

PERSPECTIVES ON NAREA

The 15th NAREA Summer Conference

Defending Spaces for Creative Freedom: Spaces of Joy, Trust, and Solidarity

by the NAREA Conference Team

When NAREA received word from Reggio Children that educator Marina Mori would be arriving in Atlanta to support preparations for the new exhibit and *atelier* “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Materials,” from Reggio Emilia, Italy, we knew we were heading into an extraordinary conference! For several days prior to the conference, NAREA staff, host volunteers, and Marina worked to ready the exhibit and related *ateliers* for debut in North America.

Atlanta, like many North American networks, benefits from the volunteerism and dedication of those who envision and work toward an optimistic future for children. In 2000, Inspired Practices in Early Education hosted the debut of the first digitized version of “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit during the annual National Association for the Education of Young Children’s conference in Atlanta. The following year, Project Infinity was launched by Inspired Practices to bring together interested early childhood programs for collaboration and shared learning about Reggio Emilia’s philosophies and experiences — a voluntary initiative that has continued for 19 years. Project Infinity boldly challenges

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the idea that schools are meant to compete, believing instead that we are destined to collaborate on behalf of the rights of children, parents, and educators. With this history of participation, Project Infinity, as the Atlanta host community, opened its heart and doors to 350 participants from 31 states, one Canadian province, and five countries for the 15th NAREA Summer Conference in June 2019, “Defending Spaces for Creative Freedom: Spaces of Joy, Trust, and Solidarity.”



The NAREA Summer Conference took place at Peachtree Presbyterian Church and Preschool. Peachtree’s generous contribution of the conference venue allowed for plenary sessions, small group sessions, collaboration, dialogue, and engagement opportunities. Peachtree’s active participation in preparations for the conference offered participants many opportunities for learning, networking, and engaging in a choice of experiences. Small tables dotted the space inside and outside the Lodge Café, which offered participants informal opportunities for dialogue and exchanging new ideas.

Over the course of three days, participants encountered concepts, reflections, and traces of experiences of children and adults from Reggio Emilia’s preschools and infant-toddler centers connected to supporting creativity as a quality of thought. The featured speakers from Reggio Emilia, Claudia Giudici, president of Reggio Children, and Marina Mori, tutor teacher who works as a mentor to teachers, along with their interpreter, Jane McCall, spent each day sharing through presentations and dialogue with participants.

The first day of the conference offered a variety of presentations and engaging ways of being together. NAREA board members, Barbara Acton and Karyn Callaghan, launched the conference with a warm welcome to participants and featured speakers. Project Infinity representatives, Jane Montgomery, director of Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool; Gabriela Garcia, founder and director of Grant Park Cooperative Preschool; and Kristen Watts, director of St. Anne’s Day School set the tone for the collaborative spirit of the conference on behalf of all Project Infinity schools and educators, “We look forward to spending time together with you and are inspired by your dedication to early childhood.”

In the first plenary session, Claudia Giudici shared the historical and current thinking around their choice of the *atelier*. “. . . [s]chools



can provide these contexts . . . the *atelier* exists for richer and more complete knowledge, for new cultural visions with a knowledge that extends our new imaginaries, all contained in your imagination. The *atelier* is a declaration for a richer more complete knowledge.” The session was entitled, “*The hundred IS there: The educational project of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia.*”

The speakers developed a flow whereby Claudia Giudici, psychologist and former *pedagogista*, offered a *pedagogical*, cultural,



political, and social framework, followed by Marina Mori, former teacher, sharing documentation from experiences of the children and adults in the schools and classrooms. This rhythm created a beautiful and tangible vision of theory and practice working together. This was particularly helpful to participants who are new to the Reggio approach because it illustrated concrete actions taken by teachers grounded in the principles of Reggio Emilia. Those who have been studying the Reggio Emilia approach for several years also benefited from this approach because they were able to deepen and expand their understanding. Claudia and Marina encouraged participants to write questions and reflections and share them, which enabled them to weave reflections into subsequent presentations. This style of evolving the presentations each day, based on participants' curiosities, wonderings, and questions, reflects the reciprocal and collaborative spirit which was present throughout the conference and also emphasizes the desire to support the participants' interests.

“Hearing from the teachers from Reggio Emilia is the best possible way to deepen our learning.” –Participant Survey

The second day launched with a viewing of “A Story of NAREA,” which highlights the life of NAREA since its founding in 2002. Inspired by the collaborative efforts in North America between NAREA, Reggio Children, and over 24 host communities, the day offered opportunities for continued engagement. Marina began with “every teacher has a sort

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of keyboard of possible ways to work with children” underscoring the many possibilities, strategies, and ways of working with children that are open to educators. “The role of the teacher that you notice, and I want to hand back to you, is to maintain the circulation between

the children’s minds and the teachers’.” The role of the teacher within creative contexts was a thread that was followed over the last two days of the conference. Marina reminded us, “Contexts are not environments only, they are the interactions between people, materials, and environments – in circularity.”

On our last day together, a lovely presentation about birthdays gave life to the notion of circularity. Marina highlighted the role of the teacher throughout her presentation by describing the experiences constructed between the children and teachers during the study of birthdays. Marina carried her role as tutor teacher to all of the conference participants as she gave invaluable insight into the ways adults and children continually work together in *progettazione*.

