco, 2009).

In practice, the method can be applied in various contexts. It is used in school environments: as an alternative form of communication between student and teacher, especially where words may be too difficult or insufficient. It is also employed in socio-artistic projects, intervention activities, and developmental cycles with high school and university students where the exploration of personal and symbolic dialogue becomes an opportunity for deeper reflection on oneself, the world, and relationships with others (Karczmarzyk, 2019b, 2020a).

The method of visual-verbal dialogues can be an effective tool for elementary school teachers, particularly in art classes and early education, where supporting the child's multidimensional development is essential.

### *Application in Art and Elementary Education Lessons*

The method can be introduced as short exercises: children draw on a given theme (My Place of Peace, What I Like in Our Classroom), and then give their drawings titles and briefly discuss them. The process does not require specialized materials: paper and crayons/pastels are sufficient and can be carried out individually, in pairs, or in small groups. In this way, the art lesson becomes a space not only for artistic expression but also for conversation about emotions, experiences, and relationships within the classroom.

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### *Supporting Language and Communication Development*

Visual-verbal dialogue supports language and communication development by allowing children to first express ideas and emotions through images, gestures and other multimodal resources, and then to gradually transform these expressions into shared verbal narratives in collaboration with an adult (Bezemer & Kress, 2020; Bland, 2018; Clark & Moss, 2023). The child first expresses themselves symbolically and intuitively through drawing and then, in conversation with the teacher or peers, learns to translate emotions and experiences into verbal language. Such exercises develop narrative skills, expand the vocabulary of emotions and metaphors, and foster communication competencies, which are crucial in early education.

### *Emotional and Social Development*

The method creates a safe space where the child can express what is difficult or inexpressible in words. In this way, it supports the development of emotional intelligence and the ability to name one's experiences. Shared interpretation of drawings also fosters the building of empathy – children listen to one another, learn to respect different perspectives, and appreciate the diversity of experiences.

### *Support for Withdrawn, Shy, or Sensitive Children*

Drawing acts as a “mediator”: a child who struggles with open conversation may more easily reveal their experiences through image. In this way, the teacher can establish contact with a student who avoids verbal expression and give them the sense that their voice matters. The method also supports inclusivity every child, regardless of linguistic or artistic competence, has an equal right to express themselves.

### *Building Cooperation in the Classroom*

Exercises based on visual-verbal dialogue can also be implemented in pairs or groups, which strengthens collaboration and teaches constructive communication. Working in a shared circle of dialogue, where each child presents their drawing and a short reflection, builds an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, which is key for early education.

The method is also used in teacher training and in preparing young, future educators, offering them a tool to connect with students in a deep and authentic way, especially valuable when working with children who are withdrawn, shy, or experiencing emotional difficulties. Among its benefits are the ability to express emotions and

thoughts beyond verbal language, strengthening the sense of agency and being heard, developing communication skills, and building trust and community.

This method integrates elements of art, narrative, and classical pedagogy creating a multidimensional educational space where image, word, and relationship co-create meaning. The method does not provide “ready-made answers,” but through the subtlety of the sign and respect for silence opens a space in which even the unspoken can be noticed and honored.

## Summary

The method of visual-verbal dialogue demonstrates that image and word can become equally valid tools of ethical dialogue with the child. In the proposed approach, the child is no longer merely a source of data but a co-creator of meaning a person whose voice and experience are of central importance.

The proposed framework rests on three interconnected pillars: a conceptual one, which recognises the child as a partner and subject within the research process; a methodological one, which flexibly integrates image and word in ways that honour the participant’s developmental and linguistic capacities; and an ethical one, which ensures voluntariness, privacy, and emotional safety throughout all stages of the interaction.

The presented case studies confirm that the method fosters the development of language and narrative, strengthens emotional expression, and builds the child’s sense of agency. It can also serve as a practical tool in elementary education, especially in art lessons supporting shy, withdrawn, or sensitive children while simultaneously cultivating empathy and cooperation within the classroom.

Visual-verbal dialogue does not provide ready-made answers; instead, it opens a space of encounter in which every participant has the right to their own interpretation. Thus, this method makes a meaningful contribution to the development of relational pedagogy and ethical research with children, offering a way of working that integrates cognitive, emotional, and communal dimensions. It also reinforces children’s agency by allowing them to shape the rhythm, form, and depth of the communicative exchange according to their own needs and capacities. Through its multimodal structure, the method creates inclusive pathways for expression that accommodate diverse abilities and developmental profiles. Ultimately, visual-verbal dialogue fosters not only understanding but also mutual recognition, inviting both children and adults into a shared process of meaning-making that strengthens democratic, participatory practices in education.

Future research may further explore how visual-verbal dialogue can serve as a platform for cultivating ethical sensitivity, relational responsibility, and empathy

in interactions between children, adults, and peers. By examining dialogic exchanges over time, scholars may gain deeper insight into how sustained creative collaboration contributes to the development of long-term, respectful, and reciprocal relationships. Such studies could illuminate how children learn to negotiate difference, recognise the perspectives of others, and co-create relational spaces grounded in trust, openness, and mutual care.

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