

## PERSPECTIVES ON NAREA

# The 2<sup>nd</sup> NAREA Fall Conference

Shaping Environments That Foster Interaction, Research, Curiosity, and Communication

by NAREA Staff

In opening the 2<sup>nd</sup> NAREA Fall Conference, Margie Cooper, NAREA standing chair, notes that since 2005, every NAREA conference brings forth an electric excitement to convene with unique educators who value the rights of children, families, and educators and look to Reggio Emilia as a guiding star to navigate the work of becoming the best they can be. This conference is no different. In two days of exchange, the group from Canada, Israel, Italy, and the United States join Elena Maccaferri, *pedagogista*, and Filippo Chieli, *atelierista*, and interpreter Jane McCall to focus on “Shaping Environments That Foster Interaction, Research, Curiosity, and Communication.”



Margie Cooper, NAREA standing chair



Filippo Chieli, *atelierista*, and Elena Maccaferri, *pedagogista*

The conference captures the vital energy of the speakers despite the restrictions of a Zoom webinar. We desire to share critical thoughts, moments, and concepts of the conference in a way that summons the passion of Elena and Filippo. It is clear from the beginning that they bring to the forefront a disposition of care, awareness, and attention to their daily lives with children, families, and professional colleagues. The speakers share the values and history of the Reggio Emilia Approach in presentations punctuated with images and storytelling to illustrate theory in practice. Like all great storytellers, Elena and Filippo capture the attention of others with their enthusiasm, respect, and belief in the stories they share. Good storytellers have a high level of empathy towards others, embrace creativity, and build a bond of trust with the listeners. The conference provides many opportunities for us to experience the stories of real children through the lens of storytellers who live the encounters with them.

Elena begins by recognizing the situation in the world and reminding us of the desire of educators to exchange with each other while placing children at the center of education. She continues,

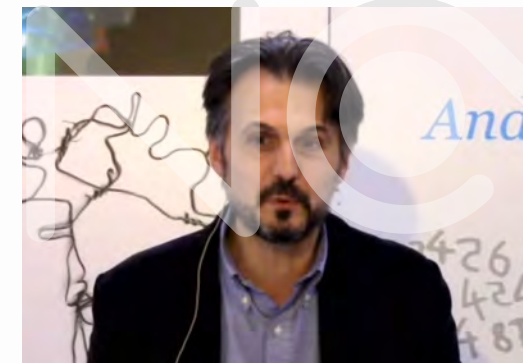
So, we all know that this is a very complex moment in time. It's good for us to take this pause to reflect together, exchange our points of view, see each other's work, and think together about the quality of our work and the quality of educational services around the world. (Maccaferri, 2021)

With this statement, Elena opens the space for building new thoughts and new inspirations and for sharing with colleagues and others.

Filippo explains that they want to construct presentations from new material taken from the contemporary life in the schools to share with us. In sharing material being lived and experienced currently, Elena and Filippo take

the risk of offering unvarnished work, work that may not be “mulled over to the same extent” as older work (Chieli, 2021). Nonetheless, Elena and Filippo's stories offer exceptionally rich contexts embedded with the rights of children to express themselves in all their subjectivities. The tales emphasize the many ways.

Reggio Emilia continues to seek a dimension of research that is quotidian, that is every day. This dimension of research isn't special but is part of our everyday life and interested in the processes of learning of both children and adults in an intersubjective way. (Maccaferri, 2021)



Filippo Chieli, *atelierista*



Jane McCall, interpreter

Elena reminds us that the culture of childhood is not a given and should be held in high esteem. Each educational project, school, and teacher has an idea of how they see and think about children, and that image can determine how we make educational choices. In Reggio

Emilia, the image of the child they choose influences the construction of learning contexts in the daily life of the infant-toddler centers and preschools. The speakers introduce the conference participants to presentations and videos that underscore the right to differences, to being different and expressing uniqueness and particularities in relation to others. These current stories from Reggio feature children in relationship with nature, movement, and sound. This is not surprising as Elena and Filippo have a strong affinity for contexts with these connections.

