

Edda Polz

Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich, Campus Baden

im Gespräch mit

Robert-James Anderson

House of Strauss Studio & Primary Education, Wiener Neustadt

Sketchopolis

Imagination, Self-Regulation and Symbolic Partnership in Early Childhood

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53349/schuleverantworten.2025.i4.a645>



Robert-James Anderson is an English native speaker and has worked in primary education in Wiener Neustadt for more than twenty-five years. During his teaching career he has written his own stories and materials, particularly for multilingual and inclusive classrooms. Observing the post-pandemic shifts in children's behaviour, resilience and sensory regulation inspired him to develop Sketchopolis, an animated concept designed to model emotional strategies in a playful, non-didactic way.

Foto: Robert-James Anderson

After the pandemic, many children struggled to readjust to “normality,” often having little or no memory of life before COVID-19. These observed challenges inspired the creation of Sketchopolis, a series centered on Max, a child who uses his imagination to navigate moments of sensory overwhelm.

You were invited to present *Sketchopolis* on an international stage. What aspects of the project were decisive for this recognition?

Robert-James Anderson: *Sketchopolis* attracted international interest because it brings together creativity, neurodiversity and early childhood development at a moment when educators worldwide are re-examining how young children cope, communicate and regulate themselves. The format does not begin with curriculum objectives but with the child's inner world. Max's use of imagination as communication and processing makes the project both artistically distinctive and pedagogically timely.

How does *Sketchopolis* differ from existing preschool formats, and in what sense is it a pioneering Austrian project?

The series centres on a non-speaking, neurodivergent protagonist whose drawings serve as bridges between sensation, emotion and understanding. This narrative focus is uncommon in preschool media and unprecedented in Austria. It is one of the first Austrian preschool concepts built around inclusion, sensory awareness and SEL (social-emotional learning) as the narrative core, rather than as accompanying themes.

Format and Accessibility

What role does the nonverbal format play for multilingual and neurodivergent children?

Nonverbal storytelling removes linguistic barriers and creates access through visual, emotional and kinaesthetic cues. Many multilingual and neurodivergent children communicate across several modalities. *Sketchopolis* does not privilege verbal language; instead, it provides a shared visual system that reduces cognitive load and supports sensory-sensitive learners.

What happens in an episode?

Each five-minute episode follows a four-part structure. Firstly, there is a trigger. Max experiences sensory overload, frustration or boredom. Secondly, a tool comes into play and Max is introduced to a coping mechanism or self-regulation strategy. Thirdly, Max enters *Sketchopolis*. He sketches, moves into his doodle-world and helps a character by applying the strategy. Fourthly, there is a phase of return and resonance. A small visual "echo" of *Sketchopolis* appears in the real world, symbolising transfer of learning. The series is intended for both broadcasting and classroom use, with supplementary materials available for educators.

Which recurring elements define the narrative rhythm?

Episodes consistently begin in the real world, transition into the imaginative space, and return with a symbolic resolution. Cooperative problem-solving, predictable visual transitions, and gentle emotional pacing give children security while allowing imaginative freedom.

How does *Sketchopolis* respond to post-pandemic challenges?

Teachers still observe heightened sensory overwhelm, emotional hesitation and co-regulation difficulties in younger children. *Sketchopolis* models strategies such as grounding, retrying after frustration and expressing emotions creatively. It validates everyday struggles without labelling them and offers a symbolic language for resilience.

Multiprofessional Collaboration and Teamwork

Can *Sketchopolis* be read as a metaphor for teamwork in contemporary classrooms?

Yes – through a modern understanding of internal and symbolic partnership. Although Max's companion Dork originates as a plush toy, he functions in the story world as a transitional partner: a co-regulator, co-problem-solver and reflective companion. SEL pedagogy recognises symbolic partners (imaginary friends, puppets, avatars) as important tools for practising social and emotional skills before applying them with peers.

Which artistic and pedagogical aims guide the project?

Artistically, the project seeks to honour children's imaginative lives. Pedagogically, it promotes emotional literacy, self-regulation and respect for neurodiverse perspectives. Inclusion is embodied in the protagonist. Multilingual accessibility is achieved through the nonverbal design. Wellbeing is supported through repetition, predictability and gentle emotional modelling applying a "stealth concept".

What does your "stealth concept" mean in this context?

Stealth learning integrates developmental content into the narrative rather than presenting it through instruction. Children intuitively absorb strategies, cues and social patterns through the unfolding of the story. *Sketchopolis* avoids moralising. Emotional messages emerge naturally from Max's journey and the visual metaphors embedded in the world.

How do you envision the further development of the project?

Future development includes collaboration with researchers on nonverbal media, SEL and neurodiversity, as well as partnerships with teacher-training institutions. The concept is currently expanding into classroom toolkits, printable materials and empirical studies on engagement and self-regulation. The long-term aim is to contribute to educational practice while providing meaningful, inclusive entertainment.

Thank you very much for the interview and the exciting ideas for using *Sketchopolis* in an inclusive, multiprofessional setting.

Autorin

Edda Polz, HS-Prof. Mag. iur. Dr. BEd MEd PhD

Seit 2022 Vizerektorin für Forschung und Hochschulentwicklung, davor seit 2014 Lehrende für Englisch, Schulrecht und Bildungswissenschaften, 2021 bis 2022 Vorsitzende des Hochschulkollegiums. Leitende Redakteurin des Journals Education and Humanities (MAPEH), Mitglied der Gesellschaft für Schule und Recht. Bücher und Zeitschriftenpublikationen in Englisch und Deutsch zu den Themen Lebenslanges Lernen, kompetenzorientiertes Lernen, Englisch als Fremdsprache in der Primarstufe, Begabungsförderung sowie KI.

Kontakt: edda.polz@ph-noe.ac.at