

The Right to Express Yourself

by Veia Vecchi



Veia Vecchi was the atelierista of the Diana Municipal Preschool of Reggio Emilia, Italy from 1970 to 2000 and head of exhibitions, publishing, and the atelier area for Reggio Children until 2015. Vecchi is currently working in research and professional development for Reggio Children.

"Every possible use of words should be made available to every single person"- this seems to me to be a good motto with a democratic sound. Not because everyone should be an artist but because no one should be a slave.

-Gianni Rodari (1996, p. 4)

In this statement, Gianni Rodari was referring to the verbal language, but it could be extended to all means of communication, to the different "disciplines," which the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia prefers to call "languages," because this term implicitly incorporates criteria of relationship and communication, and we believe that it constitutes the most complete and evolutionary approach to the different areas of knowledge.

The declaration that "the child has a hundred languages"--which by now has become a sort of "banner" of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia--and that education has the task of making their use possible must be reiterated and reconfirmed every day, on every occasion, not only in human relationships, but also in social and political relationships. I am personally so concerned and deeply disturbed by the human, social, and political situations that we are experiencing in Italy, in Europe, and around the world, that I cannot offer any reflections on the hundred languages of children without keeping in mind the extremely painful image of the thousands of children, women, and men who have been denied any possibility of self-expression and, too often, of life, solely because they were born in inhospitable places of the world.

In our first exhibition, in 1981, "If the Eye Leaps Over the Wall," which then became "The Hundred Languages of Children," the first panel had this title: "Children Betrayed." There were photographs of children exploited in child labor and as child soldiers, starving children, little girls dressed up to compete for "Miss" something, and so on. There was also a declaration brimming with illuminating hope: "Here [in this exhibition], we have children and adults searching for the pleasure of playing, working, talking, thinking, and inventing together in friendship." The intention was to reaffirm that this was an exhibition of the "possible," with the clear awareness that what was shown did not always correspond to the everyday normality, but it was what we aimed for and what we were working toward.

Since that time, we have created numerous exhibitions, some still traveling around the world and, in all of them, we have strived to communicate that "possible" through the many languages of the children and of the teachers. Despite the fact that many people's awareness has become more sensitive and has been put into practice, unfortunately, little has changed in terms of the betrayals that are committed towards children. (Note: "The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit is still traveling in Australia and the exhibition "The Wonder of Learning" continues a tour in North America that began 10 years ago. The traveling exhibition/ateliers "Bordercrossings," "Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material," and "The Secrets of Paper" are on display in Sweden and in Mexico in different versions and will soon be in other countries as well.)

In this situation, which would not be an exaggeration to define as dramatic for too many children in the world, is it superfluous or ineffectual to talk about "the hundred languages?" No, and again, no. Indeed, we should repeat Rodari's statement with conviction and be aware that freedom is only achieved when rights are respected and that denying human beings the possibility to express themselves in many different ways means depriving them of a fundamental right. We should also reassert immediately and clearly that expressing oneself and doing so with quality, requires certain conditions that make it possible, and these conditions are always cultural, social, and political.

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Ours is a culture that breaks down, separates, specializes in division and not in listening to other disciplines or other cultures; it brushes aside listening and the contribution of other thoughts that instead could make the specializations not only less sterile, but also more complex and more effective. I have a sense that never before have so many--too many--personal and social languages been mutilated in their specific qualities. The excessive simplifications that circulate abundantly, favored by the new forms of communication, lead people to be receptive only to what they already know and, thus, to shut themselves off in a

circumscribed world that is impoverished of reflections, emotions, and participation. Can education intervene and make a contribution to preserving the expressive possibilities that naturally belong to children? I believe this is what is being asked of me, so I will try to offer some reflections on this theme.

For many years now, there has been a great deal of discussion, supported by cultured and engaging arguments, about the importance of interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity (Morin, 1999) as a culture of enrichment, expansion of the ways of thinking and feeling, and the ability to make connections. Moreover, increasingly sophisticated studies are discovering the many strong connections between specialized areas of the brain.

It is sufficient to listen to children to understand that interdisciplinarity--human thought that connects different disciplines/ languages in order to delve deep into a topic--is not a philosophical or scientific theory detached from reality, nor is it an educational imposition. Rather, it is a natural strategy of thinking, supported by the underlying hypothesis that the combinatorial and creative possibilities of multiple languages enrich children's perception and intensify their relationship with both reality and imagination. To what extent can an interdisciplinary approach to education affect the evolution of individual and social knowledge? A great deal, in my opinion, certainly more than that which is habitually thought; otherwise, the policies of ministerial programs for teacher education would be different and more attentive to the problem.

The municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia have evolved over the years, always keeping in mind, among many other things,

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certain important educational cornerstones such as interdisciplinarity, relationships, individual and group work, documentation, and the attitude of research and aesthetics, and they have done this through concrete choices in the professional development of teachers and in the public communication. First, teachers need to listen with confidence, kindness, and curiosity to the intelligence of the children, to the possibilities offered by the materials, and the potentialities of the tools.

The educational research carried out in the last several years by the pedagogical coordinating team of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers - *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia has led to a number of theoretical declarations and educational choices that I have personally greatly appreciated, because they invite teachers, parents, and the world of school (and beyond) to reflect on educational paths that are consistent with the theoretical declarations. In many educational philosophies and practices, we often see a gap between theory and practice, and this is one of the most problematic elements of a widespread way of teaching that seems to be frozen in time.

I would like to analyze some of these declarations of the pedagogical team that, as mentioned, I believe have a strong cultural and educational impact. One regards the use of the culture and the metaphor of the atelier to highlight a process of learning in which mind and body do not move separately, just as *progettazione*, action, and rationality are not separate from imagination. Different approaches to knowledge and to the evolution of thought are welcomed and elicited, and these are developed and modified into a cross-pollination between disciplines with no pre-established hierarchy. The aesthetic sense is valued as a connecting and transversal element between different and distant disciplines/ languages.

A second declaration, which took immediate effect, concerned the projects to be developed in the infant-toddler centers and preschools, which from the outset are indicated with "plural" titles, such as: "The Human Figure in the Interweavings of the Languages of Clay, Drawing, and Photography" and "Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material" as well as "Nature and Digital." We are well aware that simply having a list of different techniques and languages does not create the connections that enrich thinking; rather, we must

focus on the process in which both children and adults are working with a theme that involves the interweaving of multiple languages. Loris Malaguzzi, in an interview, spoke about the passage between the verbal exposition of a theory regarding a physical phenomenon and its communication through drawing, and he explained the process with these words:

In every act of the child ... when he passes from one code to another code and to another, there is, in some way, the acceptance and the demolition of risk; therefore, the child knows how to confront the risk; he knows how to manipulate a code and reconstruct it by means of a second code; this is already a passage of remarkable beauty. (Gandini, 2017, p. 107)

This is a process that takes place in all situations in which we are working using different languages. In the documentation materials collected, the alternation between codes seems to be entirely natural for children, but for adults, it seems quite a difficult process, precisely because we are culturally shaped to operate by separating the disciplines.

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I will try to document the children's strategies by describing some phases of the project "The Human Figure in the Interweavings of the Languages of Clay, Drawing, and Photography." The project involved children from 9 months to 14 years of age. The exhibition that documents this research was part of the initiatives of the 2013 edition of *Fotografia Europea* (<https://www.fotografiaeuropea.it/en/>) and was displayed at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center in Reggio Emilia from May 2013 to May 2014. Here in particular, I present some passages of an experience that took place at the Iqbal Masih Municipal

Preschool, which is also described in the DVD *The Many Faces of the Assembly*, published by Reggio Children in 2017.

During the graphic representation of a subject chosen by the children in the morning assembly (a daily meeting that has become well-established over time) [image 1], the documentation prepared by the *atelierista* highlighted some very interesting passages. The documentation was very extensive, and I have extracted from it just some of the children's comments for the purpose at hand.

Diego (6 years old) and Rayan (5.9 years old) were working together [image 2]. The boys started by drawing a bench where some of the children are seated during the assembly, thus delimiting the space to be represented. Then, Diego chose to begin from one end of the assembly space and drew a line of seated children [image 3], commenting, "The children are sitting in all different directions, because you don't always stay still in the same direction." He had very clearly in mind his own body and those of his companions that move even while they are listening, and he drew children in profile and from behind. The representations in profile and from behind were an important conquest for Diego, because it was the first time he had drawn a person from perspectives different from the frontal view. I will never tire of underscoring how the rotation that this involves is not only formal but also conceptual. We have already highlighted elsewhere how real-life situations, in which movement is an important element, elicit and impose these rotations, this conceptual shift.

