Innovations

In Early Education:
The International Reggio Emilia Exchange

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Introduction

This issue of Innovations begins with an article titled “The Relationship between Documentation and Design of the Environment in a Reggio-inspired School: Two Sides of a Coin” by Carol Anne Wien, professor emerita and senior scholar in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, ON; Shelley van Benschop, an atelierista at The Bishop Strachan School (BSS) in Toronto, ON; and Anna Papageorgiou, a kindergarten teacher at BSS. Early in the article, the authors write:

“This article explores how our understanding shifted, so that we now view documenting and design of the environment as complementary processes, and our responses to children possess a stronger and more connected quality. We describe how this understanding developed over the course of a school year . . . during which Francesca Georgioni, a teacher at the Choreia Infant-Toddler Center of the Panta Rei Social Cooperative in Reggio Emilia, Italy, worked at The Bishop Strachan School in Toronto, ON as a pedagogista.

In the Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools, the section on the “Educational project” includes this statement:

[The] environment [is] conceived as a participating actor in the educational relationship and not merely as an indifferent container of relationships. Intelligence, in fact, is not confined in the individual “mind” but is distributed among the people, the environments, and the materials. (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2017, p. 17)

In the section on the “Conditions for guaranteeing the quality of the educational relationship and of the experience of children and adults in the educational services,” documentation is described as:

...a way of being actively engaged in the day-to-day educational process. It is the activity of generating and collecting documents on the work carried out with the children. The documents enable the teachers to design the educational action as it unfolds, differentiating the paths in relation to the different subjectivities involved and interweaving the teaching and the individual and group learning, so that teaching and learning are complementary and interdependent. This makes it possible to overcome the idea of educational action as a consequence of activities predefined by the teacher based on a standard idea of knowledge that is the same for all. (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2017, p. 45)

The “Perspectives on NAREA” column features “The 9th NAREA Winter Conference – ‘Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy’” by Patty Randall, NAREA professional development and social media coordinator and director of educational practices at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool in Atlanta, GA. On the first morning of the conference, Paola Cagliari, the director of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, made connections between the focus

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~Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools
of the conference and the values of the Reggio Emilia approach:

We believe that this kind of knowledge is a way for educators to honor diversity and difference. It is a way that we have of promoting democracy and of realizing democracy. . . . to give voice and to give value to every diversity, to give voice and to give value to all the different ways that children express themselves and all the different ways that children build and construct their knowledge.

On the final day of the conference, Ivana Soncini, pedagogista responsible for children with special rights for the Municipality of Reggio Emilia Department of Education, offered this declaration about the dynamic nature of acquiring knowledge:

All children all over the world have theories about how the world is working around them. Another possibility [for acquiring knowledge] is . . . to share my theories about what is happening in the world with other theories of people around me . . . to see the discrepancies between those different theories . . . the research . . . that each one of us does individually to re-equilibrate our knowledge only takes place when . . . what is already known within us encounters new knowledge.

The “Voices: Conversations from North America and Beyond” column features reflections on the 9th NAREA Winter Conference from seven participants: Sarah Felstiner, curriculum director at Hilltop Children’s Center in Seattle, WA; Kimie Fukuda, pre-kindergarten teacher at Oregon Episcopal School in Portland, OR; three educators from Mentor Graphics Child Development Center in Wilsonville, OR: Nan Hanson, education coordinator, Amanda Jewart, classroom coordinator, and Dawn Kenney, infant-toddler coordinator; Julia Koumbassa, director, North Campus Children’s Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI; and Heida Sigurdardottir, lead team teacher, Co-op Family Center, Eugene, OR.
The Relationship between Documentation and Design of the Environment in a Reggio-inspired School: Two Sides of a Coin

By Carol Anne Wien, Shelley van Benschop, and Anna Papageorgiou

Carol Anne Wien is professor emerita and senior scholar in the Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, ON. She is widely known for her work on emergent curriculum and pedagogical documentation, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, and is author of The Power of Emergent Curriculum and several other books; editor of Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom: Interpreting the Reggio Emilia Approach in Schools; and co-author, with Karyn Callaghan and Jason Avery, of Documenting Children’s Meaning: Engaging in Design and Creativity with Children and Families. She has been a student of the Reggio Emilia approach since 1993, has attended four study tours, and served on the NAREA board as a representative from Canada. Shelley van Benschop is an atelierista at The Bishop Strachan School (BSS) in Toronto, ON, working with children and teachers from JK to Grade Six. She has been at BSS since 2004 and took a two-year leave to work and learn in the ateliers at the Early Learning Center Family of International Schools in Bangkok, Thailand. Shelley began her study of the Reggio Emilia approach in 2002 when she participated in her first international study tour in Reggio Emilia. She believes that the search for beauty and respect for aesthetic sensibilities are important aspects of school and life. Shelley considers creativity as a quality of thinking that belongs to everyone and is essential in education. Anna Papageorgiou has been a kindergarten teacher at BSS since 1998. She was part of the original team of teachers inspired by the work in Reggio Emilia. This experience influenced her to deeply re-examine her own teaching. As a result, Anna continues to share her reflections with visiting teachers during professional development initiatives. She is passionate about making learning visible and values documentation as a way to support the image of the child. Anna also believes that documentation provides children, teachers, parents, and the community an opportunity to begin dialogue and provide ongoing learning.

Documentation and an environment designed to support rich experiences of learning and living together are intimately intertwined, like two sides of the same coin. That coin represents the adult responsibility of creating the conditions that transform children’s experiences, so that the image of children as rich in potential and capability is fulfilled (Fraser, 2011; Rinaldi, 2006; Wien, 2008, 2014). This article explores how our understanding shifted, so that we now view documenting and design of the environment as complementary processes, and our responses to children possess a stronger and more connected quality. We describe how this understanding developed over the course of a school year (2008-2009) during which Francesca Georgioni, a teacher at the Choreia Infant-Toddler Center of the Panta Rei Social Cooperative in Reggio Emilia, Italy, worked at The Bishop Strachan School in Toronto, ON as a pedagogista. During that year, Francesca worked with the Junior Kindergarten (JK), Senior Kindergarten (SK), and Grade One educators who had spent six years reimagining their programs and classrooms in Reggio-inspired ways. This team of five teachers and early childhood educators worked in a new Junior School of great physical beauty—
maple furniture and shelves, large windows into both the outdoors and hallways for airiness and transparency, and carefully organized and productive spaces for children’s learning and development. Yet Francesca’s work over this year of engagement transformed the educators’ ways of working and understanding related to the environment. What was it she helped us see that we had not understood prior to her collaboration with us?

Documentation cannot occur without an environment designed to sustain children’s interactions with materials and with each other. Teachers who complain that they have no time to document may not be able to engage in documenting because the environment has not been sufficiently designed to support children’s autonomous activity. If an environment cannot sustain children’s engagement in autonomous activity, that is, activity that they choose and remain engaged in because it is satisfying, educators cannot observe and document these processes. How does an environment support children’s engagement in social, emotional, intellectual, and physical interactions that satisfy and provide contexts for their learning and development?

We focus here on Francesca’s work over the fall term with the educators in the Senior Kindergarten classroom of 5- to 6-year-old girls, Shelley Van Benschop and Anna Papageorgiou. First, it is important to note that Francesca engaged in long, deeply intellectual discussions with the entire team of teachers, questioning all aspects of their work. Carol Anne Wien joined these discussions during the winter months when a strike at York University opened up her schedule. Francesca also insisted Shelley and Anna have time to talk together before class each day. Anna commented, “This open dialogue was very thoughtful. Those long days, just talking or interpreting or asking questions, were so valuable. I used to leave with my head feeling like it was going to explode, because we got to think.” Our first shift in understanding was that collaboration meant moving beyond collegiality to, as Shelley put it, “a more open, dialogic dynamic in which we questioned our work and uncovered elements we had not made time for or that had been invisible to us.”

Redesign of the Environment

In this section, we discuss four difficulties with the environment that Francesca highlighted. These were: 1) not using children’s body movements as a basis for decisions about classroom design, 2) overcrowded and ineffective spaces, 3) inconsistency, and 4) lack of context for materials.

Anna described an occasion when the children were interested in exploring the school’s chapel. Anna and Shelley were curious about how the children would interact with the chapel and decided to take small groups to explore the space. They anticipated the children would be awed by the space, but the children’s response was to explore it with body movement. Anna’s group, for instance, lay down on the pews, comparing their length to the length of the pew. They made pathways for themselves, running up and down the aisles. Anna was concerned about their activity and noise level, quieting them, as she experienced “a torn feeling” between respect for the place and respect for the girls’ desire to explore. But Francesca and her colleague Francesca Bianca, a pedagogista from Reggio Emilia who was visiting, encouraged us to wonder how the exploration and documentation would change if we explored the chapel with body movement. How does an environment support children’s engagement in social, emotional, intellectual, and physical interactions that satisfy and provide contexts for their learning and development?

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the space with the children. If we played with the children, running through the space along with them, could we feel what the children were experiencing? The notion of developing empathy for children’s experiences by taking part in their activity was new to us and gave us a different way of thinking about how the children use their bodies as a language of communication. Their comments served as a catalyst for Anna, who returned to the classroom and saw it with new eyes, noticing how many tables there were and how hard it was for the children to move around them and questioning why tables that were used only 20 minutes a day for journal writing occupied so much space.

Body movement as a foundation for design of the environment

While we were accustomed to considering the flow of traffic around the room, Francesca’s insistence that we carefully observe the physical movements of children’s bodies as a language of expression was a novel idea for us. While we would readily agree that inviting children’s natural movement in classrooms is important and would all note our understanding that children learn through movement interactions with their world (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), it was a new strategy to concentrate on movement as a language of communication. This meant teachers had to learn to read the children’s movements and to understand them. We learned that designing the environment to sustain the children’s interactions is built upon reading body language as communication.

One of the major projects that year was a massive reorganization of the SK classroom. It was a beautiful, carefully organized environment when Francesca arrived, with many areas of interest for children’s engagement. In fact, for years, visitors to BSS had admired the JK, SK, and Grade One spaces. Francesca, however, had a different sense. She began by documenting children’s use of various areas of the SK classroom, gradually constructing a 26-page dossier. Each page highlighted a specific area, such as the light table or the block area, and included a central image of the area in the middle of the page. Radiating around it, smaller images showed various occasions of children using the space. When Carol Anne saw this collection of documentation, she was astonished by both the quantity of documentation and its detail and precision. It seemed to offer to the process of documenting a level of gravitas that previously had been unimaginable, especially to teachers who did not think they had time for it.

When the study of movement became a priority, documentation became an essential tool of research on movement within the space, something to show us what we do not yet know or see. The implicit question for this research was, “What are the children’s relations to the space, as seen in how they move within it?” Documenting provided data for discussion, a foundation for deciding what to do. We will first outline the problems Francesca observed in the design of the environment and the changes that resulted and then note ways she helped us expand and deepen our documentation processes.

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As Shelley, Anna, and Francesca together studied the many images of the environment documented by Francesca, they could see little-used areas and overcrowded areas. For example, the block area was too small and spilled over into the drama area on one side and the teachers’ space on the other. There is simplicity to the idea that an overused space that is small and crowded should be made larger to accommodate interest and body movement.
Many programs have elaborate rules for how many children may play in any one area to avoid jostling for scarce resources by the children. How simple to consider the problem to be the environment rather than the children. Early childhood philosophies that are based in observation of children as their starting point (Montessori is another example, in addition to the Reggio Emilia approach) see the organization and preparation of the environment for children as the source of many program difficulties (Montessori, 1912/1964). Many of us have seen that “behavior problems” dissipate with changes to environmental design (Curtis & Carter, 2015; Wien, Coates, Keating, & Bigelow, 2005; Wien, 2004).

The teachers began observing their environment from the perspective of whether an area was sustaining the children’s activity and in what ways its design might obstruct or reduce interaction. In the block area, for example, in “a series of pictures, Francesca showed us how the children were trying to get through the space by cramming themselves into the block area, and it wasn’t working.” Through this analysis of the space, the teachers could see the block area was much too small, and the light table was “against a wall so nobody could move around it.” Francesca reminded us that spaces “speak” to children; spaces “send messages,” and children want to stay in inviting, cared-for spaces.

Shelley, Anna, and Francesca began to plan a reorganization of the layout of the room, observing and documenting movement and considering reorganization possibilities. The planning for the changes to be made to the whole environment occupied three months. The changes were made all at once in a single major reorganization and then “unveiled” to the children and colleagues in the school. Seldom-used tables were removed from the classroom to open up space. An intentional teacher space in the classroom was created with a
clear pathway to it. Francesca emphasized the need for teachers to have a beautiful, well-organized space for work. Anna said, “Ours had been a dumping ground for papers, unused materials, and resources.” The drama area was enlarged to encompass the former block area so that stories and plays could involve many participants. The block area moved from a back window area into the middle of the room, with three sides open, and the light table was moved from against the wall into the center of the classroom adjacent to the block area. This juxtaposition was based on the children’s movements. It allowed increased visibility for both activities and border crossing between the two areas so that further complex combinations of material, ideas, and children were possible. It made more complex activity possible. In all cases, there was a sense of providing children a landscape to enter, a place to be immersed in an activity. There were many other changes as well.

**Materials require context and consistent organization**

One change involved something Francesca called “inconsistency.” By that, we understood her to mean that some materials did not have an intended context for their use and seemed to occur haphazardly in the environment. For instance, Anna described how Francesca noticed several places in the room where shells were placed, but they were not within a context that invited their use: “Where is their place so children can use them meaningfully in relationship to, for example, mathematics, nature, or art?” Another example occurred in the computer center, where panels on nature adorned the walls; they did not reflect the activity of the center at all. In all instances, Francesca wanted to create a consistent context for materials. Carol Anne thinks of a context as a kind of landscape in which interaction might occur. Contexts are spaces that must be specifically designed for inviting and encouraging interactions, or interactions are unlikely to happen; a shelf of materials is insufficient. The exhibit from Reggio Emilia, “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children,” describes context as “an interaction that is capable of restructuring our knowledge” (The Enchantment of Writing, Between signs and writing, Communication contexts in daily life section).

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Shelley and Anna also attended to Francesca’s comments, such as “Big girls, big materials.” They found they needed both more and fewer materials. As Anna said, “You can’t have just a little basket of rocks and shells, and that’s it; the children must be able to extend their use of and thinking about materials.” We see in this comment the Reggio notion that participants in a setting must be able to expand their work, to “think bigger” with others. To do so requires not only a lot of materials, but also materials that are both meaningful to the context of interest and meaningfully organized. In one discussion about the block area, Francesca noticed that the children were greatly interested in height and asked Anna and Shelley, “Why don’t you have more materials that can help them with that?” Then when materials were added, they were given a strong organization, for example, by type (wood, metal, paper), by size, and by color, so there was a schema that the children could visually grasp. Anna shared that Francesca said, “If everything is organized, the children can be more autonomous.”

The use of time in the classroom shifted as well. Shelley and Anna had the children “running through the centers, changing every 20-40 minutes, so they would experience everything.” Shelley commented, “If we want to enrich their autonomous pursuits, we need more materials and more time for exploration, reflection, and possibility. Francesca also challenged us to use our class meeting times as ‘vehicles for reflection,’ so children could share their pursuits and understand possibilities with the materials through study and dialogue regarding the documentation.”

In recent years, Reggio educators (Lanzi, 2011; Tedeschi, 2015) have used the phrase “dialogue as a space for transformation.” Carol Anne thinks dialogue is not simply two people talking; it is, rather, any interaction between two or more entities—a child and clay, a bee and a pollen-laden blossom, a parent reading to a child (Wien, Jacobs, & Brown, 2015). The possibility of change exists in the meeting between two entities and the meaning constructed from the exchange by sentient beings. Consuelo Damasi (2015), the atelierista at Anderson Preschool, said, “What is our idea of the meeting between a child and a material?” To construct a context is to provide a space for possible dialogue and possible transformation of learning. As an example, see the October image of the overhead projector, which sits by itself; the January image shows a space to enter and engage in dialogue with materials, the projector, and light.
The results of redesigning the environment

The results of the overall environmental changes were astonishing to Anna and Shelley, for they found the children’s engagement in the new environment was sustained for months. A sense of border crossing among areas also occurred in various projects, such as the children’s interest in creating a restaurant. When they needed a menu, they went to the communication center to make one. When they set up a spa/salon in the building center, they borrowed rocks from the nature center to be coins and clothing from dramatic play and made signs and bills in the communication center. From these activities, we can see that the projects generated by the children are bigger than any single area for activity and that the notion of supporting children’s thinking so that thinking might expand becomes visible.

Through the work to refine their environment’s design and make the organization and presentation of materials more fine-grained in relation to children’s activity, the notion of observing children’s physical movement in relation to design of the environment and altering the design as a response grew more solidly embedded as a habit to continue in their daily life in the school.

Changing our Notions about Documenting

We have been documenting for many years in different contexts and for different purposes, many of them Reggio-inspired. Children also document and take photos. Francesca showed us details of documentation that were new to us and aspects of documentation that expanded our understanding. We will focus on several of these differences from which we learned.

Documentation to illuminate uses of space

When the environment was undergoing reorganization and preparation, Francesca asked how the children and community would know what happens in these centers, noting that the spaces lacked a strong visual communication. Shelley and Anna decided to make large panels to accompany each area of the environment with the title of the area, images of children working there, and notes on the purpose of the area from the children’s perspective. These panels offered explanations to visitors, as well as to children and their parents, and “gave voice” to each area, showing the rationale for its inclusion in the space. Francesca saw these introductions to the environment as fundamental to the functioning of the room, and considerable time was given to preparing these introductory panels. While some attempt had been made previously by the teachers to convey the meaning of specific areas through documentation, these new panels were much larger, more visible in their placement, and more intentional in communicating the meaning of an area to those who entered the room.
Documenting as following a process from beginning to end

There were two ways in which our notions of documentation were expanded over time by Francesca, one in relation to daily activity and one in relation to activity throughout the year. The first change was to our notions of the depth of observation that should be occurring during the day. Francesca saw the teachers multitasking to maintain the routine, rather than focusing on processes in which the children were engaged. Anna watched Francesca Georgioni and Francesca Bianca observing and commented, “They’d capture a whole process, using contact sheets of images to just talk about what they saw. That’s how we learned to spend more time following a process to the end.” Anna described an occasion when she left an experience that she was observing: “I had to put out snack, but Francesca wanted me to come back, to see the whole process, because the children weren’t finished.” Francesca explained to Anna that the time she missed was a valuable part of the experience and suggested that when one teacher is documenting, the other could be available to monitor daily routines. The awareness of the value of involvement in every part of the children’s process caused a transformation for Anna—a shift in values in how time is used—from prioritizing maintenance tasks to prioritizing children’s processes. This example illustrates the value given to listening in Reggio-inspired work. We perceived the tension between listening and maintaining the schedule and decided to give a much higher priority to listening. To follow through with listening as a priority demonstrates giving a different meaning to our work (Wien & Kirby-Smith, 2014). Thus, we learned that when we are observing, we should stay with children’s processes all the way through to the end to capture the whole experience.

The second notion concerned putting up and taking down documentation, which we are often asked about by visitors to the school. We often feel pressure to have new documentation up for parents to view when they visit. Francesca told us, “You are not to take the documentation down. The children won’t remember if the traces of their memories are not there.” Francesca suggested to worry less about finished panels for outsiders to view and concern ourselves more with documenting traces of children’s learning on a daily basis. She suggested we use “those big bulldog clips and just layer it,” so you can flip through the daily traces and “not take anything down, so your whole year is visible within the classroom.” Francesca said, “Look at how the earlier documentation can be a reference for them, there for them to see.”

In our mainstream culture of schooling, we often think of learning as occurring in a unit, such as a week or month or six-week period, but seldom is a project or investigation continued throughout the entire school year. This expansion in our thinking—to consider the flow across a school year—gives a whole new meaning to the idea of learning. Our learning with the children is no longer cut up into fragmented bits and considered “finished” at a certain time or checked off the list of expectations, but rather it is considered to be alive, continuously subject to revisiting and revision. Reminded to “respect the time of the children,” Shelley pointed out that the shift in our approach brought educators “closer to children with more joyful interactions.”

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Documentation as editing to “explode the moment”

The idea that thoughtful documenting “explodes the moment” originates with Janette March, owner of several Reggio-inspired programs in Halifax, NS. She described how the editing of photos and text in order to elicit their essential meaning opens up what was captured with greater intensity and for wider interpretation; such moments have an impact on our thinking. A group of eight teachers at BSS had a discussion about Francesca’s impact one year later and noted the difference between teachers beginning to document, those struggling to do so, and those whose experience allowed them to document more deeply. Susan Hislop noted that after several years, “you can document at a different level. You get deeper and deeper into it, and I think what administrators don’t realize is that it’s so much to take in when you start that it’s very difficult.” Carol Anne asked whether people reading documentation can tell how difficult it is to choose the one photo that illustrates a thought process so well. Kerri Embrey commented that she showed documentation to Francesca, whose response was, “‘Too many words, too many pictures.’ I wasn’t being selective enough.” Susan said, “Yes, that’s what Lella [Gandini] said to me: ‘Fewer pictures, fewer words. Pick tiny moments.’” Anna added, “Something to capture the process, a little story.” This synthesizing and editing of material is necessary so that the reader can grasp the point that we are trying to make; to edit requires thinking about what the reader requires and what is too much and will obstruct their engagement. This is a professional skill that develops with considerable practice, just as writing skills develop from persistent writing.

