

# Peer Reviewed

## What Makes Something Beautiful?

By Sandy Johns and Jennifer Kemp



*Sandy Johns is the assistant director-Older Cluster at the Cyert Center for Early Education in Pittsburgh, PA, where she has worked since 1982. Johns has participated in two study tours to Reggio Emilia and made many visits to programs in dialogue with the Reggio approach in the United States. She has been an active member of the Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative and served as the professional development chair during "The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children" exhibit's 2015 visit to Pittsburgh. Since 2011, Johns has consulted for the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, working with local schools to find connections between Jewish values and the Reggio Emilia approach.*

*Jennifer Kemp is the assistant director at the Cyert Center for Early Education's newly opened Penn Avenue site. Kemp has over 15 years of experience working with young children and has worked at the Cyert Center since 2010. She has connected regularly with visiting educators from around the country, sharing her experience working with young children in a Reggio-influenced program. She has also embraced the opportunity to visit other similarly inspired schools, continually striving to learn more. Kemp presented project-inspired work at the 2012 Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference and recently participated in the 2015 NAREA Summer Conference in Pittsburgh, during which the Cyert Center served as a host school site.*

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### The Context for a Study on Beauty

The Cyert Center for Early Education is a year-round early care and education program at Carnegie Mellon University. The center has been inspired by the fundamental principles of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia since 1993 and continues to be involved in the serious study of the approach.

This story took place during the 2013-2014 school year with the 3- and 4-year-olds in the Preschool 1 classroom. The work was supported by Jennifer Kemp, educational coordinator; Bob Hiteshew and Nicole Smith, early childhood educators; Suzanne Grove and Barbara Moser, studio educators; and Sandy Johns, assistant director-Older Cluster.

The Cyert Center for Early Education serves approximately 120 children in six classrooms, ranging in age from infancy through kindergarten. Each classroom has one teacher who

is designated as the educational coordinator, offering leadership to the team members, referred to as early childhood educators, and responsible for the organizational systems for that room. The environment and organization of the school are designed to support a social constructivist style of working for both children and adults. The building has several shared spaces that are used by age groups on a rotating schedule, including a *piazza* with areas for dramatic play, movement, and building; a space for sensory explorations; and a studio. Each classroom also has its own mini-studio, allowing for easy access to a variety of age-appropriate materials on a daily basis.

One of the pillars that helps to sustain work at the school is the time set aside for daily educator meetings. Some of these meetings have representation from each of the age groups, such as the Dialogue Groups that meet once each month and provide a platform for



educators to share and discuss their work with one another. Each teaching team also participates in a one-hour weekly planning meeting that determines the trajectory of the curricular work for that classroom. In addition, each classroom facilitates a minimum of four annual parent meetings, during which educators and parents have the opportunity to reflect on the work of the children together, helping

to solidify the importance of the partnerships. The impact of these opportunities for soliciting multiple points of view strongly influences the direction of investigations and encourages meaningful, intellectual exchange between parents, educators, and children that can be seen throughout the following story.

### The Origins of the Study

In December, shortly before the winter break, several of the 3- and 4-year-old children in Pre-school 1 were busy drawing in their mini-studio. After one child asked for a piece of tape to connect two pieces of paper and create a larger canvas for her work, others echoed this request, and a crowd began to gather. As the morning progressed, Jennifer found herself constantly doling out small pieces of tape. A few days later, she shared the story at a team planning meeting, commenting on the children's excitement and wondering why they found the tape so appealing. Was it the ease with which it could attach things versus the effort required to use glue? Was it the novelty of the experience? Was it exciting because of its perception as an adult "tool" that was typically kept out of reach? It was decided that when the children returned to school in January, the teachers would add a roll of tape, glue sticks, and several different types of paper to the materials that were accessible to the children for independent use. This would allow for more autonomy and provide interesting fine motor challenges and could be an exciting surprise for the children to discover when they returned after winter break.

On that first day back to school in January, while the teachers conversed with parents, eager to compare notes about the time away, a small group of children worked at a table in the mini-studio, reconnecting after the long break. They noticed the new additions to the space, including the tape, and one child offered the



idea of using the tape to display their work. Delighting in this newfound freedom, the children tore off one piece of tape after another, hanging their drawings, and completely covering a nearby door, referring to their work as "beautiful stickers."

