Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange

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Material Choreographies: Fabric As a Living Language of Exchange

by Sylvia Kind, Cristina D. Vintimilla, and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw

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Sitting on her knees beneath a tent-like fabric structure, Widad encloses herself in the sheets of white translucent fabric. Nika reaches out and fingers the fabric hanging near her, twisting the material like a lingering question and then, noticing Widad beneath, playfully pokes and tugs at her through the fabric. Her hands seem to question: Who are you? How real are you? If I can only see parts of you, are you still there? A game of exposing and enclosing emerges as the fabric hides and reveals. Nika, in her glances and movements, seems to wonder: What’s it like under there? Drawing the curtain-like line of fabric between them and draping it over and around her, Nika settles herself beside Widad. The fabric acts like a boundary line—a line between you and me, self and other, yet a line that is porous—revealing, inviting, and activating dialogue. These children do not know each other well, and the fabric mediates their encounter. It draws them together in languages of touch, gesture, and fabricated wonderings.

A few years ago, we introduced fabric as an exploratory material into the Children’s Center and, provoked by the iridescent and translucent quality of this fabric and this initial encounter between two children, spent significant time wondering about the particular characteristics of fabric that draw us together, reveal, hide, and activate improvisational dialogues. At the Capilano University Children’s Center, we have been deeply inspired by Reggio Emilia pedagogical practices and have been experimenting with their ideas and provocations since the early 1990s, when the first Canadian delegation went to visit Reggio Emilia. While certainly finding inspiration in Reggio Emilia, our effort has also been to find out, in emergent and experimental ways, what is unique to us—what is singularly ours in ethical, aesthetic, pedagogical, and curricular senses on the west coast of Canada.

Because fabric intensely wrapped us, we decided to settle into these fabric curiosities and for 4 months, children and educators worked with Sylvia, the atelierista, in the fabric studio. We engaged in extended periods of experimentation with long lengths of translucent fabric, moving, composing, and decomposing together. These experimentations involved weekly meetings between educators and Sylvia and Cristina, the Center’s pedagogista, to discuss emerging processes and insights. We also projected video documentation from the fabric events during the studio experimentations to engage children. However, our goal in doing this was not to elicit children’s reflections. Rather, we hoped

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In essence, our intent, in the inquiry and in this article, was to explore the living language of fabric. By this, we mean embracing a view of languages that considers not just the representational potential of the material or process and the ways it might be manipulated and used, but also the rhythms, movements, and inclinations of language itself.

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to continue provoking bodied, enacted, and dynamic exchanges and lived meanings. In other words, we were interested in exploring the possibilities for fabric as an experimental and inventive language, paying careful attention and getting to know its qualities, movements, and provocations so that we could more effectively correspond with it (Ingold, 2013). To attend to fabric is to listen to its many variances and proposals. From the Latin attendere, the word attend suggests stretching toward. And so, we seek to be stretched ourselves and to enter into fabric’s tensions, its textile and textural invitations, nurturing an enlarged sensitivity and capacity to compose with and be affected by fabric. In essence, our intent, in the inquiry and in this article, was to explore the living language of fabric. By this, we mean embracing a view of languages that considers not just the representational potential of the material or process and the ways it might be manipulated and used, but also the rhythms, movements, and inclinations of language itself. We were interested in engaging, as Vea Vecchi (2010) proposes, in a search for the rich structures, vitalities, and inventive possibilities of language. We wanted to engage with perspectives that not only see languages as expressions of meaning and communication but also engage with language’s agency. In other words, we are interested in what language does—how it invents, how it creates realities, and how it proposes particular ways of being. To explore these perspectives, in this article, we consider ways of thinking about artistic languages and materials, discuss the composition of the studio and ways of creating spaces for investigation, and offer glimpses into children’s fabric experiments through short narrations.

