

Movement in Nature: A Threshold for Knowledge Through Relationships, Connection, and Empathy

BY: MARCELA CACERES-GELINAS, ELISIA WELLINGTON, AND MICHELLE LAGUNAS

MARCELA CACERES-GELINAS



Marcela is the founder, director, and *pedagogista* of Bright Start Child Development Center in Santa Barbara, California. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, She has worked with children for over 40 years as a teacher, director, and pedagogical coordinator. She studied the role of the *pedagogista* with Red Solare Argentina and is a longtime member of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) and the West Coast Collaborative. She has visited Reggio Emilia, Italy, on several occasions and leads workshops related to the Reggio Emilia Approach in southern California.

ELISIA WELLINGTON



Elisia has been a pre-K teacher at Bright Start Child Development Center for the past six years. Teaching young children has always been her passion. When Elisia graduated with her early childhood education degree, she explored different philosophies within the field. She knew there had to be something that would complement her zeal for nature, beauty, and seeing the world through the eyes of children. Bright Start opened her eyes to the Reggio Emilia Approach, and she visited Reggio Emilia, Italy, with the West Coast Collaborative in 2019.

MICHELLE LAGUNAS



Michelle is both a teacher and an *atelierista* at Bright Start Child Development Center in Santa Barbara, California. The hundred languages of children (Edwards et al., 1998) appealed strongly to her and directed her career path. She has been actively learning and working with the Reggio Emilia Approach for seven years. In May 2019, she visited Reggio Emilia, Italy, along with the West Coast Collaborative to deepen her understanding of the philosophy. She is an artist and is pursuing her degree in studio arts.

Bright Start Child Development Center

Bright Start Child Development Center was founded in 1994 and is an independent school in downtown Santa Barbara. We are a social constructivist school inspired by the educators of Reggio Emilia, Italy. We designed our program to provide each child with an opportunity to explore rich materials and varied environments. Children come to know and witness that their thoughts, ideas, plans, projects, abilities, and theories have value. Teachers, the *atelierista*, parents, and the community help children understand and express their ideas through the hundred languages of children. The role of the teacher and the image of the child are vital and make this work meaningful. We are a Reggio-inspired school because we believe that this approach offers a different way of teaching and learning and teachers, parents, and the community are researchers learning with the children.

History

Marcela Caceres-Gelinas

We began our study of the Reggio Emilia Approach in 1999 after I attended a session led by educators from Reggio Emilia at a National Association for the Education of Young Children conference in Los Angeles. For many years, I worked towards forming the identity of our school. The constructivist approach resonated with my personal values and what I believe about teaching and learning. I started to research the Reggio Emilia Approach to gain a deeper understanding of the philosophy. I also began visiting schools in Santa Monica and consulting with others interested in the Reggio Emilia Approach in the area, including Alise Shafer, Patricia Hunter McGrath, Ellen Khokha, and Roleen Heimann.

A big shift occurred when I went to Argentina to participate in an immersive, 5-week intensive course that centered on the role of the *pedagogista* with Red Solare Argentina and Reggio Children. My primary motivation for pursuing this course was to be able to better understand the process of supporting my work with teachers at our school. I felt that this was an important piece that helped me deepen my understanding of documenting children's processes as well as the circularity of those processes. Then I had the opportunity to go to Italy with educators from South America to present and collaborate with Red Solare Argentina and Reggio Children. It was important for us

to receive feedback on our work as well as gain knowledge from everyone else's feedback. Furthermore, we went to Barcelona, Spain, as a study group with Maria Victoria Alferi from *Colegio Aletheia* in Argentina to visit other schools with the same philosophy. We attended small group dialogues with Spanish educator Alfredo Hoyuelos and educators from various Reggio-inspired schools. These experiences allowed me to gain a diverse perspective and enrich my thinking. Looking at this philosophy through the lenses of different cultures, I was able to make new connections that helped me gain a deeper understanding of this work. These connections are important because of the different interpretations that are unique to each culture, which presents the philosophy in diverse contexts/countries and adds to my own understanding and meaning.

After participating in these sessions, I was invited to join the West Coast Collaborative (formerly the West LA Collaborative). The collaborative is made up of four schools: Bright Start, Growing Place, New School-West, and Branches Atelier. We all decided to partner on working with Reggio educator Tiziana Filippini as a consultant to continue this work of learning together as we meet and dialogue with one another. We are discovering that sharing documentation offers the opportunity to consider other perspectives, a

process that has deepened our understanding of the children's work.