Joyfully beckoning others over to see this work, the children presented the educators with a dilemma. While their initial impulse was to react to what they viewed as a "tape-covered mess of papers" that the children had created, Jennifer realized that there was an intensity





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and purpose to the children's work that had to be supported. She quietly spoke to her two team members, sharing that she wanted to observe and document the children in order to have time to understand their intention. What was their underlying reason for hanging the work? Was this an exploration of materials, or was there a deeper intent behind this choice? Had the teachers clarified for themselves or for the children the possible ways that the tape could be used? While focusing on the effort to create an element of surprise, had the school's typical, systematic introduction to a new material been forgotten?

The children's intention became clearer as they began to pass out tickets to their "art gallery." The children and educators regularly visit the Carnegie Museum of Art, which is only blocks

away from the Cyert Center, as a resource for investigation and community connections, so the children were familiar with the idea of an art gallery, but until now, they had rarely used the word "art" in relationship to their own work at school. The fact that the children had taken the initiative to name this collection of drawings an art gallery showed a sense of the emotional investment they had in this experience and the empowerment it had awakened within them. There was much to consider in this moment, and although the classroom was amid a busy transition, Jennifer quickly wrote a few notes and captured a series of spontaneous images with the intention of revisiting and reflecting upon this at the weekly team planning meeting.

### Opportunities for Reflection and Dialogue on the Documentation

Team planning meetings afford educators an opportunity to offer documentation regarding the work of the children. The time is dedicated to reflecting on this work, and observations, questions, and the words of the children are shared to fully explore and consider connections. At this particular meeting, most of the hour was spent sharing the story of the children's response to the addition of the tape and discussing the possible next steps with Sandy Johns, Barbara Moser, and Suzanne Grove. The conversation focused on thinking about how to respond to the experience in a way that would support the children's endeavor while creating a respectful venue that would highlight their growing comfort with graphic materials.

Since the choice had been made to observe the creation of the children's art gallery without intervening, the educators allowed themselves the time to reflect together and gain a better understanding about the children's motivation. After much discussion, it was decided that the next step would be to have a meeting between Barbara and the

creators of the art gallery. Hoping to learn more through their conversation, Barbara, who had not been present in the classroom on the day the tape was introduced, began by revisiting with the children the series of images taken from the spontaneous experience. This is a common practice in the school; revisiting the prior work often begins each experience in an investigation. With an array of these images before them, Barbara asked the children to tell her about what had happened:

Henry: "We wanted a decoration. We want to see it [the mini-studio] be beautiful."

Sofia: "I want the other kids to see it, because I want them to think it's beautiful."

Aya: "I think the moms will be happy if they see it."

Sofia: "We can keep it up for all of time for a school decoration because we want the classroom to be beautiful."

Barbara: "Do you think we could write a message to the other children in Preschool 1 about the art?"



The desire to find a balance between supporting the children's aesthetic freedom while honoring the educator's understandings about the impact of aesthetics on the quality of an experience was constantly in the forefront.

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Henry: "Then the other children can help with it."

Barbara: "What could the message say?"

Sofia: "I love you. Can you help make the mini-studio beautiful?"

This conversation seemed to reveal an awareness of the aesthetic dimension in a way that was reminiscent of Veia Vecchi's (2010) words in *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia*. "It [the aesthetic dimension] 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" (p. 5). The children had expressed their desire to take responsibility for the beautification of their environment. Their intention to create something beautiful and enduring that they could care for in collaboration with the other children in the class was almost palpable. The educators wondered how to reconcile the children's desire to continue hanging their spontaneous drawings with the school's typical practice of creating carefully organized documentation panels to share work, while also considering the limited amount of space in the mini-studio.

