

Reflections on “Material Choreographies: Fabric As a Living Language of Exchange”

by Gigi Schroeder Yu



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We do not usually think of materials as living languages. We usually see materials as coming to life as a result of human interactions, not as having a life of their own. “Material Choreographies: Fabric As a Living Language of Exchange” by Sylvia Kind, Cristina D. Vintimilla, and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw is an invitation to consider fabric as more than an inanimate object, but also as a living language that moves and **responds** to children’s movements and gestures. Through a visual and verbal narration of a sustained exploration with materials, the authors offer provocations and opportunities to those of us willing to reconsider our perspectives on the role of materials in learning contexts.

As someone who is deeply interested in the value of expressive materials in early childhood settings, I personally find the authors’ perspective of materials as a living language compelling. I read this article several times and, each time, I found myself absorbed by the authors’ rich verbal descriptions and the vivid images of children and teachers entangled and intertwined with fabric at Capilano University Children’s Center. Informed by the pedagogical values of Reggio Emilia, the authors outline the thinking of the teachers in the design of the environment and the reactions and interactions of the children with fabric and with one another. They generously give us an insight into their detailed observations and interpretations of the children’s language and dialogue with fabric.

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The authors prompt me to wonder how thinking **with** materials might shift the perspective of what is offered to children in early childhood classrooms. As I read this article, many questions came to mind. It is my hope that my questions serve to provoke a deeper look at the ideas presented by the authors of this article and to consider how the ideas relate to the diverse contexts and learning environments in North America.

Can a material be a language? What does it mean for a material to be an expressive language? Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw clearly identify the connection of the characteristics of a material to the dynamic dimension of language and the agency of language:

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 considers the rhythms, movements, and inclinations of language itself.

They present a perspective of language not only as an expression of meaning and communication, but also one related to what language does, how language creates opportunities for relating to the world in new ways. The authors also state that artistic language is developed between the maker **and** material:

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.

Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw suggest that fabric as a language is not a static material, but rather evokes a conversation between the material and the children. The reciprocal relationship the children have with the fabric affords them the creation of a system of communication or a “language” that emerges through their collaborative movements and rhythms.

If we value the importance of a material as a language, then we should take into account whether or not the material is capable of engaging in a conversation. Is it a passive object or an object that dictates the direction of the interaction? Fabric is not often seen as a potentially dynamic and engaging material, in the traditional sense, in early childhood classrooms or for art making in general. However, the authors illustrate how fabric has the capacity to provoke movement, connectivity, and creativity among the children and teachers. What other materials might provoke a similar dialogue in early childhood settings?

How does viewing materials as languages and co-creators of ideas influence the decisions we make in regards to what we offer children in early childhood settings? Open the closets of many classrooms, and you will find an endless supply of store-bought mate-

rials that are often unused or underused. Catalog companies are persistent in their salesmanship, trying to convince us that we need to purchase the newest, biggest, and brightest materials for our classrooms. They even attempt to sell us objects that can be found in our outdoor environments, such as plastic insects, leaves, and manufactured rocks. Artificially manufactured objects have a strong presence in many early childhood classrooms. Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw's approach toward materials as a language represents an ethical and authentic orientation to materials. We are invited to consider materials as objects that contribute to experiences, rather than as “things” that are used.

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The authors state, “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.” Materials have a presence and contribute to the meaning of an experience.

Do the materials we offer children inspire new thought, new languages, new ideas, new ways of seeing the world? Loris Malaguzzi (1996) wrote that “every language has the right to be fully developed, and the more this is made possible, the more one language works with the other languages in a process of mutual enrichment (p. 34).” The children and teachers at Capilano University Children's Center participate in a mutual and reciprocal

exchange **with** the fabric. Children have the right to engage with intelligent materials that are capable of meaningful and in-depth conversations. This concept of material as a language presents early childhood educators with the challenge to reconsider what is offered to children as educational materials.

Does seeing the role of materials as languages impact the role of the teacher in the interactions?

I find the authors' description of the role of the teachers to be thought-provoking. They describe the teachers' interactions in this way: "[W]e 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." The teachers do not provide the children with step-by-step instructions for how to use the material. Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw describe the role of the educators as researchers alongside the children. The teachers are also not standing by and simply waiting for the children to do something with the material. Instead, they are guides, observers, and researchers alongside the children.

Vea Vecchi (2010) suggests that the teacher's role is to allow children time to encounter a material so that they can discover for themselves its possibilities: "Encounters between children and materials are generally extremely rich in suggestive qualities, memories, and meanings, without much intervention on the part of the teacher (p. 32)." It is difficult for teachers to not intervene and to allow an experience to unfold for children at their own pace. This means that we, as teachers, consider how we can talk less and observe more. Observing contributes to our understanding of the experience. We may discover that we see children and materials in new ways. Through our observations, we might create new possibilities for engaging with materials that reflect the interests and ideas of the children and the materials.

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Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw describe the fundamental element of time in their descriptions of the encounters with fabric. Children are given time to explore the fabric's identity through touch and movement, which leads to acts of new discoveries. The educators take the time to listen, photograph, and pay closer attention to the relationships that are forming between the children and the fabric. Perhaps we should reconsider the role of the teacher as slowing down and giving time for both teachers and children to discover and learn from the process of encountering and getting to know the material as a language.