Documentation as a place to welcome emotion

The value, place, and treatment of emotion in our educational systems are difficult issues to consider in North American schools. Our discussion about it, in relation to Francesca’s questions to us, resulted in larger questions that led to even more questions. Through this article, we report on our discussion with a sense of confronting something problematic but without really resolving issues related to emotion for ourselves. Someone noted, “Francesca was always speaking about emotion, asking, ‘Why don’t you document emotion? Why don’t you care about emotion? Why aren’t the feelings of children and how they resolve conflict documented?’” These were interesting and challenging questions that were unsettling for us. Didn’t we care about emotion? Wasn’t living together well incredibly important to us on a daily basis? Were we really setting emotion aside?

But as we thought through this issue raised by Francesca, we could see patterns we had taken for granted as normal in a school setting that also indicate our cultural preferences in education. Our general sense is that emotion (with the exception of motivation) is repressed in North American educational systems—not considered important or valuable. But what exactly is it that is repressed? Is it any strong or vibrant expression of emotion, whether positive or negative? Is it any negative emotion that is not supposed to darken our days? Is it any sign of conflict imperfectly raised? We all agreed on the importance of Francesca’s question and the difficulty of containing the question; it continued to lead to issues of cultural difference and expectation. Kerri, working with JK children (4-years old), said:

There’s a lot of emotion in JK. They’re emotional to begin with. We’ve got tears for the first few months, somebody crying every time they’re dropped off. Children have accidents, get upset. It’s not that there’s not emotion in the classroom; I don’t think we document it.
Kerri thought this was what Francesca was asking: Why isn’t emotion part of what is documented? We found this interpretation of her question interesting. Why indeed do we not document emotion? Or do we? On the whole, we recognized that emotion is present, and we deal with it, generally, on the sidelines or in a group circle, but it is neither included in what we select as valuable to document nor included in thoughts about the design of the environment. Francesca argued that emotion is part of who we are and part of what we could value enough to document. Carol Anne wonders what we would alter if we thought about the relationship between design of the environment and the emotions that space creates in us.

Shelley and Anna realized that they had previously considered documentation to be a form of assessment. Shelley said, “Our documentation read very much like a slightly poetic report card, but we were missing the nuances of relationships, identities, and friendships. If the role of documenting is to give value, then what do we value?” Is adult-set curriculum the only thing teachers are expected to value? Reggio-inspired education makes a strong argument for giving visibility to the complexities of children’s experiences and for keeping intact the inseparability of heart, mind, and hands at work. Others argue this as well: “Thought, emotion, play, and creativity as well as the creation of relationships are an integrated whole. When some aspects of this totality are broken apart, learning and development are diminished” (John-Steiner, Connery, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010, p. 8).

While psychologists and neuroscientists believe there are six basic emotions—happiness and sadness, fear and surprise, anger and disgust—that are present in humans from birth, cultural preferences soon contribute to a modulating effect on emotions that produces social emotions, such as sympathy, pride, embarrassment, admiration, guilt, and so forth (Damasio, 2003). What is valued in a culture becomes highlighted and emphasized, and all the feelings that arise around what a culture values become an aesthetic penumbra around its experiences. Has our society acted implicitly to stifle the expression of emotion in schools? We, as teachers, recognize the power of positive feeling (motivation) to fuel learning. We acknowledge the issue—Where is emotion?—but have done no more than to confront it. The question that gains significance becomes: How do documenting and design of the environment affect the tonal quality of a classroom and the range of emotion possible within it?
Closing Thoughts

The consequence of refining understandings about documentation and design of the environment, through our work with Francesca, was a shift in both values and confidence. Shelley noted:

Before, we wanted to “prove” that Reggio-inspired practice had value and “worked.” It can be challenging for families to understand the shift from traditional school experience to that which is Reggio-inspired. Thus, our documentation often focused on discrete disciplines and highlighted academic elements.

The teachers’ values shifted from “proving” to “researching”: “We shared our questions in the documenting; we made sure the subjective nature of our observations was clear; we welcomed the points of view of others.” We moved from “Now the children understand” to “We wonder, and is it possible they might better understand?”

In response to an invitation to reflect with us on her experience in Canada, Francesca responded:

I still wonder if I managed to create autonomous working strategies for the teachers. I have no definite answers to that, because it is difficult to be on the other side, having carried out only one experience of this type. However, I do think I stirred in them a curiosity in observing, listening, sharing, and being astonished, which is the basis of our work. And maybe one day, when I go back to visit, I will be able to find traces of our work together. (translated by Sandra Stella)

We think that if Francesca returned, she would see some of those traces and the fact that they rippled out beyond the walls of one classroom to others in the school and to educators in other institutions, such as Carol Anne, who believes there was transformational learning happening that had to be shared in a wider public domain. It was an experience for which we are all most grateful. Former Principal Jennifer Armstrong and former Head of School Deryn Lavell made possible this dialogue between two entities—educators from Reggio Emilia and educators from The Bishop Strachan School—so that this transformation could occur.

“. . . I do think I stirred in them a curiosity in observing, listening, sharing, and being astonished, which is the basis of our work.”

–Francesca Georgioni
REFERENCES


Perspectives on NAREA

The 9th NAREA Winter Conference – “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy”

By Patty Randall

Patty Randall is the NAREA professional development and social media coordinator and the director of educational practices at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool in Atlanta, GA.

Some say Seattle has always been ahead of the curve. From human rights issues to the environment, the Seattle community supports progressive thinking. So it was fitting that Seattle served as the host city for the 9th NAREA Winter Conference entitled “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy.” Over 290 participants from 26 U.S. states, three Canadian
provinces, and four countries convened in the Microsoft Auditorium of the award-winning Seattle Central Library to encounter the values and experiences of the municipal infant-tod	
der centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. It was powerful to see every seat in the auditorium filled with educators and advocates dedicated to advancing early education.

NAREA Board Co-Chairs Barbara Acton and Margie Cooper opened the conference with a warm welcome to participants and featured speakers. Paula Jones and Tom Drummond, representatives from the Washington Collective, the local host community, greeted participants, and Tom oriented all of us with this thought, “It is our responsibility to make sure all voices are heard” (March 22, 2018).
The organization of the days followed a rhythm, beginning each morning with plenary sessions offered by the featured speakers from Reggio Emilia, Italy, Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini, interpreted by Jane McCall. The plenary sessions included the titles, “Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy: How to Know the Knowledge of Children and Adults,” “The Context as a Potential Space of Discovery and Knowledge Building,” “Building a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Participating in What?,” and “Learning in Groups and with Groups.” A strong thread connected to words within the conference title was woven through the sessions. Paola’s comments helped us stay attached to the idea that, “[t]here is a plurality in the world, but there is also a plurality in children’s ways of seeing the world and, therefore, in children’s ways of representing the world, and this is the democracy that we owe to children. This is the respect that we owe to children. This is the respect that we owe to children’s ways of seeing things” (March 23, 2018).
All children all over the world have theories about how the world is working around them. Another possibility [for acquiring knowledge] is . . . to share my theories about what is happening in the world with other theories of people around me, with the children, to see the discrepancies between those different theories. . . . the research . . . that each one of us does individually to re-equilibrate our knowledge only takes place when . . . what is already known within us encounters new knowledge.

—Ivana Soncini

Paola opened Thursday’s session by reframing the title, “The title that the organizers of this conference . . . offered to us is a particularly interesting title . . . that requires some hard work . . . and is very broad . . . The idea of constructing a culture of shared values immediately brings to mind the idea and practice of participation. [For this morning’s presentation,] we have added a subtitle to “Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy,” part of the title [of the conference, which is]: “Knowing the Knowledge of Children and Adults” . . . We believe that this kind of knowledge is a way for educators to honor diversity and difference. It is a way that we have of promoting democracy and of realizing democracy. . . . to give voice and to give value to every diversity, to give voice and to give value to all the different ways that children express themselves and all the different ways that children build and construct their knowledge” (March 22, 2018). As director of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Paola set the framework for our time together, using a variety of means: exchange, videos, and presentations. Ivana, pedagogista responsible for children with special rights for the Municipality of Reggio Emilia Department of Education, shared clear and forthright presentations and videos that gave insight into working with possibilities, emphasizing the dynamic nature of acquiring knowledge: “All children all over the world have theories about how the world is working around them. Another possibility [for acquiring knowledge] is . . . to share my theories about what is happening in the world with other theories of people around
me, with the children, to see the discrepancies between those different theories. . . . the research . . . that each one of us does individually to re-equilibrate our knowledge only takes place when . . . what is already known within us encounters new knowledge. That is when each one of us begins this process of re-equilibrating what we thought we knew. It is that re-equilibrating that creates a desire [and] a purpose within human beings to construct new theories about the world. When I say theories, I mean . . . to give meaning to things or to make sense of things. . . . the philosophers have said, ‘If we all think the same thing, then nobody is actually thinking’” (March 24, 2018). Keeping in mind the importance of sharing thoughts and hearing from others, Paola and Ivana encouraged exchange each day by inviting participants to share their doubts, comments, and questions through written messages. The invitation emphasized the sense of responsibility Paola and Ivana felt to encounter the questions and weave their responses into their presentations and comments.

One unique feature of this conference was the frequency of spontaneous applause when participants felt strongly about a statement made by the speakers. It was not unusual for applause to break out several times over the course of a session. It was apparent that the participants felt passionately about Paola’s and Ivana’s message. The conference took place during a unique time in the history of North America, as students and adults from across the country are seeking to be heard. The “March for our Lives” student-led demonstration took place on the final day of the conference and underscored the idea that, “[e]ach person, each one of us, whether we are an adult or a child, is a bearer . . . of diversity and a bearer . . . of difference, and each should be seen and should be recognized” (Cagliari, March 22, 2018).

Each person, each one of us, whether we are an adult or a child, is a bearer . . . of diversity and a bearer . . . of difference, and each should be seen and should be recognized.

-Paola Cagliari
After the morning plenary sessions, conference participants made their way to lunch in the city. It was a way to explore downtown Seattle and taste the local fare, while reflecting on all that they had encountered.

The afternoons were filled with a variety of breakout sessions, which included cultural tours of the Seattle Central Library and discussions around the concepts of participation and democracy based on articles in *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange* and facilitated by NAREA board members. In addition, the host community made it possible for the exhibit, “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” to be open each afternoon. A short walk to One Convention Place led participants to encounters with the exhibit and with other colleagues. At the exhibit venue, participants found special pre-stamped postcards featuring the words: rights/diritti, voice/voca, and plea/appello, along with an open invitation to use the postcards to give voice to their thinking about the rights of children. These encounters highlighted connections to a plurality of perspectives.
Each one of us—each child, each adult—is asking to be looked at with an optimistic gaze, to be looked at with a gaze that gives value to us—a gaze which looks at and sees the resources and the potentials of each of us.

–Paola Cagliari

Paola and Ivana delivered an intelligent, inspired, and thought-provoking conference experience. The stories with video that were presented spoke volumes about their respect for the rights of children.

