

The *Atelier* as a Listening Space:

Perspectives from an International Collaboration of *Atelieristas*

BY: GIGI SCHROEDER YU, SARA DEL RIO, ANNA GOLDEN, SARAH HASSING, STEPHANIE L. STEIN, AND WENDY ROBBINS

G I G I S C H R O E D E R Y U



Gigi is the spring and summer issue editor and associate editor for the peer-reviewed issue of *Innovations*. She is an assistant professor in art education at the University of New Mexico. The early learning programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and their deep respect for children's artistic languages inspire her creative work and research. Her study of the Reggio Emilia Approach began in 1999 as a studio art coordinator for Chicago Commons, a community-based child development agency. In 2014, she was the project manager for *The Wonder of Learning* exhibition during its presence in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Introduction: Reflections from the *Atelier*

Loris Malaguzzi, in the 1960s, introduced the *atelier* as a unique space within the schools of Reggio Emilia, as a “reaction against the concept of the education of young children based mainly on words and simple-minded rituals” (Gandini, 2005, p. 7). As *pedagogista* Simona Bonilauri asserts in conversation with Veà Vecchi,

In the pedagogy of Reggio, art has been used as a force for breaking away from dominant thought. . . . When children learn, they do it by interweaving and making connections between the different languages, and this is exactly what school in the traditional sense does *not* do, because it tends to separate the languages, which are defined as different subjects, disciplines, fields of knowledge, etc. (Vecchi, 2010, p. 56)

The *atelier* is referenced as a space for connection, collaboration, and the building of deep relationships.

In conjunction with creating the *atelier*, Malaguzzi created the position of the *atelierista*, a person with an artistic background who collaborates with children and teachers. Vecchi (2010), one of the initial *atelieristas* in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, describes the role as having a stronger influence and presence in the schools, as “*guarantors* that the dance between cognitive, expressive, rational and imaginative would always happen” (p. 131). In many early childhood contexts, the role of the *atelierista* is often viewed as superfluous or misinterpreted as “simply an art teacher who supplies art materials and teaches techniques from an external vantage point” (Cooper, 2012, p. 297). In this article, *Innovations* offers a more complex description of the role of the *atelierista* from varied early childhood contexts.

This article reflects the ideas of a collaboration of *atelieristas* who, since 2019, have regularly met to support each other. The group formed when Wendy and Stephanie

reached out to *atelieristas* on Instagram. They initially began as a larger and more worldwide group. However, the core participants reflected in this article remained together through the pandemic and saw each other through to the other side. As *atelieristas*, the authors have found their role to be, at times, isolating and separated from the daily life and rhythms of the classroom. The vision of the *atelierista* as an iconoclast within the school is challenging to negotiate in real life, even when they are in constant communication and working with teachers closely. In their collaborative meetings, they often discuss the loneliness felt in the *atelierista*’s role. This inspired the authors to search for relationships with others in similar settings. Through sharing rich imagery and stories from the *atelier* on social media, they began to form a web of studio artists, *atelieristas*, and *pedagogistas* interested in supporting, nurturing, and inspiring one another. For years, they played with various digital spaces and apps for dialogue, collaborative book readings, and sharing photos and videos. While these early attempts often sputtered, they continued to troubleshoot, iterate, and attempt to build a space for those interested in an exchange based upon Reggio-inspired practices and studio arts.

As the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, they found themselves lost, alone, and uncertain of how to transform the *ateliers* to suit online platforms. While it felt that things were falling apart culturally

and politically, the pandemic catalyzed weekly online meetings where shared strategies, novel ideas, and emotional support flourished. Zoom became, and remains, a platform they use to sustain their relationships with one another, as they are scattered across continents and countries. These meetings have become digital spaces for daydreaming, venting, collaborating, and coming together in solidarity to support one another in our roles within the studio.