Our pedagogical work is inspired by the Reggio Emilia pedagogical project, yet it is not a copy of it. As we continue our learning alongside Reggio Emilia’s pedagogies, we innovate as we constantly create something new. As the reader will notice, our interests converge and diverge from those of pedagogisti and educators in Reggio Emilia. For instance, we are not always interested in documenting children’s meanings, because our image of the child challenges the rational and objective thinker. Instead, in the case of the fabric explorations, we were interested in the lived movements that happen in between children and fabric. Inspired by feminist philosophers Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway’s work, our image of the child is based on the idea that subjects become-with rather than already exist as bounded individuals. In other words, subjects are always becoming in relation to others, rather than existing as an autonomous, self-made and independent subject.
Artistic Languages

We have found that it is quite typical in early childhood to think of artistic creation as an individual and interior process, as if an artwork’s evolution is a progression from idea to form. For instance, a child might have a nascent idea, something he or she wishes to explore or communicate, and the materials are used to give shape to this. This tends to frame artistic languages as a movement from interior to exterior, as if the origins of a work are situated in a child or maker’s mind, pre-conceived and human centered with ideas made visible through available materials. Certainly, materials such as fabric can be used to help children express and communicate their theories, thoughts, and ideas, yet they are not only symbolic representations of children’s ideas. We propose that materials such as fabric are artistic languages: processual, reciprocal, relational, bodied choreographies. Artistic languages are dialogic and relational encounters in which the life, qualities, and movements of the materials themselves shape the exchange. In this way, we think of artistic languages as a conversation or dance between material and maker, evoking particular ways of being together. As Loris Malaguzzi (1983/2013, translated from the original in Italian by Cristina) writes, 

Non-verbal languages have many “words,” sensations, thoughts, many desires and means to come to know, communicate and express. These languages are ways of being, of acting; they generate images and complex lexicons of metaphors and symbols. They organize practical and formal logics. (p. 9)

Malaguzzi (1996/2005) also writes that artistic languages “are interactive by nature, and are equipped with the exploratory and perceptual tools for organizing information and sensations and for seeking out exchange and reciprocity” (p. 30). This idea is closely related to Malaguzzi’s idea of the hundred languages of children as a metaphor and theory of knowledge based on an assumption of difference (Hoyuelos, 2013), that there are multiple forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Language is a way of knowing, not only a system of communication. If language, as Malaguzzi (1983/2013) suggests, creates worlds, those that are proliferate and diverse, then we would like to understand the nature, qualities, and doings of these languages. Recognizing language’s agency helps us notice how, in the multiple repetitions of children’s encounters—for example, with fabric—there is a reiteration again and again that performatively produces new ways of being. We also see these encounters as the conditions for participating in the creation of new discourses rather than the repetitions of fixed or stable meanings that exist inside a child’s mind. What is produced through these languages is more than children’s ideas made visible.

The Life of Materials [ST]

Intimately connected to this perspective on artistic languages is a particular way of thinking about materials. Rather than thinking about materials as static bits of matter waiting for children to produce something with them, we are interested in the liveliness of materials and how materials are active in shaping our engagements with them. This means getting to know materials by what they can do and by what happens when they are engaged in certain situations in particular ways, while paying attention to the webs of relation, movements, rhythms, and regions of intensity and to that which is activated and set in motion. We spent considerable time with these ideas during a 3-year project, Encounters with Materials in Early Childhood Education (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2017). Through an art-based collaborative inquiry process, which is similar to a/f/tography (Springgay, Irwin, Kind 2008) and other forms of post-foundational research, we explored what it means to think with materials by con-

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sidering how each material evokes particular intra-actions. In thinking about intra-actions, we rely on Lenz Taguchi (2009) and refer to the ways that materials and bodies act on and act with each other, which presents particular possibilities among, with, and between young children. We investigated how materials such as paper, blocks, clay, paint, and charcoal shape us as much as we shape them, how materials are joint participants in early childhood pedagogies, and what happens when we see materials as events instead of objects. We were interested, as Ingold (2013) proposes, in discerning the life and vibrancy of materials so that we might collaborate more fluidly and creatively with them.