–9th NAREA Winter Conference participant

Each afternoon session was designed with exchange in mind because as Paola reminded us, “The learning of each one makes the learning of all grow. It is possible to increase the possibilities for learning in a context if within that context, there is a circulation. . . . By circulation, I mean listening that is responsive . . . and the possibility for change with all the people together.” Each day concluded with opportunities for discourse and thinking together. Saturday afternoon was dedicated to visiting local schools. As participants boarded school buses bound for Hilltop Children’s Center, Our Beginning, Epiphany Early Learning Preschool, and Pike Market Child Care and Preschool, Paola and Ivana made their way to the airport to return to Italy.

It is with gratitude that we thank our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, Italy, Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini. It was a pleasure to work with the Washington Collective, and we are sincerely grateful for their contributions to the 9th NAREA Winter Conference. We extend our appreciation to the children, families, and educators in the schools we visited for all they did to shape the conference. We are inspired by all the educators, from a variety of contexts, who value and respect the rights of all children and who participated with us during the conference.

Our hope is that the time spent at Seattle Central Library, participating in the ongoing study of the Reggio Emilia educational project and reflecting upon the responsibility of educators, will serve to support everyone who attended and that each participant will continue to look “with an optimistic gaze,” as Paola suggested:

Each one of us—each child, each adult—is asking to be looked at with an optimistic gaze, to be looked at with a gaze that gives value to us—a gaze that looks at and sees the resources and the potentials of each of us.

(March 22, 2018)

We believe the words of the participants in their conference survey responses reflect our collective thoughts:

“Paola and Ivana delivered an intelligent, inspired, and thought-provoking conference experience. The stories with video that were presented spoke volumes about their respect for the rights of children.”
“The presentations from the Italian educators were terrific and developed day-by-day with a good mix of philosophy articulation and concrete stories. I loved hearing more about teacher thinking and process at this conference than I had experienced at other NAREA events. Topics were important, relevant, and challenging.”

“Overall, I found the content very engaging. I appreciated the amount of deep thought given to the ideas about education and the connections with democracy and inclusion.”

“As a relative newcomer, I was able to significantly deepen my understanding and appreciation for the principles of the Reggio approach! It was a privilege to be there, and I am excited to learn more.”

“I think that the perspective that Ivana gave concerning children with special rights and children with behavior issues really spoke to a lot of the participants. Teachers are faced with a more diverse group of young learners, and the insights that Ivana shared from the Reggio school context was something I had not heard before from them. It would be nice to have more of this dialogue.”

Overall, I found the content very engaging. I appreciated the amount of deep thought given to the ideas about education and the connections with democracy and inclusion.

–9th NAREA Winter Conference participant
Overall, I learned a tremendous amount from Ivana and Paola, coming all the way from Reggio with their wealth of knowledge and experience in children’s development and brain science. I really appreciate the way that they both think and approach children, childhood, and humanity coming from a Reggio framework.

–9th NAREA Winter Conference participant

“I was so happy to learn from all of you—everyone who spoke and moderated inspired me and touched me with their sincerity. I have wanted to learn more about Reggio since I came into this field, and my cup is filled up and overflowing from this one conference. Paola and Ivana and their wonderful translator, Jane, were so clear in presenting ideas through their precise words and the very helpful videos. So glad to receive their collective wisdom. Thank you.”

“Overall, I learned a tremendous amount from Ivana and Paola, coming all the way from Reggio with their wealth of knowledge and experience in children’s development and brain science. I really appreciate the way that they both think and approach children, childhood, and humanity coming from a Reggio framework. The opportunity to be in the room listening to them both talk about their ideology as well as being able to share a glance into the lives and stories of the children of Reggio was invaluable.”
Tribute to Ellen Hall

By Jennifer Kesselring and Brenda Fyfe

We have the great privilege of honoring our dear friend and colleague, Ellen Hall, who lost her courageous battle with cancer on March 7. Ellen was a passionate and determined educator and mentor to many, lived her life fully committed to the unqualified rights of children, and embodied an unwavering determination to advocate for and to create high quality early childhood education in the United States and around the world. She was the founder and executive director of Boulder Journey School in Boulder, CO.

Ellen was deeply inspired and compelled by the work of the educational experience in Reggio Emilia and dedicated her career to a strong and ongoing dialogue with the Reggio Emilia approach. Her voice and actions, alongside others with the same commitment and passion, made a significant contribution to the founding of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance. Upon its establishment in 2002, Ellen assumed the role of co-chair and worked tirelessly alongside other founding board members to bring the dream of NAREA to life. Ellen stayed fully immersed in the work of NAREA over many years, and Boulder Journey School was the first context to host “The Wonder of Learning,” the newest North American version of “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit, in 2008.

There, the exhibit was used as an innovative educational and political platform for advocacy and awareness of the highest quality educational and life experiences for children and families in the state of Colorado and beyond.

Ellen was inspired by the hope and respect that the Reggio Emilia approach offered children, families, and educators, and through her work, countless people have been inspired and encouraged to be change makers in their own communities. She was a champion for children’s rights. She fought for this cause around the world, but also, within each daily moment at her school, eventually publishing her thoughts, along with stories from the school, in the book titled Seen and Heard: Children’s Rights in Early Childhood Education.

Ellen’s vision, her resolve, her far-reaching influence, the eloquence with which she spoke and wrote, and her deep respect for children will never be forgotten. We will honor her memory by committing ourselves to continuing this work that brought her so much joy.
Voices: Conversations from North America and Beyond

Reflections on the 9th NAREA Winter Conference – “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy”

Sarah Felstiner

Sarah Felstiner is the curriculum director at Hilltop Children’s Center in Seattle, WA, where she has worked for over 20 years as a classroom educator and administrator. During that time, Sarah has supported Hilltop’s transformation from a traditional neighborhood daycare to an internationally recognized school of inquiry and professional development. Sarah participated in a study tour of the schools in Reggio Emilia in May of 1993. In the 25 years since that transformative visit, she has continued to explore the implications of the experience of the Reggio Emilia preschools and infant-toddler centers for her own program and for the American context. In particular, Sarah has focused on possibilities for supporting children’s authorship of their own curriculum and on opportunities for engaging families in studying their children’s learning.

Though I have been exploring ideas from the municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia for a long time, I stepped into the conference hall with a mix of anticipation and curiosity. The title of the conference, “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy,” was rather dense, and I was interested in uncovering what it might mean. In his opening remarks on the first day, Tom Drummond, a representative of the Washington Collective, host of “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit and the 9th NAREA Winter Conference, declared, “We are together in an aspiration for democracy” (March 22, 2018). This helped set the tone for the conference. Then, in the first minutes of the opening session, the presenters, Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini, introduced the premises for the week’s presentations, which had equally provocative subtitles: “Knowing the Knowledge of Children and Adults,” “Participating in What?,” and “Learning in a Group and with a Group.” I knew then that we were in for three intensive days of complexity, thoughtfulness, and storytelling.

Paola Cagliari began by unpacking the notion of participation, which she described as “both a strategy for working and a value of working.” Paola asserted how essential it is for educators “to give value to every diversity” and “the fact of schools democratically welcoming all children is a premise, but it isn’t sufficient. It is not enough for activating. . . processes of valuing difference and of working with knowledge in democratic ways. We have to ask ourselves: Do schools really, truly promote this process of participation, this process of constructing knowledge?” She also shared this quote from pedagogista Elena Maccaferri: “Participation means children are the active participants in their own learning processes and that children are citizens right from the beginning” (March 22, 2018).
Also on the first day, Ivana Soncini began to examine the notion of context, declaring the importance of “shifting our gaze from individuals onto the context they are living in and experiencing before judging the person.” She went on to highlight the hypotheses of the adults as a living part of the learning context, which can be “organized . . . [to] encourage and solicit this . . . exercising of strategies.” She described the way in which context can be aspirational, “a space of the possible” (March 22, 2018). This idea of context was woven through the conference, generally referring to a learning context, which includes the setting, people, and beliefs of each classroom and school community, as well as the social and political history and climate in which those learning contexts exist.

Through the videos and stories that Paola and Ivana shared, we saw the sincerity with which each child’s experience is considered, challenged, and celebrated. Paola called out the “singularity of [each] human being . . . each unique in their way of thinking and of doing.” She later described context as “a space of potentials and a space in which differences and diversities are expressed.” I agree with and aspire to this view of each “human becoming” (as Paola so beautifully put it) as unique and full of possibility. . . . And I am actively trying to complicate my own understanding of the social contexts operating in our country, which can erase that uniqueness and interrupt that sense of possibility.

I agree with and aspire to this view of each “human becoming” (as Paola so beautifully put it) as unique and full of possibility. . . . And I am actively trying to complicate my own understanding of the social contexts operating in our country, which can erase that uniqueness and interrupt that sense of possibility.

–Sarah Felstiner

Many children encounter a world that does not honor their uniqueness, but instead pre-judges them based on their gender, ability, skin color, and other attributes. Children’s and families’ experiences are impacted by both institutional and implicit biases, both inside and outside of school settings. Through the three days of the conference, I felt a curiosity about how to understand “context” in a way that includes these very real forces acting on each of us and on all of us.

In the eye-opening and heart-warming stories that Paola and Ivana shared, I heard a thread of describing diversity in terms of both multiplicity and individuality. Here in the United States, I believe that our context is strongly influenced by enculturated biases and constructed systems that limit multiplicity and individuality, because people are grouped by their
I believe that in order to live up to Malaguzzi’s vision that “all children have the right to live in utopias,” . . . we must confront these systemic oppressions, including those related to our youngest citizens. Part of working toward diversity and democracy is to make those systems transparent and to engage children in considering the impact of those systems on their own lives and the lives of others.

-Sarah Felstiner

characteristics and then stifled or privileged by those biases. I believe that in order to live up to Malaguzzi’s vision that “all children have the right to live in utopias” (Soncini, March 22, 2018), we must confront these systemic oppressions, including those related to our youngest citizens. Part of working toward diversity and democracy is to make those systems transparent and to engage children in considering the impact of those systems on their own lives and the lives of others. The goals of anti-bias education challenge us to support children in appreciating their own identities and the identities of those unlike themselves. In an anti-bias approach, we acknowledge children’s natural capacity to notice unfairness and disequilibrium and to take action toward equity.

Fortunately, this obligation to engage children in beginning to understand and confront bias dovetails well with our goals for children’s social learning. As Ivana described on the third day of the conference, learning in groups and with groups naturally brings children into a space of encountering and considering multiple perspectives. She said, “[E]ach single human being works in a process of constant re-equilibration of our knowledge, and there’s a constant reforming of that equilibrium, a re-equilibration, only if we encounter people who think something different than the way we think.” She described a productive “socio-cognitive conflict” that I believe is precisely what anti-bias education is built upon. She went on to say, “[A]dults are capable of creating contexts where the children are interested in observing each other—creating contexts where reciprocal or mutual observation is very interesting, very stimulating . . . Communication is channeling everything that is happening in the group, where judgment is suspended . . . “ (March 24, 2018). For me, this resonated directly with the goals of anti-bias education.