Some of the questions that the educators generated echoed the thoughts of Margie Cooper (2009) in "Is Beauty a Way of Knowing?," particularly her concept of creating the "least restrictive environment" as opposed to allowing an "anything goes" chaotic space (p. 3). Veia Vecchi's (2009) views about the importance of care and attention and how each decision that educators make is intertwined with the learning process were also considered. The desire to find a balance between supporting the children's aesthetic freedom while honoring the educator's understandings about the impact of aesthetics on the quality of an experience was constantly in the forefront. Would it be conducive to thoughtful, deliberate explorations to enter a disorganized space? Having a well-cared-for space creates a striking and provocative atmosphere, but there is also an educational value that is much more difficult to articulate.



### A Proposal from the Teachers and the Children's Response

With all this in mind, the teaching team ultimately proposed that a classroom art book could be made to gather the spontaneous work made by the children for the children. This book would support the children's desire to create something beautiful without overwhelming the limited amount of available space in the mini-studio. The momentum for creating would continue uninterrupted while also allowing educators, parents, and children more time to consider the potential for developing a deep and collaborative understanding of "beauty."

The children could add their creations to the art book, housed in a binder within the mini-studio, along with their reflections about the work they had included and what about their work was beautiful to them. This idea was shared with Aya, Henry, Perrin, and Sofia, and after some discussion, they volunteered to help formulate a message to their peers. The next morning, they brought the letter to the circle as the children gathered for their daily meeting time.

Dear Friends,

We want you to make things for the art book. We want the pages to be filled by everyone, by all of us. And the classmates to become great artist display makers. All beautiful things can go in. We make it beautiful. Talk to the teacher about your art. It should be very beautiful.

We really love you,

Sofia, Perrin, Henry, and Aya

As the children worked to motivate their community of artists, the educators reflected on their enthusiasm. The teachers also discussed how this experience had helped them to realize that the aesthetic potential for the mini-studio had not been fully developed. In fact, a series of conversations and initiatives to elevate the functionality of this space and better meet the needs of both educators and children had already begun. The spontaneous creation of the art gallery opened new possibilities for consideration. In response to the provocation the children presented, it would be exciting to partner with them, as well as their families, to create a mini-studio that could fully promote the children's endeavors. Just as importantly, it would be a response that recognized the children's desire to make this space warm, welcoming, and beautiful.





## The Role of Participation of and Communication with Children and Families

The value of partnering with the children and their families is fundamental to the development of ongoing investigations and project work. For meaningful partnerships to develop and grow, there must be effective means for communication. Every day, documentation is shared via email to give parents a window into the work taking place within the classroom. This communication affords educators and parents a space to share insights and reflect together in a timely manner through more informal exchanges. Exchanging anecdotal stories at drop-off and pick-up times, trading informative emails and even quick phone calls to ask a question or celebrate a recent development—the constant exchange of information sets a strong foundation and the opportunity for further collaboration.

Furthermore, class parent meetings are held quarterly to sustain the intellectual partnerships formed between educators and parents. An upcoming meeting provided the perfect opportunity to contemplate the children's work and provide an avenue for further dialogue about this exploration. While the children were not physically present, their voices were well represented via a slideshow of images, accompanied by the dialogue transcribed from their conversations. Understanding that this meeting presented the first opportunity to exchange information as a group, the educators opened the meeting by recounting events from the very beginning. As the story unfolded and the photo of the tape-covered door was shown on the monitor, the parents laughed. Parents interjected, sharing experiences from home, including one about a chalk mural on the bedroom wall and another about a child's insistence that a bedspread in a store was an object of beauty, while the parent thought it was quite gaudy. As the teaching team went on to illustrate the progression of events and share their wonderings from the planning meeting, many parents were nodding in agreement and voiced relief that others were having similar differences of opinion with their children.

Throughout the discussion that followed, the parents continued to reflect upon this work as they contributed insights that their children had been sharing at home. The dialogue opened up doorways for deeper consideration for the perspectives shared by the children. Making a connection between the documented conversations and shared observations with their life at home was fundamental in solidifying a foundation for the continued work of the children.

