

## PERSPECTIVES ON NAREA

# The 11<sup>th</sup> NAREA Winter Conference Livestream “Defending Thoughtful Learning, Human Competence, and Human Dignity”

by NAREA

“We’d like to thank the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Reggio Children, and all of the citizens of Reggio Emilia for their forbearance and their creativity during this very difficult time. As well, we hold close in heart all those in the Italian areas suffering from the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.”



Margie Cooper

With that, Margie Cooper, North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) standing chair, opened the 11<sup>th</sup> NAREA Winter Conference Livestream. She continued by sharing these words from Loris Malaguzzi, spoken during an international conference in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in 1990:

I would like to quickly give a sort of strong message, an image of a political, geographic, and economic nature. It is an image that takes us into the changing of the world. A world no longer made of islands, intervals, spaces, oceans, and mountains but a world made of a network.

It is a powerful image. It not only leads us into a shrinking world, it also describes a world different from the world of the past. Now we begin to see a world not made of coexisting islands, separate parts, distant unique languages, but a world held in a web. Migrations, changes of tradition, changes of language are all in this web. We must think of everything happening today, everything that will happen in the next few years, to understand it is a powerful image to keep. . . .

A world of networks is a world that communicates even when it does not wish to, a world which has the same destiny even when it seeks out partial, different destinies; a world where beliefs, old fundamentalisms and new ones, will perhaps come around again, we do not know how or in what way, we do not know how history will resolve its knots (Cagliari, Castagnetti, Giudici, Rinaldi, Vecchi, & Moss, 2016, p. 390).

**Loris Malaguzzi reminds us of our connections to each other all around the world and how we are all held together in a network that communicates together.**

Loris Malaguzzi reminds us of our connections to each other all around the world and how we are all held together in a network that communicates together. In that spirit of connection, we are pleased to share that approximately 200 participants from 25 states, two Canadian provinces, and three countries virtually attended the 11<sup>th</sup> NAREA Winter Conference live-streamed from Reggio Emilia, Italy: “Defending Thoughtful Learning, Human Competence, and Human Dignity,” a NAREA initiative in collaboration



Valentina Violi

with Project Infinity. Due to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 virus, a decision was made to offer the conference to registrants by way of a live-streamed webinar.

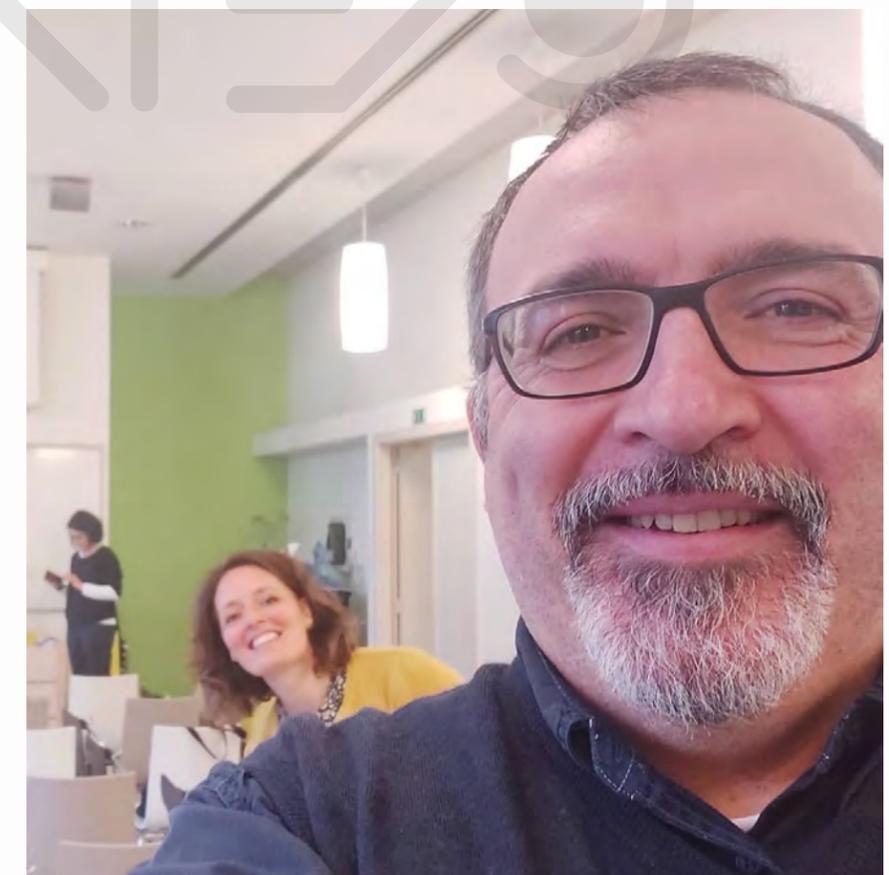
Participants met together from their living rooms, kitchens, and home offices and connected to the speakers from Reggio Emilia on their laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Chat functions in the webinar helped us connect our questions, thoughts, and comments to Valentina Violi, *pedagogista*, Massimo Ghirardi, *atelierista*, and Jane McCall, interpreter, who practiced social distancing while sitting in an empty meeting room inside the Loris Malaguzzi Center.