As the pandemic subsides, they continue to redevelop and refine an understanding of what the *atelier* offers as a space apart from classroom life. As artists and educators, they see value in forging connections between aesthetics, ethics, and politics within learning spaces. At its core, art is a means of expressing oneself to others. Henry A. Giroux (2020) furthers these ideas,

Pedagogy is a moral and political practice that is always implicated in power relations and must be understood as a cultural politics that offers both a particular version and vision of civic life, the future, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. (p. 81)

The authors jointly reflect on Vecchi's (2018) seminal article for *Innovations*, titled "The Right to Express Yourself." In their reflections, the authors hope to make visible approaches that promote listening "with confidence, kindness, and curiosity to the intelligence of the children, to the possibilities offered by the materials, and the potentialities of the tools" (p. 6). Together, the authors describe their work as *atelieristas* within unique contexts and the concept of the *atelier* as a space for transformation, participation, listening, and honoring children's and educators' voices through the hundred languages.



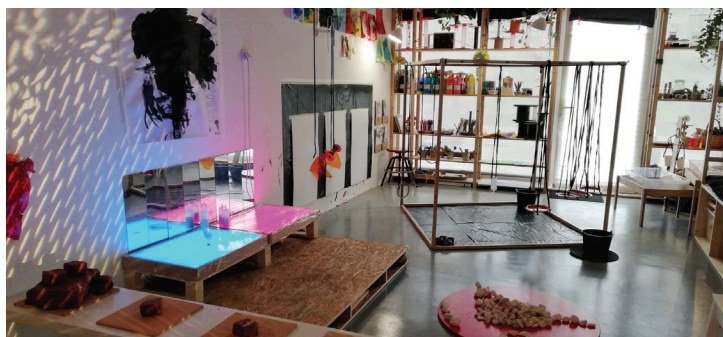
S A R A
D E L R I O

Sara is a content creator at Wunderled, and was born in Lisbon, Portugal. Her background includes a degree in graphic design followed by 17 years in the visual communication field and 3 years as an *atelierista* in an independent *atelier* for children. Offering *atelier* experiences in schools and cultural events ignited a deep fascination with how children explore materials, sparking her curiosity about their learning processes. This passion led her to a specialization course in "Classroom Investigations in a Socio-Constructivist Approach" (*Universidad Antonio Ruiz de Montoya*) and to participate in a Reggio Children study group, "Culture of the *Atelier*." Through this lens, she's dedicated to creating dynamic learning environments that nurture children's innate creativity and curiosity, fostering collaboration, inquiry, and self-discovery.

The *Atelierista* as a Creative Translator

By Sara del Rio

In my experience, an *atelier* is a thinking laboratory where children and adults come together to engage in diverse experiences that spark curiosity and ignite the imagination. Going beyond exploring art techniques or step-by-step art experiences, the *atelier* is a rich context to observe and research the thought processes of young minds, the interpretations they make of a world they are just beginning to experience, and the imaginative provisional theories they develop.



The *atelier* with invitations



Exploration of sound in the *atelier*



An exploration of tubes



Colors through many materials

Art materials are essential to the *atelier*, allowing children to express their ideas and emotions in tangible forms. But the focus is not only on the artistic abilities. I agree with Vecchi's (2018) suggestion that simply relying on lists of techniques does not create the connections that enrich thinking. Rather, we must focus on how both children and adults work with a theme that involves the interweaving of multiple languages.

The *atelier* becomes a space of wonder and discovery where children can explore, manipulate, and transform these materials to suit their ever-changing narratives, moving from one language to another naturally. It is a place where questions are encouraged and ideas are met with respect and curiosity, allowing children to immerse themselves in open-ended explorations that stimulate their creativity and foster collaboration. Whether through painting, sculpting, dancing, storytelling, role-playing, or scientific investigations, every language is respected and embraced.