At a certain point, Diego stopped and commented, "We have a problem--how do we turn the children now? We sure can't draw them on the heads of these." Diego was facing a difficult cognitive problem using a representational strategy that takes into account the limits of the graphic language, and he solved it using another language: "I need to take a photo of the assembly to understand; everybody has to be in the photo, and the photo has to be from kind of high up. The photo helps me bend the assembly to make the circle of children."

Diego waited until the next morning, then photographed the assembly, choosing the point of view that would best help him resolve the problem that arose [image 4]. He was then followed by his friend Rayan, who understood that Diego's idea



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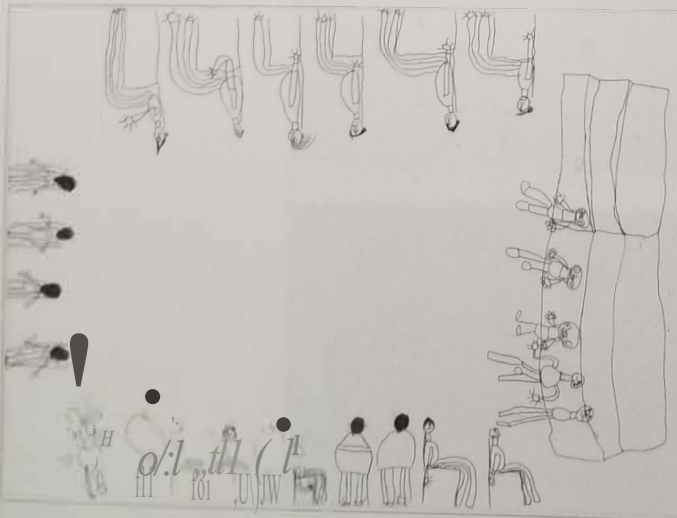
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15

is a good one and also fun, so he took a photograph, too, choosing another point of view. Then together they printed the photos and, choosing the one they felt was most suitable, they kept it in front of them while they continued their drawing.

Everything proceeded until they reached another difficult intersection: drawing people from behind, which is an unusual representation, further complicated by the seated position [image 5]. Diego had actually used this point of view previously, but perhaps because he was not satisfied with the result



or because the different spatial context disoriented him and seemed to require that he find new solutions, or whatever the reason, this representation was perceived as a difficulty. Here, too, we must not take anything for granted. You will have encountered at other times the solutions devised by children to draw a person from behind, such as drawing the figure from the front, using a familiar schema and then subsequently erasing the features that are not seen, sometimes covering them with hair.

Though Diego and Rayan had the photograph in front of them, it was not helping sufficiently, so they decided to ask for help from a friend who is very skilled at drawing and also nice--Francesca (5.4 years old) [image 6]. "I know how to do children sitting down really well." Francesca stated confidently. "You have to draw the legs of the chair like in the photo." So, the seat of the chair became the point of reference and of departure for drawing the seated figure. Children know how to make excellent suggestions of strategies among themselves and, thus, the drawing continued for all three authors up to its conclusion [image 7].

The children then moved to representing the assembly with clay, and Diego immediately made use of what he had just learned in the drawing. Every experience fully acquired, it is such (but it isn't always), is internalized, reutilized, and renewed in confronting new problems. Before starting to build a seated person with clay, Diego commented, "I am going to make a child, but first I have to make a design." "What do you mean by that?" asked the teacher. Diego said, "I'm making a design so I can always remember how I did it." Rayan confirmed: "Like an instruction book!"

Diego drew a seated figure in profile [image 8] and kept the drawing in front of him during the time needed for making the clay model.

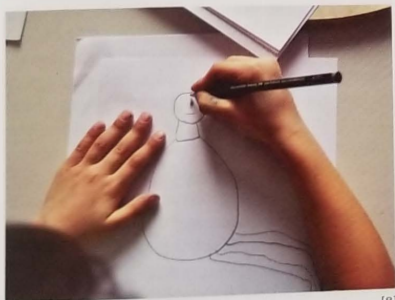
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Starting from a bent leg, he built a high-relief figure in profile [image 9]. While working, he said almost to himself, "Look, I'm doing the child from the side [image 10]. So then, do I have to make one eye or two? Well, even though it's from the side-two!" and he completed the three-dimensional figure.