During the first day, we encountered a presentation about the educational experience of Reggio Emilia which included historical notes and the story of its evolution. The presentation highlighted the values of belonging, participation, and the image of the child. Valentina Violi shared these thoughts with us:

This idea of participation is a value but it's also a strategy, a way of working that defines and gives quality to the way that children, educators, and parents are all stakeholders



Jane McCall and Massimo Ghirardi



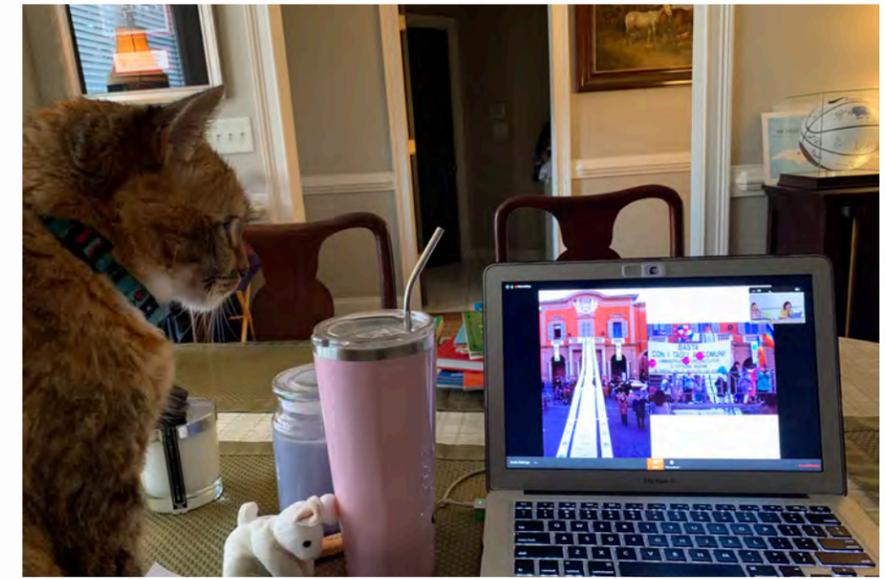
Massimo Takes a Selfie with Valentina



Through Jane, Max responds to participants' questions



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and part of the educational project. This is a way of generating and nurturing the feelings and the culture of solidarity, of responsibility, and of inclusion in this educational project.

Education is an opportunity, an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of each individual but also an opportunity for the growth and emancipation of the entire community. This idea of the whole community being emancipated and growing makes the infant-toddler centers and preschools a place of meeting, a place where we meet together and practice our democracy, practice our freedom. It's a place where we say that we practice every day this idea of welcoming others, of welcoming difference in order to have peace.

Children are capable of interpreting the reality around them and of giving that reality new meaning, new significance. This is possible, we believe, when children have around them adults who are sensitive adults with a sensibility towards their capacities. These are adults who are capable of listening, capable also of waiting. Adults who are capable of giving the children time and of also giving themselves time.

This Winter Conference was one of complexity, in the organization and planning of the virtual conference and in the work shared by the Reggio educators. Through videos and presen-

tations, over the course of two days, Massimo and Valentina underscored the importance of teacher formation, research, observation, documentation, the environment, rich materials, and rich thinking. Massimo said:

This professional learning is something that plays out very much in our daily lives. Our daily lives offer many opportunities for reflection. We do our reflection through observing, documenting, interpreting and every week, each member of our staff has a weekly update meeting together with others so that they can share their reflections in the work that they're doing.

Massimo offered us a glimpse into the environment of Martiri di Sesso, a municipal preschool in Reggio Emilia. His guided tour began at the entrance, which promotes transparency, welcoming, communication, and relationship. Throughout the school, we saw the many ways participation comes alive on a daily basis—documented, interpreted, re-launched, and ongoing. During the tour he shared:

So, an entrance is something that all of our buildings have. We have always believed that an entrance doesn't mean closed doors. We think of our entrances as a sort of a diaphragm or a membrane between indoors and outdoors that as we approach them, let people have a glimpse of the life they might find inside the building.