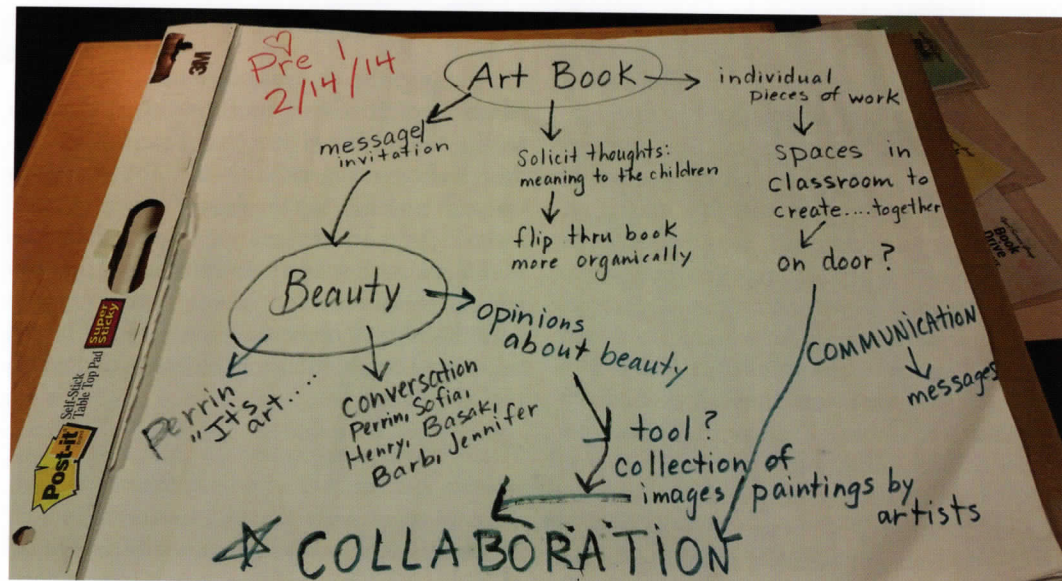
There was a clear sense of collaboration as parents and educators realized that while they were pleased with the children's feeling of ownership for the classroom, the possibilities of looking more closely at the children's concepts about beauty were even more intriguing. The question "What makes something beautiful?" afforded many different avenues for exploration. This could be a chance to reinforce the idea that multiple perspectives are accepted and encouraged, a value that contributes to the well-being of the classroom, as well as a milestone of the preschool years. Like Simona Bonilauri's perspective about creating an environment to support "variation and the possibility of choice" (Vecchi, 2010, p. 60), the teachers wanted to support the children in creating a space that they would find aesthetically pleasing.

Offering a provocation to further draw parents into the investigation with their children seemed like a logical next step. Each child decorated a collection bag that was distributed to his or her parent(s), and the group brainstormed possible approaches to talking about beauty at home that would encourage thoughtful gathering of "artifacts" that met their child's interpretation. As the bags were returned, the children shared the treasures at morning meeting, and as the collection grew, opportunities for conversation, dramatic play, counting and sorting were among the ideas envisioned.

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Meanwhile, the children's persistent enthusiasm for this work propelled the investigation forward. During planning time, the educators began to experiment with recording the meeting notes in a "webbing" style, visually mapping out potential connections between ideas extracted from the wealth of documentation detailing the children's thoughts, ideas, and

wonderings. While moving through this process, the teachers realized that the children seemed pleased with the art book, but they still had a strong desire to collaboratively produce something beautiful that could be more of a focal point in their mini-studio, and it was important to support this.

### Further Opportunities for the Children to Collaboratively Create Something Beautiful

At the Cyert Center, an overhead projector is present in every classroom, and this group of children had been experimenting with its affordances since their days in the infant room. They had recently been using it to scaffold fine motor development, tracing the projections onto easel paper. Might it be interesting to offer the provocation of using the overhead projector for creating a large, collaborative piece that could serve as this kind of focal point? The next day, the children arrived to discover that the overhead projector had been moved to a table in the center of the room and was accompanied by a collection of new materials. Perrin and Sofia responded to this provocation with delight and created a design using the translucent, geometric shapes. Their projections on the shadow screen attracted much attention



from those nearby, and the two children were eager to share their work, prompting others to offer their help. With educator support to negotiate turn taking, the tasks of tracing the projected shapes, painting them, and adding





small, colorful pieces of paper were offered as choices to the other members of the class. This process ebbed and flowed over the course of weeks, in concert with many other classroom endeavors, and seemed to create a sense of group purpose and shared experience. When every area of the design had been filled with color and the collage was hung in the mini-studio, a group of children and teachers gathered around it, complimenting one another on the work and declaring that it was "beautiful."