Citing neuroscience research, Elena explains that the physical self is fundamental to all human learning, and the creation of places for bodies to express themselves and connect to another asks the big question “Who is the other?” She further offers,

This idea of otherness is a paradigm, even for us in Reggio Emilia and for all of us worldwide based on the things that are happening in the world now and have been happening for many years. Our relationship as human beings with the planet must find new paradigms for us to express. We believe that all schools, from those for infants to the highest level of school, must be capable of renewal, of finding a way of being less anthropocentric, of a new way of thinking about human relations with the world. (Maccaferri, 2021)

Elena shares that over the past two years, the educational project of Reggio Emilia and the professional learning plans shared with families have tried to bring a magnifying glass to their outdoor spaces. The educators in Reggio Emilia recognize that the outdoors can ask and answer many questions children and adults have. Children encounter the outdoors daily when in the parks and natural areas surrounding their homes or when in the schools' winter gardens and outdoor spaces. Reggio

educators understand that living beings in the world outside have a different design from human design and that when we listen to nature, the first thing that comes to mind is complexity. Reggio educators desire to create learning contexts that encounter living beings in a contemporary way.

Elena remarks that she deliberately chose to share work with very young children, 3 to 15 months, because of the complexity of being in relationship with them and the difficulties adults might have in collecting clues from children who have only recently come into the world. The first story Elena shares is from the Rivieri infant-toddler center in a space designed to welcome and reflect the language of music. The space, prepared for sound encounters, offers researching adults' opportunities to observe the children's actions. These educators are interested in ideas connected to sound systems, such as reverberations and timbre. Through a video sharing, how the environment and materials change over time and how the teachers use materials to make the children's gestures and actions more explicit are made visible. This helps the educators become more attentive and aids their listening. The adults do not simply prepare the environment, they are a part of the context. Elena recalls an idea of Jerome Bruner (1960), which suggests that everything can be learned by everyone at any age depending on how the adult designs the learning context.

The video features young children who are fantastic processors and builders of knowledge. Elena highlights the adult obligations that accompany that reality, "They are taking responsibility for the orchestration of children's research. And we know, all of us with this age group, how difficult it is to take responsibility for children's research." She continues,

We'd like to underscore that it is our observations with children, the way we observe them constantly that leads us to say that aesthetics is children's way of knowing. Children's way of knowing is aesthetic. That means that empathy is at the forefront in the quality of relations. We are talking about contexts that favor a curious and active way of getting to know the subjects that we are investigating. (Maccaferri, 2021)

Elena continues sharing strategies that educators have in mind while designing learning contexts, such as creating questions for looking to the future to predict what might happen. The creation of questions does not only occur at the beginning of the design process. This is a continual process that orients the teacher's gaze in a particular direction. Reggio educators use the questions to think together, analyze the context they design, interpret how the children encounter the context, and relaunch. Elena introduces three elements of designing to participants:

- The teacher's role
- The relationship of individual children to the learning group
- The role of documentation

She invites us to keep them in our pockets as we view the documentation from Reggio.

Elena speaks of the Reggio educators' view of knowledge as ecological, based on children's empathetic relationship with the world. She went on to describe how documentation makes visible the children's complex relational thinking:

This is the mission of documentation to see that. It's a mission that we share with the parents of the children, with the families. The mission of documentation, therefore, is to see all this complexity, the capacity of children for complex thinking. (Maccaferri, 2021)

Elena describes the necessity of approaching education through plural points of view, not a singular perspective:

We don't say that we want a plurality, different points of view to create more uncertainty. We need more than one point of view so that we know always that we are living with uncertainty, because our thinking is always becoming. It isn't fixed, it hasn't been determined. (Maccaferri, 2021)

This plurality of views is made visible in the Reggio educators' presentations and the documentation that is shared.