For the past three years, we have also studied with Loretta Bertani, an *atelierista* from Reggio Emilia. As a group, we present our work and offer conferences for other teachers and the community at large throughout southern California. Presenting our work is part of the reflection process because we gain a new layer of understanding when we share our work. As Vygotsky (1978) said, "By giving our students practice in talking with others, we give them frames

By giving our students practice in talking with others, we give them frames for thinking on their own.

for thinking on their own" (p. 19). Reflecting together really deepens our work because of everyone's shared input and perspective. As a collaborative, we are always sharing strategies for documentation. During the pandemic, collaboration with others served as vital support. During this time, we discovered the online tool Milanote for sharing and studying documentation.

Shifting the Research

Every year after winter break, we begin weekly excursions to Alice Keck Park Memorial Garden, only two blocks away from Bright Start. We go every Wednesday morning to explore and have our morning meeting and work time. The park is a lush magical garden with a variety of plants and wildlife. It is filled with endless possibilities. Every year, a new project emerges based on the teacher's observations of the children's interests. The teachers then set intentions, provocations, and challenges for the children in relation to the observations they had at the park.

It is our practice to upload our observations and documentation of the children's explorations at the park on our digital platform Milanote and share our challenges and possibilities for relaunching the project with Tiziana and the West Coast Collaborative. This documentation includes photographs of the children exploring the park and observing the natural life and the visitors at the park. We also document sketches the children made of the animals and the natural materials they collect as well as notes about the children's discoveries and videos.

Originally, the children expressed an interest in the turtles and ducks that live in the park. But this topic did not hold their interest for a long period of time. Instead, they were more invested in running and climbing. This brought about many disagreements and conflicts

among the children. They were stepping on each other's fingers while climbing and pushing each other off the branches. We shared with Tiziana that "all they want to do is run around and climb trees." She said that we might be missing what is important for the children. If all they want to do is run and climb, "then why not focus on that" (personal communication, February 15, 2022)? We were initially baffled by the simplicity of this possible solution. However, after reflecting among ourselves, we wondered: Why don't we focus on the things that the children are eager to do and that draw them in?

So, the next day we completely shifted our lens. Rather than viewing the children's running and climbing trees as a peripheral experience, we decided to focus on listening to the children's need to express themselves physically. We expected children to enter into dialogue with their environment through sensory exploration and movement. Therefore, we decided to focus on movement in relation to the environment and community. We wondered: What learning possibilities do we see in movement? What is movement for children?

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Tiziana suggested thinking about the many learning possibilities related to movement and how our motor actions can connect to the construction of knowledge, both cognitively and socially.

On the next visit to the park, we photographed and recorded videos of the children's experiences as they freely explored the park environment. We met with the children the next day to share our observations and asked them to reflect on their encounters at the park. The children began commenting on their experiences and sharing their observations. Most of the children looked shocked and exchanged glances with each other and the teachers as they watched the video of themselves interacting with one another in the trees.

Children's Reflections

AMOS:

"Whoa, there are way too many friends on that tree. The branches are bending because we're too heavy."

CHARLIE:

"That was when you stepped on my finger. It really hurt. There wasn't enough room for me."

RUBY:

"I didn't see you, and it was too loud. Sorry."

FLEUR:

"It looks like it's not working out very well. I think we should have fewer friends on the tree at a time."

DAXON:

“Yeah, and take turns and wait.”

The teachers documented some pieces of the conversation and underlined words that seem to capture the meaning that the children gave to their experience in the park.

FLEUR:

“There were too many people in that tree. I think we should make agreements.”

We concluded that something had to change because of the children’s behavior. After sharing this video with the children and reflecting, we wanted our future park visits over the next few weeks to consist of going around the park testing trees and collectively deciding which were climbable and why. The children’s discoveries resulted in them becoming more mindful of their climbing practices and behavior with each other and more aware of the trees’ attributes. The children successfully worked together to decide not only which trees they could climb but also how to climb them successfully together. They deemed each tree either climbable or unclimbable for various reasons, such as the location or structure.

UMA:

“We should not climb in places that are supposed to be peaceful, like next to benches.”

They were also very aware of the role a tree’s physical characteristics played in its ability to be climbed.