Throughout this time, beautiful artifacts from home began pouring in. The families were enthusiastic and engaged and arrived each morning with items and stories about conversations they had participated in at home. As the children and teachers took a closer look at these artifacts together, the children continued to offer their thoughts on the notion of beauty. What is beautiful? What is not beautiful? Through these conversations, things were determined to be beautiful based on a determination of aesthetics that included form, color, shape, and utility.

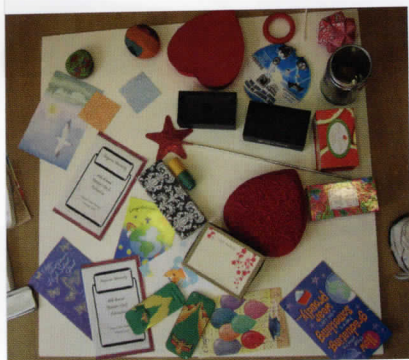
Nicholas: "I like that this opens [eyeglass case]. And that you can wash things with this [sponge] and that you can measure with this [ruler]."

Nicole: "Then, why is it beautiful to you?"

is beautiful because it has chalk on it. And this flower is beautiful because its petals are beautiful."

Sofia: "I like the watch because it has silver and black and can tell time."

These kinds of conversations seemed to flow easily as the children interacted with the artifacts from home, and it was apparent that they could articulate their opinions. The educators began to imagine that a series of collages, created using these treasures, could help represent the various emerging ideas about beauty. Wanting to honor the work that launched this investigation, the door where this work started was chosen to serve as the canvas where the children's developing understandings about beauty would be visible and encourage chil-



Nicholas: "Because it's black, and black and blue are my favorite colors. The ruler's numbers are black, too."

Nora: "I thought this trophy guy was beautiful because his hat was beautiful. I think this rock

dren, parents, and educators to wonder together. This door had been the "spark" that put into motion the ongoing work to beautify this space and was a powerful reminder of the children's voices. The educators introduced the idea of



creating a collaborative collage with the children, a work that would be mounted in the art gallery space, and the children responded with an eager anticipation and immediately began discussing the possibilities.

The next order of business was to find a new home for the original "gallery." The children's earlier conversation, from which the idea of the art book developed, afforded several viable ideas, including photographing the gallery. Nicole helped Aya, Perrin, Sofia, and Henry to take a photo and then taught them to use a photo editing program to manipulate the picture. Experimenting with the many options this program offered, the children used filters to play with color and contrast to alter the original photo. The choice to introduce the children to this computer technology was made because of its potential for evoking an emotional response while viewing the various colors and hues and the virtual transformation of the gallery. Would this process alter their perceptions of beauty?

The four children returned to the mini-studio to consider their creation together. How could they preserve the work that was currently displayed and make room for the new collages?

Aya: "Well, we were working together."

Sofia: (pointing to the top of the art gallery) "You could put it up there because we don't want our pictures to get all covered."

Aya: "We have to not knock down Henry's art."

Perrin: "Maybe if we take a picture, then take another picture, then change the color and print two pictures. We can show them to the other group, and we can hang them over there and make our mini-studio more beautiful."

Henry: "We can put them in the art book."

Sofia: (looking at the altered images) "Guys! Look at this one! Some is blue, and some is not. I want that one! It's blue and orange. My favorite colors."

Perrin: "I like that. It's so beautiful."

Henry: "The blue and red are my favorite colors."



Aya: "I feel happy because Sofia, Henry, Perrin, and Aya like it."

This process of altering images really interested the children, and at the next meeting time, they brought the printouts from the previous day to help illustrate this technique to their classmates. Everyone wanted to try it, so it was decided that small groups would meet to use the donated materials to create the additional collages, which would then be photographed, altered, and highlighted on a new panel for the mini-studio door. Perhaps working closely with these new materials would uncover a deeper understanding of the children's sense of beauty. Sifting through the many artifacts from home, the children could barely contain their excitement about selecting the items that spoke "beauty" to them, and this prompted a great deal of dialogue.

Aran: "There is soooooo much."

Bob: "So we have all of this stuff here. We have been talking a lot about beautiful stuff lately. Does anyone know how to tell if something is beautiful?"

Doga: "You know it because it is!"

Danny: "Because it is, and we like it."





Bob: "You like what, Danny? What is beautiful to you?"

Danny: "Colors are beautiful like red."

Aran: "Flowers are beautiful, too."

Danny: "Look, this circle thing is beautiful. I like these things."

Doga: "No. It's not. It is scary."

Danny: "It's not scary. This has cool things on it."

Doga: "No. I don't like it."

Bob: "Can scary things be beautiful things also?"

Danny: "No."

Bob: "Aran, what do you think? Can scary things be beautiful?"

Aran: "No, because they are super, super scary. See, this star is scary; it is not beautiful."

Danny: "But I like it; it's magical. Somebody loved it and brought it."

### The Children's Continued Investigations of Beauty

Many of the children's initial comments revolved around color and hue, and as the children investigated further, they uncovered the idea that what might be beautiful to one person could be unappealing, even scary, to another. Other small groups made interesting discoveries through their explorations and concurrent conversations. For example, Perrin approached Jennifer, rubbing together two seashells that she had found while sorting through the artifacts. "Listen!" she said. Tilting her head to better hear the sounds Perrin was producing, Jennifer confirmed that she could

hear soft sounds. Intrigued, Julian moved closer and commented, "It sounds beautiful." Aran and Julian started to explore the many sounds they could produce through various combinations of seashells.

Aran: (tapping two shells together) "It sounds like a clock."

Jennifer: "We have been talking a lot about beautiful things. Can sounds be beautiful?"

Perrin: "Yes. I like quiet music—**soft** music."

In response to Perrin's statement, Aran tapped two shells together. "See? It is quiet. It is music." He increased the rate and force with which he tapped until the noise he was producing was quite pronounced and loud. "Too loud!" Perrin covered her ears. Aran adjusted his tapping to quiet it again, watching Perrin carefully, as if curious about what level of sound Perrin found to be pleasing and when it became unpleasant or not "beautiful" to her ears.

It had become increasingly clear that the class was invested in the exploration of the idea of beauty as a multi-sensory concept. Gabe was quick to associate the idea of beauty with the scent of flowers. Alex found a scary object to be beautiful, even though he did not understand why. Aya initially did not perceive a champagne cork to be a beautiful thing, but after she considered the sound it made, she realized that she did indeed associate "happy" feelings with it and declared it was something she liked.

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—Sandy Johns and  
Jennifer Kemp







The materials in the collection bags provided many of the opportunities envisioned in the initial planning meeting. They were being used as manipulative materials for sorting and counting games, to symbolically represent objects in their pretend scenarios, to create collages and designs, and in many other ways. There were other avenues that were not predictable, such as trips to the botanical gardens that provided an exciting place to explore beautiful smells or the creation of “sound bottles” to capture beautiful sounds.







## Closing Thoughts

When attempting to answer a question as elusive as “What makes something beautiful?” we did not expect there to be a unified response. Rather, the hope was that our support of each person’s search for the answer would be done with a thoughtfulness that promoted many of the considerations that Veia Vecchi (2010) wrote about when she defined aesthetics as a “promoter of relationships, connections, sensibility, liberty, and expressiveness, and its closeness to ethics appears natural” (p. 14).

This journey to uncover differing perceptions about beauty explored many different pathways. Along the way, shared experiences and open dialogue were continually utilized as ways to support children’s ability to negotiate their different perspectives. The educators’ commitment to working in relationship with the children and fostering an atmosphere of shared ownership was considered in almost



every curricular decision. Most importantly, this collaborative quest to define beauty seemed to promote an atmosphere of trust in the room, when children openly shared their opinions, struggles, and fears, as well as their joy and successes.



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– Sandy Johns and  
Jennifer Kemp

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## REFLECTION on “What Makes Something Beautiful?”

By Gigi Schroeder Yu



*Gigi Schroeder Yu is an Innovations consulting editor, an early childhood art resource teacher for Albuquerque Public Schools in Albuquerque, NM, and co-creator of the New Mexico Collaborative Teachers Institute. Yu was project manager for “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit when it was in Albuquerque in 2014.*

Danny: “Colors are beautiful like red.”

