

Tarek Atoui

The Whisperers

October 18 — November 20, 2021

Tarek Atoui (TA): Audrey, in our chat, I would like to discuss your background and how you came to teach a class of four-five-year-olds students?

Audrey Belmin (AB): It's a long story. I was in advertising before I became a schoolteacher. It was a totally different job. I was working for international advertising agencies, and, at a certain moment, some rather existential questions arose... I decided I didn't want my life to be "that"... to be "only that". The idea of transmission is fundamental for me, as are being inquisitive and self-confident. I think that a teacher's job is to transmit what they have, and bring out the potential in each child, that every child is confident they have something special to give to society, to the community, that everyone has their place, in their own unique way, no matter what their chosen profession or values. I think this is what's fundamental when you're a teacher. I've been a teacher for almost twenty years now and this is what drives me.

At the beginning of my career, I taught a lot in elementary schools, especially in areas of greatest need. During this time, I worked with some inspiring pupils and their families, then four years ago I started at the École alsacienne kindergarten.

For me, this age group is the essence of being human, it's where you're not afraid to show yourself as you are. This, I think, is where we can really say that each child has their place and has something to tell us, whatever their personality. Even more than in elementary school. And where, sadly, we may already be "damaged". You might already think you're not good at math or at French. I've had children in 4th or 3rd grades say: "Miss, forget it, math is not for me, I've never understood a word of it!" when they're only just beginning to touch upon it. It's like leaving a child who falls over because they're learning to walk and says, "Forget it, I'll never be able to walk". For me, it's the same thing! I'm convinced that every child has tremendous potential, but often they just don't know it, because we haven't encouraged them enough. There are times when they may have been damaged or broken by hurtful experiences without us necessarily knowing, without ill will or intent. For me, this is not a mission, it's a question of wanting to. I think that every one of them is beautiful. They're like little jewels.

TA. Just hearing you makes me think of transmission. I'd say that everyone's concerned with transmission, not just teachers.

AB. Yes, everyone in society has a job.

TA. Whether you're a laborer, an engineer, a researcher...

AB. Butcher, baker, candlestick-maker... Everyone! Because everyone contributes to making society work together in harmony. That's why I find it so valuable having parents like you come into the classroom: you see how rich everyone is. It's their uniqueness that's rich: in their discretion, their laughter, their fears. Everyone brings something we might not have had a glimpse of, because all we are is us. While children, through their way of seeing things, awaken us to things we wouldn't even have thought of. Every year my class is different, so I adapt my teaching style. Even with workshops, I find that a workshop undertaken twice in a row is never the same. Because we interact, and according to the interactions and feedback we get, it doesn't bring out the same things, the same desires, the same needs, or the same reactions. And this we can't predict until we have experienced them. The richness of each parent who joins us is magical for me and for them because all I am is me, while another parent who comes to show their work or talk about a passion of their own will open up a world that's often unknown to me and the children in the class.

TA. As I said, teaching has been an important part of my work and research from the start. Until now, the youngest groups I've worked with were eight-ten-year-olds. I'd never worked with younger children. It was really striking for me because they were so singular. And, for me, what was special about this workshop situation was that I didn't have the technical or conceptual vocabulary to communicate with children of that age at all. I had to think differently and see how I could simplify things. Very early on, you told me: "One idea! Concentrate on one idea!". After losing all my familiar points of reference – a liberating idea in itself – I had to start again, I could see that these young people were sincere. They can be perfectly blunt in how they say what they like and what they don't.

AB. Emotions! Emotions are so spontaneous. They're not hidden at all.

TA. They're not afraid to say things, and that was something I had to deal with, too. There were times when the group got stuck because someone said, "Nope! I don't want to do this".

