

PERSPECTIVES ON NAREA

The 17th NAREA Summer Conference

Creating Conditions for Learning and Living in Schools for Young Children: Reggio Emilia's Experience

by NAREA Staff

As the world faces economic and cultural crises, worsened by the global pandemic, we understand that those who are the most vulnerable are more greatly affected. Too often, this means children. With this in mind, NAREA, in collaboration with Reggio Children, offered a platform for sharing the collective voices of children, families, and educators who envision and live in a world that embraces diversity, multiple points of view, and excellence in education.

Each time we encounter experiences from Reggio Emilia, we marvel at the depth, focus, complexity, and innovation within the daily life of the infant-toddler centers and preschools. The Reggio Emilia educational project is based on fundamental values and cultural, social, political, and relational conditions that are rights from birth. Reggio Emilia's example continues to broaden our possibilities to raise early childhood education to a level of priority in all communities.

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Positioning the 17th NAREA Summer Conference within the theme of *Creating Conditions for Learning and Living in Schools for Young Children: Reggio Emilia's Experience* recognizes the desire of educators and advocates to view schools as places of creative imaginings where authentic connections strengthen relationships with our youngest citizens and among adults. We feel that one of the great challenges we face is finding unity between the many different ways children think and feel and the contexts educators offer children. In her welcome at the opening of the conference, Margie Cooper, NAREA standing chair, shared the words of Loris Malaguzzi (2012),

I believe that our schools show the attempt that has been made to integrate the educational program with the organization of work and the environment, so as to allow for maximum movement, interdependence, and interaction. The school is an inexhaustible and dynamic organism: it has difficulties, controversies, joys, and capacities to handle external disturbances. What counts is that there be agreement about what direction the school should go and that all forms of artifice and hypocrisy be kept at bay. Our objective, which we will always pursue, is to create an amiable environment where children, families, and teachers feel at ease. (p. 41)

Now, more than ever, we look for inspiration that illuminates what it means to embrace a world of promise, possibility, and humanity for all children, families, and educators.



Artist Esther Traugot | intricately crocheted sculptures

Voices

The summer conference was a unique opportunity to hear from three alternating voices from Reggio Emilia: Elena Maccaferri, Moira Nicolosi, and Laura Castagnetti. Throughout the two days we spent together, each shared presentations, reflections, and messages that took us into the “folds of *progettazione*” (Nicolosi, 2021). The invitation to peer behind the scenes into the work of children and educators offered insights into designing quality learning contexts. Throughout the conference, the voices of children, teachers, notable educators, philosophers, naturalists, scientists, authors, and artists were brought forth to bring depth to the notion of *progettazione*.

Elena Maccaferri

Elena Maccaferri is a *pedagogista* and member of the pedagogical coordinating team of the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Currently, she has the role of representative for the research project “Resonances: Listening, Productions, and Compositions Between Dance and Music in Everyday Contexts.” In addition, she is one of the pedagogical coordinators of the Remida project. Elena reminded us of Reggio Emilia's ethical and political commitment to make the children's learning processes visible.

We believe we are living in a historical period. The crisis we are living in is a social, political, health crisis, and it is important to communicate the rights of children at this historical time. Making visible the children's imaginaries is an important way to continue to evolve a culture of solidarity and childhood. (Maccaferri, 2021)

Considering Elena's background, it was not surprising when she reflected on how children use their bodies to ask questions, look for answers, make connections, and resonate with the natural world. Maccaferri said,



Elena Maccaferri

Interdependence of bodies is the capacity that we have to feel ourselves, the perceptions of others, the emotions of others, and for our gaze to be capable of taking those things in. That gaze, which is capable of feeling other people's emotions and perceptions becomes a metaphor for a wider and broader definition of listening. (2021)

Elena wove together the children's work, influences of artists, the value of the *atelier*, historical milestones within the educational project, and the culture of self-reflection as she described core values, intelligences, and aspirations of Reggio Emilia's educational approach.

One of the paradigm-shifting aspects of Reggio Emilia's experience is both the presence of the *atelier* and the diffusion of the culture of the *atelier* throughout the infant-toddler centers and preschools. Deepening our consideration of the culture of the *atelier*, Elena describes the following:

This idea of caring about things, removing them from their invisibility, is part of ecological thinking, a part of the *atelier*, and the foundation of human's ways of knowing. You will find that we have always sought to have a dialogue with processes of art. (Maccaferri, 2021)

She went on to explain that thinking about artists' approaches to different domains and cultures becomes a tool that teachers can use for building their understanding of learning processes and interpreting the many ways in which children develop their knowledge. Comprehending the resonance between children's ways of knowing and artists' ways of knowing accompanies educators in designing contexts conducive to children's learning processes, rich in possibilities, the 100 languages, and countless combinations of the 100 languages. Offering learning contexts empathetic to the time it takes to build a relationship with the subject is crucial. As Elena stated, "If we skip these phases of getting to know the subject of what we are representing, without empathy, this is when we find ourselves with stereotyped images" (Maccaferri, 2021).

