

Researching Together: Mark Making with Materials that Inspire Relationships

By Melanie Akins, *atelierista*, and Kelsey Vasquez, director of educational practices, Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool, Scottsdale, Arizona



Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool is nestled into the Sonoran Desert in the northern part of Scottsdale, Arizona. The preschool is a mission of the church and shares an expansive campus offering beautiful desert gardens to study and explore. Nature walks along the desert washes also provide students with ample opportunities to investigate and develop a deeper relationship with the desert around them. Arizona is situated on the homeland of 22 recognized tribes. We acknowledge the painful history of their forced removal. We express gratitude to the Indigenous peoples for the privilege to reside, work, and explore the Sonoran Desert, the most beautiful desert in the world.

Currently, Pinnacle serves 140 children across 125 families with programs offered for children from age 18 months to pre-K. Established in 1995, Pinnacle is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and has been committed to studying the Reggio Emilia Approach since its educators experienced *The Hundred Languages* exhibit in 1998. Members of the staff have participated in multiple study groups organized in Reggio Emilia, Italy since 2008. Most recently, 12 team members attended a study week in Reggio Emilia in May 2019 as part of a larger group of educators from across six states..

The school is like one big *atelier* or habitat where different tools, languages, codes, and materials are connected to generate synergies that allow the children to delve more deeply into their research through different levels and types of access in order to create more mental images and construct



Researching the outdoor world through drawing

knowledge-building processes that are richer—a school that is beautiful, vital, and aims to cultivate children’s desire to learn. (Cagliari, 2017, pp. 9–10)

Like the quote from Cagliari, we at Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool acknowledge a reciprocity between the work in the *atelier* and the classrooms where thinking evolves and transforms through the different dynamics of each space.

The abruptness of the COVID-19 pandemic left us with more questions than answers. It created a pause, a moment, that encourages introspection as we begin our rise anew. What is the relationship between teachers as researchers and the research of children? What are the processes necessary to support teachers as they co-construct research alongside children? Researching with rich materials has been a strong emphasis for many years at our school. This was the case when our school doors opened again after the pandemic. The following represents a snapshot of the varied ways we have researched mark making alongside children and families since coming back to school.



Teacher reflecting on drawings with children

When charcoal was first introduced in a 3-year-old class, the teachers observed a strong focus on the natural qualities of the medium. Children shared their observations in the following comments:

“They kinda look like scary rocks.”

“It’s bark.”

“It does look like a tree.”

“Or a hard piece of asphalt. It’s like fireplace rocks!”

“I think this one is from nature because it smells like wood.”

“It smells also like you’re cooking something.”

“Oh, my gosh. You can smell where it’s from.”

The starkness of the black color was another immediate observation:

“My hands are black, but my hands are white.”

“I think it erases it, but actually it’s making it blacker.”

“It’s dusting off! I’m just moving my arm and it’s doing this! I didn’t know you can draw with your fingers. Only if you have charcoal on your finger. If you rub this around, you can draw with it.”

Vea Vecchi’s (2010) *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the Role and Potential of Ateliers in Early Childhood Education* was instrumental in considering our investigations with art materials and expanding Vecchi’s “culture of the atelier” beyond the walls of the physical space. Together, the teachers studied Vecchi’s book accompanied



Teacher Deborah researching charcoal marks

by intentional experiences with materials planned by Melanie, Pinnacle’s *atelierista*, as an opportunity to disrupt the traditional expectations of the medium charcoal. These explorations with charcoal led to an emergence of teacher’s research and their own wonderings. Researching alongside children for us as teachers means that, as Cagliari (2017) stated, “The adult has to be curious and interested in learning. She must put herself into play in the children’s learning and take responsibility for constructing knowledge by means of problematizing the questions of knowledge” (p. 11).

One teacher noticed the parallels of thinking between her first experiences with charcoal and those of the children. She shared, “Charcoal reminds me of clay. It’s a natural material, it breaks down and becomes something different, not like anything else, and then you can explore it in different ways.” Researching with art materials for teachers was restorative—renewing both our mind and spirit as educators—as we engaged in a relational creativity alongside children.

This exchange of research with charcoal and mark making continued during collaboration meetings outside the classrooms with teachers, the *atelierista*, and the director of educational practices. In the meetings, the classroom

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research is supported by our co-reflection on documentation collected from classroom investigations with children. Together, we make decisions based on the documentation where to go next. As Nicolosi (2017) stated, “This is our attempt to give justice to the creativity and the richness that we encounter every day when we try to understand and support the learning processes of the children and the teachers through pedagogical documentation” (p. 8). We created questions that supported a deeper study of charcoal with the children. For example, we wondered: How can charcoal capture movement? What do we observe as we change the levels offered? How can charcoal inspire collaboration? The following images reflect the varied ways we continued to research and document the marks made by charcoal through the children’s interactions.



Mark making with paper on wall outside classroom window



Charcoal with paper side by side outside with shadow



Researching pressure with charcoal



Exploring collaboration across the table



Two hands simultaneously with focused marks



Mark making with paper on the wall while kneeling

Our intention was for families to come alongside their child as co-researchers. This open invitation gave the adults a better view and understanding of their child's perspectives, capabilities, and intelligence. Together they explored, experimented, and researched the possibilities. We observed an openness to curiosity and questioning as families created unique theories and blended imagination with research.

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In our work at Pinnacle, we recognize the role of the family as the child's first teachers. As such, we wondered how parents could also be engaged in this research with mark making. Our precautions in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 have limited many of the traditional ways we have engaged with families. We responded by organizing Family *Atelier* Days—an opportunity for families to work in small groups in an outdoor *atelier* experience centered around mark making materials.

Parents reflected on their time together with the children:

“This is so soothing.”

“My first thoughts—calming, grounding. Watching the children explore allows us to be calm.”

“We love to see how engaged their minds are with unique things and ways that aren't typically available at home. I see their imagination being strengthened.”



Parent and child drawing each other through plexiglass



Parent and child investigating charcoal



Parent and child drawing together with charcoal vines



Parent and child investigating transfer of pastel to rocks



Family exploration of mark making



Father's illustration of laughter on playground

One father shared how the sounds of the laughter from the playground inspired his artwork as he explored with chalk pastels: "This is the color of laughter. I was listening to the children on the playground."

If we give time and do not close down children's research by giving answers, if we recognize that they and we are in continuous research, if we collect and gather up the children's ideas and throw them back to the children, the children will naturally return to their own thoughts, and they will re-elaborate their own theories in a more and more complex way. (Cagliari, 2017, p. 22)

The quote above from Cagliari speaks to our work as we continue to redefine the ways in which we study alongside children and families. This co-research continues to inform and inspire the many possibilities with mark making as a way of making visible the complex thinking of both adults and children and the relationships that are inspired by interactions with materials at Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool.