

CONTESTING EARLY CHILDHOOD



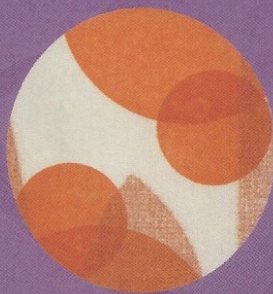
ROUTLEDGE



Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia

Exploring the role and potential of
ateliers in early childhood education

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Aesthetics/Poetics

It would be truly naïve to imagine that the mere presence of an atelierista might constitute an important change in learning if the atelier culture and the pedagogical culture do not reciprocally 'listen' to each other or are not both of quality. To introduce an atelier into a school means that materials available for children's use will most probably increase in number, that techniques and the formal qualities of final products will improve. Above all, however, it is an approach, the relation *with* things that must be activated through certain processes where the aesthetic dimension is a significant, fundamental presence.

To my mind an indispensable premise for ideas about the atelier is a reflection on the role of *aesthetic dimensions* in learning and education in general – and a topic deserving of deeper evaluation and understanding. The topic is a difficult one but must at least be mentioned, for among Reggio pedagogy's most original features is an acceptance of aesthetics as one of the important dimensions in the life of our species and, therefore, also in education and in learning. While in Reggio schools the role of an aesthetic dimension can be felt immediately, the opposite is usually true and the world of education generally keeps a distance from the subject. I do not think a true understanding of Reggio pedagogy is possible without due consideration of this issue; an issue which can be approached from various points of view and studied in different ways. For my part, I will discuss it mainly with a view to giving far more attention to the role of atelier and atelierista in places of education and in learning.

Undoubtedly it is difficult to say simply and clearly what is meant by an *aesthetic dimension*. Perhaps first and foremost it is a process of empathy relating the Self to things and things to each other. It is like a slim thread or aspiration to quality that makes us choose one word over another, the same for a colour or shade, a certain piece of music, a mathematical formula or the taste of a food. It is an attitude of care and attention for the things we do, a desire for meaning; it is curiosity and wonder; it is the opposite of indifference and carelessness, of conformity, of absence of participation and feeling.

The *aesthetic dimension* is certainly not only these things. On the level of education it deserves deep thought and I am confident its presence, together

with awareness of it, would raise the quality both of relations with the surrounding world and of learning processes in schools and in education. With the help of some stories to illustrate, I will try to argue how sensory perception, pleasure and the power to seduce – what Malaguzzi called the ‘aesthetic vibration’ – can become *activators of learning*; how they are able to support and nourish kinds of knowledge not based uniquely on information; and how, by avoiding simply definable categories, they can lead to the sensitive empathy and relation with things which creates connections.

I believe everyone senses on entering Reggio Emilia’s municipal schools how the presence of an atelier and atelierista gives them particularly well cared for physical environments, including striking products and documentation by children and teachers. However, not all visitors fully appreciate their positive educational value. Reflection is needed in order to understand to what extent Reggio Emilia’s recognition of aesthetics affects not simply such appearances, but a way of ‘doing’ school and consequently learning by children and adults and the pedagogical philosophy. This is the most difficult part of the story to tell and we can attempt to do it through examples and personal experience.

Aesthetics as meta-structure

It is as well to clarify from the beginning that for us educators in Reggio each discipline – or rather language – is made up of rationality, imagination, emotion and aesthetics. Cultures which rigidly separate these qualities and processes of thinking inevitably tend to subtract part of the processes from the various disciplines or languages. They recognize the rational part of an engineer, the imaginative part of an architect, the cognitive part of a mathematician, the expressive part of an artist and so on, in simple categories.

In this act of fragmentation and exclusion of some of the processes which, I repeat, belong to our species’ way of thinking and constitute a biological inheritance that is probably ancestral, cultural resources are effectively diminished and there is a consequent impoverishment in the overall quality of concepts and thinking.

Rationality without feeling and empathy, like imagination without cognition and rationality, build up partial, incomplete human knowledge.