We understand art-based collaborative inquiry processes intimately related to Manning and Massumi’s (2014) conceptualization of thinking-doing, in which thought is activated in and through creative practice. Rather than merely holding representations of ideas and theories, as if ideas are articulated and then applied to a material, materials provoke different ways of thinking as the child, artist, or maker engages and works with them (Eisner, 2002; Sullivan, 2005; Kind, 2010). As Cadwell (1997) describes, “Each material offers its own particular qualities” (p. 27). Yet these qualities are not just physical properties such as color, texture, density, and malleability, but also ways of being, knowing, moving, and responding. Language of the body, relational movements, collective rhythms, and emergent and adaptive processes take shape through the encounters and exchanges with materials. As Manning and Massumi (2014) describe, thought is formed in the creative act, not just as a precursor to it; thus, artists and makers think through materials with ideas and images taking shape in the doing. As Paola Cagliari (2015) states, this renders the hundred languages as a social and political theory and not only a pedagogical one. One of the fundamental aspects of this theory is that any process of communication is a process of knowledge. For instance, as Cagliari writes, “When the child communicates, throughout all the languages that humanity has created, the child is not only communicating a concept but is developing the concept that she is communicating” (p. 1). Thus, the child does not just use languages to represent the concept that she has in mind. Rather, through making, creating, designing, constructing, and transforming materials, the child is developing and elaborating the concept. Through the use of different media, Cagliari (2015) concludes, “the concept expands, it becomes more structured and it creates new relations” (p. 1).

Thus, as Vecchi (2010) proposes, we engage with “an intense relation with things” (p. 12) in an effort to think in and through a material, respond in rhythm and correspondence with it, and embrace a wider view of knowledge and languages so that our work with children in projects and inquiries might be enriched. We embrace a listening that includes listening to the materials themselves and to “how things dance together with one another” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 15).

The Fabric Studio

At the Capilano University Children’s Center, we have imagined the studio as a space of collective inquiry (Kind, 2018) that affords both children and educators time to dwell with materials, linger in artistic processes, and work together on particular ideas and propositions, creating a relational space of investigating and creating together—constructing, making, and composing understandings. The studio is not conceptualized as a container for creative acts and materials, but rather an emergent space itself inherently creative and creating and constantly becoming (Kind, 2018). In this way the studio, or atelier, is understood as a space of research (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Vecchi, 2010) and experimental interplay (Kind, 2018).

As a space in movement and always in process, a studio takes shape in response to our inquiries into the living language of fabric. During the summer months (May–August), we have the use of a large light-filled room where we engage in rather intense experimentations with particular materials in a space that allows us time to dwell and gives Sylvia the opportunity to work with many of the educators and children throughout the Center. There are usually 10–15 children of mixed ages (1-year to 5-years old) and 2 or 3 educators present at one time. Most of the children and educators spend time in the fabric studio on a regular basis, but there are others who only come occasionally. The focus of this article is a 4-month exploration of fabrics in the fabric studio by 2 1/2- to 5-year-old children, by educators, and by Sylvia.
Experimenting and thinking with fabric means becoming attuned to its qualities, characteristics, and ways of moving and encountering children and other materials, which in turn, necessitates creating conditions so that listening and extended experimentation become possible.