By actively engaging with children's explorations, an *atelierista* develops a deep understanding of their thinking strategies, unraveling the intricacies of their cognitive processes and problem-solving approaches. As a result, I often take on the role of a translator, deciphering the meaning of children's explorations and my intentions and interpretations. I am always very curious and enthusiastic about their discoveries alongside children, even (or especially) when they transcend the boundaries of conventional knowledge and challenge established scientific explanations or cultural norms. These moments inspire me to question preconceived notions, explore alternative perspectives, and think creatively about how to support their explorations best. Sometimes, it's the choice of a color needed to share an idea; other times, it's the details on a drawing that make a thought process visible. These cues provide valuable insights into their unique perceptions and understanding of the world around them.

As an *atelierista*, I am passionate about nurturing children's curiosity and empowering them with the tools and materials to explore their interests and ideas more deeply. Inspired by Vecchi's wisdom, I believe in developing two crucial competencies: fluency in multiple languages and understanding children's strategies. And rather than dismissing or correcting their explorations,

I cherish engaging in meaningful conversations with the children. These dialogues become a source of mutual learning, where we exchange ideas, reflect on different viewpoints, and celebrate the beauty of diverse interpretations. Being a translator in this context is a profound responsibility and a privilege, entailing empathy, open-mindedness, and an attunement to the subtleties of children's interactions with materials and other people. This involves

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“listening” to their voices with a transdisciplinary lens and appreciating their choices to express their thoughts and emotions that transcend traditional verbal forms.

The work of unveiling these processes and the meaning of children's explorations is complex but rewarding. In my journey as an *atelierista*, I have discovered the transformative power of two invaluable tools for this translator role: reflective conversations and pedagogical documentation. These tools enable me to capture and communicate the profound learning experiences that unfold within our *atelier* and serve as gateways to deeper reflection and continuous improvement of my practice.



Natural materials investigations



Pedagogical documentation, *What is a Rock?*



Documentation near materials inviting children's reflections

My process of reflective conversations with caregivers and colleagues is rooted in open-mindedness, empathy, and a genuine desire to understand and learn from each other. When conversing with caregivers, I approach the dialogue as a collaborative exploration of their child's learning journey. I share insights and observations about their child's interactions within the *atelier* and actively listen to their perspectives and expectations. These conversations are a reciprocal process, where our observations and interpretations enrich the conversations and help us co-construct meaning, leading to a deeper understanding of the children's creativity and thinking. Pedagogical documentation is a powerful visual medium; its potential goes beyond mere information-sharing. Recognizing the immense value of visual communication strategies in conveying the depth and richness of children's learning experiences is crucial for educators. Drawing from my personal experience, when I started my journey with pedagogical documentation, I quickly realized the advantage my background in graphic design afforded me. By integrating a thoughtful approach to the composition of text and images, specifically aimed at aiding understanding, we weave a dynamic and engaging narrative that celebrates each child's unique journey of discovery. This approach becomes an invitation for families and colleagues to actively participate in the learning process, fostering collaboration and mutual understanding. The documentation becomes a dialogue that connects educators, children, and families, creating a more profound sense of community within the educational setting.



A N N A
G O L D E N

Anna is an *atelierista* at Sabot School in Richmond, Virginia, with 27 years of experience in teaching. Before working in early childhood programs, she worked in commercial art when she received the first edition of *The Hundred Languages of Children* as a gift and knew she was meant to be an *atelierista*. She studied studio art, concentrating on photography and printmaking. She then received her education in a K–8 teacher certification program and her Master of Art Education from Virginia Commonwealth University, writing her thesis about Vygotsky and intersubjectivity. She likes to read, write, and speak about art, nature, and education and has published several articles and book chapters.

The *Atelierista* as Co-inquirer

By Anna Golden

Almost everything has changed over the 27 years of my teaching career at Sabot School. The school went from a preschool serving 70 children to an independent school for children aged 2 through 14 with many administrators and teachers. What has remained the same are the moments of listening deeply to children. Those moments can happen outside while looking at something curious on the ground or in the *atelier* while sitting at a circular table in dialogue with a small group of children. Being in dialogue with children, finding problems to solve, and coming up with hypotheses and ways of testing them—those moments have not changed.

