In an effort to continue the dialogue on the challenge of diversity, the NAREA guiding board has invited the NAREA membership coordinators in Canada, Mexico and the United States to contribute their perspectives on these issues. What follows are the first responses that we received to this invitation. The Summer and Fall 2005 NAREA Columns will include the thoughts of membership coordinators from other North American communities on this subject.

Reflecting on diversity and the issues that teachers in my school community face, I find myself returning to my notes from a study tour to Reggio Emilia, Italy in the fall of 2003. During my visit, I had the honor of listening to the words of Carlina Rinaldi, pedagogical consultant for Reggio Children. Her presentation began with the aspect of values and the responsibility of educators who live in schools to create values. Because I live and work in a school that represents many countries and thus many languages, the culture of my school reflects a diverse population of people. The educational experience offered to us from Reggio Emilia gives us possibilities for imagining a society that values difference. During the 2003 study tour, Carlina remarked that "the greatest damage a school can do is to not attempt to break down stereotypes." In order to educate, we need to understand the differences and to approach each individual in terms of background and personal stories with "great sensitivity."

Later in the study tour, Tizianna Filippini, *pedagogista* with the Pedagogical Coordinating Team of the *Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d’Infanzia*, shared her experience from the educational project entitled, "Town In waiting." This project emerged in response to questions educators had about the growing diversity...
in the city of Reggio Emilia. Tiziana shared that the relationship between the city and the schools needs to be strong because culture is constructed through the reciprocal relationship between the child and the city. Who is the child? Who is the city? How does the city transform the child? How does the child transform the city? Educators in Reggio Emilia united to study these and many other questions, thinking more about how to value difference, change and transformation.

Giovanni Piazza, atelierista at La Villetta Preschool, remarked from his experience with this educational project that a “city in waiting” is a metaphor for the town expecting to be created from the children’s desires. Giovanni spoke about how the town was becoming more multicultural and how this new aspect was being embraced though the process of research. He posed this question to the study tour participants: "What does it mean to hold the value of difference?"

My school community continues to be inspired by the work of educators from Reggio Emilia, which encourages us to ask questions and think deeply about the value of difference as it is lived daily in our school.

Seeking Equality of Opportunity

By Nora Thompson
Galileo Early Childhood Center, Mason MI

The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life. - Jane Adams

Thinking about the challenge of diversity in our community and within the state of Michigan, this quote came to mind. I believe this wholeheartedly, and think it applies to both the children and the teachers involved in programs inspired by the Reggio approach.

Children are not always able to access preschool programs of high quality. Universal preschool has not yet reached Michigan. Families who have limited financial means often do not have choices that more affluent families have. Those with limited means do not have the opportunity to consider many options, weigh the differences and make choices. This is unfair to children, who have no say or ability to change their family’s financial status. Who can speak for the children? Who can speak for the families who quietly accept their limitations? I believe that we must ask ourselves these questions.

At Galileo Early Childhood Center, we have a diverse group of children, ages 2-5, with varying financial backgrounds, from very low income to very high income families. Our school is currently in the process of partnering with a new free clinic in our community. The children at our school are participating in planning an examining room and waiting area for children at this clinic. We have talked about this in a community meeting with the children and a discussion about money spontaneously emerged. We discussed how some families have insurance, which helps pay for doctor visits, and some do not. Immediately, the children began to share whether or not their family had enough money, food and resources. They listened to each other share differing perspectives. The children had compassion for each other and wanted to make sure everyone had the same opportunities. I was struck by their willingness to give, not just to the clinic, but to the others in the group. Some children offered to bring food to those who said they didn't have much. The next day, several children appeared with coins in their pockets, which they gave to those who said they had little money. It seems as if children have the capability to problem solve and give support to others in ways that are possible for them. I wondered how this kind of empathy and compassion could apply to teachers like myself. Could we do the same?

I am a member of the Michigan Reggio Collaborative, a group of teachers and professionals who have been studying the Reggio philosophy for many years and
who support each other in our journeys in our own schools. Our schools are found in university laboratory environments, public school buildings, charter schools and private centers. Some are in urban areas; some are in rural and suburban areas. Yet it seems as if most of our programs are struggling, in some way, with financial difficulties.

I wonder about how the teachers' professional development survives in the midst of these difficulties. Costs for many professional development initiatives and NAREA membership are high. Some of my colleagues have told me they are not able to join NAREA because of the cost. Conferences with registrations of $300 and more are often out of reach for many teachers. A study tour to Reggio Emilia costs several thousand dollars and those who wish to go often cannot afford this expense. Yet others with greater financial means or those with higher level professional positions can attend these conferences and study tours more easily. If we want to "secure" the benefits of professional development "for all of us" and incorporate it into our common life, how can we make access to these opportunities more equitable?

Teachers within my own school district were recently told that we cannot attend any conferences out of state, due to the district's financial situation. This creates great challenges for my future professional development, as I cannot afford these conferences on my own. I imagine I speak for others who have children in college, are single parents and have families to support. I know I am not alone.

How can we break down the barriers to achieving equality of opportunity among teachers? How can we find common ground? I believe dialogue and open discussion of the realities we face can bring about solutions. Perhaps NAREA can develop a way for this dialogue to take place, so that all children and teachers can participate in high quality education, in a way that supports them respectfully and with dignity.

Support for Diversity

By Julie Biddle
University of Dayton, Dayton OH

NAREA as a Resource for Diversity

I believe that NAREA can best serve as a resource for Reggio-inspired early childhood educators from a diversity of cultures and communities primarily through professional development opportunities and publications (e.g., Innovations). The annual summer conference is a good example. I think it is important to have Italian educators at as many of the professional development opportunities as possible because it is difficult for many early childhood educators (especially our Head Start and preschool educators) to travel to Italy.

We are fortunate in Ohio to have a network of Reggio study groups located throughout the state. The study groups support local early childhood educators from a number of educational arenas - Head Start, public and private preschools, public and private elementary schools, in-service and pre-service institutions. Our state department of education and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation support the existence of the study groups and sponsor statewide professional development meetings. Despite the richness of our statewide Reggio network, we need NAREA to coordinate, sponsor and bring us in contact with a broader, more diverse audience.

I see involvement in NAREA as a way to connect with other Reggio-inspired educators on a national and, to some extent, international level. Involvement in NAREA and attendance at NAREA-sponsored conferences provides networking and learning opportunities with those in similar programs from different regions of the country and world.

I also believe that NAREA should serve in an advocacy role for young children, their families and the educators serving them. The lack of regard in North America for our youngest citizens is appalling. With the existence of NAREA, we have an obligation and an opportunity to be another voice for doing what is right for children.
Innovations as a Support for Diversity

*Innovations* is often used in our Reggio study groups. It is used as stimulation for dialogue, support to our participants with colleagues who are not knowledgeable about Reggio Emilia preschools, and for ongoing professional development and growth. These are critical components of support that early childhood educators need.

Other early childhood periodicals typically focus more broadly on the entire field of early childhood. *Innovations* is unique in that it can strictly focus on Reggio-inspired programs and work. *Innovations* can also be a tool for the advocacy work mentioned in the previous section.

Key Issues in Ohio Communities

The key issues that teachers face in our communities are related to enforced standards and assessments that are often not child-friendly. Some of the Reggio study groups have spent time reading and discussing how to use the tool of documentation to demonstrate various ways that programs are meeting standards and assessing student learning.

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-Julie Biddle