Aran: “Flowers are beautiful, too.”

Sofia: “Information is beautiful.”

These quotes represent children’s diverse and intriguing responses to the question, “What makes something beautiful?” This article focuses on the Cyert Center for Early Education’s investigation of the complex philosophical issues of beauty and aesthetics from the perspectives of the children and adults. Authors Sandy Johns and Jennifer Kemp, the staff, the children, and the families generously offer to us the opportunity to learn through their experiences. Is beauty found only in the “eye of the beholder”? How do you know when something is beautiful? Do children and adults share the same definitions regarding beauty? These questions and many others guide the adults and children through a study of the concept of beauty.

This article offers early childhood educators a window into what it means to be inspired by the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach from the perspective of the adults and children at the Cyert Center. The aesthetics of learning or seeking out beauty is a central thread in the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy (Vecchi, 2010). For many educators, the rich and beautiful environments of the schools, the materials

offered to children on a daily basis to contemplate, and the *atelier* are the first elements focused on during their study of the Reggio approach. However, focusing solely on the visual aesthetics can lead to a misinterpretation of the experience of the Reggio Emilia educational project. Educators end up admiring the product without understanding the process.

In this article, Johns and Kemp give us an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the process that precedes the product. Throughout the article, the authors communicate their intentions to build a deeper understanding of children’s notions of beauty through the processes of observation, documentation, reflection, and intentional planning. Through this experience, they were confronted with their own notions of beauty and its role in the classroom. Johns and Kemp share how they attempted to develop negotiated learning practices as they investigated the concept of beauty as educators alongside the children. Together, they discovered that beauty can mean more than what something looks like.



## • The Spark

The provocation to study what makes something beautiful came from the children. The project began with the children's use of tape to transform a door in the mini-studio. We learn that the mini-studio is a place within the classroom where children are offered "many languages" to explore and communicate. The mini-studio is, in essence, the focal point for the study of beauty where the values of children and adults are exchanged and explored.

In an effort to clarify the children's intentions, the teachers shared photographs of the initial art gallery with the children. Henry said, "We wanted a decoration. We want to see it [the mini-studio] be beautiful." Sofia stated, "We can keep it up for all of time, for a school decoration because we want the classroom to be beautiful." The children's use of the word "beautiful" created a spark with the teachers, and they began to wonder what beautiful meant to the children.

Johns and Kemp emphasize documentation as a tool for constructing and reconstructing ideas among not only the teachers, but also the children and families. Much can be learned about the value of obtaining a group understanding of the concept of beauty.

—Gigi Schroeder Yu

The teachers paid close attention to the children as they very diligently pulled and tore pieces of tape in an effort to transform the space by taping their art work onto a door. In many classrooms, the experience may have ended here. However, rather than intrude on the children's process, the teachers asked themselves questions to help identify the children's intent. What was the children's original interest? Was it in the properties of the tape? Was it their interest to see their work as art work on a wall, similar to an art museum? Were they interested in transforming the space? Why did putting up the "art gallery" (as the children called it) give them such pleasure? The teachers saw the children's interest in transforming the space as an opportunity to study further the "aesthetic potential for the mini-studio."

Ellen Dissanayake (2000), an aesthetics educator, refers to aesthetics as a sensibility that defines how people intentionally show what they value, appreciate, and care about. As the teachers at the Cyert Center took time to consider the children's responses, they also took the time to reflect on their own aesthetic views of the environment. The authors describe the teachers' considerations: "The desire to find a balance between supporting the children's aesthetic freedom while honoring the educator's understandings about the impact of aesthetics on the quality of an experience was constantly in the forefront." The teachers and the children expressed different values in regard to what makes something beautiful. This challenge, to negotiate what makes something beautiful, is the foundation of this study.