Various philosophers and thinkers when considering aesthetics have located it in the border zone of tension and vicinity that exists between rational and imaginative, between cognitive and expressive. This tension and vicinity tends to bring a greater degree of completeness to thinking. Gregory Bateson defines aesthetic sense as ‘responsive to the *pattern which connects*’ (Bateson, 1979: 9) and adds, ‘*The pattern which connects is a meta-pattern*. It is a pattern of patterns’ (Bateson, 1979: 11), to be thought of ‘*primarily* (whatever that means) a dance of interacting parts’ (Bateson, 1979: 13). Some pages later he cites a discovery by Goethe, ‘a considerable botanist who had great ability in

recognizing the nontrivial (e.g. in recognizing the patterns that connect). He straightened out the vocabulary of the gross comparative anatomy of flowering plants' (Bateson, 1979: 13). Taking leaves as an example, Goethe argued that the terminology used to name their various parts was unsatisfactory, using words which are too abstract, too far removed from the life built up by related structures. Saying 'stem' has little meaning if it is not placed in a relationship of growth and life with other living elements.

'A stem is that which bears leaves.'

'A leaf is that which has a bud in its angle.'

'A stem is what was once a bud in that position.'

(Bateson, 1979: 17)

Bateson comments on these botanical formulas with a more general consideration, 'The shapes of animals and plants are transforms of messages' (Bateson, 1979: 18).

I, too, will attempt to use the plant world to support my thesis. Leaves appear to be a favourite subject for school work for various justified reasons. But too often and too quickly the leaves become leaf corpses far removed from the 'pulse of life' which ought not to be lost during the course of investigation, whether in drawing, natural sciences or other.

Drawing close to a leaf and considering it to be a living organism generates a sense of empathy that keeps the level of interest high in children (and adults) for sustained periods of time. It gives the eyes lenses of 'solidarity', which in the end often give direction to ways of seeing and thinking, modifying processes of understanding of the leaf in question and simultaneously the quality of understanding of the entire plant world (see Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3).

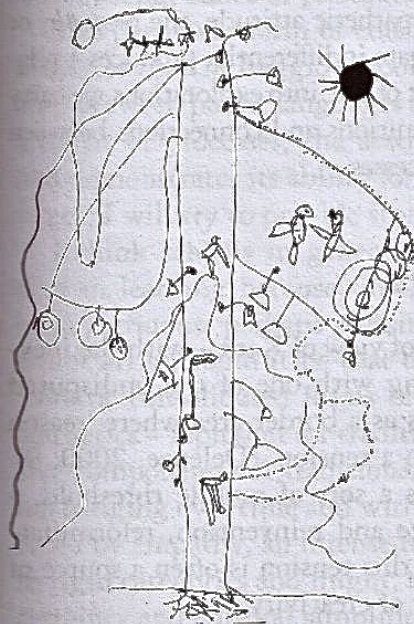


Figure 2.1 Drawing of a tree. 'I think trees are alive because they make apples, they make leaves, they make wind.' Marco, aged 4 years, scuola comunale dell'infanzia Diana



Figure 2.2 Clay trees with roots. 'The roots are very, very important because they are the tree's brain.' Giuseppe and Giulia, aged 5–6 years, *scuola comunale dell'infanzia Diana*

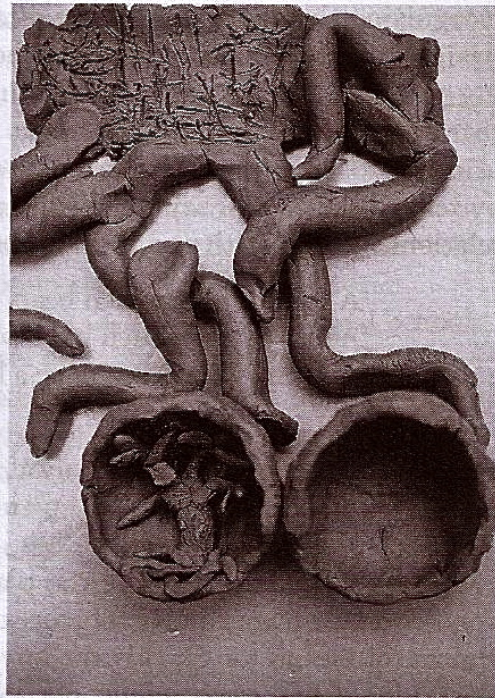


Figure 2.3 An open seed in a tree. 'The seed already knows how it has to become.' Vittorio, aged 5 years 6 months, *scuola comunale dell'infanzia Diana* (author's comment: a small tree foetus with the DNA already written inside it)