Elena introduces "Resonances - Design Thinking and the Language of Music," research conducted in 10 schools on designing contexts in education through the language of music. She speaks about the difficulty of creating learning contexts and the need to renew ideas, languages, and contexts constantly. Reggio educators do not want teachers to feel inadequate when working with particular languages. Therefore, teachers, *pedagogisti*, and *atelieristi* design professional learning opportunities in which to engage as adults. Professional learning has the potential to awaken sensibilities towards languages. In Reggio Emilia, this is essential because the teacher lives the closest to the children in the daily life.

The dialogue between the teachers, *atelieristi*, *pedagogisti*, and artists is fundamental to the research. Carefully designed workshops encourage teachers to embody the language before offering it to children, not to learn a technique or correct way but rather to raise awareness and levels of attention when designing learning contexts for children. The idea that the design is connected to daily life and emerges through a tightly woven relationship between life and design remains a constant. Elena explains, "We are talking about places of permanent everyday research where we never separate the idea of learning from the idea of research because we believe that all learning has to do with an attitude of research" (Maccaferri, 2021). Some of the areas of research in Reggio Emilia include:

- » How children acquire knowledge
- » How children process knowledge
- » How children carry out knowledge
- » How teachers construct their own knowledge together with children.

As Elena and Filippo guide the participants through several documented stories, they offer specific ways in which they shaped the environments to foster research and creativity. After sharing a video of a virtual visit to the Balducci school, Filippo offers a presentation on research with 5-year-old children

at Balducci, "The Wood Makes Friends with Music." He begins by inviting us to read together a quote from David George Haskell's *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors* (2017), "We cannot step outside life's songs. This music made us; it is our nature (p. viii)." Haskell's quote goes on to state,

Our ethic must therefore be one of belonging, an imperative made by all the more urgent by the many ways that human actions are fraying, rewiring, and severing biological networks worldwide. To listen to trees, nature's great connectors, is therefore to learn how to inhabit the relationships that give life its source, substance, and beauty. (pp. viii-ix)

Filippo invokes an image of adults who deeply think about an area of investigation and look to books, research, poetry, art, and the natural world for inspiration that can accompany them as they shape the learning contexts within the centers and schools. The culture and the knowledge of the subject often calls for a deeper investigation to open thinking to more possibilities, more questions, and more conditions for working.

Filippo tells a story about an investigation designed to look for possible relations between trees and musical instruments. The children take instruments outside to get closer to the trees to research in ways that are physical, original, reflective, and exploratory. The experience resonates with the children, instruments, and trees, connecting them with fragments of vibrations that feed the research and keep them attached to the concepts of beauty and life. In closing that story, Filippo shares, "Being outdoors in harmony with elements of nature can confuse you. But you here are capable of giving children time to feel confused and then time to find themselves again" (Chieli, 2021).

The presentation Filippo shares is close to his heart, a story from before the pandemic about a soundwalk, a way of walking through a space that invited all to immerse oneself in listening. It is a reminder to adults to be immersed inside the work with the children, "con il bambini" (Chieli, 2021). It is also an



encounter that requires adults to look carefully at their knowledge and how the children are seeking understanding. Within the presentation, Filippo shares critical elements of the research—variety, complexity, and equilibrium—that become transformed in interactions with others when encountered.

Filippo discusses encountering the soundwalk. The experience of a large group on a soundwalk is like listening to a small orchestra and potentially resonating with what they encounter. Canadian musicologist and composer Murray Schaefer gives us a beautiful idea of being in a permanent concert of the universe where the seats in the room are free. . . . When we begin listening to it and encountering it, soundscapes interrogate us and ask us to reply in some way, and our bodies are the main way in which we respond." (Chieli, 2021)

Filippo helps us see that sound has the potential to be a way to rethink our relationship with the planet, to find the original unity between humans and nature, and to experience the complexity of belonging.