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Experimenting and thinking with fabric means becoming attuned to its qualities, characteristics, and ways of moving and encountering children and other materials, which in turn, necessitates creating conditions so that listening and extended experimentation become possible. In doing this, we resisted deciding ahead of time what ideas would be explored, what the fabric would be used for, what purposes it would serve, or what the children would do with it. Rather, we sought to enhance the life of fabric, play with its movements, and learn its ways as it interacts with bodies, beings, and things. Thus, in designing and preparing the studio space, listening to fabric became our first preoccupation. We draped long lengths of translucent fabric in hues of forest and moss greens, turquoise and sapphire blues, muted greys in the colors of the west-coast skies, and soft reds over wooden doweling hung from the ceiling. Other lengths were gathered in baskets and placed in loose bundles and configurations on the floor. Smaller scarf-like fragments in coral, salmon, and crimson were pinned to lines of twine suspended between the walls. A few large drawing easels, chalk pastels that echo the colors of the fabric, multiple large skeins of moss green wool, tall baskets of finely rolled paper tubes and delicate curved willow sticks, and small containers of clips and clothes pegs offered suggestions for interaction. If we think of materials as lively, active participants and things as always in relation, then meanings are not just in the fabric or in the children’s ideas, but are composed in the encounters and exchanges. And so we brought materials into play with each other, not making decisions based on what we thought children would do with them, but on how the materials spoke to each other, resonated in form, function, color, and texture, and offered metaphoric, poetic, and tangential connections so that children entered a studio space already alive with materials in interaction.

Before the children arrived, Sylvia and Judianne, an atelierista practicum student, lingered in the fabric studio, taking in the beauty, colors, lightness, propositions, and suggestions of the materials. We attended to how the fabric welcomed and reflected the streams of sunlight coming in through the windows, how it echoed the greens of the trees...
and the springtime blossoms in the forest and flowers outside, how it resonated with the moving air as it gently floated and swayed to the movements of bodies and lightly hovered over structures. We paused for a while under tent-like structures, placed a few densely knit pillows under billowing canopies of cloth, and arranged green felted pods in a circular line around a pool of lavender fabric on the floor. We noticed how the fabric played within the space, with the materials, with the light, the coming summer, and the lifting of the west coast winter’s darkness. We dwelt momentarily in the pleasures of fabric as it enlivened the studio and felt a sense of anticipation. As participants fully immersed in this project, we used video as our primary means of documenting, as it enables particular forms of noticing and draws us to attend to the movements, exchanges, and entanglements and to language as much more than the verbal (Kind & Argent, 2017).

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Fabric-Becoming

As children arrived in the fabric studio, there was an initial rush of movement and then a brief pause as socks and shoes were instinctively removed. Sylvia echoed this as well, as the fabric seemed to compel intimate connection. Bare feet and hands explored the fabric, hands touching gently, with fabric slowly rubbed between fingertips and toes buried deep in the fabric’s folds. Fabric followed shuffling feet, trailed behind small bodies, and enclosed children underneath its lucent sheen. Soon fabric and children ran, flew, danced, and flowed throughout the room. Ingold (2013) writes that to know a material is to learn its movements, and so we orient ourselves to the emerging flows and rhythms and the gestural dance of improvisation that is taking shape.

Bundling

Fabric and bodies became entangled as children immersed themselves in the vibrant folds of fabric. Rolling, covering, twisting, tying, knotting, and wrapping, the children were reconfigured into pulsating fabric-bundles. Mattius sat in the midst of colourful mounds of fabric on the floor, feet and legs covered in green, blue, and lavender. Emily
and Graeme wrapped their arms around him, gathered up swaths of fabric and poured it over his head. He welcomed this and sank deeper into the pools of color, rolling, winding, and wrapping himself up in its hospitable softness. Soon, his body was joined with the fabric. For a while, only his head, arms, and torso were visible as he swam and scooted across the floor, but soon he was completely immersed. Rolling, winding, and intentionally entangling himself, he was entwined with the fibers. The large bundle shifted and wiggled and then grew still. There was a momentary pause, then bursting out from the cocoon, he exploded from the bundle with a loud roar and casually leaned back into the pile, arms outstretched, in complete tranquility until Emily and Graeme joined him again. This was repeated numerous times in rhythm: covering, entangling, entwining, joining, pulsating, pausing, bursting, roaring, reclining, resting. The fabric seemed to extend to him vigour and vitality, the warmth of hospitality and momentary serenity.