As I said earlier, it is not simple to demonstrate these claims. In final products those like myself with a background in the arts and possessing a knowledge of visual languages can pick up on – in drawings, sculptures, verbal language – signs of a relationship between artist and leaf which is culturally and emotionally complex. As far as formal qualities of final products are concerned, this complex approach confers on drawings and other forms of representation stemming from different techniques and materials a particular kind of sensibility and originality, which would rarely be found otherwise. An empathetic attitude, the *sympathy* or *antipathy* towards something we do not investigate indifferently, produces a relationship with what brings us to introduce a 'beat of life' into explorations we carry out. This 'beat of life' is what often solicits intuitions and connections between disparate elements to generate new creative processes.

Aesthetics as activator for learning

I would also like to mention briefly the point of view of Kant – with the inevitable impertinent superficiality when dealing with one of the undisputed prodigies of philosophy – who sees aesthetics as a border area where 'reason and imagination do not concur except within a tension' (Deleuze, 2000: 9). Kant and other writers speak of thinking as a sort of mobile threshold, a continuous back and forth between challenge and reinvention, reformulating faculty structures and domains, and how this tension is often a source of renewed paradigms and, therefore, a producer of creativity.

If we believe these claims – which naturally require evaluation by people with other competencies – we can establish a first basic connection; *if aesthetics fosters sensibility and the ability for connecting things far removed from each other, and if learning takes place through new connections between disparate elements, then aesthetics can be considered an important activator for learning.* If all of these things are even only partially true, it is difficult to understand why the aesthetic dimension is usually so distant from the world of school, so extraneous to formative experience for future teachers and pedagogistas.

Earlier I said it would be naïve indeed to think the presence of an atelier and atelierista is sufficient to guarantee the aesthetic dimension becoming an activator of learning. Continuous dialogue is needed between an informed atelier and pedagogy that is both sensible to ‘poetic languages’ and aware that these are often characterized by a different way of seeing, more profound, anticipating the future, in order to construct innovative spaces together of great interest for education and learning.

Because I refer often to ‘languages’ and ‘poetic languages’, I should make it clear at this early stage what I am referring to. In Reggio pedagogy, a choice has been made to extend the term language beyond the verbal and consider *languages* as the different ways used by human beings to express themselves; visual language, mathematical language, scientific language, etc. In a conversation on the relationship between pedagogy and atelier, Claudia Giudici, pedagogista, puts it like this, ‘When we speak of languages we refer to the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems; languages, therefore, are the many fonts or geneses of knowledge’. *Poetic languages* are forms of expression strongly characterized by expressive or aesthetic aspects such as music, song, dance or photography.

The particular form of educational observation and the documentation of processes used in Reggio schools for some time, testifies to the fertile relationship between poetic languages and pedagogy. During this documentation and analysis of processes, the aesthetic dimension *expresses* its powerful energy, and demonstrates its ability for developing new connections. In the following pages, I will try to provide stories that make this clearer.

I think schools in general do not take account of the aesthetic dimension in learning because, in the vast majority of cases, they consider it to be superfluous; perhaps pleasing but neither necessary nor indispensable. A doubt arises: could it be that the freer approach to problems and irreverence towards consolidated forms of knowledge – typical of those working with aesthetics – represent for traditional culture and education potentially subversive components? A traditional education is often based on rigid paradigms, unchanging over time and with no doubts or uncertainties. An aesthetic sense is fed by empathy, an intense relationship with things; it does not put things in rigid categories and might, therefore, constitute a problem where excessive certainty and cultural simplification is concerned.