Elena shared that the educators in Reggio Emilia have a responsibility to have a more poetic approach to design thinking, which is full of inventiveness based on the daily life with the children. The *atelier*, documentation, and the evocative power of shared experiences play pivotal roles in *progettazione*, also known as designing. At the heart of *progettazione* is the adults' responsibility to comprehend concepts within the proximal zones of the children and create contexts where they can evolve. Educators seek to understand current research and theories and support a constant dialogue between themselves and the children to get closer to their thinking. Teaching is not at the center of their intentions; learning is. The educator aims to respect the many ways children encounter the objects of knowledge and to uncover as many as possible. When designing, educators in Reggio Emilia research to understand how children are researching. These parallel design pathways coexist among the children and the adults and require continuous reflection and adjustment to determine possible ways of extending children's and adults' learning. Through daily life examples, Elena highlighted the bravery of educators to see the potentials, intelligences, and proximal development of children so that they open new windows to what is unknown. Elena brought the children's work to us and wove in the professional development of the teachers, the

historical world, and the city's contemporary culture, revealing once again that interconnectedness, interdisciplinarity, and solidarity create intelligent and beautiful results.

Moira Nicolosi

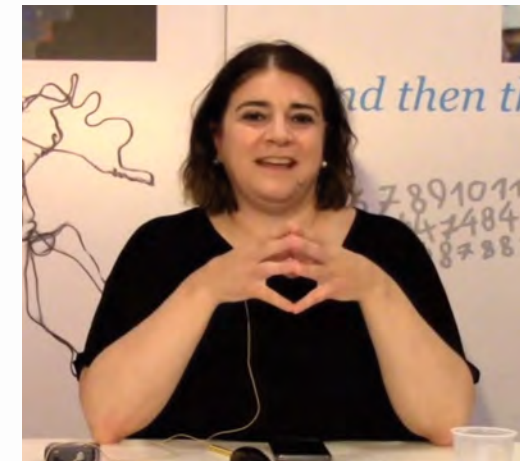
Moira Nicolosi is a *pedagogista* and member of the pedagogical coordinating team of the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Furthermore, she served as coordinator of professional development courses for *pedagogistas* and coordinated the planning and organization of research in the educational field with national and international partners.

Moira focused on children with special rights and their families, as well as their teachers and community. Moira discussed Reggio Emilia's choice to embrace a holistic approach, which does not detach from what is culturally and biologically connected. Following Elena's thread, Moira added,

If we believe that the context is so central to our educational project, then you can understand that it is even more so for children with areas of fragility. We have to take into consideration the importance of context even more... the reason we amplify the context... is to give people a plurality of accesses onto the world of knowledge. (Nicolosi, 2021)

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Sharing documentation revealed children's active and passionate participation, and gave visibility to contexts open to different languages, materials, exchanges, and accommodations. Shared videos provided testimony to the children who push past stereotypes and discover particularities in the world they inhabit with others. Moira reminded us that



Moira Nicolosi

adults need to take care as the children are always looking at them. The children watch; borrow; lend gestures, words, actions; and ways of forming relationships to generalize their knowledge and solidify a sense of self. For this reason, teachers need to work to enrich their imaginations, experiment, try out new things, and push against stereotypes. Moira reminded us of the different pathways humans use to access knowledge and the never-ending reorganization of what we learn. She said,

How we learn speaks of who we are. As we are learning, we learn something about ourselves. . . . Knowledge of reality is constructed through individual and inter-individual cognitive processes. A knowledge process always has within it a character that is cultural in nature. Learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural context. (Nicolosi, 2021)

She drew attention to the idea that intelligence and learning depend on contexts rooted in culture. These rich contexts offer experiences that lead to the proximal zones, where understanding emerges if a more proficient person accompanies the learner. In a presentation entitled, *Design Thinking in the Relations Between Children, Adults, and 'Languages' from an Inclusive Perspective of Differences – "A Shining Hug,"* we were privileged to view an investigation of life that took place with five-year-old children in Reggio Emilia. In the research, teachers and children had a strong desire to develop an empathetic relationship between themselves and nature. Over time,

children came up with multiple ideas as a focus of the research, which became digital stories shared with the families and community. Once again, our colleagues from Reggio Emilia emphasized the importance of sharing the traces, facts, happenings, and the culture of children with the wider community.