**Knotting**

Ella picked up a skein of wool, its tail end trailing behind. She slowly unwound it, and as she walked throughout the studio, the strands left lines marking her walk. Owen intercepted the strands, his feet winding in the fibers and, still walking, created further entanglements. Hamish noticed this and, with another skein, began to respond to the windings and weavings by creating deliberate loops, twists, and knots. He did this slowly, as he was not yet fluent in the craft of knotting. He wove strands around each other, tugged at the ends, undid and reconfigured the arrangements, and wound some more until the strands held in knot-like configurations. Ella retrieved another ball of wool and, maneuvering through the network of fibers, unwound the ball as she walked under and around the lines of wool and the fabric structures, intentionally creating gatherings that reconfigured the hanging panels of fabric. Strands of wool traced the lines of the children’s movements and the studio became woven together in a tapestry of knottings and entanglements. Tara enacted this interweaving as she stepped into the maze, dove through the web of lines, jumped over the rows of strands, hopping, sliding, and entangling, and finally immersing herself in a tangle of wool.

**Knittings**

In response to children’s knottings and bundlings and as a way of wondering about the pleasures of entanglement, Sylvia gathered several skeins of thick green wool and began to knit a large body-sized cocoon. In fluid configurations, children gathered around, joined in,
and began to move with the strands. Children brought in other balls of wool to correspond with the knitting, and wool moved between knitting needles, hands, and children. Rachel held a ball of wool and its strands extended to Isabelle, who twisted and wound it while Graeme intercepted the tangled lines, looping some around his waist. Ava gathered a handful of green yarn and tucked it under her chin, a paper tube in her hand resonating with the knitting needles. Rachel connected another stray ball of wool, fingered the moving threads, and her weaving gestures echoed with Sylvia’s knitting. Wool wound around stools and feet, hands and bodies twisted and entangled in rhythm movements, children’s eyes, fingers, and bodies followed the intersecting and vibrating strands of green. Lines of traveling wool connect this group of children together and, in this temporary configuration, children become the knitting.

Gatherings

We were drawn together in tangles of connections, and the slippery nature of the fabric activated a particular quality of being together as bodies in the studio responded and echoed the fabric’s qualities (Kind & Argent, in press). The fabric took shape only temporarily as it cannot, on its own, hold a form. It covered a child and, for a moment, became an eggshell. It was laid over a chair and became a temporary shelter. For a while, it became wings and enacted a possibility, but once released from hands, it slipped to the ground and laid waiting in loose and colorful mounds. Fabric’s instability lends itself to temporary compositions and re-compositions, activating loose, flowing, and fluid-like gatherings.

Children brought a fascination with hockey into the studio, and as hockey met fabric, helmet-like head adornments, kneepads, and hockey uniforms were configured. Long lengths of fabric were wrapped around heads and bodies, paper tubes became hockey sticks, and a soft, small, yellow felted heart became a hockey puck. The textile softness lent a gentleness to the game as the fabric offered its qualities to the players and the game kept a fluid and supple quality, not conforming to the rule-bound, fast, and often violent game. In keeping with the qualities and entangling characteristics of the fabric, the players came together, intersected, merged, and flewed into other configurations, and the game slowly morphed into something else. The fabric embellishments unwound as the game progressed and fabric-helmets slipped and enclosed heads and faces, lending blue, green, and orange hues to the hockey player’s vision. Fabric trailed behind running children encircled the room, unwound, and then was taken up and recomposed in other fabricated inventions.