UMA:

“These branches are too bendy and will break. These might be baby trees. I don’t think we should climb them.”

GIORGIO:

“Well, palm trees don’t have branches, so we can’t climb them.”

Some branches were too thick or too bendy. Some trees had bark that was too rough or too “pokey.” Some trees had branches that were too high for the children to reach. Eventually, the children decided on some criteria for a perfect climbing experience:

CLIO:

“Strong and sturdy branches”

GIORGIO:

“Bark that isn’t too scratchy”

ANNALISE:

“Knowing how many friends can fit at a time”

REGGIE:

“It can’t be too high that we can’t reach.”

They also agreed on how many children can climb at one time. The children took it upon themselves to form a line and wait patiently while each child took a turn posing in the tree.

Mapping Climbable Trees

While revisiting the trees in the park, the children decided which trees were climbable. They wanted to make their discoveries visible. The children remembered the big park map they had previously seen and planned to recreate this map to identify which trees were safe to climb. This map assisted the children in locating the trees they could climb. The map also included a color-coded key representing how many children fit in each tree.

Using the concept of the hundred languages, the teachers explored the same subject in different ways and with different mediums to provide the children with



Map locating trees for climbing

various ways to connect and make meaning of their experiences at the park. For some, the graphic language was the easiest. For others, forms of expression were more physical. We chose to offer tangible expressive mediums such as wire, clay, photography, large-scale drawing, building, and other forms of expression to allow the children to demonstrate their understanding of their experiences.

We noticed that the children’s behavior shifted dramatically when we returned to the park. The children seemed to be developing an awareness of themselves and others. We observed their behavior becoming more empathetic to other living organisms at the park. They became increasingly aware of themselves and others and more caring towards the trees they encountered at the park. This behavior shift was also noticeable at school as they could communicate more with their words rather than just physically. This social awareness continued through the end of the school year.



Map resources tree key

Map Resources and Maps Created by the Children

We took time to reflect with the children, “What is the meaning of a map?” By referencing the map at the park, the children created their maps with the tree locations. We projected a birds-eye view map of Alice Keck Park and invited the children to trace the paths and areas so they could then add drawings of trees. While talking and drawing, the children had the possibility to walk down the paths in their minds, using their memories of what they experienced at the park.

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In addition, the children collaborated in recreating a three-dimensional model of the park using the small blocks and props in the construction room. It appeared to be a tangible way of retracing their steps and reenacting their joyful discoveries. The following comments were recorded while the children were making 3D models of their version of the park:

ALEXEI:

“If this is the pond and this is duck island, then this is where the tree [is that] we always fight about.”

CLIO:

“Yeah, that tree is behind a bench, and it can bother people who are watching the ducks.”



Color-coded tree key

REGGIE:

“The thorn tree was down this path, and I think it’s here on the map.”

ANNALISE:

“We have seen trees climbing everywhere. Maybe with the map, everyone will know which ones work and which ones don’t.”

The children created a map resources tree key of how many can climb a tree at once. Some trees are safe for climbing, and some trees are only for sitting.

Inspired by other maps they were researching; the children created a color-coded tree key to represent the specific location and function of each tree as well as how many children can climb each tree.

On their collaborative map using colored pencil, the children named each tree based on how they interacted with the tree and related to it. The names of trees were The Meeting Tree, The Together Tree, The Yoga Tree, and The Miracle Tree, among others.

Researching Trees to Climb

After the children researched maps and created their own, they returned to the park to find the trees they located on their maps. Once the children arrived at the park, they went to look at the trees and focused on one tree in particular. They noted that this tree was sturdy and large enough for everybody to climb. They noticed the branches appeared like never-ending pathways. Ruby began to sing a tune and the rest of the class followed: “Follow the branches, follow the tree, they tell you which way to go.”

We took a walk around the park to further investigate and carefully explore and consider the conditions of each individual tree for climbing. We asked the children, “What are the characteristics we are looking for in climbing trees?”

AMOS:

“Sturdy branches”

GIORGIO:

“It had to have branches, so not palm trees.”

RUBY:

“I think that we need to push down on the branches, not hard. But if they bounce like a trampoline, we can’t climb because they will break. If they don’t bounce, that means they’re sturdy and you can climb.”

AMOS:

“Actually, I agree with Ruby. We can find out if they are sturdy if we press down on them first.”

Each group focused on a different section of the park to carefully analyze and consider the conditions of each individual tree.