By the end of the third day, with all these concepts swirling in my head, I began seeking a way to consolidate the notions of diversity, individuality, and group—of context, participation, and democracy. Though nobody who knows me would list “math” as one of the languages I use most fluently, for some reason what popped into my head was a simple mathematical formula, a pared-down way to hang on to the big ideas of the conference:

**Context + Participation = Democracy**

If we attend to the context (both the learning contexts we help construct and the societal contexts we inhabit), and we seek avenues and opportunities for full participation by children, families, and educators, then we have laid the groundwork for democracy. While certainly a gross over-simplification of the three days of thinking we did together, for me, this formula felt particularly poignant, because as we sat in the closing hours of the conference, a remarkable thing was happening outside the building.

The last day of the conference fell on March 24, a day when students in Seattle (and many other places around the country and the world) took to the streets to advocate for their right to safe schools and safe lives. These children were naming the conditions of their context and actively participating in seeking change. The capacity and bravery of these children gives me hope for our democracy. Elena Maccaferri’s declaration that “children are citizens right from the beginning” was affirmed in the presentations of the Reggio educators and by the students declaring their rights.
Kimie Fukuda

After 13 years at Opal School of the Portland Children’s Museum in Portland, OR, which hosted “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit in 2012, Kimie Fukuda is now a pre-kindergarten teacher in her first year at Oregon Episcopal School, where her colleagues from preK-5th grade are examining the “big rocks” that ground the work while collaboratively considering the anchors that move their work from purpose to process. Kimie remembers the disorientation and awe of her first encounters with the work in the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia in 1993. The images and ideas turned her assumptions about education upside down, creating a crevasse between what she assumed her role to be in working with young children and work that honors children’s competencies and rights to education as citizens.

Gems in the Pocket

Loris Malaguzzi claimed that children who attended the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia carry “gems in their pockets” (Malaguzzi, 1993) that serve as touchstones over their lifetime. These treasures offer a dynamic lens through which to look upon the world and find continual meaning.

The first gems in my own pocket were those gathered as a young child through the support of my mother, whose empathetic conveyance that every person is valuable and has something integral to contribute was made clearly visible through what she offered her children.

Her support was expressed in the languages of the arts and the natural world to which she provided ample access, gifts that allowed her to reclaim parts of her own childhood, lost when she was punished for her dyslexia and left-handedness throughout her life in school. How is it that she became an art teacher and at 82 years old, still assists in a small Reggio-inspired preschool in Tokyo today? I think it has to do with the people, things, and ideas that help us to reclaim lost parts of ourselves, a gift that reflection offers.

There is much to be learned by reflecting on the gems that we carry in our pockets. If, through collective reflection, we can shine a light on what is needed to give children the ability to claim their rights to education that reflects their intelligence, competence, and capacities as thinkers and learners, perhaps we can help each other reclaim these essential gifts for living.

The Gift of a Geode

In considering the subject of reflection for this year’s NAREA Winter Conference, “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy,” I chose the following gems given to us by Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini:

- Considering our gaze upon children and adults in this work;
- The lens of participation;
- Group learning;
- Making use of problems;
- Multiplicity; and
- The hundred languages as a tool for transferring ideas and dialogue.
Like the gift of a geode, which reveals a hidden landscape, these ideas have provided me with a fresh view for honoring diversity, differences, and democracy in our work.

These subjects are not easy to write about, as I am still working to construct and imagine how they might transfer into our daily lives with children and families. Sharing a reflection generates unease, because its meaning is static to the writer only as far as his or her next review of it. I choose to share regardless, because I have been shaped by my experiences to understand that we need one another: our questions, noticing, wonderings, stories, and connections and the capacity of these contributions to further our research. Just as our efforts as educators are founded on the idea that children do not learn in isolation, I wonder: How might we become stronger and wiser through collectively lending our voice?

**Considering Our Gaze**

Ivana’s and Paola’s presentations reflect the ideas of philosopher Michael Foucault, who invites us to consider the implications of a singular gaze upon its subject in its potential to exclude or invite power and privilege. I believe that a rigid and narrow definition of things, children, curriculum, institutions, and responsibilities of teachers contributes to the polarization we experience in so much of the world today. I wonder about the many voices and diverse kinds of learners that are shut out by this polarization, particularly those who are culturally marginalized. How can I ensure, for the sake of their democratic rights, that I seek to see things from a “side-on” gaze, a need that increases, as Ivana pointed out, with the complexity of the subject (March 22, 2018)? She reminded us that it is in looking at things from a slightly side-on view that we are able not only to honor the children in their full and diverse ways of learning, but also to free ourselves from the unnecessary frustration and difficulty that comes from the challenging aspects of our work.

Furthering this idea of examining our gaze, Paola stated:

Each person, each one of us, whether adult or child, is a bearer or bringer of diversity and a bearer or bringer of difference, and each should be seen and should be recognized. Each one of us, each child, each adult, is asking to be looked at with an optimistic gaze, to be looked at with a gaze that gives value to us—a gaze that looks at and sees the resources within each one of us. There are two meanings to this idea of knowing knowledge. The first of the meanings is to know more about each child, each child with their differences, how each learns and constructs their learning. The second meaning of knowing knowledge is knowing more and being more aware as adults of the gaze we have. That means knowing more about the beliefs and the expectations of our adult gaze toward children (March 22, 2018).

Not only do these ideas cause me to consider the role of inquiry in moving through conflict, but it also raises a new question: How might the experiences I offer give value to these ideas in a way that is lived and understood as essential considerations for each participant in this work?

**The Lens of Participation**

Seattle educator and advocate Tom Drummond brought into focus the idea of participation, which a democracy is reliant upon, in his opening remarks: “We host [“The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children”] exhibit because of people who cannot be heard as well as those who are invited to dive into the work—the voices and wisdom of people knowing when things are better. . . . I invite you to see how social change happens” (March 22, 2018).

These words evoked emotions and recollections that sent me on a journey in time, revealing both limits to my full participation as a teacher of young children and possibilities for challenging these limitations. I was mostly satisfied in my early years with the prescriptive nature of my schoolwork, yet sensed subtle levels of inhospitableness that occurs when participation is valued only in as far as we can contribute to these predetermined outcomes. I believe I became somewhat passive and complacent as a result. I thought of my contributions as “good enough” while resigned to the idea that decisions were for “experts” or for those who simply held more power. This view of my past leads me to look forward, eager to explore a new path in which I can no longer rest upon my hesitation, with the following questions as my guide:

- How has my own belief in what is/is not possible influenced/limited the degree to which I have invited others to participate in this work?
What does it mean to participate and create conditions for all voices to join this project of learning from children and about children?

How might I reclaim the idea of my own participation as a key to advocating for the changes I hope to see in the world?

**Adult/child participation**

Preparing school experiences for children to progress along in a linear fashion with predetermined ideas about their development would mean that, as Ivana chided, “obviously, we would have to discard a lot of children” (March 24, 2018). These words reference the incongruence between what we ask children to do and what they can do. Further explained is the idea that if the gap is too big or too small, it disengages the motivation of the learner. When this happens, Ivana continued, it is important that the adults take responsibility to know children’s knowledge and adapt this gap to create a zone of hope, which becomes a zone of motivation within zones of play, so “then we will begin . . . to see those proximal zones of [development]” . . .

-Kimie Fukuda

Parent participation

The question of reflecting on the potential of parent participation and the ways we invite families into our work was passionately discussed during the conference. The dialogue caused me to consider the expression of respect for parental participation, combined with the wisdom of Loris Malaguzzi, who offered this call to action: “We need to make a big impression on parents, amaze them, convince them that what we are doing is something extremely important for their children and for them” (Malaguzzi, 1994). If we truly believe that parent participation enriches our work, what ways can we imagine for motivating and bringing parents into the daily life of the school? If parents are not participating, this too implicates our strategies and assumptions. How might our invitations reflect the diversity of the parents’ perspectives on what it means to be invited and participate? In what ways might we inspire and invite parents to construct and understand the value of this work not only for their child, but for all children?
Group Learning

As human beings or human “becomings,” as suggested by Paola (March 22, 2018), we form connections and a sense of belonging with a group to the extent that we feel we have something to contribute that matters. In schools, however, children are often placed in group settings, dynamics, and contexts that make this difficult to achieve. The images from Reggio Emilia of children learning in small groups engaged in mutually supportive exchange give visibility to the groups’ intentional design for “the good of the individual [becoming] the common good” (Soncini, March 24, 2018). These groups, made up of carefully selected individuals with a context designed for all participants to critically support knowledge, inspires within me reflection on the potential of small group work. Knowing that in Reggio, they have two adults and often 26 children in their classrooms and still find ways, materials, and beautiful contexts to make this work, I am motivated to continue to consider how to create these ideal groupings and how to advocate for making this kind of work happen. How else, after all, will our desire and value live on in our future if we are not giving children the reference points to be integral to the construction of ideas through a process of dynamic exchange in school?

Making Use of Problems

Paola gave an example of “problematizing” learning contexts, which are designed to motivate empathetic engagement, giving children in groups opportunities to practice and create meaning and skills for democratic exchange. These include the understanding of the value of lending their voice, empathetically generating multiple new perspectives, socially constructing solutions to a problem, and honoring diverse ways to show that every contribution is important. I am inspired and provoked by the language that children must “breathe in and feel on their skin” (Soncini, March 24, 2018) in reference to understanding the rules for caring for and respecting others in their community. It is only then that they can begin to adjust behavior and work to live within these expectations.

The investment in teaching others to ride a bike through collectively researching methods and sharing theories is one such experience in Paola’s stories. The context becomes a “zone of hope,” (Soncini, March 22, 2018) by allowing children to bring their full attention to a task through playful exploration as “they begin to mobilize all the resources that they have … to get their thinking moving around the problem” (Soncini, March 23, 2018). Teachers call out to children eager to research the problem as they scatter across the playground, running alongside those brave enough to mount the bicycle, to try to find out what is most useful. A child discovers the concept that balance is a critical key for riding. The teacher throws another metaphorical ball, asking the children where else they might explore that idea, as children scatter into trees, across logs, teetering upon objects, sharing new theories about balance and advice with one another. Children consult with one another, sharing the excitement of discoveries and collecting questions about mastering their respective feats. Paola concludes her story by explaining that the cold concept of balance is “warmed up” (March 24, 2018) by the children’s joyful engagement as they construct an understanding through kinesthetic and intellectual collaborative development of solutions that are enriched by their collective knowledge.