Beauty as an aspiration and right of the species

Perhaps an important point to agree is that the pursuit of beauty and loveliness is part of our species in a deep, natural way and constitutes an important element in our humanity; a primary need. A rapid, superficial glance at the history of mankind is sufficient to find, in each age and culture, in objects that have come down to us, a constant presence of care taken with form and attention towards an aesthetic dimension. Gestures of care, research into the quality of form and beauty are testified to in objects which are not only great works of art but ornaments for the body and simple objects for everyday use. This form of inspiration can be found in all peoples and cultures, past and present: to aesthetisize, understood and experienced as a filter for interpreting the world, an ethical attitude, a way of thinking which requires care, grace, attention, subtlety and humour, a mental approach going beyond the simple appearance of things to bring out unexpected aspects and qualities. This aspiration to beauty and loveliness is too often demeaned by the dominant current culture that underestimates the significant psychological and social repercussions of doing so.

It is neither comfortable nor simple to speak of beauty and aesthetics in a world afflicted by injustice, poverty, repression and cruelty. Beauty and aesthetics may seem ideas so ephemeral and far removed from our everyday lives that we feel almost ashamed to speak of them. At the same time we can sense how they counter apparent fragility with an extraordinary strength and resilience that derives from this intrinsic fragility itself.

I would like to quote the ideas of two different authors, which reflect the most dramatic aspects of this contradiction. The first from George Steiner is terrifyingly true and distressing, 'Fascism and the Apocalypse of Auschwitz did not arise in a desert, but at the centre of high culture in Europe. Only 200 metres separate Goethe's garden and the gates of Buchenwald' (Steiner, 2006: 43). The other is by Andrea Branzi who writes, 'The question of aesthetics is *the* serious political issue of the future; in the sense that either this system will prove capable of less ugliness, or it is destined towards social collapse and political refusal' (Branzi, 1997: 25).

Like many others I personally believe that beauty and aesthetics are generative resources for women and men and that to propose them as inalienable and fundamental rights would greatly benefit all humanity.

Poetics

In an informal meeting in a municipal school during one of his most recent visits to Reggio, scholar Jerome Bruner spoke of how in his lessons he prefers to substitute the word 'Poetics' for 'Aesthetics'. The statement struck me

greatly, not simply because they are the words of a great *maestro* like Bruner, but because it also made me feel the word 'poetics' as less abstract, less lofty-sounding, almost more humanly tender.

Aristotle's Poetics goes beyond the specific confines of the particular poetic production he is discussing (theatrical representation) and his philosophical reflections assume meanings that can be extended to all human communication in which poetic qualities are expressed. The word 'poetics' becomes extended to include all the languages of the arts, structures of knowledge and underlying processes. 'Aesthetics' and 'Poetics' are different terms for describing concepts and processes that are very close to each other. In simplified terms, we could say that 'Aesthetics' is a system of values and 'Poetics' is a project of values of a more subjective nature in which the task of a poet is not to say what has taken place but what might take place (Aristotle, 2007: 3) and where creativity and rigour flow together. Creative thinking develops when it knowingly searches for 'how plots must be composed for the poem to come out well' (Aristotle, 2007: 19).

In what ways have the aesthetic dimension and poetics contributed to identity in the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia? Through which channels have they been demonstrated to be most incisive? How has the presence of a poetic approach extended traditional pedagogy with certain values? Is there a risk of superficial aestheticism, an aesthetic facade, a process that some people, in particular pedagogues, accuse us of from time to time? These are some of the questions to which I will try and bring my point of view in various chapters of the book.

An aesthetic sense

It is as well to recall once again that an *aesthetic sense*, precisely because it is an integral part of the species, easily spills into different fields of knowledge and runs across the various disciplines. It is not uniquely connected with art but becomes a 'way of researching, a key for interpretation, a place of experience'. When mathematicians admit that often, from among various hypotheses, they choose the one which presents the most elegant and beautiful formula they are effectively confirming this attitude. Here are some more examples.

