

The culture of the atelier in the municipal infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia

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At the end of the 1960s, coherent with the politics of promoting a new culture of childhood and a new idea of school, Loris Malaguzzi decided to introduce into each of Reggio Emilia's municipal preschools an atelier organised and looked after by a person with an education in the arts. This decision was and is more revolutionary than it might appear, and testifies to how the genesis of the ateliers occurs simultaneously with the genesis of the educational project of these schools and is part of their overall design. It was a courageous choice that wanted to strongly state the importance being given to imagination and creativity in educational processes and in knowledge.

Atelier culture, in our experience of education here in Reggio Emilia, is at once a physical space with a specific professional profile dedicated to it, but perhaps even more it is a way of thinking about school and education. In fact ateliers should be places capable of guaranteeing there is always an expressive and emotional part, just as there is a rational and cognitive part, in every discipline and language.

"The atelier [...] has, as desired, proved to be subversive – generating complexity and new tools for thought. It has allowed rich combinations and creative possibilities among the different (symbolic) languages of children [...]" Loris Malaguzzi ¹

Naturally, we need to avoid the risk of ateliers becoming places where techniques are taught.

Techniques are necessary but they have to evolve into expressiveness; we adults have the task of knowing the possibilities of languages and not offering overly poor contexts: ateliers have to try and generate learning contexts that accompany children towards an expressive use of the languages.

The metaphor of "the hundred languages" elaborated by Loris Malaguzzi pushes us to broaden our horizons and go beyond traditional languages of expression, because all languages have their own expressive capacities and necessities. The theory of "the hundred languages", if we interpret it with coherency and passion, also tells us there is no hierarchy between languages, there is no timing for encounters with languages, first one, and then another, and so on.

In our experience in Reggio Emilia we believe that systems of teaching that tend to separate the different disciplines, that tend to work in compartmentalised ways, limit the development of thought. Research and discoveries in the neurosciences have confirmed for some years now that our minds and sensations live in a continuous connection, and we believe the opportunities for analysing each complex problem through the filter of several languages supports the natural biological development of the human mind, giving great richness and completeness to our thoughts.

The atelier at the Balducci Municipal Preschool



Ateliers therefore become opportunities for attempting to keep together rationality, creativity, sensibility, imagination, the aesthetic dimension and expressivity.

Creativity is understood not as a mental faculty that is an exclusive legacy of artists, but as a mental faculty characteristic of each person's way of thinking, knowing and deciding. Creativity is a potential that accompanies the life of every individual, and becomes one of the traits on which our unique and unrepeatable nature is founded. A creativity we in Reggio Emilia like to associate not so much with extraordinary dimensions of experience, or the possession of exceptional qualities, rather we love to make it one of the possibilities open to daily life. It is not the child passing freely through myriad techniques that is creative but the knowledge process first and foremost, when this is not standardised.

Creativity is giving shape to your own ideas by choosing the languages most suited to developing and communicating your own ideas and thinking. As in the case of these "Plant Metaphors" where we asked 5 year-old children in the Balducci Preschool to imagine possible transformations that could be created through combinations of 3D elements and mark-making/drawing. The children's ideas took into account not only the shape, but also the colour, consistency and smell of the edibles offered, with a tension towards knowledge that was strongly multi-sensory; the concepts of similarity and metamorphosis are woven with the possibilities of composition and transformation, so that the richness and originality of each child's thinking and creativity emerge.