This story helped me to see opportunities in our settings with children for such work. Such an opportunity presented itself the day after I returned to school following the conference—not five minutes after drop-off in a conflict over a small plastic toy in one corner of the classroom. It became evident as one child protested the snatching of a toy from his hand, an object brought into the classroom after its discovery in the schoolyard, that there are micro-opportunities that arise every day. These moments invite perspectives to come together around the most common problems of navigating conflicting points of view.

While engaging the support of others, asking, “What do you think? How do you feel?,” the children connect to the feeling of losing something, wanting something that others have, or being angry and sad to have someone take something away. As they begin to share ideas that reflect their varied points of view, they need our optimism. By engaging with empathy through the questions we ask, they will arrive at an answer that considers the diverse perspectives of others. I recognize that although children can be coerced, bribed, threatened, or handed a solution, if we want children to...
see themselves as agents of change with optimistic reference points and to know that their collective ideas hold possibilities for solutions, we must ask how we can make time for them to practice this in their daily lives. What potential contexts exist in our daily lives that we have yet to give value to? What are the elements in the design of these contexts that intrinsically motivate children to research and exchange ideas to pursue possibilities for helping others?

**Multiplicity**

While I have seen elements of multiplicity reflected in the works by educators from Reggio Emilia in the past, I wanted to further understand the value of this element in relationship to the topic of the conference. Paola gave us a window into the countless ways multiplicity can be experienced, represented, and understood. She recounted the investigation of a dynamic subject that allows for multiple entry points of research and multiple expressions through the arts as Reggio educators ask the children to consider: “What is a piazza?” She began by stating, “[P]oints of view on the world are plural, so it’s very important for us, as educators, to keep that in mind and to communicate it, to convey that we think that to the parents of the children. There is a plurality in the world, but there is also a plurality in children’s ways of seeing the world and, therefore, in children’s ways of representing the world, and this is the democracy that we owe to children. This is the respect that we owe to children’s ways of seeing things” (March 23, 2018). Through this lens, I listened to the myriad of expressions of the piazza with renewed appreciation for the capacities children have for expressing multiplicity, while considering how I might give new value to it in my work.

One day, my teaching partner, Carole Burton, observed children’s delight in the idea of a rose as “pokey” and beautiful, as they imagined it in movement and song. She followed up with the story of trimming her roses and getting scratched while enjoying their beauty. She posed a question to the 4- and 5-year-olds, “Have you ever experienced something that felt sad and happy at the same time?” Although this idea connected to the children’s interest in paradox and the emotions study in which they were engaged, they were not used to reflecting on paradoxical thinking as a group. Yet the challenge, paired with their interest, caused excited responses: “We got a box this morning with a toy inside, and we thought we had time to open it, but we ran out of time, but my sister said we could do it after school.” Another child added, “Spiders—their feet make me feel happy, but their bite is scary.” A third child said, “On the boat, since it’s a fun time on the boat, but we don’t get to do it very much, and you might fall off the boat and drown!” I felt renewed appreciation for the opportunity to learn from my partner as I listened to her make use of every chance (both in formal project planning and impromptu conversation) for the children to offer their diverse perspectives for circulation and construction of ideas through reflection. As an artist and a teacher, she is helping me to appreciate and research the critical role that studio languages provide for this exchange.

How can we make use of the wisdom that Paola shared in relationship to the role of materials in her comment, “[A] way that we have of promoting democracy and of realizing democracy [is] to give voice and to give value to every diversity, to give voice and to give value to all the different ways that children express themselves and all the different ways that children build and construct their knowledge”? (March 22, 2018)

**Revisiting the Hundred Languages**

I have spent much of my time as a teacher researching the role of materials in making children’s learning visible, drawing out children’s learning strategies and ideas, and developing a greater understanding of the affordances of materials for children to express and explore their thinking. This research leads me to new struggles and questions, as reflected in Paola’s statement: “[A] generative individual is the result of a creative dance between different languages. . . . pathological individuals are a result of a coup d’état in which one language is brought in to suppress all the others. This is a way of interrupting the conflict and coordination that exists between a multiplicity of languages” (March 22, 2018). I realize that while I have considered these ideas in the context of writing and storytelling, I must keep asking how I might understand the full potential that lies within translating ideas between languages.
Another aspect that I hope to understand in greater depth is that the hundred languages offer the opportunity to develop the idea that the work does not stop at the end of a single child’s experience with a material—the creation of an image, exploration of a material, expression of a theory, an idea. What can I learn by challenging myself to see how working with materials is a door to exchange and dialogue? How can the hundred languages support the circulation and construction of ideas to allow for change and exchange between all participants in this work together?

I used to believe that, as teachers, we can only do so much while trusting that children would evolve into active, caring, contributing community members as a result of their life experience, including the influence of the school and community. As I begin to consider all the possible interruptions to this process, I do not know how confident I am in this idea. The world is changing at a rapid pace, which makes me fearful that the digital interruptions, standardization of education, and fewer opportunities to live in empathetic relationship with one another will lead to further distancing ourselves from the motivation to consider complexity and connection in our communities. The only way for me to create a zone of hope is to challenge myself to take action.

In the opening remarks, NAREA Co-Chair Barbara Acton stated that this conference “tells a story” we become a part of through our participation. Participation is a subject at the center and core of every educational system and of the individuals interacting within them. This participation, be it by children or adults, is reflected in a constellation of images and ideas as varied as the contexts in which they are derived. Reflecting on our personal journeys of participation as students, teachers, administrators, parents, and people connected with these systems is essential if we hope to confront issues of power and privilege within them.

Sharing our Voice

The environmental and political conditions of today have led us to a point where change is not an option but a necessity. The gems that Paola and Ivana have offered help me to see more clearly than before that an optimistic gaze upon children and the educational systems that reflect an image of their competence as citizens from birth is the crucial key for the survival of our species. As I return to my own setting, I realize I must always consider what contributes to and what limits our democratic right to participation. Considering the boxes that we have put children and education in for so long, we may feel that we have to see dramatic changes in order to believe that things can be different. But I believe that change begins by shifting our lens and lending our voice through sharing our stories and inviting the building of new ideas by the constructive circulation of these ideas. If the introduction of new variables is a cause for reorganization, what new perspectives do we want to add to this story? Tom Drummond invited us to “listen for how social change happens” (March 22, 2018). Paola declared:

We think that the knowledge that we are discussing is not objective knowledge. It is knowledge that is a result of a process of construction...a result of a collective social building process in which knowing and making learning available becomes a single process. Therefore, the only effective way of learning is to participate in such a process. The primary part of democracy is giving value to diversity and difference, and this is the task of schools from the day that the child is born.” (March 22, 2018)

How might this reflection become an invitation for you to add your much-needed voice?

REFERENCES


Nan Hanson has been working with infants and toddlers and their families for 30 years. In 2006, Nan joined Mentor Graphics Child Development Center (CDC) in Wilsonville, OR as the infant-toddler program coordinator, and she currently serves as the education coordinator. She has been interested in the inspiration from Reggio Emilia since encountering “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit in New York City in 1994 and began to study the approach in earnest when she started working for Mentor Graphics CDC. Nan presented work from their infant-toddler program with Lella Gandini at an Opal School Summer Symposium and has participated in three NAREA conferences: in Boulder in 2008, Portland in 2012, and Seattle this year.

In my role as education coordinator at Mentor Graphics CDC, my work is often focused on professional development and the annual dance of integrating new and developing teachers to our team. It is through this lens that I have been reflecting on the conference. I have been thinking a lot about two topics of Paola Cagliari’s and Ivana Soncini’s presentations and how they might relate to the role of the teacher:

- The core understandings of the strategies children use to learn
- The concept of “learning contexts”

What might it mean to view a project as a “journey of desire”? How do we, as teachers, create “situations of motivation and play, [so that we begin]…to see those proximal zones [of development]”? (Soncini, March 22, 2018)

Despite many years of studying, working with inspiration from Reggio Emilia, and participating in two other NAREA conferences, I had a really powerful experience of integration in my own thinking during and after the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference, which I am just beginning to unpack. I was particularly struck by the clarity of video as a tool for professional development. It was so powerful at demonstrating the skill of the teachers in activating children’s natural learning strategies. I felt that through the window of video, I had a new view into the simultaneous complexity and simplicity of the work. I came away from the conference thinking that a fundamental understanding of the ways that children learn could function as a platform for strengthening the capacities of new teachers.

Much of my work at Mentor Graphics CDC lies in mentoring teachers of infants, so I find myself asking:

- Do we, as a school, have a collective understanding of the natural learning strategies of infants, and how might we give visibility to it, both for parents and new teachers? What is the teacher’s role in activating infants’ natural learning strategies?
- What competencies do we expect our infant curriculum to strengthen? What contexts must be created for those objectives to be realized?

I am hoping that I can integrate my own thinking about children’s learning in a way that might support me in offering some concrete points of access to this very complex work of developing teachers.

I was intrigued by the translation of Malaguzzi’s quotation as “nothing without pleasure” (Soncini, March 23, 2018). The idea of “nothing without joy,” as it has most often been translated in English, was always a bit puzzling to me, because, for me, joy has the connotation of something all-encompassing that just happens to you, that is exultant and exuberant, and that is often fleeting. The idea of pleasure in the pursuit of something, of working hard, of being deeply engaged is so much more compelling and, in a way, realizable. By that, I mean that as an educator, I can more easily believe that I am capable of and responsible for creating contexts that are pleasurable for children and their families and for teachers than contexts that are joyful. The idea that teachers can create contexts in which we are “capable of being a means through which what the children are learning can be amplified” and invite them “to be busy with their thinking… forming hypotheses, experimenting with those ideas… having uncertainty, and making mistakes” (Soncini, March 23, 2018) is message that I will carry with me.

Despite many years of studying, working with inspiration from Reggio Emilia, and participating in two other NAREA conferences, I had a really powerful experience of integration in my own thinking during and after the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference, which I am just beginning to unpack. I was particularly struck by the clarity of video as a tool for professional development.

-Nan Hanson
In reflecting back to what I learned during the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference and relating it to my own educational and teaching processes, I found that there was so much that both Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini shared that was relevant, challenging, and pushed my thinking forward. I would like to focus on two aspects of their presentations.

Paola said, “[E]ach child, each adult is asking to be looked at with an optimistic gaze . . . a gaze which looks at and sees . . . the potentials of each of us.” She also spoke about the need for educators to know more: “. . . being more aware, as adults, about the gaze that we have . . . that we know more about the beliefs [and] expectations that [we] gaze [at] the children with” (March 22, 2018).

Ivana asked, “In what way do we honor [children]?” She spoke about how we know children and their knowledge and stated, “Welcoming children with special rights into our schools all those years ago was a way of measuring ourselves, of measuring our own mental constructs.” She also said that Loris Malaguzzi had “an intuition that having a desire to welcome children with special rights was something that would give enormous gains to everyone’s formative experience” (March 22, 2018).