The Sabot studio is a relatively small space between preschool classrooms in the “main house” (a former mansion). Because it’s a bit crowded, the studio isn’t an especially lovely room, but it has good space to work and enough materials in it that when a child sends me a note that says, “Dear Anna, we need a brain,” I can provide a lovely palette for them to choose from. The studio is a listening space. Children know that they can show me the beginnings of ideas, and I will listen and look for a way for them to make ideas visible.



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When Loris Malaguzzi introduced the *atelierista* and *atelier* into the schools of Reggio Emilia, he meant for the position to be subversive. He wanted an artist in the school to shake up the educators’ thinking. It’s a bit mind-boggling that even with what we know about the future and technology, our instant access to facts, and the fact that human beings do not think or learn in disciplinary silos, there is still a pull toward traditional education. Didn’t we think the pandemic might shake up the status quo in education and, at

last, open a path for a better way? Sadly, here in Virginia, children's right to read, speak, and think freely are challenged by a state government bent on removing possibilities of thought in the form of school library book bans and removing areas of the curriculum under the guise of "parents' rights." I dream of a world where children are respected as human beings. Still, this type of political movement assumes that children, especially young children, only react to ideas given to them by adults. I see in the studio children investigating ideas they are curious about. Sometimes, this includes so-called controversial ideas.

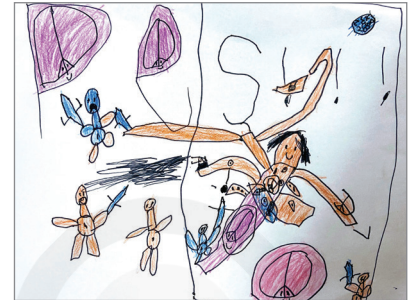
The examples are from larger projects centered around peace, the theme of Sabot's meta-project from last school year. Peace was the most recent *umbrella project*, a yearlong, school-wide research into one concept. These projects are done by children with important things to say and create in a context that feels safe. My colleagues often talk about not being afraid to have difficult conversations. In the studio, children courageously express ideas about many topics that adults feel worried about, like gender and race. They feel safe to question authority—even safe enough to say something the *atelierista* won't like, as in the case of "the right to play video games," an idea presented after many talks in which I expressed concern about the extent of this 6-year-old's gaming knowledge! The "We do tackle war" sign came from the question, "What message can bring peace to the community?" Ezra seems to be telling us adults not to worry, that playing war isn't the same as real war.

"Peace They" is a superhero, part of a long story first grade children made about "Peace Heroes" saving animals. Peace They is, as far as I know, the first non-gendered superhero. "Peace Alligator" is a paper mache sculpture made

Tackle War



Drawing of Peace



Displaying Images



by Jake, 3 years. It was meant to be displayed where the whole school community could see it. The text accompanying the alligator says, “Children! Do not eat the alligator, and they won’t eat you either. They are a nice one and won’t even chomp you.” Is Jake reminding us not to make assumptions or judge by appearances?

The *atelier* is where people can think with materials and go where those thoughts take us. In her article “The Right to Express Yourself,” Vecchi (2018) states, “Interdisciplinarity . . . 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” (p. 5). It seems clear to me that artmaking is not just an aid to thinking but a way of thinking. We think with materials. From artist Barry Goldberg (2014), who worked with young children, “The activity of making art is a unique form of wordless thinking” (p. 2). The studio is a place of “combinatorial and creative possibilities” because it’s a place where after making thinking visible in one way, you may be challenged to re-present the same idea with a new material (Vecchi, 2018, p. 5). It’s a space where the *atelierista*, in turn, asks questions that will complicate or clarify thinking. It’s a space where spelling, scale, counting, and measurement happen in the context of figuring out a big idea. With experimentation at its heart, the studio frees us to think and associate and go where our imaginations lead. That’s why it’s no surprise to me that what is produced in the studio is interdisciplinary and often interweaves ideas about social justice and ideas necessary to children.