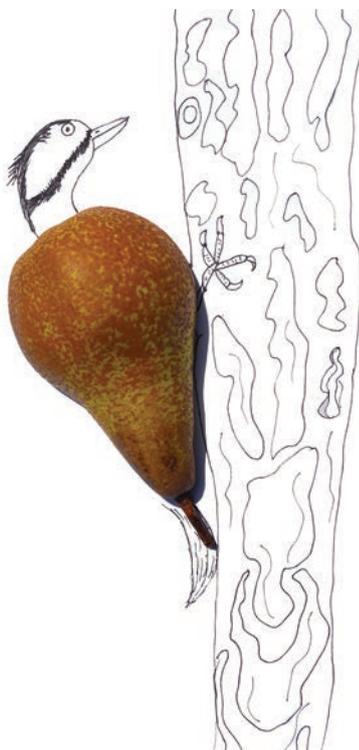
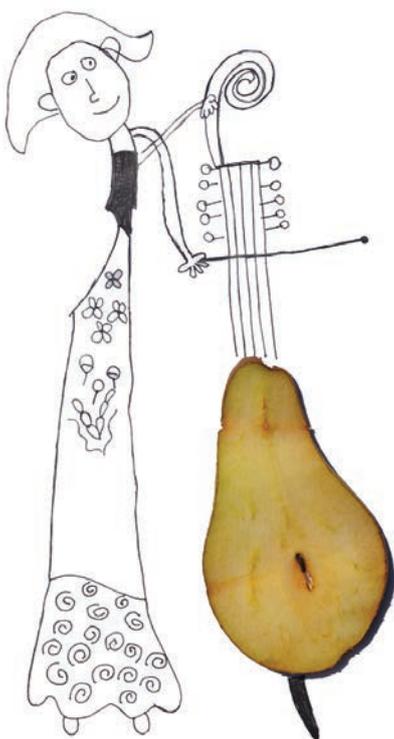
Plant metaphors: double bass-pear, woodpecker-pear, mermaid-pear

Children should all have the same right to develop their own creativity, their own competencies, their own motivations.

I believe the atelier should guarantee this right to children, offering a plurality of expressive languages, and giving each child a chance to construct their own personal journey of research, of discovery of the world, and their own personal responses to the many questions encountered each day. The journey is subjective because every human being is unique and unrepeatable – but not solitary. So it is worth remembering here the importance of learning in groups, precisely because children are naturally disposed to encountering others, to listening, to exchange. I see this when I have the opportunity as an atelierista to go into the infant-toddler centre, where young, very young children, we are talking of children aged 9 months, strike a metal plate with a baton and create original and complex sound effects that propagate through space. And then? Immediately the children turn to their friends and neighbours, as if saying: "Did you hear that? Did you hear it too?" A powerful statement of sharing, and an extraordinary research into communication.



Nilde Iotti Municipal Infant-toddler Centre



Another original trait in Reggio Emilia's educational project has been to consider the **aesthetic dimension** a fundamental element for the formation of individuals. Beauty is intrinsic to our species, and human beings have always desired beauty. Aesthetics lets us discover an extra sense in our daily work: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste – and aesthetics, a sort of sixth sense allowing us to win the battle against boredom, conformity and habit.

The aesthetic dimension is first and foremost a process of empathy, that creates a relation between us and things, and between things themselves, *“it is like a subtle thread, an aspiration to quality, an attitude of attention and care related to what we are doing, it is knowing how to wonder and marvel, it is the opposite of indifference, of a lack of participation and feeling”*.
Vea Vecchi ²

We have become increasingly aware that sensory perception, pleasure, and seduction can become activators of learning, stimulating the creation of connections between different areas of knowledge. The intensity and the quality of relations arising from this approach help children listen with greater sensitivity and participation, and perhaps also help adults to gaze, glimpse, and grasp fragments of what it is children do to elaborate knowledge.

The entrance, or better the eruption, of the atelier and atelierista also produced a new encounter between pedagogy and art.

It is important to understand that the suggestions and evocations artists and their works offer us are important not so much on a formal level, but rather in relation to the concepts and new kinds of relations with the world made manifest by products of the arts.

Art's research is not into marks, gesture, words and things that illustrate reality, its nutrients are symbols, allusions and simple clues; this is why it is always open to the possible, open – fundamentally – to ambiguity, and why it expresses the idea of a constant going beyond. This character makes it particularly close to our way in Reggio Emilia of seeing the world of children and education.