Primo Levi, chemist and writer, defined the structure of a material (*Allosan*) as 'graceful' and commented, 'It calls to mind something solid, something properly connected', adding 'to say lovely (*bello*) is to say desirable' (Levi, 1994: 182). Paul Dirac, a founder of quantum mechanics, said that 'a law of physics must possess mathematical beauty' (in Atiyah, 2007: 47). Hermann Weyl, another mathematician, has written, 'I think certain qualities intrinsic to mathematics make this subject closer to the creative arts than to other experimental disciplines' (in Atiyah, 2007: 47).

I think the best way to explain what mathematicians mean by the concept of beauty is through comparing maths and architecture. Architecture draws

many of its qualities from its overall visual impact, from the artistic nature of its design, from the engineering that underpins its structure and the sophisticated care for detail in decoration. Various experts work concurrently on different parts of a construction that ends up by being permeated with a constant tension between aesthetics and functionality. Mathematics can be seen in the same light; an abstract building, whose elegant structure expresses an overall project of extreme beauty where the refinement of detail can be admired in its intricate argumentation and whose solidity is constantly reinforced by rigorous technique and the intrinsic usefulness of its innumerable applications. In both maths and architecture it is possible to list qualities the sum of which create beauty: elegance, precision, profundity. In the end however, the aesthetics of maths begins to exist only when it finally becomes visible to our eyes.

(Atiyah, 2007: 47).

There are similar examples in all professions and disciplines. At the same time, however, it should be recognized that, as for all cultural activities, an aesthetic sense has to be supported and defended with constancy.

When, at the end of the 1960s, Loris Malaguzzi chose to introduce in every municipal school an atelier organized by a person with a background in the arts, his decision was and is more revolutionary than may at first appear, for it has brought a new way of seeing into schools and into the processes of learning compared with customary views and pedagogical tradition. What we are talking about is a different vision of problems.

Without diminishing their value, we need to get beyond the materials and techniques introduced into schools by the atelier, even though they are extremely important for the processes they promote and their acquisition of competencies. We must go beyond materials and techniques to stop and look at processes of empathy and intense relations with things which the atelier promotes, to think how atelieristas are capable of proposing themselves as guarantors of the fact that an expressive, emotional part as well as a rational, cognitive part will always be present in every discipline, or language.

In Reggio's experience of ateliers and work with visual languages – by nature sensitive and close to the other poetic languages – the *aesthetic dimension* has found significant, tangible expression through eyes, ears and hands that are capable of simultaneously constructing and feeling emotion.

Suggestions from art

The atelier takes many suggestions from the arts, both past and contemporary. It does not stop so much to look at products as to catch the suggestions that artists, with their sensitive antennae, give us through their works of art. I will give examples for a better understanding:

- the quality and transformation of light during the day (this is particularly evident in Monet's *The Water Lilies*)
- signs (drawn or painted) as writing, as narrative
- how one subject never presents itself through a single facet but through multiple points of view, not as a total of these but with a complex identity
- how colour sings and expresses itself through various hues to reach the point of expressing chromatic uniqueness, as in the works of Klein
- materials perceived as chromatic substance as in Burri's works
- body art where the physicality becomes gesture, rhythm, total participation
- video art, where time and movement are an integral part of the work
- ambience music where the traditional contrast between sound and noise is lost and through sensitive listening everyday life becomes music
- Luigi Ghirri's photography in which form and concept are abstract and colour becomes chromatic music
- concept art in which metaphor becomes a story
- and other examples could be added.

I could go on at length because there are truly many, many *eyes, ears, gestures, emotions, perceptions* and forms of protest offered generously, sometimes *angrily*, by art and artists.

It is important to understand that the suggestions are not so much on a purely formal level. Rather, they materialize into equally numerous new concepts and new types of relations with the world; which is why references to the world of art and its values should above all be re-experienced and reinterpreted in teachers' ways of working and in children's imaginations. These processes of exchange, vicinity and kinship with the world of art have given rise to ways of working and structures for educational practice, and generated a culture and approach to things which quickly and visibly diffuse throughout schools: to the environment, classroom proposals, processes and final products.

In an educational project, listening is a difficult but indispensable practice that must be learned. Aesthetic tension, with its empathy, searching for relations and 'connecting structures', together with its grace, humour, provocations and non-determinism, supports the process of listening.