AB. Yes, what was great was that you came several times. And thinking about it these past few days, I think it was a great opportunity for them, and for us as adults too because, at the beginning, they didn't know what was expected of them at all. They were a bit wary. We had Sohal your son whose laughter reassured his group. But the other group, who didn't know you, didn't know how to interact with you and your tools. And I find that children of that age are extremely sensitive: to tastes, sounds, noises... some of them – I can still see their faces – tensed up because they were afraid your sounds were going to hurt or bother them.

But, little by little, they realized it was never the case. Their sensitivities and emotions were respected somehow. They were reassured by your presence and not afraid of what they were going to be asked anymore, they knew it was going to be fun, exploring things and handling things, but not getting into a place that would frighten them.

TA. In preparing the workshops, you mustn't make them complicated either technically or conceptually. It was important not to upset them but, rather, get into a time and space where they felt safe to explore and experiment.

AB. That's very different.

TA. It was great! It required all my improvisational skills because I improvise a lot in what I do. It's never done the same way twice. It was enjoyable. Sometimes I was like: "Oh, I forgot to do that!".

AB. Yes, they took us somewhere else, that's how it is, with their tastes. We didn't do the same thing as the first group. And you can't do the same thing: you think they're the same but, no, they're not, and necessarily so.

TA. Yes, totally. But tell me, we did five sessions, and the first was about objects that vibrate if I remember correctly.

AB. Yes, amazing! With the branches!

TA. What do you remember about the first session?

AB. Honestly, I don't look at trees the same way anymore.

The branches that vibrated... I didn't even know that actually... And yet I like to understand the scientific side of things! I didn't know that things had their vibration frequency. But I'd never even thought about it before either, so that doesn't help!

I felt the branch vibrate, and I said to myself that there may be animals or beings that hear sounds in this way. You can't imagine it exists, I found it wonderful. There's something very poetic about it. It opened me up to an unknown world I didn't know. I think the children were affected because when we worked on the trees for spring and winter, we remembered that. The trees' branches vibrating. Obviously, if something affects me, I'll use it more afterwards.

But the other vibrating objects were amazing, too! The tiny electronic bugs! I think that really struck the kids. The fact that such little things, like insects, can let a sound out is magical!

The session on water was incredible, because we went into another world, where the kids were allowed to "splash". The kids were happy to play with the water and put their hands in it. We were allowed to get wet. So what? You get dry, it's no big deal. There was something naughty about it, it was fun, and it let them listen to sounds they heard in their mother's womb, or in the swimming-pool... Things like this might be taken for granted by adults but not for children. It moved me, having them remember, subconsciously perhaps, something they could have experienced even before they were born. And then the session with the objects which rotated. I think they will never see record-players

or pottery motors the same way again. Even me – when I put a record on now – I remember that moment. It was sort of sacrosanct to my parents: “No touching!” until I reached a certain age! I must not touch it, it was fragile. It was important not to break the needle. At home, I think it’s the same. At the end of the day, a record-player’s an adult object.

In the workshops, we managed to use these objects and show them that we thought them old enough to interact with objects which might usually be prohibited...

I watched the videos again this weekend where Greta started making wolf noises.

TA. That was amazing! It was a sort of crowning-moment for me, a portal into something else.

AB. That’s right. We have something planned...

We don’t know where we’ll end up yet, we’re taking them on a journey, a path, but we don’t know what we’ll find on the path. Will we see little animals, insects maybe, perhaps a puddle... We took them down a path and at the end of the day its they who reveal things we didn’t see ourselves. And that’s what’s beautiful about this age group. They show you things you wouldn’t have seen that you wouldn’t even have imagined. That’s what’s hard about being a teacher, it’s accepting that some things are beyond you, that you’re not necessarily a conductor keeping your orchestra together. Sometimes you’re just a guide, someone helping them move forward.

TA. Wonderful, thank you so much Audrey, these workshops have been such a great experience for me and I hope we can continue.

AB. I’d really like that. Even if it’s never easy. You don’t have your child in my class, and you are busy with other projects. But if we can make it happen once or twice, that would be marvellous.