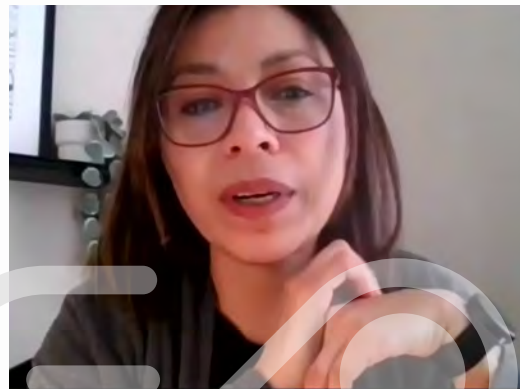
After two days of diving deep into the concept of designing environments, including periods of questions and responses, our time together comes to an end. With deep gratitude, we thank our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, Italy, Elena Maccaferri, Filippo Chieli, and Jane McCall, who share theory and stories with us to engage our thoughts. We are encouraged and moved by all the educators who join us from various contexts, who work every day with children and families to ensure excellence in education. We feel that the reflections on the conference from participants are representative of the group, and we are thankful for those who responded.

Reggio Emilia educators excel in the deep and meaningful way they give context and interpretation to the learning experience. I am always touched and inspired about the capabilities of children. Documentation is a powerful way to transform education.

**Fabiola Barrios**



**Eric Bucher**



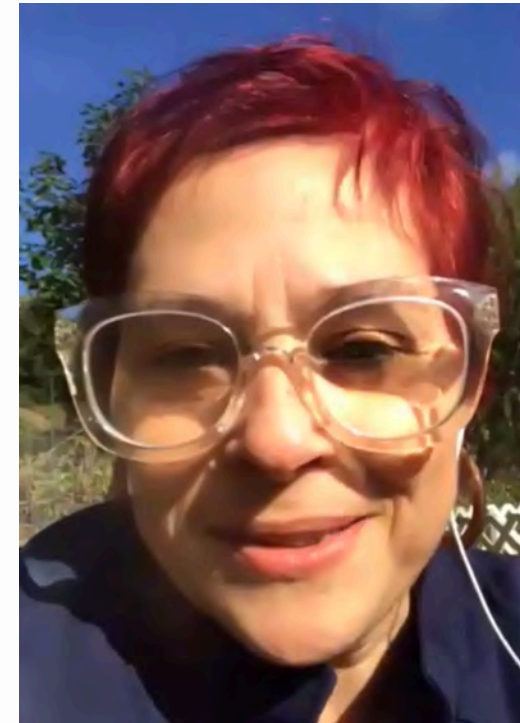
**Fabiola Barrios**



**Teresa Cole**



**Vanessa Bond**



**Tamara Troadec**

I appreciate the great wisdom that comes from the Reggio Emilia schools. I enjoy the thoughtfulness and the invitation to engage. I appreciate the thought that is put into how to make a virtual conference more engaging.

**Amanda Messer**

I appreciated seeing the videos from the unique perspective that Filippo offered. It impacts my current practice to slow down and observe with a different “gaze.” The

image of the child that educators hold in Reggio Emilia is very inspiring and noticeable through the rich environments, time, and materials offered to the children. I enjoyed and was inspired by the soundwalk on the second day. Seeing children's competence and the school as a place of everyday research was very inspiring.

**Paola Hohenadel**

I have increased appreciation of the process of close observation of children, both as a group and individually, to anticipate and plan for next steps in building projects. I also appreciate the oftentimes forgotten emphasis on awareness of learning goals that always need be in the back of the adult's mind and guides the direction of the classroom project work. The pace of the classroom experiences is steady and geared to the needs and tempo of the children rather than awareness of the clock.

**Betty Lansdowne**

We feel that Elena's words offer us a good reflection in our ongoing story of growing as professional educators:

We hope that you can take some small part of these two days away with you, take them back to the places where you work with your colleagues, take them home, reflect on them. It's very important for us that outside in the world we form a community where all of us can be thinking and reflecting about the rights of children and working towards those rights being respected. (Maccaferri, 2021)

## REFERENCES

- Bruner, J. S. (1960). *The process of education*. Harvard University Press.
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- Haskell, D. G. (2017). *The songs of trees: Stories from nature's great connectors*. Penguin Books.
- Maccaferri, E. (2021, October 20–29). Conference presentation. 2<sup>nd</sup> NAREA Fall Conference, Virtual.