Aesthetics/ethics

No-one denies the risk of a superficial aesthetic attitude, which could cover up fragile or poor contents. For in today's society a powerful process of standardization is being acted out, based on dominant cultural models transmitted through mass media and in which beauty is very often devalued, exchanged and sold off in its most futile, superfluous and luxurious forms. This shameful devaluation certainly cannot be attributed to the nature of the aesthetic dimension; it is the

fruit of a misunderstanding, or worse, of a betrayal. In our understanding of the word, aesthetics is a promoter of relationships, connections, sensibility, liberty and expressiveness, and its closeness to ethics appears natural.

In educational terms, I would speak of a need for an inseparable union; the surest of unions for keeping all forms of violence and oppression at a distance, making aesthetic sensibility one of the strongest barriers to physical and cultural violence. Since aesthetic experience is also principally the experience of freedom, it is no coincidence that avant-garde aesthetic research has always been and continues to be greeted by hostility in all dictatorships.

Aesthetics/epistemology

Drawing to the conclusion of these brief reflections, I chanced to pick up a copy of the talk given by Professor Mauro Ceruti in Reggio Emilia. Ceruti, Professor of Philosophy of Science at the University of Bergamo, chaired the commission that prepared the *Indicazioni per il curricolo per la scuola dell'infanzia e per il primo ciclo d'istruzione* (*Guidelines for curriculum in preschools and the primary cycle of education*), circulated in 2007 by the Italian Ministry for Education and approved for use in nursery and primary schools. I must say that reading his words about the guidelines could not have made me happier. Because as well as his intelligent thoughts on schools as places of research, in the last few pages (in felicitously synthetic thinking) Ceruti deals with the topic of art as 'deeply epistemological and pedagogical' and how art must not be 'confined to a museum framework, otherwise its aesthetic – and, therefore, epistemological – potential disappears, because the real danger is that of museumizing art'. Soon after he states again, 'epistemology and aesthetics are synonymous'. Why is this? Perhaps because, 'we have even lost the meaning of the word aesthetic. In our everyday experience and I think in the activity of criticism, when we transformed it into an academic discipline. Aesthetics means caring for our sensibility towards relations' (Ceruti, 2007).

I found the same aesthetics–epistemology word pair in a recently published book on synthetic morphogenesis ('The generation of simulated forms starting from algorithms and biogenetics and the generation of artificial living forms starting from recombinations of genetic information', Berardi Bifo and Sarti, 2008: cover) in which nothing can be rigorously anticipated:

[...] What we are interested in is the point where aesthetics and epistemology meet. For this reason we will look into the magnifying glass given to us by artists. [...] We must start from sensibility, from physical and conceptual perceptions, and also from the sensation of unease the intimate interweaving of things sometimes provokes in the epidemic tissue of subjectivity.

When we speak of aesthetics we speak of our bodies. From this point of view we can have a better understanding of what is meant by art. The work of art is to create antennae. Antennae which perceive all that is intolerable, discomforting, hateful and repugnant in the universe that we ourselves have created. Antennae capable of harmonizing us with the happy constellations of existence, showing us technical and epistemological paths out of the darkness, for freeing us from oppression, for dissolving violence.

In this sense our book is a book of aesthetics. But at the same time it is a book of epistemology.

(Berardi Bifo and Sarti, 2008: 8)

The authors add, 'Epistemology is the science that studies the phenomena of our mental attitudes, our attitudes towards knowledge...' (Berardi Bifo and Sarti, 2008: 9)

I cannot but feel enthusiasm for this marriage of epistemology and aesthetics referred to by people from different disciplines, and bringing aesthetic experience back to an experience of life and relations, removing it from perhaps too solemn an area and returning it to the everyday processes which help us to sense how *things dance together with one another*. My plea is to listen carefully to the many appeals which have been made about how not reflecting on the tie between epistemology and aesthetics, how not considering them synonymous, deprives us of a deeper understanding of things, 'I hold to the presupposition that our loss of the sense of aesthetic unity was, quite simply, an epistemological mistake' (Bateson, 1979: 19).