CLIO:

“This tree we can maybe climb, like one friend only, but there’s a bench around it so maybe this is a sitting place?”

REGGIE:

“This tree we can’t even reach. No one can climb and that’s too bad because the branches look so good and perfect. Too bad it’s too tall for us.”

REGGIE:

“This tree has huge thorns that can scratch us, so I don’t think it’s safe.”

SKYLAR:

“This tree is so perfect and everyone can fit, the whole Dolphin class. I come to this tree with my mom, and it’s like a secret tree. But it’s not high, so if we fall, it’s okay. But you won’t; it’s safe.”

AMOS:

“Wait, how did you get up there? Can you show me?”

SKYLAR:

“Sure. You have to start in this end and get both feet first. Then scoot up and hold on with two hands all the way up.”

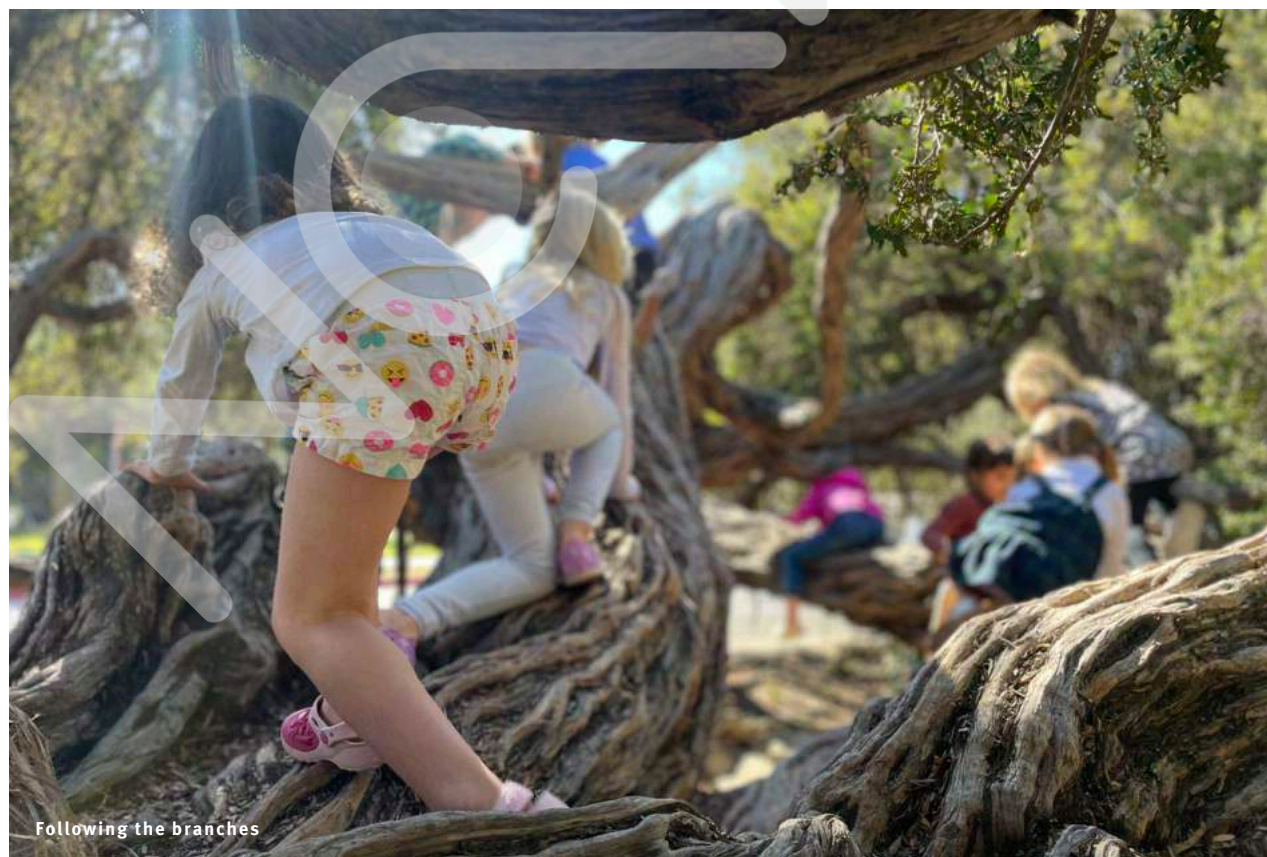
CLIO:

“This is more like a quiet, peaceful sitting space.”