Ateliers must always maintain a contagious character, impertinent and generous. We like to speak of a **diffused atelier**: in the same way as atelieristas are not confined within the physical space of the ateliers, atelier culture has also expanded out until there is a contagion through the whole school, with all its indoor and outdoor spaces. Contagion that over the years has led to creating new spaces, such as the mini-ateliers, small environments in or close to classrooms where we can work in small groups, and make different languages visible and practicable every day; contagion that in the case of the Balducci Preschool, for example, has made it possible to conceive of participatory projects on the school garden, like the project completed with the creation of a maze or *labirinto*, together with our Australian friends in REAIE.³





Loris Malaguzzi said the atelierista is a “figure to be continuously reinvented”, and he was right. As part of this continuous regeneration, ateliers must also consider ways of keeping dialogue alive with teachers present in the school, a dialogue that needs time, and a willingness for reciprocal listening. One of the most effective strategies, from this point of view, is **identifying subjects for deeper exploration and research**. Having a subject helps us to think and work in a group, helps us have shared objectives where effort and pleasure can go together.

Testifying to this I would like to offer interpretations of a string quartet, a project that was realised in the Balducci Preschool with children aged 5 and 6 years old.

We chose string quartets as a subject for investigation because of their musical, human and aesthetic characteristics: a string quartet is an expression of making music together and a metaphor for education; it is a group of people collaborating together to create and communicate something special to other people; a string quartet offers fertile terrain for exploring techniques and languages more deeply, both individually, and in small or large groups.

The encounter with live music at school, and with real live musicians, was one of the elements of quality that contributed to the creation of increasingly elaborate and complex graphic interpretations [in mark-

making/drawing] uniting different levels of representation, as in this drawing by Sofia, in which a lateral or side view is present, and there is an effort to reproduce the postures of musicians playing while seated, their bodies adapting to chairs but also embracing the various sizes of their string instruments (violin, viola, and cello). The music stands in front of the musicians with scores for reading music do not impede the sound from passing between one person and another, so that the communicative aspect of making music emerges, both for those playing:

Tommaso:

Musicians can understand the words of music because when they play, they speak.

And for those listening:

Chiara:

If we listen to the same music, we think different things.

The other challenge was clay, a material very much ‘at home’ in our school. The idea of trying to create a clay quartet of musicians tested us all, children and adults. Instruments and musicians, new postures, proportions and balances needed re-thinking constantly, precisely because clay supports research and possibilities that are found less commonly in other materials. Obviously we also liked the idea of offering children a chance to go from a 2-dimensional language [drawing] to a 3-dimensional language [clay].



This large clay string quartet was donated to the Theatres of Reggio Emilia as a gesture of friendship, to thank them for the many opportunities they have offered us in recent years. During the Quartet Festival, the Balducci Preschool gathered in the Hall of Mirrors in the Teatro Valli, and at the end of the concert we gave our precious gift.

The atelierista then, has the task and the role of designing, together with teachers, highly evocative and creative contexts where areas of languages and knowledges can start to resonate together. Contexts capable of giving ethical and aesthetic support to the children's research, contexts that try to valorise and gain from their attitudes, and transform the impacts of the new into an enrichment for all: enrichment for the children, and a daily enrichment for teachers and atelieristas, we researchers, together with the children.

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Loris Malaguzzi interviewed by Lella Gandini, *History, Ideas, and Basic Principles: An interview with Loris Malaguzzi*, in Edwards C., Gandini L. and Forman G. (eds.), *The Hundred Languages of Children*. Praeger – ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara, CA, 2012, p. 49.
- ² From a talk on the relation between aesthetics and learning by Veà Vecchi at a conference some years ago held at the Achille Peri Music Conservatory in Reggio Emilia.
- ³ Further information on the project is available in; The Labyrinth – a participatory project *The Challenge* Volume 23, No.1, April 2019.