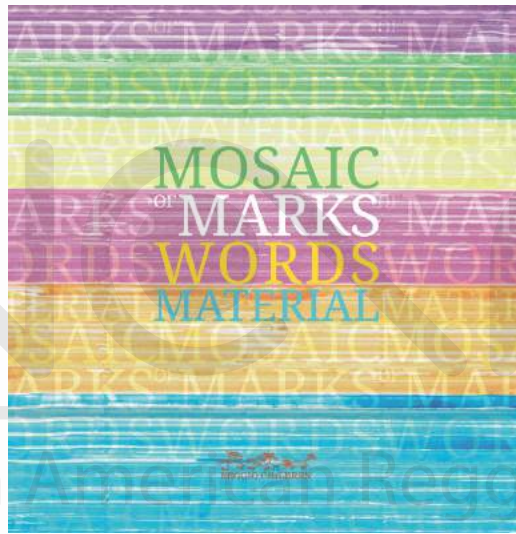


Book Review: *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*

by Christie Colunga



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The enigmatic title, *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*, pertains to an exhibit, a catalogue, and a current *atelier* in the Loris Malaguzzi Center. The purpose of all three is to “restore to drawing, materials, words, and the children all the cognitive and expressive richness they generate” (p. 15). To this end, the exhibition and its catalogue are an “unfinished story that seeks wider spaces for reflection and comparison of ideas” (p. 9). The *atelier* is an interactive part of the exhibit with invitations to explore the materials and reflect on the processes. The existence of an *atelier* within an exhibition created by the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia is noted as a common strategy for moving the discussion and reflection into public forums. The exhibit, the catalogue, and

the *atelier* are all possible starting points for discussion and reflection. All are a compelling case for the well-being of mark-making and drawing in early childhood programs.

The story of how I became interested in the catalogue *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* is born out of simple curiosity. Over the course of a four-day 2018 summer studio led by Gigi Yu and Jesús Oviedo, Phoenix area early childhood educators had opportunities to explore and revisit vine charcoal, charcoal pencils, Conté crayons, China Markers, oil pastels, wire, corrugated paper, vellum, bubble wrap, and a multitude of interesting surfaces or supports. Much like the protagonists in the catalogue, *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*, the summer studio participants found the appeal and potential of the various tools or instruments and supports. Gigi mentioned that *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* was influential in her research and organization of the summer studio. Upon hearing this, I had to have the book. Not only did I order one copy, I ordered 33 additional copies to share.

Once the catalogue arrived, this is what I found — *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* takes the reader exactly where Reggio Children intends, on a journey that is simple and complex, literal and poetic, contemporary and futuristic. Paola Cagliari and Claudia Giudici describe the project’s intentions as part of a renewal of the forms and methods of public communication related

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to the daily life of the early childhood services. This is where we learn of the exhibition's role as an educational resource. The introduction carefully connects the importance of drawing and telling stories with the intent to investigate "the extent to which drawing and materials are nourished by words, mental images, and the extent to which words and mental images are nourished by perceptions" (p. 16), and the intent "to promote vigilance to ensure the quality of the learning, the perceptions, and the imagination that manual instruments offer to children and adults is not lost or impoverished in the day-to-day life of the school" (p. 16). The stage has been set for the action or drama to unfold.

What follows is a visually stunning presentation of the children's engagement with three initial palettes: black, gray, and white pencils, large colored pencils, white, black, and colored water-based paint markers; oil pastels, fluorescent highlighters, colored markers with different tips (the authors note this is a highly chromatic palette); gold and silver-tipped markers of various thicknesses, and black and sanguine Conté crayons. The mark-making instruments are referred to as tools and the surfaces receiving the mark as a support. We are challenged to think of the existence of a variety and complexity of tools and supports.

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The intention of the nearly 100 pages with purposefully restricted commentary is to create for the reader the ability to **focus on the children, their images, and their words**. This is done very effectively with text limited to children's quotations and minimal explanations. This is a substantial portion of the catalogue and has been curated and organized into sections with provocative titles such as "Camouflage, Relaunches, and Creative accidents." The section entitled "Sensitive suggestions" gives powerful insight into how the materials speak to children, and how the children talk back to the material. I found myself making connections between the documented experiences of the children in the catalogue to experiences I have encountered either studying documentation of children's words and work with others, or as a protagonist in my own learning as I was using mark-making instruments and supports. There were also new thoughts and insights generated by experiences I have not yet had, which were shown to me by the documentation in the catalogue.

Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material concludes with photographs of the record of observations and documentation studied for both the exhibit and the catalogue, the graphic materials offered in the atelier that accompanied the exhibit, the exhibit's inauguration, an explanation of what happened in the exhibit-atelier, and interpretations and analysis made by Reggio educators, including Veà Vecchi. In this final section, I found articulate evidence to support the thesis that the exhibit, the catalogue, and the atelier make a compelling case for the well-being of graphic languages in early childhood programs. Extracted from the section entitled "The complex challenge of professional development," is this explanation from Daniela Lanzi and Annalisa Rabotti:

Drawing communicates with the inner and outer worlds of the children, strengthens their empathetic receptiveness and sensitivity to entering into a relationship with the subject drawn and evoked.

The theme of drawing and narration, around which the exhibition was conceived and constructed, had a number of cultural premises: drawing is like the “mind placed on a surface,” and in the reciprocity with symbolic-verbal narration, it finds a strong potential for building knowledge for associating emerging meanings between languages. Drawing communicates with the inner and outer worlds of the children, strengthens their empathetic receptiveness and sensitivity to entering into a relationship with the subject drawn and evoked. In this interaction, the graphic language is “naturally” complementary to the narrative dimension. (p. 146)

One of the many tensions after studying the work of the educators in Reggio Emilia is that of a decision point. The decision of what to do next. What can or should I do with this body of work? A personal goal I have is to incorporate the study of Reggio Children publications into our everyday work as college faculty and leaders of professional development. In this case, studying *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* prompted the creation of an experience of sharing interesting instruments and supports with two educators in a local early childhood program.

The early childhood education program at Paradise Valley Community College administers a professional development grant for our state agency, First Things First. As a part of this grant, my colleague Ana Stigsson and I lead weekly collaborative planning meetings in local early childhood programs. Last fall we began working with two new educators at the United Cerebral Palsy Early Learning Center. The teachers co-taught in the pre-kindergarten room. The program director cleverly arranged coverage for both teachers so that we could meet weekly or biweekly to study

documentation. We began with an invitation to the teachers to explore oil pastels, who in turn, offered the oil pastels to the children. We had a robust study of children’s use of the pastels and eagerly documented the children’s preference of pastels over crayons. While Ana and I were comfortable with oil pastels, pastels were new for both the teachers and the children. Oil pastel work evolved into work with watercolor crayons. And then mixed media of watercolor crayons and black Sharpie pen. We prided ourselves on the use of higher quality instruments and supports. We were comfortably challenging ourselves. However, there was that uncomfortable feeling that while this was indeed good work, there was and could be more. We gave copies of *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* to the teachers and the director to review. Fortunately, there was an enthusiastic embrace of trying out new palettes.

We started the new year with offering the children gorgeous metallic sharpies on black paper. Not small sheets of black paper, but long, expansive pieces that covered the long classroom tables. It was during these collaborative mark-making and drawing times that we uncovered children’s group use of space and how each child found a way to leave a mark.

One teacher found the Stabilo highlighters interesting. We ordered lots of them. We had a plentiful supply of bubble wrap and transparencies. The teachers experimented with placing the transparent supports on the window and the plexiglass easel outside. Our strong Arizona sunshine often made it difficult to see the highlighter marks on the supports taped to the window. The light table was brought out and children were excited to be able to see the color. Transparencies were referred to as “clear paper” that offered the

chance to “write on the table” without actually writing on the table.

We offered China Markers left over from the 2018 summer studio. The children found the China Markers fascinating. The waxy texture leaves a mark on almost any support. Teachers offered large expanses of cardboard on the floor with China Markers and highlighters. We were seeing the teachers offering the instruments alone and in combination, and varying the types, position, location, and size of the supports. As we moved through our work together, we noticed another strong shift. Unlike the beginning of the project, the ideas for the palettes were now coming from the teachers. Our role was to provide the instruments and supports, if needed, at the teacher’s invitation.

The collaborative planning meetings provided a forum for us to study the children’s approaches, initial explorations, and sophisticated responses. We were also becoming more sophisticated in our study of documentation and what we were learning about children and their mosaic of marks, words, and materials. The technique of blending, something that was discovered at the beginning of this study with the oil pastels, transcended all the instruments. As we studied the various representations children described for us, we found many connections to the children’s lived experiences and many recurring themes. As one teacher noted, “Children have a good memory for the things they like.” Perhaps so do adults, although we might have to work more intentionally to create the good memories.

Pieces that could be pulled out for discussion and challenges to others:

- Experimentation with richness
- What does the well-being of a language (material) mean?
- Power to generate narrative from drawing (*grafiche*)
- Exhibits/catalogues and the recurring theme making known the day-to-day life

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How might an experimentation with a rich normality of instruments and supports change our daily encounters with children, families, and each other? What is the status of mark-making and drawing materials in our program? What might a study of narratives generated by drawing (*grafiche*) reveal?

What are the possibilities of exhibits and catalogues, in not only our theoretical understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach, but our day-to-day life? What is the difference between imitation and inspiration? Where might this narrative take us if we write our own story of marks, words, and materials? Not arranged as a mosaic, but a different constellation of our experiences, both lived and desired.

REFERENCES

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