

## The 14<sup>th</sup> NAREA Summer Conference – “Crossing Cultures, Contexts, and Communities”

by the NAREA Conference Team

At a time when children’s rights at the U.S. border were the topic of international news, Boston, with its long history of welcoming both local and immigrant families, seemed uniquely poised to host the 2018 NAREA Summer Conference, “Crossing Cultures, Contexts, and Communities,” and “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit. Boston hosted Reggio Emilia’s original traveling exhibit, “The Hundred Languages of Children,” in 1989, two years after its debut in San Francisco. Boston, like many network communities within North America, benefited from the volunteerism and dedication of persons who envision an optimistic future for children and adults and work to bring it about. And, Boston, like all of North America, benefits immensely from the constant collegiality and perseverance of many representatives of Reggio

Emilia, Italy, who maintain a dialogue with North American educators and advocates. It seemed fitting that against this backdrop, the conference was held in the Boston University Law Auditorium where beautiful Elbert Weinberg sculptures representing truth and justice greeted us each morning.



Over the course of three days, 400 participants representing 30 U.S. states (and Washington, DC), four Canadian provinces (Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec), and eight countries (Australia, Bermuda, Brazil, Canada, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and the United States) came together to engage in dialogue and thinking about education as a common good. The featured speakers from Reggio Emilia, Tiziana Filippini and Barbara Quinti, along with their interpreter, Jane McCall, spent each day sharing presentations, offering historical and contemporary examples of work from the Reggio Emilia educational project, and exchanging with participants, while inviting participants to deeply consider both theory and practice together.

NAREA board co-chairs, Barbara Acton and Margie Cooper, launched the conference with a warm welcome to participants. Representatives of the Boston host community, Kelly Pellagrini and Megina Baker, added their welcome and shared some history of the decades-long collegial work in Boston, as well as the community’s projections for the duration of the exhibit’s presence in Boston. NAREA board members, David Fernie and Brenda Fyfe, reflected on the 10-year history of the exhibit project, the many collaborations with Reggio Emilia over those years, and the impact that 22 communities have made by welcoming “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit in their communities.

In the first plenary session, Tiziana Filippini, via video conferencing, set the context for our days together by sharing the first identity principle of the Reggio Emilia municipal education project:



From left, Barbara Quinti and Jane McCall

From left, Kelly Pellagrini and Megina Baker



From left, Brenda Fyfe and David Fernie



Education is the right of all, of all children, and as such is a responsibility of the community. Education is an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of the individual and the collective; it is a resource for gaining knowledge and for learning to live together; it is a meeting place where freedom, democracy, and solidarity are practiced and where the value of peace is promoted. Within the plurality of cultural, ideological, political, and religious conceptions, education lives by listening, dialogue, and participation; it is based on mutual respect, valuing the diversity of identities, competencies, and knowledge held by each individual and is therefore qualified as secular and open to exchange and cooperation. (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, p. 7)

Throughout the morning session, entitled “Reggio Emilia, Educating Community: The Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools as Laboratories of Citizenship,” Tiziana, from her many years participating within the pedagogical coordinating team of Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools, discussed values, principles, and theories, while Barbara, an *atelierista* for 22 years, elaborated by sharing in-depth stories of experiences generated by children and adults. The two perspectives offered possibilities for observing the interplay between vision and research, theory and practice. Insights were further enabled through questions and dialogue between participants and speakers.

The first morning’s discussion drew from the experiences of the 2017-2018 school year through which infant-toddler centers and preschools not only recognized the beginning of the new three-year term of the community management vehicle, the City Childhood Councils, but also the overarching research of the year, “Piazza Piazze.” As Tiziana narrated the preferred stance of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia—as “always trying to update ourselves and to keep the school a live organism, not something getting old or separated, but able to live in the context lived in by our children,” it was interesting to reflect

on how determined the municipality and the system of education of the municipality is in facing contemporary issues and opportunities within society.

The message from the pedagogical coordinating team that greeted the children, families, and educators at the start of the 2017-2018 school year was shared:

A new school year is beginning and the greatest thing we can wish for each other is that, despite everything, schools all over the world continue to preside over democracy and participation as places of rights which are open to all—children and adults. On Monday morning, we will open the doors of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia with this message, a declaration, which is also a constant commitment to welcoming, to plurality, to free thinking: “Wherever you come from, you are not a stranger.”

Whereas Tiziana shared the backdrop and overall considerations within the *Piazza Piazze* research, Barbara continued by sharing specific experiences of children and adults of the Bruno Munari preschool connected to this research. Mentioning that the Bruno Munari



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preschool is the only preschool without an interior *piazza* or square, Barbara captured the attention of the participants as she talked about the garden of the preschool and the connections children and adults of the school enjoy in the garden. Barbara commented that “these themes are dear to our hearts, and we will work for a long time with the values and concepts connected to them. Context is never indifferent or neutral. Context often gives us the premise for the work we are doing.”