As the children were climbing, they had to try and figure out which way to move in the tree. Trying different strategies for climbing, the children began to study movement itself. While discussing children’s inquisitive minds and ability to form theories, Carla Rinaldi (2004) wrote,

But children not only ask “why?” They are also able to find the answers to their whys, to create their own theories. . . .

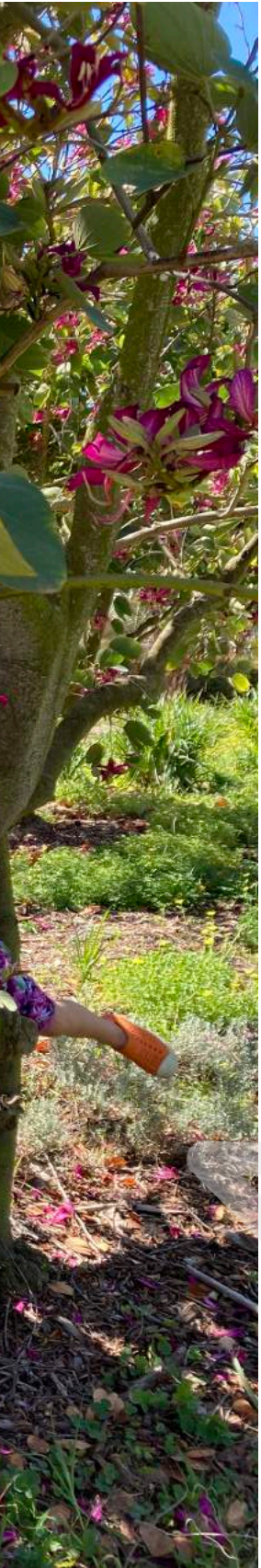
This attitude of the child means that the child is a real researcher. . . . Yet it is possible to destroy this attitude of the child with our quick answers and our certainty. (p. 2)



Following the branches



Group focus on individual trees



Clay Representations

Using clay slabs, coils, and natural materials from the park, the children represented climbing a tree. We decided to use clay because it is a material that supports 3D structures. Offering clay as a medium invites the children to explore diverseness and flexibility, as clay is easy to manipulate and modify to reflect the children’s thinking processes. We were able to observe the children’s different strategies. Some were focused on the physical positions of the legs and arms while climbing the tree. As they developed their strategies, we witnessed the children’s patience and perseverance in making their 3D structures. As the clay transforms, the children use different strategies to keep the structure of the tree they were climbing.

We asked the children, “What does it feel like to climb a tree?”

MAX:
“I like holding on to the branches to feel still.”

AMOS:
“I like getting myself stable in the trees, so I don’t fall. It makes me feel like I’m flying.”

CLIO:
“I like swinging from the trees. When I’m in the air and swinging, it’s kinda relaxing and I like the wind in my face.”

UMA:
“I like to play pretend in the trees. I like to see everything from up there. I like seeing the other trees, the pond, the turtles.”

KAYLEE:
“I like that the trees are strong, and they can hold me up. It makes me happy, and the trees are happy, too, because they welcome us.”