Sharing keywords and definitions of reference points were other ways Moira clarified the theoretical concepts that inform the work. Words common in education: research, didactics, observation, documentation, and design take on different meanings and imaginaries when explained within the daily life in Reggio

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Emilia. Research, no longer tied to the scientific and academic world, is free to be a strategy and attitude to get close to children's ways of knowing. Didactics is how teachers interpret listening to children. Observation is no longer objective, but is informed by backgrounds, depends on created contexts and relationships, and is the bountiful source of documentation. Documentation gives structure to daily life and serves as a place from which to extend new learning contexts. Essentially, design or *progettazione* is a choice that involves possibilities, theories, and openness of children and adults. A design approach, as we observe in the shared experiences of Reggio Emilia infant-toddler centers and preschools, transforms words, concepts, and ideas, making it possible to think in a non-sequential way, which is one way the human brain works—we think about things, imagine new ways, make new connections, and expand.



Participant Janet Davies | note taking

Laura Castagnetti

Laura Castagnetti is a teacher at the Salvador Allende municipal preschool. She has collaborated with numerous educational projects and professional development initiatives promoted by the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. In addition, Laura collaborates with Reggio Children as an educator in professional development experiences.

Laura's comments and reflections expanded on the design of learning contexts. She continued the discussion and built an argument for design work with children by sharing documentation focused on mutuality, relations, and connectedness—an ecological vision of living beings. The documentation shared showed the overarching theme of trees as natural connectors. This theme was a cultural choice and a political act that grew out of the restrictions that came with COVID. The need to be outside during this time meant that the outdoors became essential to designing learning contexts. The synthesis of the work celebrated learning processes that began with enchantment, connections, and the motivation to know something new. Throughout the work, children used graphics as a language, reinterpreting the world with each mark they made. Laura shared, “It is very important to

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constantly regenerate the language in our everyday contexts. It is important because every sign is a way of multiplying our gaze on the world. That means we are multiplying the ways we relate to the world” (Castagnetti, 2021). The drawings of the children showed the complexity they discovered and highlighted during their investigation of trees. Each mark represented a different view of



Laura Castagnetti

life and a variety of points of view by those who made the mark. In revealing the work of the teachers, Laura cast a light on the underpinnings of *progettazione* in concrete ways, sharing their choices, continual evaluations, and relaunching strategies that were rooted in professional development, history, current culture, understandings, and children's proximal zones of learning, interests, and desires. The children's research and the teacher's actions brought clarity to the design process.

Putting a finer point on Reggio Emilia's perspective, Elena Maccaferri (2021) said,

Children feel that their point of view and their voice become part of a fabric with the others, interacts with the other voices, and points of view of the other children. That is to say, [in] our context, we don't consider our conversation context to be the sum of 26 voices and opinions but a weave, a collective or polyphonic weave, of voices interacting.

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We hope that weaving the collective voices from the 17th NAREA Summer Conference remains in your thinking as you work in your contexts to raise early education to new heights with a common goal of creating well-being for the entire community.

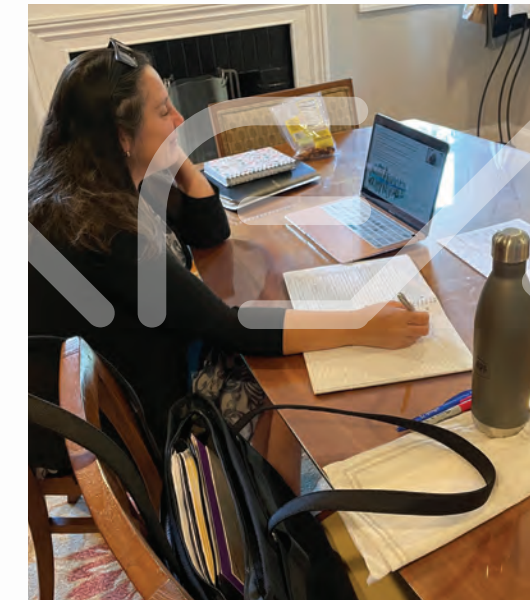
Hearing from participants is important to us. We are grateful to the educators from Velma Thomas Early Childhood Center in Chicago who contributed a collection of collaborative reflections on the summer conference. Perhaps one of their reflections will resonate with you. Finally, in closing and by request, we share a sampling of supporting quotes encountered during the conference.



Peter Brown | Head Teacher



Mara Villanueva | Special Education Classroom Assistant



Gabriela Garcia | NAREA



Jane McCall | Interpreter

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