The afternoon continued with Barbara sharing a presentation entitled “Crossing Boundaries: Nature and Digital.” The research of children and adults examined nature more closely at a time when children and adults are more and more immersed in the digital world. Stressed was the notion that the aim was not to look at nature **versus** digital but rather nature **and** digital.



From left, Judy Kaminsky and Lella Gandini

Every so often, certain themes and languages become the object of deeper exploration in order to update our thinking and ways of working educationally. Our ethic is to pursue the interconnectedness between things, the relationships between things, the interdependencies between things. We have an ecological way of thinking.

Other options in the first afternoon included visits to “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit and a session with Megina Baker, Boston University, and Mara Krechevsky, Harvard Project Zero, titled “Making Learning Visible: Understanding, Supporting, and Documenting Children as Individual and Group Learners.”

Prior to the plenary session of the second conference day, NAREA was proud to honor the life and contributions of the late education leader, Carolyn Pope Edwards. Lella Gandini and Judy Kaminsky fondly recalled Carolyn’s contributions to education, including her years as a founding *Innovations* editorial board member and her receipt of the NAREA Lifetime Achievement Award. During her comments, Lella said:

What is very important is that Carolyn Edwards has been a very strong supporter of the Reggio Emilia approach. She brought “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit to the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1988. But the first meeting that she had with Loris Malaguzzi was in 1983. . . . The book *The Hundred Languages of Children*, which Carolyn, George Forman, and I collaborated in preparing, was recognized by Reggio Children as an important contribution and included many chapters by Reggio educators. . . . Carolyn’s voice, her smile, and her work will remain inside me and many other students, educators, and colleagues.

Following her comments on Carolyn’s essential role on the *Innovations* editorial board, Judy announced that after 5 years on the editorial board and 21 years as associate editor of *Innovations*, Lella will now assume the role of associate editor emeritus, continuing to offer her perspective and wisdom on the evolution of the periodical. Following an invitation to express their appreciation for her contribution to *Innovations* and the Reggio-inspired community in North America, the conference participants surprised and delighted Lella by giving her a standing ovation.

As Tiziana rejoined via live video from Reggio Emilia, the second morning delved into responding to written questions offered by participants throughout the first day. Tiziana began by commenting that the “processes of pedagogical documentation, together with the theory of hundred languages, could be the big contribution of the Reggio Emilia approach to education in the world.” Continuing, in

response to a question regarding the origins of research topics, Tiziana reflected on the rhythm of a new school year:

When the school year starts in September, every center is welcoming new children and families and the ones who are returning. The *pedagogisti* of the coordinating team are working side by side with the staff of the centers they are coordinating—trying to find out what could be the general, overarching themes of the year. . . . Gathered together



to start working on some hypotheses and ideas to characterize that school year, we ask: Who are we? What would we like to improve? What is important to update? Or, we take inspiration from what is happening in the world. What is happening in Italy? What is the debate about immigrants? What is the debate about cultural, ethical, and social differences? This year, we thought that the idea of *Piazza Piazzes* [a focus of the 2017-2018 school year discussed in depth by Tiziana and Barbara on the first day] could be something good to work on because it would allow us to support the idea of dialogue, of coming together to contrast the tendency to separate and isolate that is so strong in our society these days.

From Tiziana’s discussion of Reggio Emilia’s theoretical context, particularly related to processes of choosing topics of research, Barbara continued by sharing experiences that contributed to the mini exhibit, “The Magic of Paper.” Through these experiences with paper, Barbara reflected,

We were in the realm of the teachers’ professional development—trying to raise our own level of culture vis-à-vis a topic we think we are going to work on with the children—we are trying to equip ourselves with thinking and ideas before we work with the children, trying to raise our own awareness of various issues. In Italian, we call professional growth *formazione* or formation, forming yourself, becoming. You may call it a formative experience. Very often, for us, *formazione* is actual experience and not sitting and listening to a lecture. Loris Malaguzzi used to say, “Your hands think.” So we have always worked with this idea that children’s and adults’ hands construct thought—the hands and the mind together. The hands feed the mind with thinking.

Sharing images and narratives of the children and adults as they built up an experience later titled, “Migration of Color,” Barbara offered insights into the style lived within the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, which are always tethered within processes of *progettazione*. The starting point of this particular research was a desire to “kidnap

the paper and take it to a place where we could see how enchanting it is.” The thinking generated during the morning session stimulated participants’ engagement in the afternoon *atelier* sessions.

Interrelated concepts, “The Hundred Languages/Relationships/Understanding/Communities,” served as a springboard for the *atelier* sessions, which gave participants an opportunity to think with their hands. *Atelier* facilitators—Julie Bernson, Emma Boettcher, Katie Higgins-White, Amanda McCracken,

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Marla McLean, Kendra PeloJoaquin, Marina Seevak, Nora Thompson, and Maggie Van Camp—along with a host of volunteers, crafted contexts on the following: “Mapping Our Journeys and Meeting Others at Crossroads,” “The Stories We Weave Together,” “Weaving as an Act of Love,” “Creating Cross-Cultural Conversations Through the World Cup,” and “Creating Dialogue through Movement and Graphic Expression.”