Peace Alligator paper mache sculpture





S A R A H
H A S S I N G

Sarah is an *atelierista* at The College School in Saint Louis, Missouri, where she has collaborated with children and educators for the past 15 years. Her background in the visual arts helps to bring the hundred languages to life in the studio. She has visited the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia twice, each time finding inspiration in the schools, the documentation, and the collegial dialogue that stems from the visits. She has presented at several national and international educational conferences, with most of her work revolving around the use of natural materials within early childhood settings. She recently graduated with a Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education from UC Denver.

Ecologies of Listening

By Sarah Hassing

Nestled between two preschool classrooms, the *atelier* at The College School functions as a studio, a workshop, and a space for research and experimentation. Its walls of windows connect these three spaces and their inhabitants in solidarity and relationship with one another. Throughout my 15 years as an *atelierista* within this space, I have also come to view the *atelier* as a site of cultural production. Using the hundred languages, the children express their ideas, prototype and test out theories, and communicate outward with others. Using the languages of watercolor, pastel, clay, and many others, the children research themselves and the world around them. Regardless of its medium, their work reflects, interprets, affirms, and often critiques the cultural values and messages woven into our community's identity.

As an *atelierista*, I am an interloper on childhood and its customs. I brush past its edges with my documentation tools, camera, notebooks, and senses. I seek to capture the moments and messages the children create, moving back and forth through my own



The atelier at The College School

In viewing the *atelier* as a space for cultural production and democratic participation, children's rights are a constant theme of our work together.

languages of photography, videography, transcription, and conversation. In viewing the *atelier* as a space for cultural production and democratic participation, children's rights are a constant theme of our work together. In particular, children's rights to self-expression, beauty, and creativity play pivotal roles in the studio. I see being a witness to the children's work as a means of honoring and affirming a strong image of the child. As Vecchi (2018) argues in "The Right to Express Yourself," "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" (p. 5). In supporting and upholding this right to self-expression, I feel a deep responsibility to listen closely to children's voices as they speak through creative media and the hundred languages.

Pausing and intentionally listening allows us to hear children's theories about the world around them, often found within the layers of visual languages being utilized. It also allows us to grasp the many layers inherent in children's research. As an *atelierista*, I am inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome metaphor to better understand the organic interconnectedness found within children's expressive endeavors. They argue, "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). Connectivity, then, establishes points of relationship between symbols and written language, visual arts, and the disciplines we adults so often isolate from one another. In the *atelier*, schematics and representational illustrations are often accompanied by verbal storytelling and body movement. These languages work in tandem to provide insights into children's thinking, giving the listener a fuller understanding of both the knowledge being built and the connections being forged.



Side by side creating with natural materials



Oliver's evolving observational drawing of the shell from multiple perspectives



In setting up a simple provocation of natural materials, magnifiers, pen, and paper, I had assumed that the children might be interested in creating observational drawings of these new and unique artifacts. However, listening closely to both their spoken word and drawn illustrations enabled me to see the depth of their thinking. After drawing a large shell on its side in black pen, Oliver expanded the composition to include the intriguing perspective of looking down from its top point. While adding arrow symbols to these two illustrations, he noted, “I think the points on the top [of the shell] keep the bad fish away. They touch it and go ‘ow, ow, ow! They’re spikes.” Oliver gently pressed the pads of his fingertips onto the rounded protrusions of the shell as he examined them again. At this point, using his prior knowledge of sea life, alongside his working theory of the shell’s protective capacity, Oliver sketched a series of fish, expanding the scene he imagined before returning to the shell to add embellishment and sharpen the lines of its “spikes.”

These shells returned to the *atelier*’s table the next morning to a new and younger group of students. After choosing a small selection for herself, Leah carefully turned the shells over in her hand. Her eyes followed their lines and patterns as they inverted within the shell’s undersides and inner chambers. Leah then turned her

focus to a small jar of flowers I had added to the morning’s mix. She tenderly took cuttings from the jar and inserted them into the shell’s folds. She worked quietly, focused on bringing these two materials together, placing each on a round wood piece that served as a frame for her composition. “There,” she said, “they are in their homes. They are safe.” In pausing to listen closely during both quiet moments, I began to see interconnected themes of safety and protection permeate the children’s experiences with these languages. Not only did the interplay of these materials enrich their thinking, but they also reflected outward the children’s tangible fears and needs.