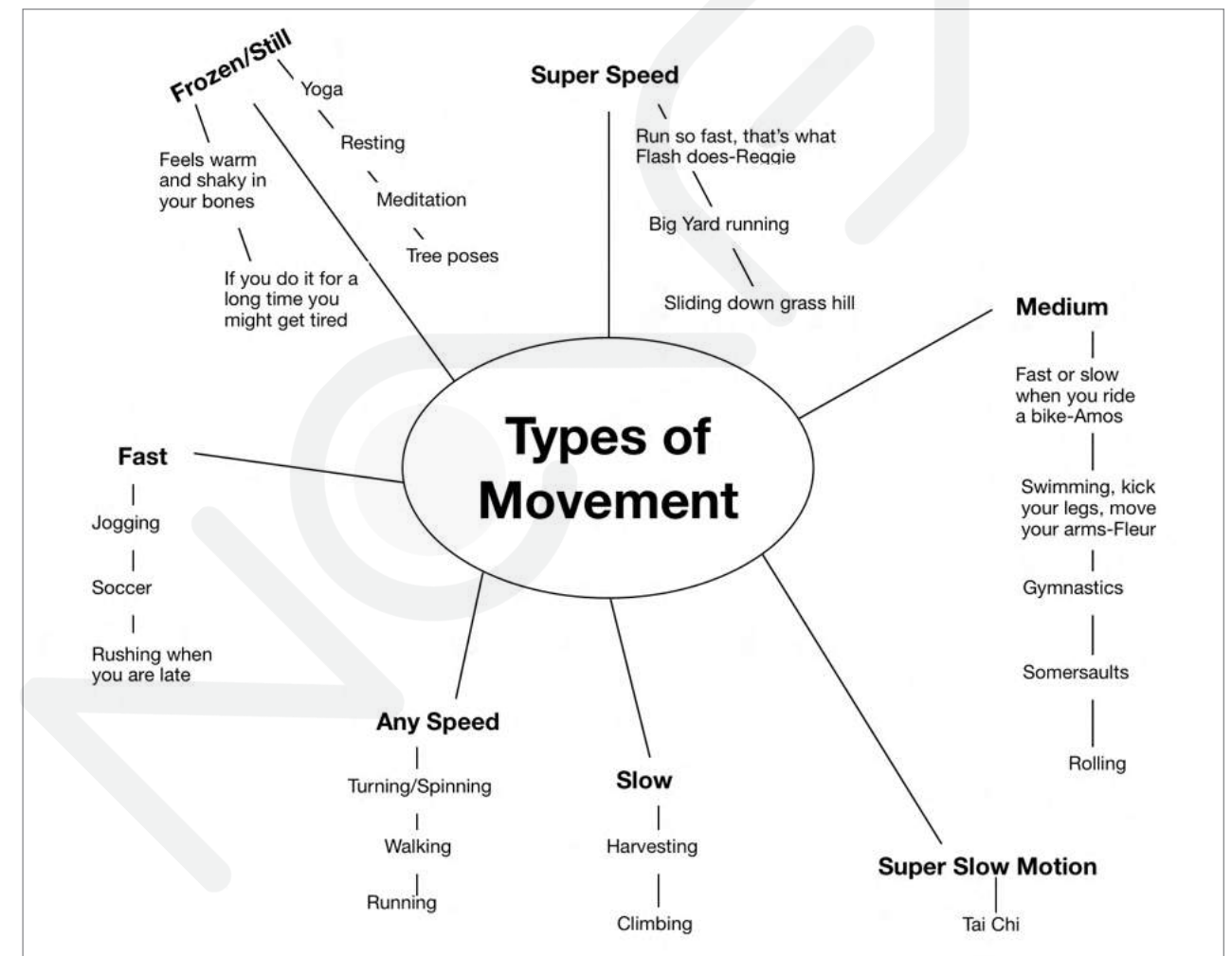
TOP Creating clay tree structure

MIDDLE Clay tree structures

BOTTOM Clay tree sculpture

Types of Movement

While the children investigated climbing, others decided to run around the park. They hopped, jumped, leaped, and pretended to fly in circles. This prompted the teachers to invite the children to wonder, “What other types of movement can we do at the park?” We had a meeting to dive further into the concept of movement. We received many responses that pertained to speed. We heard ideas like fast, slow motion, super-speed, frozen, and still. We dug deeper and asked them, “What movements fit in the category of speed? What is a frozen movement? Does anyone have an example of what that would look like?” The children began to list styles of movement for every category of speed that they came up with. Pretty soon, we had a large list of movement styles.



Concept map of types of movement

Still Movement



Meditating on the ground



REGGIE:

“Tai Chi feels relaxing in my body; it’s like meditating while moving.”

The children continue to investigate the motions of Tai Chi. They practice different poses and feel in their bodies what parts and muscles are activated.

SKYLAR:

“It is actually really hard to kick out to the side and look forward.”

MAX:

“I feel very strong and sturdy like this. I have good balance.”

AMOS:

“My arms are strong like I’m saying, ‘Stop!’”

As the Tai Chi investigation continued, the children tried many different poses and movements in unison.



Skylar



Charlie



Ruby



Amos

Trying out various poses

Slow Motion

There was a group of people that met near our favorite morning meeting spot in the park to do Tai Chi. As the children are investigating different types of movement, they notice these people practicing Tai Chi. When we do our mindful breathing exercises and a mindful minute in silence, the children often close their eyes or choose to admire the slow synchronized movements of the Tai Chi group. We decided to investigate Tai Chi because the practice centers on your own movement in relationship with the body. We wondered if we could talk to this group and ask questions about their mindful practices. Could they offer us insight into movement and breath?