How might the notion of "materials as a language" invite teachers to imagine new ways to design the learning environment?

According to Vea Vecchi (2012), an *atelier* or a studio "is a space that makes it possible for children to encounter interesting and attractive contexts, where they can explore many and diverse materials as well as techniques that have expressive and combinatorial possibilities (p. 304)." Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw share similar considerations when designing the environment:

Experimenting and thinking **with** fabric means becoming attuned to its qualities, characteristics, ways of moving and encountering children and other materials, which in turn, necessitates creating conditions so that listening and extended experimentation become possible.

The educators at Capilano University Children's Center—the teachers and the *atelierista*—have the privilege of a studio

space where they can create opportunities for experimenting with materials in uninterrupted intervals, a space 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 kinds of encounters with materials that the children and educators have are particular to the kind of space available.

Many early childhood programs have limited space, and it is difficult for prolonged investigations to occur. However, Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw challenge us to consider how to re-think our learning environments. We can reconsider how we offer materials in a range of situations, perhaps the outdoor environment or other spaces that exist outside of our classrooms that allow for new discoveries to occur. We also might consider how to reinvent our classroom environment to include spaces that are open and flexible and allow for explorations that require fluidity.

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How can the creative act, the process of creating be seen as research in early childhood education? How can visual research contribute to our study of learning? “Material Choreographies: Fabric As a Living Language of Exchange” is an example of how concepts are developed through making, creating, and transforming materials. The authors richly describe how new understandings and new languages are activated while engaging in creative acts with fabric. The authors state, “[M]eanings are not just in the fabric or in the children’s ideas, but are composed in the encounters and exchanges.” We are invited to think alongside the authors and children to reconsider traditional research in early childhood classrooms as a study of the process of creating.

The intention to discover new ideas is declared and lived by the group through an art-based collaborative inquiry. The teachers and *atelierista* meet weekly to share, discuss, and study documentation collected in the forms of video and photography. The result of the collaborative inquiry is shared through the authors’ rich verbal descriptions that illustrate the children’s encounters with fabric. However, the photographs alone are a unique contribution and provide an opportunity for visual research that brings to life the context of the experiences. The photographs frame and focus the teachers’ discussions and are used to plan forward their intentions.

Sergio Spaggiari (2016) states that “books about pedagogy rarely host images . . . they frequently tend to be saturated with words” (p. xiii). He challenges the notions of research on early childhood pedagogy to move beyond texts and include images “that tell stories lived by the children themselves (pg. xiii).” The educators at Capilano University Children’s Center carefully consider the form of visual documentation in their choice of photographs and video recordings that bring nonverbal interactions to life. This visual documentation is shared with the children. During their

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engagement with the fabric, video of previous experiences is projected on a screen as a form of engagement and provocation: “[W]e hoped to continue provoking bodied, enacted, and dynamic exchanges and lived meanings.” The videos serve as a form of visual research for the children.

As you read the words in the article, I encourage you to study the photographs that Kind, Vintimilla, and Pacini-Ketchabaw share with us. These images provide a rich description of the children’s interactions with the fabric. The visual descriptions of “knittings” and “gatherings” remind me of mini-stories from the educators in Reggio Emilia. Veà Vecchi (2010) describes mini-stories in this way:

Through visual images, we try to pause on children’s expressions and actions with one another and in the work they are doing, seeking to convey as much as we can of the learning and atmosphere, the sense of life flowing within a group (p. 134).

According to Vecchi (2010), educators documenting through photography must be “highly alert” (p. 134). When photographing, they must be able to discern how to best describe what is taking place through images. In this sense, photographing can serve as a form of visual research. We can challenge ourselves to consider how to look into the deeper meaning of photographs taken in the classroom. In addition, photographing can serve as a way for us to practice “listening to **situations**” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 134).


In Consideration of the Many Languages

“Material Choreographies: Fabric As a Living Language of Exchange” speaks to the powerful “dialogic and relational encounters” that are constructed in the encounters with children as they engage with the fabric and each other. Yet, I am left wondering about how the many other languages could be applied to this experience. Perhaps this is a challenge for all of us to consider how experiences with materials can also provoke children’s verbal and graphic languages. In addition, I wonder how experiences with one language translate or interact with other languages. Carlina Rinaldi (2006)

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reminds us of Loris Malaguzzi’s “fantastic” theory of the hundred languages (p. 192). It is our responsibility as educators to give value to all the verbal and non-verbal languages and the right of these languages to communicate with each other. Rinaldi (2006) describes the importance of the interconnection between languages:



That means, interconnection, interdependency, that can help each language to become more aware of its own specificity, and to support the conceptualization and the dignity of the others. So, take an example, when you draw you can support not only your graphic language, but also your verbal language—because you make the concept deeper. And when the concept becomes deeper, the languages are enriched ... (p. 193).

In this way, we are challenged to create multiple opportunities for all languages to emerge and interact in our work with children. This includes the potential of seeing materials such as fabric as a language. I consider “Material Choreographies: Fabric As Living Language” to be a provocation for all of us. The authors provoke us to reconsider our work with children, the spaces we design for learning, and the way we view research in the classroom. They draw attention to the importance of becoming more attuned to materials as languages and the various ways that children and materials respond to one another. Materials possess the potential for having their own way of speaking, listening, and responding. We may find ourselves in dialogue with materials when we take the time to observe, listen, and engage with them.

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