Over the past several years at Mentor Graphics Child Development Center, we have experienced higher enrollment of children with special rights. Specifically, in the classroom in which I have worked during the past few years, there have been more children with autism, anxiety, sensory processing disorder, and other special rights that have created a different educational context. I came to the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference feeling overwhelmed and confused about how to engage in constructive, respectful, and honorable work with each child and family, as well as with the entire group of children, while living and teaching within this dynamic context. I have often felt disheartened, exhausted, and incapable of being able to carry out my or our school’s values and beliefs around how children learn and construct knowledge. I feel that I have dishonored the identities of children with special rights by working tirelessly to fit them into the framework of our program, rather than looking at them with a gaze of wholeness and as unified beings.

As I listened to Paola and Ivana share the perspectives of the Reggio Emilia educators, their message strongly affected me as they dug deep into the core beliefs and pedagogy of working with children with special rights. As I listened to them, my heart and brain were filled up and challenged in a way that I believe is necessary in order to move my teaching and learning with children forward. As I prepared to re-enter the classroom after a weekend of inspiration, I asked myself:

- With what gaze do I look at each child? What could democracy look like if I changed my gaze?
- How am I honoring and promoting difference and diversity?
- What opportunities am I creating for children to leave traces of themselves? Why am I not feeling able to create contexts in which children can leave traces? How could I better take the traces of each child and give voice to them?
As I listened to Paola and Ivana share the perspectives of the Reggio Emilia educators, their message strongly affected me as they dug deep into the core beliefs and pedagogy of working with children with special rights. As I listened to them, my heart and brain were filled up and challenged in a way that I believe is necessary in order to move my teaching and learning with children forward.

—Amanda Jewart

- What could reintegration look like in our context?
- What ways of thinking can I change in order to begin creating spaces of hope and motivation for all children?
- What mental constructs have I built around working with children with special rights?
- How could I shift my perspective and expectations to honor and give value to all the different ways children construct and express knowledge?
- What role do I have in creating a community of democracy where all human beings are seen as whole?

My thoughts have definitely been challenged by the research and stories shared during the NAREA Winter Conference, and I plan to put these provocations into my pocket and begin to refer to them regularly. I also will dedicate energy toward creating a more dynamic context in which I demand from myself an optimistic gaze on every human being with whom I work—child, parent, and teacher. I believe that gaining the awareness and the ability to pause and evaluate the “why” behind my own thinking is the first step toward positive change in my knowledge building about children’s learning and my own teaching. I am left with so many lessons from this experience that I wonder how to best support other educators in our school who did not participate in the conference in understanding these new challenges of thought and pedagogy.
The concept of our gaze on children was a strong thread woven through our days together in Seattle. Both Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini spoke frequently about adults having a gaze toward children that conveys to children our image of them and communicates the power and the possibilities that the children possess.

–Dawn Kenney

Leaving the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference, I drove south toward Portland, OR. During the three-hour drive, I had the rare chance to be alone and reflect on my days at the conference. One thought kept returning to my mind, “What is my gaze when I look at children?” The concept of our gaze on children was a strong thread woven through our days together in Seattle. Both Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini spoke frequently about adults having a gaze toward children that conveys to children our image of them and communicates the power and the possibilities that the children possess.

In the United States, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the context and expectations of benchmarks, developmental milestones, teacher-to-child ratios, and strict safety regulations. We allow these to turn our gaze away from the child, to stop us from seeing them as whole. And when the child looks to us, they are met with a gaze full of worry and doubt, frustration and disappointment. Our gaze may be projecting fear of what the child cannot do rather than an optimistic gaze that is full of confidence.

Reflecting on the video shared on the third day of the conference, which followed a group of 5-year-old children facing the transition of learning to ride bikes without training wheels, I cannot help but think about how this same situation may have played out differently in many schools across the United States. Specifically, I reflect on the child who walked her bike to the top of the hill, seemingly thinking about riding it down. Her teachers were calm and engaged; they did not stop her from exploring this idea fully. I wonder what she saw when she met the eyes of her teachers that day. I would imagine there was love, trust, and possibility in the gazes reflecting back at her. In the same situation, I hope that I would have taken a breath and made space for her ideas at the top of that hill, but I am afraid I would have communicated fear and doubt in my gaze, regardless of my actions.

During this same morning, Ivana offered a cautionary statement, “When the teachers and the family begin to agree on this negative vision of the child, that child is finished.” For me, this statement related to an earlier idea she shared with us, “[A]dults [must] learn to manage their fears [about] what the children express” (March 24, 2018). Are we so afraid of what children might do or may not be able to do, that we cannot see the child before us and can no longer celebrate all that they have accomplished? Paola’s concluding remarks reminded us that “our meetings with parents are about the beauty and loveliness of growing up as a child and the enormous hard work it takes children to grow” (March 24, 2018).
Nineteen years ago, as a new parent, I received some advice that I follow to this day. I was told that in moments of reuniting with my child, I should always be careful to greet them first with a look of love and welcoming. At the time, this seemed silly; of course, I would always look at my child with love and welcoming! As a parent who now has three nearly grown children, I have heard these words in my head many times over the years. While the temptation at times may be to frown or communicate worry, I understand now that in these moments, my children are looking to me, meeting my gaze to discern if I have faith in them, if I believe they are capable, and whether I confirm that they are safe and loved no matter what.

Through this lens of parenthood, I begin to make connections and develop a new understanding of my own question: What is my gaze when I look at children? As a parent and teacher, the power of my gaze to convey a strong image of the child resonates deeply. I do not want any child to be “finished”! I want all children who meet my gaze to feel my confidence in them as complete, whole, and worthy. In trying to articulate this perspective, I look to a question that Paola asked repeatedly on our first day together when talking about partnerships with parents and children: “When we discuss participation in children’s learning processes, exactly what is it that we ask them to participate in?” This question seems simple at first, related to what we are literally asking them in the moment. In the end, perhaps, participation has nothing to do with those things. I believe we are asking them to participate in something much greater. We are asking them to participate in a revolution of hope and possibility, to create the utopia that Malaguzzi spoke of years ago (Soncini, March 22, 2018).
Julia Koumbassa

Julia Koumbassa is currently the director of the North Campus Children’s Center at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, MI. Julia has been working in the field of early childhood education for 20 years and has served as an infant educator, preschool and kindergarten teacher, and college faculty member. She has been serving in leadership roles in early childhood programs since 2004, with a passion for professional development and guiding positive change.

About five years ago, I left the Seattle area to take a position with the University of Michigan Children’s Centers. Seattle is home to a thriving early childhood community, rooted in serving families with diverse needs and educational approaches infused with a commitment to social justice. It is also home to a robust network of educators inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia. I did not quite realize what a gift it was to work as an early childhood professional in this community until I left. So, it felt quite serendipitous to be returning to Seattle for the first time since my departure to attend the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference.

The Seattle Public Library was a magnificent and most fitting venue for the conference, accurately reflecting the vibrant, quirky, and culturally diverse vibe of its city. The location also offered an ease of exploring some of Seattle’s most popular destinations, like the Pike Place Market. And, of course, there were many options for fueling ourselves with coffee—lots and lots of coffee.

Unsurprisingly, the most memorable part of the conference experience was the presentations from the Reggio educators, Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini. The completely full notebook that I left with serves as pretty good evidence of my captivation with their every word. Each sentence that flowed from their mouths was like its own Rumi poem, simultaneously possessing beauty and profound meaning—which, interestingly, is how I might also describe my interpretation of the spirit of the schools of Reggio Emilia.

Paola began the conference by expanding on the conference focus, “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy,” with a discussion of the idea of participation. She explained that participation is both a strategy and a value. It is a way of being as teachers and also a way of being for parents. By the end of our three days together, I was left with several questions around participation that I would like to continue to wonder about and explore in my own context. Some of those questions include: What are the processes that can activate participation? What exactly are we asking children, parents, and teachers to participate in? Does our school really promote a process of participation and construction of knowledge?

The discussion of participation led to the idea of “knowing the knowledge of children and adults,” which is an idea that was not only underlined and starred in my notebook, but has continued to permeate my thoughts since I left. Paola explained that teachers must strive to know more about how each child learns and constructs their learning, while also being more aware of the “gaze” that we have (March 22, 2018). My interpretation of the idea of the teacher’s (or adult’s) gaze, a term I heard a lot at both this conference and the 2017 NAREA Summer Conference in Michigan, is being aware of the beliefs, expectations, and biases we hold that may impact how we see the child.
I think that really considering our gaze as educators is so important, especially when we are committed to serving diverse children with diverse needs in ways that really allow us to see them and honor them for who they are. In Paola’s and Ivana’s presentations, discussing the gaze of teachers and parents was an important precursor to a discussion on serving children with special rights. At one point, Ivana said, “When the teachers and the family begin to agree on this negative vision of the child, that child is finished” (March 24, 2018). This statement really resonated with me because it communicated how impactful the adults’ image of the child can be on children’s growth and development. We know this inherently as educators, but I think that we can also lose sight of this when we are deeply involved (and perhaps exhausted or frustrated) in working through a child’s or family’s challenges. I am grateful for this reminder.

This past year, our school has seen the highest percentage of children with special rights and children needing more individual emotional support than I have seen in my 20-year career. As I work to support the teachers, the children, and the families of my school, the discussions on serving children with special rights in the schools of Reggio Emilia were of great interest and relevance to me. Again, I felt this sense of serendipity as Paola and Ivana shared their stories, as they were so closely related to what we have been experiencing in our own school.

The videos that Paola and Ivana shared communicated well the ways in which children with special rights are supported and engaged in the schools of Reggio Emilia. One video that stood out for me was one in which a child with autism had a fear of open spaces, in this case, the school’s piazza. The teachers led the other children in the class in developing ideas for how to help her overcome her fear and included the children in the realization of those supports. Seeing how the children in the school not only supported her, but were also invested in her progress, was an emotional experience for me. Since my departure from the conference, I have been thinking a lot about how we can do a better job of engaging the children in our school in not only supporting one another, but also in being truly invested in everyone’s accomplishments.

This was my third NAREA conference and each and every time, I am left with more wonderings, more inspiration, and more devotion to this profoundly important work that we do with young children and their families. I have been grateful for the opportunity to participate in and learn from the experiences of the schools of Reggio Emilia and am keenly aware of its tremendous impact on my work.

At one point, Ivana said, “When the teachers and the family begin to agree on this negative vision of the child, that child is finished.” . . . This statement really resonated with me because it communicated how impactful the adults’ image of the child can be on children’s growth and development.

–Julia Koumbassa
We at the Co-op Family Center were introduced to the Reggio Emilia philosophy about 20 years ago. We embraced the philosophy partly because we could identify with the history of the schools in Reggio. Our school was founded in 1979 by students who needed care for their children while they pursued their education at the University of Oregon. Now, we are a center with six classrooms, serving children aged 8 weeks through pre-kindergarten, and we also have an after-school program for children in kindergarten through fifth grade. Throughout our history, parents have been active participants in our school.