“There are so many ways to teach, so many ways to learn, and we, in any environment, should be able to learn from each other!” –Victoria Peltier, Participant

Each afternoon of the conference offered a wide range of choices for participants. One option for participants was a presentation by Claudia Giudici entitled, “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Materials,” focusing on the work from the new exhibit. The presentation was shared with a small group of participants, which allowed for opportunities to ask questions and share thoughts in an intimate setting. Claudia provided an in-depth description of the backstory to the exhibit and the accompanying *atelier*. In the session, Claudia spoke of the responsibility that teachers have in their own professional formation, “We are the authors of our own learning processes. The teachers, *atelieristi*, and *pedagogisti*, themselves, are the protagonists in the same way that children are.”



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“The “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Materials” exhibit and *atelier* was breathtaking and an open space to explore materials.” –Participant Survey

Participants were also offered opportunities to engage in small group *atelier* sessions of their choice. These unique sessions were designed by *atelieristi* from the host community and by *atelieristi* who have supported previous NAREA conferences. The *atelieristi* had the pleasure of working earlier in the week with Marina in the set-up of the *atelier* for the “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Materials” exhibit. Afterwards, Marina and the *atelieristi* turned their attention to the conference *ateliers* to offer further connections and possibilities. Throughout the *atelier* sessions, the *atelieristi* shared with participants insights from working with Marina regarding the complex identity of each material, the design of the space, and the many possibilities for encountering the materials.

The small group *atelier* sessions were designed based on different palettes inspired by the “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Materials” catalogue, exhibit, and *atelier*. Each session allowed participants to actively explore and consider the concepts of creativity and expression through the hundred languages as encountered in the plenary sessions of the conference. Claudia’s words,

“Aesthetics and the epistemological are the foundations of knowing. We could add that this relationship between aesthetics and epistemology is a relationship that brings in ethics. These important aspects have required us to develop a dialogue between artistic thinking, the expressive languages, and pedagogy. This dialogue is part of our daily life that goes together. The culture of the *atelier* does not only belong to the *atelierista* or *atelier*. The culture diffuses out into every part of the school.”

“The unusual instruments *atelier* was very innovative and offered ideas I never



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had thought about. There were many uses of technology such as drawing on a tablet that was projected on 3-D objects in front of a screen. That was amazing.”
–Participant Survey

Another option for participants was to participate in a presentation offered by Project Infinity school directors entitled, “A Story of Project Infinity.” Educators interested in building collaborative working relationships between diverse schools attended the session. During the session, participants engaged in a frank discussion around challenges within the current educational climate and the potential solidarity educators and schools can create when they strive to work together. The session offered participants insights into how exchanges, shared pedagogical work, and long-term relationships between schools can lead to the development of living laboratories through collaborative study and mutual projects inspired by the preschools and infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia.

Participants were offered opportunities to encounter interpretations of Reggio Emilia’s approach within different schools during the host community school tours. The school tours illustrated different ways the community is working and studying together. Four Project Infinity Schools welcomed visitors by sharing the daily lives of the children, teachers, and families and the distinct identities of their schools.

Participants were also offered an optional evening tour and dinner at Freedom Park Preschool and The Highlander School, two community schools with strong histories and long ties to the schools of Project Infinity. Some participants decided to forgo the transportation provided and braved Atlanta traffic to visit multiple schools and also “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit located in the beautiful SunTrust Garden Offices Atrium designed by renowned architect, John Portman. The current location of the exhibit is a testament to defending creative spaces as it makes publicly visible images, works, and words of the children from Reggio Emilia, Italy, and serves as a reminder for what is possible within our own contexts. It is our hope that educators who encountered the exhibit in Atlanta will consider it a strong contribution of the conference and continue to reference it in their daily work with young children.



It is with sincere gratitude that we thank our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, Italy, Claudia Giudici, Marina Mori, and Jane McCall. We are grateful to Project Infinity and all their contributions to the 15th NAREA Summer Conference. In particular, we thank Jane Montgomery, director, and the staff and families of Peachtree Presbyterian Church and Preschool for their generous donation of space, time, and efforts. We extend our appreciation to the children, families, and educators of Grant Park Cooperative Preschool, Saint Anne’s Day School, First Baptist Day School, and The Nest Nursery School for all they did in support of the Summer Conference. We are

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inspired by all the educators from a variety of contexts who participated in the conference and who share the value of creative freedom as a right of all children and adults. It is our hope that our time spent together will serve to support those who attended and that each participant will continue to be inspired by a Loris Malaguzzi quote shared by Claudia, “We maintain that all the languages of a child’s life are born together with the child. Imagination and logic, like socialization, feelings, creativity and aesthetic have a hundred roots and a hundred geneses . . .”

We believe the words of participants reflect our collective thoughts and inspire us to continue creating, in collaboration with Reggio Children and Istituzione, opportunities for encountering ideas, experiences, and optimism for the future.

“So happy for all of you who attended this event/conference! So many teachers never get the goodness of collaboration so enjoy all you take home with you. Keep going with all of those good things with children and yourselves. We are so enriched by how we work with children!” –Participant Survey

“I really appreciated the *atelier* experience in conjunction with the “Marks and Mosaics” exhibit. I felt the experience of the atelier really helped me access the children’s work and their thinking. I would recommend continuing to create these connections. I also loved that the speakers included examples from the “Wonder of Learning” exhibit. These examples make the exhibit meaningful.”
–Participant Survey

“My heart and mind are still full from the three days of the conference. It was so inspiring and rejuvenating. I don’t know whom to thank, but the planning and attention to detail is much appreciated. Everything seemed to go seamlessly, and I never felt like I didn’t know where to go. Thank you for making it such a completely enjoyable experience, on top of being intellectually and spiritually motivating.” –Lisa Hendix, Participant Via Email