## Documentation and Democratic Processes

Manfredi (2016) invites us to consider the important role documentation plays in the development of ongoing dynamic learning processes between adults and children:

We see documentation as an essential tool. Documentation is one of the fundamental characteristics of what we call our style of curriculum. Documentation is transversal to all learning. We consider learning as a continuing, ongoing process—an equilibrium reconciling balance and imbalance. Within this process, the individual theories are nurtured by the theories of the others. (p. 8)

Johns and Kemp emphasize documentation as a tool for constructing and reconstructing ideas among not only the teachers, but also the children and families. Much can be learned about the value of obtaining a group understanding of the concept of beauty. Several examples throughout the article describe the teachers' collaborative reflective process of observation, documentation, reflection, and planning that is consistent with the Reggio Emilia approach. For example, daily and weekly times are set aside for teachers to share, study, and reflect on documentation and plan for next steps in the classroom. The unique perspectives of pedagogical leaders and the studio educators are included in their collaborative reflection and planning process. This collaborative process reflects what Reggio Emilia educators believe to be the most effective and long-lasting means to increased professionalism because it allows teachers to become researchers (Filipini, 1998). Within this collaborative style of working, teachers supported each other, coming up with new ideas and discussing when

and how to offer new materials, all leading toward the design of learning experiences that are respectful of the children's ideas and interests.

The authors describe the value of involving parents in the documentation process. The teachers shared the "tape on the door experience" through photographs and the dialogue of the children. The parents shared, in a similar way as the teachers, differing understandings of beauty with their children that they experienced at home. The teachers then prompted the parents to collect "artifacts" of beauty with the children from outside of school. This opportunity was used as "a tool for participation of the families in the children's research—a tool that fostered and increased the enthusiasm and the solidarity between children and adults" (Manfredi, p. 12–13).

Johns and Kemp give insight into the teachers' process for interpreting and reinterpreting documentation with the children. In this experience, documentation "is an integral part of the learning and teaching process of the children and teachers" (Rinaldi, 2004, p. 1). The teachers were very intentional about creating group provocations for the children. The children's ideas about beauty were collected and revisited in an "art book," a collaborative experience was designed with an overhead projector, and children gathered in small groups to observe and discuss "beautiful" objects collected from home. These opportunities engaged children in a democratic process as they worked together to demonstrate their notions of beauty through the process of comparing their different perspectives.

## Negotiating Aesthetic Views

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,

humor, provocations, and non-determinism, supports the process of listening. (Vecchi, 2010, p. 13)



Vea Vecchi describes the inclusion of aesthetics in educational projects as not only a consideration of visual elements, but also as a search for connections among differing points of view. We learned from the Cyert Center children through their conversations, their agreeing, and disagreeing that beauty can be:

- transformation;
- a shared and collaborative opportunity;
- a choice of color;
- function;
- unique characteristics;
- shapes;
- evocative of feelings—scary, magical, love, or deep connections to an object or experience;
- sound;
- personal choice; and
- information.

One of the initial intentions for the Cyert Center educators was to investigate how the children's interest in transforming the space of the mini-studio could be an opportunity to study further the "aesthetic potential for the mini-studio." The authors described all of the essential elements necessary to create democratic processes for listening, sharing, and creating together with children. However, we are left wondering: What if the teachers challenged themselves to really let go of their own ideas and listened to and considered the children's ideas about beauty as a way to transform the studio? This process of slowing down and deeply listening to children's perspectives and ideas and integrating them within decision-making is one of the most challenging aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach.

Yet, Johns and Kemp provide all of us with a valuable opportunity to learn through their processes and challenges. As they challenge themselves, we learn that when we consider aesthetics as central within our pedagogical approaches, it can be seen as an activator of learning and a tool for listening for both adults and children (Vecchi, 2010). In an era of stan-

dardization of early childhood assessments, curriculum, and classroom materials and design, aesthetics is rarely considered. The Reggio educators ask us to consider the important role aesthetics can play in our educational settings.

The question we should be asking is to what extent and in what ways the processes of learning and teaching could change if school culture welcomed the poetic languages and an aesthetic dimension as important elements for building knowledge. (Vecchi, 2010, p. 16)

This article offers us the challenge to consider how unraveling and uncovering the varied aesthetic perspectives of both adults and children can be a way to interact that involves paying attention, contemplating, and listening as we make thoughtful choices together.

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– Gigi Schroeder Yu