What does it mean to respect this right to self-expression? What tools do we adults have in protecting and promoting expressive languages and the voice they give to children and childhood? For me, the answer lies in the intentional and mindful listening that we adults can give to children and all their forms of expression. It is in our power to document and honor children’s many ways of being, sensing, experiencing, and learning.



S T E P H A N I E
L . S T E I N

Stephanie works as a pedagogical *atelierista* at TriBeCa Community School. She was born in New York City and has 16 years of experience working as an *atelierista* in both Los Angeles and New York. An exhibiting artist herself, she delights in and is endlessly inspired by the ways young children use materials, often connecting intellectual concepts to real-world materials in novel ways.

Ephemeral Moments in the *Atelier*

By Stephanie L. Stein

The world seems to grow progressively anti-child and all that childhood represents. The trend of sadistic pranks against children on TikTok comes to mind. Also, climate catastrophe and poverty cause me to be increasingly desperate to demonstrate young children's competence and value to our society. If only we could arrive at a common understanding of children as **valued citizens** and **incredible resources by our side**. However, we may inadvertently be nurturing a generation fixated on consumption, with little time remaining for adulthood.

Nevertheless, I'm an idealist and perhaps an alarmist. Still, I believe Vecchi (2018) when she says, "is it superfluous or ineffectual to talk about 'the hundred languages'? No, and again, no." (p. 5). The *ateliers* at the Reggio-inspired TriBeCa Community School are where we attempt to shine a light on children's beauty and the value of their perspectives and theories. At the heart of this school is the spirit of collaboration as we foster learning through dedicated co-teaching teams. With 10 classrooms and the energy of 140 curious children, we have an environment where teachers' growth is as significant as children's. The school has an open loft-like setting, and our three separate *ateliers* offer us many ways to research materials and practices alongside the children. We have a flexible schedule in the *ateliers*, allowing small groups of four to five children and one educator to visit throughout the week.

I began studying the Reggio Emilia Approach 15 years ago with Naama Zoran, the Israeli representative of the Reggio Children International Network, and then later with Paola Trigari, our educational consultant at TriBeCa Community School. I was immediately intrigued to discover that I could translate artistic preoccupations with shape, color, texture, and perception into the work with young children and materials. My journey in this role began early, as I was fortunate enough to be immersed in the arts culture of New York City growing up. My parents sent me to many art classes the city offered, exposing me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Art Students

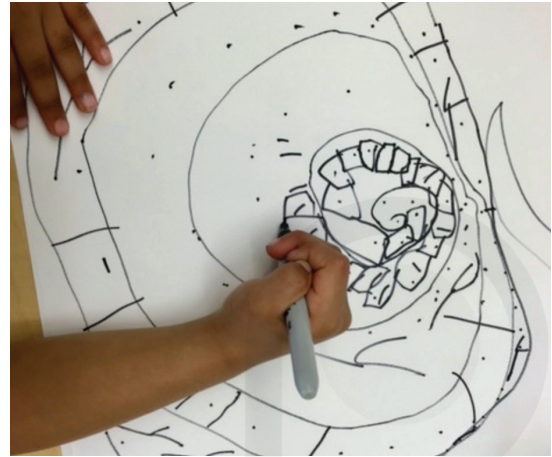
League, and the 92nd Street Y. I continued at the High School of Music and Art and eventually obtained a BFA in printmaking from the Philadelphia College of Art.