I think that this process can attest once again to the intelligence of children, the richness of group work, the importance of experimentation and exploration, and the recovery of previous experiences that are internalized and remain as a background onto which new activities are grafted. "Every action produces knowledge, and every knowledge an action," said Malaguzzi during a cultural professional

development meeting on knowledge-building processes with the pedagogical coordinating team of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools in June 1988.

Now we can ask ourselves a number of questions: To what extent does the experience with all three languages—drawing, photography, and sculpture—and the quality of that experience, affect not only the children's learning, but also the imaginative and cognitive possibilities in using them together to solve new problems or devise unexpected inventions? How can an adult who is able from the start to imagine certain possibilities of interweaving between the three languages support the children and enable more children to gain an



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awareness like that acquired by Diego? I have always been convinced that the better you know a language and the more time you spend with it, the better your ability is to "listen" to it and interweave it with other languages and that having good knowledge of the techniques can refine and increase the imaginative possibilities.

As part of the professional development project of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers - *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia for the 2017-2018 school year, one of the topics addressed was the language of clay. The project involved all the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. For about a year now, we have been working on creating a manual about clay, a material that we believe is extraordinary for its cognitive and expressive possibilities. In this manual, which will be published by Reggio Children in 2019, we will try to show, through processes and products, how knowledge of the material and of the tools is an important generator of images.

We cannot escape the reality that, in order to enable sensitive and cultured "listening" to the various languages--a transdisciplinary listening--we must possess two competencies: that of the languages and that of children's strategies. The teachers' professional development and *progettazione* must make this possible through choices that are, first and foremost, cultural and, consequently, also economic and political.

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This dual competency (in relation to the language used and the children) makes us appreciate certain works like this one [image 11] (Vecchi & Ruoizzi, 2015, p. 53)--works that could be viewed with a hurried glance and then put aside, or worse, end up



111

in a folder of "insignificant" works. On the back of this work, untitled, the teacher recorded a comment made by the author while he was working: "on the paper that makes music." Clearly, this originated from the perception of the more or less repeated passage of the child's fingernails over the surface of the corrugated cardboard, but the choice of *playing music* with notes (colored) that are chromatically varied and of different lengths is a poetic invention of the author ("a wonderful invention," remarked a painter friend, looking at this work), a graphic transcription of the variation in sound obtained by modifying the pressure of the fingers and fingernails on the surface.

Is this an over-interpretation? I don't think so. But, in any case, the viewer's interpretation gives the work and the child's process an identity that becomes an integral part of the work itself, with effects that reach the child, as children are always very attentive and sensitive to the assessments made by adults. In the everyday life at school, this attention to the process, the teachers and the *atelierista* support, listen, remind, and relaunch with words, silences, smiles, interest, doubts, and exchange. Naturally, I am aware of being less "in tune" with languages other than the visual language, but it is precisely this awareness that should lead to exchange with those who have other competencies and sensibilities. I consider exchange to be an important and essential evolutionary process.

Constructing contexts with "promising" (a term used by Paola Cagliari, director of the Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools - *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, to underscore the importance of preparing high quality contexts in which the children can work) potentialities is an important base for offering tools, materials, and spaces that can elicit curiosity and experimentation. The experience of the city *ateliers* at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center has underscored the importance of the preparation and setup of the contexts, which should be appealing, attract curiosity, and stimulate questions, investigative actions, and interesting discoveries. The *ateliers* are contexts for the experiences on various topics involving creativity and learning, where different languages interweave. They are open to school groups and to children, youth, and adults. Since the opening of the Loris Malaguzzi International Center in 2006, the *ateliers* have continuously evolved and been redesigned and transformed. Currently, the following *ateliers* are present: "Ray of Light," "Digital Landscapes," "Living Organisms," "Graphic-Narrative Plots," and "In the Shape of Clay." Other *ateliers*, for example on the languages of food, of the body, and of photography are also proposed during initiatives and events organized by the Malaguzzi Center.

In these *ateliers*, the relatively short time available for meeting the users—one hour, two at most—means that the design of the context must be particularly attentive and rigorous and the materials and tools prepared so as to suggest a series of combinatorial possibilities. In the last few years, a profess has been developing in the city *ateliers* that offers particularly interesting interweavings--the combination of analogue and digital. Digital devices and instruments are extremely seductive, but they can engender excessive fascination, with the risk that interest in knowing the technique of the device can overshadow the ultimate aim of the work; whereas, we think that simultaneous exploration using both traditional digital instruments can provide greater richness and increase the expressive possibilities.