Choreographies

Emily moved through the studio with long strips of soft magenta fabric wrapped around her wrists. The fabric trailed behind, floated in the air, and twirled with her as she danced through hanging panels of delicately woven cloth. Johanna, an educator, with lengths of pink and crimson fabric held in her hands, moved in response. Swaying, twirling, turning, and leaping, she echoed Emily’s movements in an embodied wondering. Graeme followed behind with emerald green fabric tied around his waist. He watched them both closely and, with hands tucked behind his back, he echoed their rhythms and inventions. Tara moved closer and studied Johanna’s twirling. Sophia swayed along with Tara’s fabric scarves, and both began to join in and corresponded with the tempo and tone of this fabric dance. Hudson ran repeatedly between a line of hanging scarves, the fabric brushing against his face as he negotiated the hanging panels. Gabi, an educator, becoming attuned to the supple and flowing qualities of the fabric, began to join in. She amplified the movements of the fabric and Hudson’s hide and seek games, her hands rhythmically brushing along the hanging fabric scarves, peeking through and hiding herself, making herself momentarily visible and then invisible. The fabric invited a particular way of moving. Soft, trailing, translucent, and enveloping, it is sympathetic to the interactions of bodies and the gentle situations of
the moving air. Children and educators moved together and responded to the adaptable and fluid qualities of the fabric.

Malaguzzi (1983/2013), in referring to the collective work of adults and children, insists that “what remains fundamental is the circularity among the minds” (p. 10). Too often, communication is unidirectional: from the child to the adult or from the adult to the child. Often, we understand communication as aiming to impart knowledge from the adults to the children or even just trying to draw out from children their understandings. Here, bodies and fabric moved together, and meanings emerged through the material’s force and were shaped by the materials themselves. Meanings materialized in particular ways through these material encounters (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2017). The fabric connected children and educators, and they moved in rhythmic correspondence with each other and with the fabric. Communication moved in multiple directions with an improvisational cadence.

**Co-Fabrications [ST]**

In the touch of fabric on skin, something was proposed. In being with fabric, children and fabric created multiple processes of experimentation and investigation, and new languages and ways of being emerged from these happenings. We think of these becomings as co-fabrications when fabric and children are working together enacting a relational understanding of being, and both child and fabric are inventing languages and creating new possibilities for each other. We became curious about the we, or the collective, that is produced in and by these co-fabrications when, often, the I was wrapped up, cocooned, and tangled in the creations of a we that allowed children and fabric to perform other ways of being, other interferences, and other temporalities.
In these 4 months of experimentations, we have related to living languages as acts of invention that emerged in the interplay with the ways in which life is embodied in the encounters. Drawing from these fabric experimentations, we focused on children’s compositional strategies and approaches, ways of experiencing fabric, and the movements, responses, and propositions of the material.

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In these 4 months of experimentations, we have related to living languages as acts of invention that emerged in the interplay with the ways in which life is embodied in the encounters. Drawing from these fabric experimentations, we focused on children’s compositional strategies and approaches, ways of experiencing fabric, and the movements, responses, and propositions of the material. We have been interested in the everyday affects that emerge in the experimentations with the living language of fabric and how imaginatively the encounters with fabric become the occasion to move beyond the already familiar and give us many possibilities for new relational configurations. If, as Malaguzzi insists, “[E]ducat ing means increasing the number of possible opportunities” (Hoyuelos, 2013, p. 207), then it is essential that we become increasingly attuned to the many variances and rich intonations of multiple languages. In doing this, as van Manen (1997) writes, we become sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak. This means that an authentic speaker must be a true listener, able to attune to the deep tonalities of language that normally fall out of our accustomed range of hearing, able to listen to the way the things of the world speak to us (p. 111).

In this, we are interested in staying by the children’s side and attuning ourselves to children’s research pathways and material exchanges and to fabric’s own inclinations. We entered into composition with the fabric, not just using it for our purposes, but also searching for a way to attune ourselves, as children and teachers together, to fabric’s own rhythms, movements, and propositions. We entered into and facilitated a vibrant and living language of exchange. In this, we discovered a dynamic language of fabric and fiber, one of connectivity, becomings, and choreography of movements and relations. Every language, not only verbal language, has a grammar, syntax, and semantics of its own. Our hope was to catch the rhythm and intonation of this language, flow with fabric’s modulations and tempos, and move in correspondence with the liveliness of the material.
REFERENCES


Note

Visit the Encounters with Materials website (http://encounter-swthwithmaterials.com) for more information on the Encounters with Materials in Early Childhood Education project.

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