When we, as teachers at the Co-op, are given the opportunity to participate in a conference, especially a NAREA conference, we eagerly accept. Being able to hear firsthand from the educators in Reggio Emilia is an honor, and we always leave inspired to do better in our work with children. We usually send a few teachers together, and the opportunity for reflecting together and connecting what we learn to our own context is always invaluable. This time around was especially exciting to us because of the focus of the conference. I felt very fortunate to be able to experience this professional development initiative with my colleagues Kim Frank and Anna Gistelli and will be forever thankful for the engaging discussions we had and the collective knowledge we gained as a result of this conference.

The issues of democracy and diversity are close to my heart. The teachers at the Co-op recently started exploring the idea of teacher research and focusing our documentation on a certain topic each year. Last year, the teaching team in each room looked at children’s learning through the lens of perspectives. The intent of the focus on perspectives was to learn more about how we, as teachers, can support children in sharing and accepting each other’s viewpoints. After participating in this conference, I realize now that our question was really about how we, as teachers, can facilitate democratic learning, finding collective knowledge through respectful sharing of ideas. We started our yearlong conversation by reading an article by Ada Cigala, Arianna Mori, and Francesca Fangareggi (2015), “Learning Others’ Point of View: Perspective Taking and Pro-social Behaviour in Preschoolers.” This article emphasizes how important it is for children to practice looking at things from different angles, sharing and hearing each other’s points of view. The authors also suggest that practicing looking at physical things such as block structures or three-dimensional art from different angles can help children accept each other’s different perspectives.

Last year’s focus on perspectives in the context of prosocial learning made this year’s NAREA winter conference especially interesting to me. Ivana Soncini’s invitation to look at complex issues from the “side on” captivated me from the start, and in reflecting on our time together at the conference, I have related this concept to everything we learned. I believe that this side-on view has fundamentally changed the way I understand the Reggio Emilia philosophy, especially the concept of the hundred languages. We might think that looking at things from the side on is the same as looking deeper into things, but I believe it is more than that. I believe that it means looking at things from a different view completely.
Work with infants is not often included in early childhood education conferences, and those of us who work with infants generally have to adjust or transfer our learning to our context. When reflecting on the 2018 NAREA Winter Conference, I am thankful about the inclusion of a video story of young infants learning together on a climbing structure and the different ways that they approached climbing on it. The short discussion after this video supported an evolution in my thinking related to the hundred languages of children. My image of the hundred languages was of different media such as clay, paint, markers, etc. that we introduce to children from an early age so that they can use their knowledge of these languages to express themselves a bit later in life. The conversation after the video considered the children’s different ways of knowing within the languages of moving and reminded me that infants’ and toddlers’ negotiations with space represent one of their primary languages. We, as infant-toddler teachers, continually redesign our environments to support this ever-evolving language.

In his poem, “No way. The hundred is there.,” Loris Malaguzzi (1996) talks about “a hundred ways of knowing.” A “straight-on” view of that concept might interpret this to mean that each child has a hundred ways of knowing and many languages to express their thinking. This is the view I have always had. I understood that each child also expresses herself or himself differently than any other child. I thought of the hundred languages as a means for expression, but not necessarily for dialogue. The video about the infants and the climber helped me develop that side-on view of the hundred languages that clearly shows not just one child’s hundred ways of knowing, but also a hundred different children’s ways of knowing. As the Reggio educators discussed during our days together, there is no learning without diverse ways of thinking. If we view the concept that Malaguzzi writes about in his poem from the side on, we might see the hundred languages as a major tool for democracy.

A second video shown at the conference represents another strong example of the hundred languages as a tool for democracy. This video showed a group of children playing together within the context of “shop.” The teacher’s provocation was to choose two things and pay for them together. During this video, we saw three of the children come up with three different ways to explain to a younger child how she could pay “6” for the two items she bought in the store. We saw, within the language of math, three different ways of knowing. Not only did the teacher see the different thinking of each child, but more importantly the children were able to see each other’s different ways of thinking. Each child in the group came away having learned something. Even the youngest child, who stayed silent and might be considered by some as too young for the conversation, came away with knowledge that she could apply later in a different context. There was not an “expert” in this group, but rather a gathering of collective knowledge. It is the right of children to learn in a democratic way—to have their own voices and ideas heard without judgment and to learn to listen and respectfully engage with others’ different ways of knowing. It is the right of children to participate in true democracy.
Collective knowledge was a thread throughout the conference—the idea that in order for children to learn democratically in a group, there had to be diversity within the group. Without diverse thinking, no learning will take place. That means that children with special rights as well as children who we might assume are too young for the work should be included in meaningful work with the group.

–Heida Sigurdardotir

Ivana shared that another strategy developed in Reggio Emilia when working with children with special rights is to change the context in terms of the number of teachers in the room. By adding a teacher for the class as a whole, rather than a support teacher for the child with special rights, the context for learning for all the children is changed. That is what is possible in the municipal early childhood system in Reggio Emilia. In Eugene, OR, we have to look side-on at the issue of structural support in our context—look beyond the wall of the impossible and toward possibilities. At the Co-op, for example, parents work in our classrooms, and we have a relationship with a nearby high school child development program. We can ask more students at a nearby community college to do their practicum with us. We can invite the residents at a nearby retirement home to spend time with us, which might not only enrich our lives but perhaps theirs as well. How can we use these valuable community resources and relationships to support the contexts we want to create for all of the children, including those with special rights?

Putting supportive structures aside, one of the first things we, as adults, have to rethink is how we view children with special rights and how we share aspects of their day with parents. Some of us fall into the trap of focusing on the negative at the end of the day, when we are tired and wish things had gone differently. Ivana reminded us about the reality that “[w]hen the teachers and the family begin to agree on this negative vision of the child, that child is finished” (March 24, 2018). Her words
represented a truth that resonated strongly with me. We have to change how we talk about and treat children with special rights. I know that in our hearts, we want to do what is best for all children, but because the work is sometimes difficult, this may not be evident. Ivana reminded us how easy it is to say that we welcome children with special rights, but we must mean that from the bottoms of our hearts, and it has to be visible. We have to look at all children as a part of the diversity that makes democratic learning possible.

We have the power, through our own image of children, to change others’ images of children with special rights, as well as the children’s images of themselves. This is especially important for teachers and others who work with children with special rights, as these children are more than likely met with a different image elsewhere in the community. Ivana shared what neuroscientists say about desire—that desire can be as important as the desirable action itself. Having a strong image of oneself leaves room for desire and hope, and citizens with desire and hope are more likely to be active contributors in their community.

I have believed for some time that the values and principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, due to their very nature, support children with special rights. We, as Reggio-inspired teachers, must continue to grow in our understanding of the Reggio Emilia philosophy in order for it to be the foundation for our work with all of the children and families in our classroom. We must develop partnerships with our parents, strive to understand the hundred languages as a synonym for diversity, and be willing to “leap over the wall” (Malaguzzi, 1987, p. 16) and research possibilities.

When we honor children with special rights as members of our community who are entitled to the same rights of others, we realize that we have to create a context for learning that works for all children. When we add wheelchair ramps to our spaces, we do that to honor the right of everyone to move around and access every part of the school. We remember that children with special rights have zones of proximal development just like any other child, and we offer provocations accordingly. We work to discover the multiple languages each child learns through and uses to express herself or himself. This is not to say that creating an appropriate context for children with special rights is easy. It is challenging, but by taking a side-on view, it is possible. Children with special rights are a part of the diverse classroom community, and they are a part of the democratic learning we want to happen there. When we look at children with special rights as a part of our learning community, we are moving beyond their right to inclusion to that of equal participation.

Ivana shared what neuroscientists say about desire—that desire can be as important as the desirable action itself. Having a strong image of oneself leaves room for desire and hope, and citizens with desire and hope are more likely to be active contributors in their community.

REFERENCES
Resources

Organizations

NAREA
North American Reggio Emilia Alliance
www.reggioalliance.org

Reggio Children
info@reggiochildren.it
www.reggiochildren.it

Reggio Children Publications

Resources published by Reggio Children are available:
In the U.S. from Learning Materials Workshop
802-862-8399
info@learningmaterialsworkshop.com
www.learningmaterialsworkshop.com

In Canada from Parentbooks
416-537-8334
orders@parentbooks.ca
www.parentbooks.ca

Bibliography

Visit the NAREA website for a comprehensive listing of resources related to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy.

North American Study Groups in Reggio Emilia, Italy

Contact: Angela Ferrario, Reggio Children liaison in the U.S. for study groups
aferrario@comcast.net

International Professional Development Initiatives in Reggio Emilia, Italy

Contact: Reggio Children
www.reggiochildren.it

“The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” Exhibit

June 20–November 30, 2018
Boston, MA
Hosted by the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network, the exhibit will be located at Wheelock College and accompanied by a series of professional development initiatives.
Contact: Kelly Pelligrini
kelly@charlestownnursery.org

January–May 2019
Madison, WI
Hosted by the Preschool of the Arts, Madison Public Library, and Overture Center for the Arts, the exhibit will be accompanied by a series of professional development initiatives.
Contact: Ann Gadzikowski
agadzikowski@preschoolofthearts.com


Peer-Reviewed Issues

See the Innovations Peer-Review Process page for the summary of the peer-review process for the September 2018 issue. For further information, contact Judith Allen Kaminsky, judy@reggioalliance.org
New NAREA Resources Available!

In celebration of the 25th anniversary of *Innovations*, NAREA launched several new resources. The inaugural volume of the *Echoes* series, *Environment, Spaces, Relations*, highlights voices from Reggio Emilia, Italy and North America. We anticipate this will be a valuable resource for educators as they continue to design spaces in schools viewed as places of life and relationships.

**Cost:** $35 + S/H

A series of 25 *postcards* designed with quotes from each year of *Innovations* was a favorite at the 2017 NAREA Summer Conference. The front of the postcards highlight, in English and Italian, a key word from each quote. The format is perfect for writing welcome notes to parents, thank you notes to a community sponsor, or communications to legislators. Bulk pricing available upon request.

**Cost:** $15 + S/H

Through the combined efforts of the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia; Reggio Children; and NAREA, we bring you a resource from Reggio Emilia, the English translation of the *Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools*. Included are descriptions of how a school day is organized, the culture of the *atelier*, the way the kitchens work, and the priority access for children with special rights, among other aspects of the educational project.

**Cost:** $15 + S/H

If you are interested in purchasing these new resources, please contact the NAREA office (thresa@reggioalliance.org or 770-552-0179).
Infants and children in all places in the world cannot continue to have rights only on paper; the right to have good parents, good housing, good food, good schools, good teachers, and good government is what they ask for and what is urgently needed. If we adults will keep in mind that the children are always the holders of new possibilities and perspectives—and not only in the field of learning and of knowledge—perhaps we will not carelessly dissipate, with guilty nonchalance, the good that they, along with we, possess.

– Loris Malaguzzi, Innovations, v.1, no. 1, Fall 1992