Concurrent with *ateliers*, Lella Gandini and Karyn Callaghan, NAREA board members, offered a session entitled “Reflections on Dialogues with Loris Malaguzzi, A Living Legacy.” It was an opportunity for Lella to share many insights, memories, and reflections from her decades-long role as liaison for the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia approach. Those gathered took a special opportunity to celebrate and honor Lella’s birthday!

The final conference day began again with Tiziana responding to written questions from participants, such as “What are you documenting and why?” to which she commented,

I imagine that many of you are very curious about how our teachers become such good observers, and even more, so able to document in such a thoughtful way. But, I assure you that it is not something that happens quickly; it is something we never give up, no matter the subject we choose as the main project to work on in a school year. We still pay a lot of attention to how we are going to observe, how we are going to increase our competence in interpreting what we have observed and analyzing what we are collecting, how we can use this analysis and reflection to move forward in order for our project to continue to evolve.

If we believe that our profession mainly has to do with what happens in the interaction—the interaction that the educational context we offer to the children provides—you can understand that in talking about interaction and relationship, we are always dealing with something that we can prefigure, that we can think about ahead of time. But we will



never be sure until the moment in which the interaction takes place. So, our job is not that of transmitting; it is not that of working with a boxed curriculum, but it is a way to be side-by-side with the children, a job that will never really get to the point in which you are sure that you know exactly what you want to do or what you are able to do, because the relationship, the interaction may always surprise you, may always bring you the unexpected. So, you must be ready to be flexible, to have a lot of hypotheses, to handle the situation.

Steeped in the centrality of education as relationship, Barbara shared a final offering from the Bruno Munari preschool in a presentation titled “The Hundred Languages of Children: Between Research, Poetry, and Beauty,” which included documentation of the project “The Hospital, a Place in the City.” Barbara’s final comments summarized for us all the mission and vision of our collective work,



We have something we can share. We can share the point of view of the children. We can credit the children who have something to tell about places in which they live. This is a school that has a strong identity—a school that really believes it is an important place. It is not just a place in which we take care of the children while the parents are working. We are seriously welcoming the right of the children to be citizens, to be a person, to be part of our community, in the dialogue with the city. By sharing this, we can build the identity of the city. The childhood culture can be very helpful to the community!

Barbara’s words seemed even more relevant as we concluded the conference by going out into the Boston community for the school tours. Participants used the “T” subway and bus system to navigate the Boston area to visit schools that had graciously offered to share their contexts and their work with us. Advent School, Charlestown Nursery School, Newtowne School, Peabody Terrace Children’s Center, Radcliffe Child Care Center, and Early Childhood Learning Lab at Boston University all welcomed dialogue and exchange with educators from the conference.

We would like to extend our sincerest gratitude to the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network; the children, families, and educators of the Boston area schools who opened their doors and hearts to us; and especially to Tiziana, Barbara, and Jane who spent three days with us in professional dialogue, exchange, and development.





## North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

We feel the following responses from several participants are reflective of the views expressed by those responding to the conference evaluation:

Thank you for a conference well organized. My participants felt inspired, recharged, respected, and welcome. The conference provided a venue to connect theory and practice as well as the tangible possibility of what's possible in the U.S.A.

The passion, and most importantly, for me, the clarity of delivery of the philosophy and practice of the Reggio teachers—the presentations supported and emphasized this. I am very much more clear on the process and practice of working with children in exploring and researching a topic.

It was amazing to have that many educators in one room who care about the importance of early childhood education.

I continue to think about the role of the teacher as shared by Tiziana and Barbara. They carefully wove together the various responsibilities that the teacher has in each of their presentations. They were able to show the intentionality of the teachers and the specific ways that teachers plan for multiple possibilities in the classrooms.

*-14<sup>th</sup> NAREA Summer Conference participant*

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Tiziana was wonderfully inspiring. The quality and excellence in our center's educational practices can only improve after such meaningful presentations. My entire staff advances by taking part in these conferences. I appreciate everything each of you do to make these special events possible!

The *atelier* sessions this summer were fantastic. I wish it would have been possible to participate in more than one.

I believe the deep discussions that evolved around documentation and project work were most helpful, especially if you had been exploring these areas for a period of time. It informed those of us that are very familiar with the process—like an advanced study. Tiziana's discussions, in particular, were most informative on a theoretical side, while Barbara's additions and presentations were very informative and thought-provoking.

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## REFERENCE

Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres, Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. (2010). *Indications - Preschools and infant-toddler centres of the municipality of Reggio Emilia*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children.

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