The children and the Tai Chi teacher practice together.



The children watch the Tai Chi video.

Representing Movement with our Bodies

The following images reflect the various ways we captured children’s movements through photography. We used the long exposure camera setting to capture the children’s fast movement while running.



Long exposure capturing fast movement



Leaping



Twisting



The worm



Flying



Cartwheeling



Climbing

Nonfigurative and Figurative Representations of Movement

The hundred languages of children refers to the many ways children can express themselves. We provide the children with different possibilities to relate to a variety of materials and experiences in order to express themselves and make meaning. Each material offers a different entry point, perspective, and understanding of the subject. The hundred languages connect the cognitive, aesthetic, emotional, and relational dimensions in the process of learning. As Loris Malaguzzi (1998) stated, “The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences. We must widen the range of topics and goals, the types of situations we offer and their degree of structure, the kinds and combinations of resources and materials, and the possible interactions with things, peers, and adults. (p. 79)”

We asked the children, “What types of movements feel best? What colors and lines would represent this movement?” Materials are a threshold to understanding different concepts. We used various mediums such as watercolor, drawing tools, charcoal, wire, and clay as different entry points for understanding the concept of movement. The first medium offered was a large watercolor palette and markers. The children used their imagination to express their understanding of types of movement that became non-figurative drawings.



Charcoal on the Ground

The children used charcoal to leave traces of their large movements. As the paper was filled with soot, the children started to move and dance. Smudges from children's arms and feet spread across the ground in whimsical patterns. Movement becomes visible on paper.



Movement of feet in charcoal



Group dancing with charcoal



Movement with charcoal



The children's charcoal movements



Dancing together with charcoal

Wire: Tai Chi Poses

While meeting with the Tai Chi group, the children observed that the movements were fluid and flexible. We chose to use wire as the material to represent the Tai Chi movements because the property of wire offers flexibility and, at the same time, invites the children to work on equilibrium. As they encounter the wire, they develop a different understanding of the movement. They ultimately picked one pose to represent.



The Posing Tree: Digital Drawing

Drawing is a favorite common language for children. One child at a time, we reflected on their tree pose. We asked, “What did it feel like to hold this pose? Looking at it now, what does this stance remind you of?” The children then carefully represented their ideas by using translucent tracing paper to trace over the images of their bodies to transform the photograph and pose. We then digitally removed the paper’s white background to place the markings over the photograph. Our original plan was to use a digital drawing app, but the brushes did not allow for as much detail and did not offer as intimate an experience as being able to flip back and forth between the image underneath and the drawing on top.

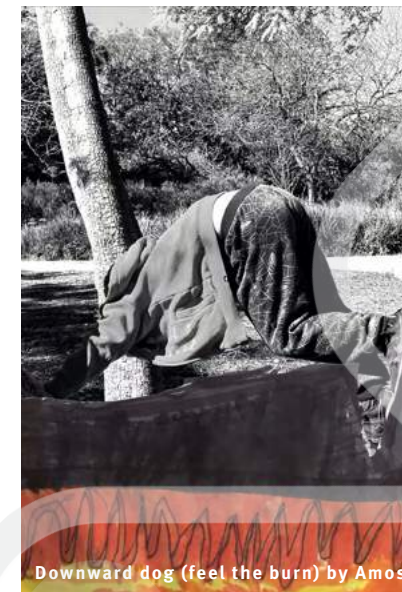
The children took turns holding poses on two trees with two trunks. One at a time, they shared their thoughts as to what each pose reminded them of. While the children took turns on the two-trunk

trees, they narrated while holding poses. They connected these poses to their real life and imaginary experiences. We photographed each child as they held a pose and later reflected as a group on the photographs. The children then represented their ideas by tracing over their bodies to transform the photograph and pose. We used colored pencils and watercolor on translucent vellum paper. We then digitally removed the paper’s white background by using the app Juxtaposer to place the bright-colored markings over the black and white photograph.

AMOS: “Skyler, you look like you’re surfing!”

GEORGIA: “I look like a ‘mer-pup’ swimming in the ocean. That’s so funny.”

AMOS: “I was doing downward dog, actually, and I could feel the burn, so I drew fire under the yoga mat so people would know I was feeling the burn.”