The two topics that were chosen for the most recent exhibitions at the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre are the encounter between nature and the digital world, and visual metaphors. The exhibition, "A Festive Thought: Visual Metaphor in Children's



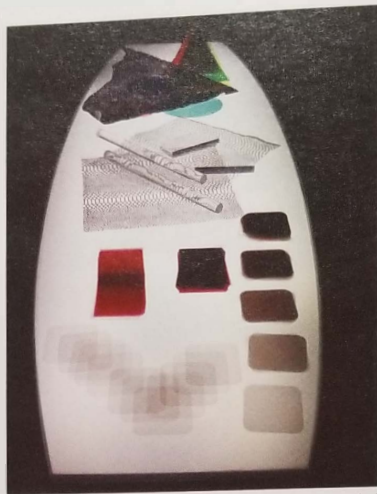
[12] Exhibition-atelier "A Festive Thought: Visual Metaphor in Children's Learning Processes"



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Learning Processes," inaugurated in May 2018 and supported by a corresponding *atelier*, is currently on display at the Malaguzzi Center [images 12 and 13]. According to a well-established custom, the public communication of the exhibitions moves along different tracks, including written texts, images (photographs, drawings, sculptures, videos), and interactive experimentation between analog and digital.

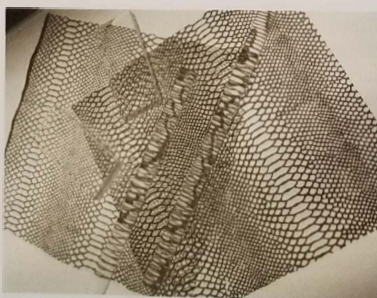
These are somewhat complex contexts that are difficult to explain in just a few words. To give an example, I have chosen a context that is seemingly very simple: a light table on which a number of objects are laid out [image14]. But the simplicity is only apparent, because even in a limited space with just a few objects, it is possible to experiment in many different ways, to glimpse interesting situations, and to construct images that previously were unimaginable.



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For example, we might be interested in an elegant arrangement of sheets of white paper overlapped, which makes us immediately see that there is not just one white, but a vast range of whites, and this discovery could stimulate us to search for other shades, new perceptual and expressive sensations.

In another case, we might be curious about the overlapping of two transparent sheets printed with black and white lines, on which two plexiglass cylinders are set. If you slide or rotate the sheets, the two base patterns change the warp and produce fascinating optical effects that can be varied and multiplied by moving the plexiglass cylinders [image 15], which can also function as magnifying glasses.



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If the patterned sheets are placed under an optical microscope, even an inexpensive one we discover other fascinating images [image 16 and 17]. One exploration that we think can be interesting and generate ideas focuses on the *nomadism* of the objects, which can be moved around in the space to search for relationships with other materials and tools, where digital devices connected together can vary, distort, or multiply the optical effects [image 18]. This leads to the discovery that, with digital instrumentation, the image is never finished but can be fragmented, projected, and reflected in the space, superimposed over other images, with the continuous creation of new and fascinating situations in which you can continue to intervene. "I'm creating new worlds," said a 5-year-old girl while experimenting with these possibilities.

Depending on the time available and the user's knowledge of the instruments, there are many interesting combinatorial possibilities for producing images, but the starting point is only one: the curiosity to experiment with shapes, lights, colors, optical effects, and expressive situations. Even starting from a simple experimentation, a teacher can become curious and want to try to understand more; she can immediately imagine a context with materials and tools to offer the children, who are sure to find further combinatorial possibilities in their own research, adding ideas to ideas. These visual contexts can be supported and enriched by other languages, such as sound or body movement, confirming that the educational process is in continual evolution and transformation, where even a repetition is never the same as the previous model.



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— Vito Verrini

In conclusion, I would like to mention the desire for beauty that children naturally possess.

Aristotle said (in one of his principle works, *Metaphysics*) that wonder is the source of our desire for knowledge. As we know, wonder is an integral part of childhood. Beauty is the thread that transversally connects all my reflections and is an element that can integrate the different languages. Beauty is not always evident, but it is found above all in the mind and in the desire of the beholder, and it is an incentive to research.

I began with a quote, and I would like to end with one from Italian physicist Carlo Rovelli. "Perhaps poetry is another of science's deepest roots: the capacity to see beyond the visible" (2018, p. 28). Perhaps one of the deepest roots of the theory of the hundred languages of children can be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and, especially in education, in the close relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

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