As life evolved and I became a parent, I discovered a profound fascination with observing how children learn and grow. There was something inexplicably captivating about witnessing those tiny gears turning in the minds of even the youngest infants. I began studying human development at UCLA and then at Pacific Oaks College. During this transformative phase of my life, I stumbled upon the Reggio Emilia Approach, and a connection between my art practice and children's thinking formed immediately. This journey led me to Reggio Emilia, Italy, not once but twice, where I was introduced to invaluable colleagues, mentors, *atelieristas*, and the group of authors in this article. We meet to lean on each other and hold space for our experiences in the *atelier*, to bolster these perspectives, to encourage the approach and not waver.

Although I have facilitated many long-term investigations over the years, exploring "How the Brain Talks," "The Water Shadow," "What Flies and Does Not Drop?" and "From Shadows To The Universe." I hold a collection of favorite intimate moments that have lingered:

- A 2-year-old "plants" his seeds on paper by drawing patches of red for them to lay upon.
- A 4-year-old inquisitively ponders during a sketch of his eye, "If my pupil is so small, how can it see the whole world?" (The profundity of the question astounds me. It could be something the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty might have posed!)
- A 3-year-old ingeniously sketches the front and rear of a horse on opposite sides of a paper, explaining, "Because it has to gallop."
- A 5-year-old delicately paints the pink interior color of a dying camellia flower on a sheet of watercolor paper and its fading exterior in brown on the other.
- A 4-year-old budding learner paints the doorway to her apartment and explains as she fills the space with paint, "Door closing. Door is closing now. See? Door is closed. Goodbye."

"If my pupil is so small, how can it see the whole world?"



In these moments, children recreate the essence of a thing. The paper *becomes* the flower, not just a representation of a flower. This is where lines blur and boundaries dissolve, a goal that all professional artists strive to accomplish.

Like Vecchi (2018), I, too, “am aware of being less ‘in tune’ with languages other than the visual language” (p. 10). The things I find beautiful in the studio might not make much sense to others. What then becomes of these enchanting moments that unite perceptions and materials? This is where the value of documentation comes in. Because these moments are so intimate,

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small, and fleeting, I strive to capture them, to show them to my directors Kristen Pallonetti and Megan Boyle, to the children’s parents, and to my friends—to anyone who will listen, really! It is my duty to show others *why* these moments are important, just as they show *me* what is essential elsewhere in education. As Vecchi says, this “should lead to exchange with those that have other competencies and sensibilities. I consider the exchange to be an important and essential evolutionary process” (p. 10). Here, I believe Vecchi is speaking about how bringing differing perspectives together can and *must* create a whole picture of the life of children.

W E N D Y
R O B B I N S



Wendy is the *atelierista* for the Early School at Ashley Hall in Charleston, South Carolina. Previously, she owned and operated a program in a small nearby town that embraced the arts to educate young children. Discovering the Reggio Emilia Approach changed the trajectory of her studies to include early childhood and the ways different kinds of artistic expression affected how children learn. Her undergraduate work at Salem College led to a self-designed major in children’s fine arts. Continuing to follow a desire to seek specific studies in this approach, she earned another self-designed degree in fine arts and the Reggio Emilia Approach at Lesley University. Her current role at Ashley Hall includes the development of an *atelier* that embraces music and movement as part of its identity. She works with children aged 2 through 5, in addition to a kindergarten art program that bridges together the Reggio Emilia Approach, Teaching for Artistic Behavior, and the International Baccalaureate Primary Years program.