Reflection on the Use of Different Media

This project was an extensive investigation of movement through different media, expressions, and playful inquiry. Through movement, children explored the many dimensions of physicality. They also practiced Tai Chi movement, which is flexible and fluid, as they observed a group of people doing Tai Chi at the park. They represented the Tai Chi movement with wire. We chose wire because it comes in many gauges of flexibility and can bend and retract like our bodies. As they built their sculptures, they were able to explore the human form and understand the concept of equilibrium.

We also offered clay to bring another 3D aspect as the children were creating structures based on their tree-climbing experiences. Another medium the children used was charcoal so that they could represent large movements on the floor and see the traces of their movements. They continued to explore the concept of movement by still posing on the tree, and they made connections to their personal and imaginary experiences like yoga, ballet, surfing, an uphill train, a mermaid, becoming a rock star and construction worker, and so on.

This process of representing movement with different mediums also created a shift in the children’s awareness of their behavior and how they interact with peers in their group as well as the living organisms in the park. Through this journey of movement, the children became more collaborative, resulting in a more cohesive and united community.



Movement Exhibition and Book

We followed up on this project with an exhibition at school in May 2022. In addition to the exhibition, we created a book on our movement project to make visible the work of the children, which enhances the image of the child. Sharing the children's work is important so that the parents and the community understand more about the children's capabilities. The exhibition allows children to see their work presented beautifully as valuable. It is important for teachers to reflect on how they present the children's work and communicate their processes, enhancing their reflective teaching practices. The following feedback was collected from emails written by educators and parents who visited the exhibition:

I am a childcare consultant in Santa Barbara County and had the pleasure of visiting the *Movement in Nature* exhibition at Bright Start Child Development Center with two childcare teachers from another program. It was such a pleasure to see the displays and the parents' interactions. The whole evening was instructional, interesting, and beautiful. The teachers who came with me were engaged by the Bright Start teachers in discussion about the Reggio philosophy as well as the materials, documentation, and environment. We all came away inspired and curious to learn more. – Eileen Monoham

The documentation was beautifully displayed next to the art, detailing the project's intentions. The constructivist style easily engaged the visitors. Each project was linked to the others. It was definitely a creative experience for families, school staff, and community members." – Carmen Geiler, Bright Start parent and museum educator

The *Movement in Nature* exhibition was rich evidence of a process that turned 5-year-olds into empowered co-creators able to express creativity, value their own curiosity, and play and communicate with increased social-emotional intelligence. My 6-year-old regularly looks back through her *Movement in Nature* book to celebrate her creations and the deep connection she feels to nature and her Bright Start friends. – Mally Chakola, Bright Start parent

TOP Image from exhibition

MIDDLE Tai Chi wire sculptures from exhibition

BOTTOM *Movement in nature* book

Conclusion

During a conference presentation in 1984, Malaguzzi (1984/2016) said, "Children and adults always transit simultaneously through cultures and social spheres, and their relations between them (their being and their becoming) are part of interwoven processes even when they seem distant, or even contradictory" (p. 302). When you hold the image of children as capable and creative beings and give them the space to express themselves, they will show you how powerful they are. When teachers are present and think with children as co-creators, children become empowered to express their ideas and theories. Children need to be given the space, time, and opportunity to speak and act freely. Simultaneously, when teachers genuinely listen and observe their dialogues and interactions, the space becomes a threshold to critical thought, reflection, creativity, and endless possibilities. Children build their strategies and structure for learning based on how they think, construct, and co-construct ideas. By viewing children as citizens and agents of knowledge, we witness their creativity and how they share ideas, concepts, and perspectives.

This project was made possible because the teachers were open to a shift in the research on movement by slowing down and being present with the children. This shift invited the teachers to create space to listen, observe, and think with them. To make meaning from the children's experiences, the teachers, *pedagogista*, *atelierista*, parents, and children met to discuss, reflect, observe, interpret, and relaunch ideas. Learning is circular, and every part of this circularity is revisited in reflection with children and adults.

“**Simultaneously, when teachers genuinely listen and observe their dialogues and interactions, the space becomes a threshold to critical thought, reflection, creativity, and endless possibilities.**”

This work points to a greater objective. We must rethink how we understand children because this invites us to rethink how we understand humanity, which is necessary to change culture. By reconstructing how we view children, we can transform society. This begins with acknowledging that children are vital contributing members of humanity and citizens of the world.

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