Listening as a Journey

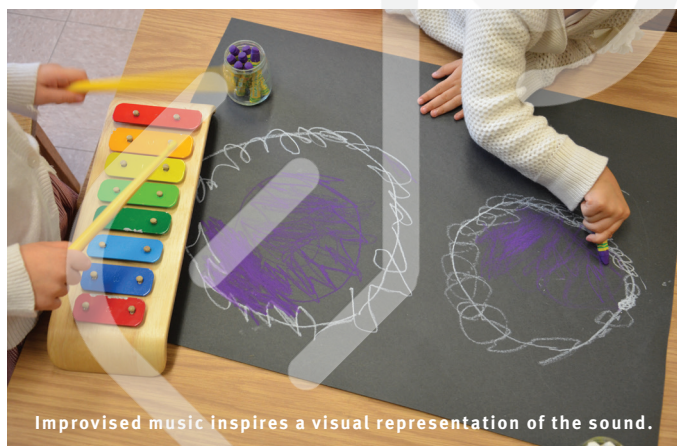
By: Wendy Robbins

When the space of the *atelier* was first developed at Ashley Hall, the Early School had been studying the approach for only a few years. It was a much-needed component to help fully realize the vision for the program. In our particular context, the role of the *atelierista* evolved out of a desire to intertwine music and movement classes with the philosophy of the *atelier*. My background consists of self-designed degrees in children's fine arts, including studies of the visual arts, music, dance, writing, and theater, while looking at non-traditional educational approaches like the Reggio Emilia Approach. It was a natural transition into the position of the *atelierista* for our program as educators began to see the potential of the hundred languages in children's learning.

Designing a new *atelier* in an environment slowly progressing away from a more traditional educational approach proved to be a challenge but a welcome one. There was a yearning to create a space grounded in the pursuit of making children's expressions of original thoughts and ideas visible. This would be a space where many different languages would be accessible to them, not just for visual arts but also for exploring sound and movement, dramatic play, and early literacy. Above all, the *atelier* would become a place of immense joy, not just for the children but for teachers and families.

To create this kind of environment, there had to be a mental shift in our community. Observation and careful listening would be paramount. In her article "The Right to Express Yourself," Vecchi (2018) urges the development of relationships through individual and group work, interdisciplinarity, documentation, research, and aesthetics. She reflects, "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" (p. 6).

Initially, we needed to build our confidence in our ability to tune into children. This was a challenging switch coming from more teacher-directed methods. Listening is using your whole self, not just words, to interpret the meaning of children's work. When children are truly heard, something special happens. We see the inherent wisdom of children, built upon reciprocity and deep listening.



In one example, children in the studio explored the sound of a xylophone. One child ran the mallet along the bars up and down, back and forth, again and again. Another child drew, moving the pastel at a pace matching the rapid movement of the xylophone player. The resulting shape was a circle with twisting lines crossing all around it. At first, this did not appear to correspond with the sound being played on the instrument, but as the children spoke, their ideas became clearer: "This is the music going around and around in the air." It would have made more sense to me that the visual representation would have been more linear, but the children saw it another way. Listening to the children's ideas was imperative to fully understanding their thought process. Their interpretation of the sound as a circular shape perhaps mimicked the way the notes flowed from one end of the instrument to the other.

In another situation, a child manipulated clay into a tower of rolled-out spheres. Examining the shape he had created, he was silent for quite a while. Finally, he said, "God, I guess you are in real life now." This act would have been lost had the observer not given time and space to be present with the child as they created their own meaning for the work.

Children can cross modes easily in a way that can appear almost miraculous to adults who have lost the knack of moving our thinking between disciplines and categories. A child rolls an oil pastel across the paper with the palm of her hand and says, “It makes a sound when I roll it. It’s an instrument.” It’s as if a line between visual and musical modes of expression doesn’t exist.

This capacity to move between categories is a special gift of the *atelier*, where we are used to thinking creatively in music, visual art, and dramatics. Carlina Rinaldi notes, “What is extraordinary in the human mind is not only our capacity to move from one language to another, from one ‘intelligence’ to another; but also that we are capable of reciprocal listening that makes communication and dialogue possible” (2006, p. 116).

The journey of developing and integrating an *atelier* into our preschool program has been one of discovery, transformation, and immense reward. Guided by the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach and fueled by the passion for empowering children’s voices, we’ve witnessed the *atelier* become a place where diverse languages merge and the remarkable capacity of children influences their own learning experiences. The *atelier* has become a testament to the idea that when we truly listen, we honor the hundred languages of childhood, allowing each child to express themselves uniquely.



Visual representation of sound



Discovering the joys of marks



Intentions with painting



Connecting through light and shadow



Patience when listening to a child often reveals deeper meanings.

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