When we think in our work about the entrances into our schools, we're giving shape to one of the values that Valentina mentioned earlier when she talked about this word in Italian, *accoglienza*, which literally means embracing and taking to oneself. It is very often translated as welcome, but it actually has an action of bringing things to us. So immediately we have this idea of spaces which say things, which talk to us.

So, we have to think of the entrance as a sort of daily newspaper. This is the school newspaper as you arrive, the entrance is telling you about the daily life inside the school. It tells you about what kind of topics and subjects we're looking at in the life of our school. It tells you about the opportunities that your city is offering you on many different levels, cultural events. And what is very, very important to us is always the question and about the entrance, the question is – who is it that we are embracing and welcoming? Who is it that we are communicating for?

Throughout our time together, participants posted “chat” messages and questions for the speakers. Words of welcome, well wishes, and comments of concern were intermingled with questions about teacher collaboration time, creating generative questions, culturally competent teachers, opportunities for documentation, and ways Reggio teachers are

staying connected to the children and families during this time of isolation. The speakers addressed the questions on the last day, giving careful attention to the underlying value connected to the answers.

Valentina, Massimo, and Jane addressed the last question, “How are you staying connected to children and families during this time of isolation?” With emotion in their voices, they answered and we heard how they are working to reach out to the children and families in the schools, the people in the city, and the world through a new section on the Reggio Children website called “At Home with the Reggio Approach” ([www.reggiochildren.it/acasaconilreggioapproach](http://www.reggiochildren.it/acasaconilreggioapproach)). We are inspired

**We are inspired by the ways the educational project of Reggio Emilia is always working to defend thoughtful learning, human competence, and human dignity as they face the future and all it brings.**

by the ways the educational project of Reggio Emilia is always working to defend thoughtful learning, human competence, and human dignity as they face the future and all it brings. Here, Valentina offers some of the specific ideas generated during this time:

What we have at the moment is two different trajectories that we're working with. Each school is working remotely with all the

[Images 1-3]

Participants join from their homes.

children at home, having put together groups with email addresses or WhatsApp groups. But, we also have journeys which are taking place, organized on a more city level... What the city administration has asked us to do now is to create a daily appointment for everybody in the town with children of this age so we're thinking about the television... We have local newspapers and a local television channel we can use...the municipality has a website, the *Instituzione* of Reggio Emilia has a website, and Reggio Children is also working in this direction... We are thinking about a daily appointment that people can turn to for shared ideas, not just for the children in the preschools and infant-toddler centers run by the municipalities, but that every family in the city can share together.

Families really are interested in maintaining contact. The very hands-on suggestions that we're sending out to the families are a source of enthusiasm for them. Just an example from the Tondelli preschool. We've had a weekly appointment on Monday. We asked our cooks to suggest a recipe that families could make at home so we sent out a recipe for biscuits, for cookies. We asked all the families to take photographs of their biscuits or cookies and so we have a shared place where all those photographs can go together and everybody can look at each other's outcome.

At the Tondelli preschool, we had been working on sowing seeds and what happens to seeds as plants grow. So, one of the suggestions we have sent out to families is that if they can find any kind of seed at home, we suggested they plant a seed and that they try to keep a record of what happens to the seed, take photographs of it, or drawings of how it grows. Everybody will bring that plant back to the school when we can go back together, and we will dedicate a part of our garden to the plants that have grown. All these seeds that people have planted will be a kind of collective.

With deep respect and gratitude to all who participated, we conclude with a special word of appreciation to the educators and families from First Baptist in Greenville, South Carolina, for all they prepared and organized to host the conference. It was a pleasure thinking, learning, and wondering together.

"We're very happy to be here with you remotely, but together, and as Margie Cooper says, like the whole world today, we are in a sort of communion." - Valentina Violi

#### REFERENCE

Cagliari, P., Castagnetti, M., Giudici, C., Rinaldi, C., Vecchi, V., & Moss, P. (Eds.). (2016). *Loris Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia: A selection of his writings and speeches, 1945-1993*. Routledge.

**Right after the war I felt a pact, an alliance, with children, adults, veterans from prison camps, partisans of the Resistance, and the sufferers of a devoted world. Yet all that suffering was pushed away by a day in spring, when ideas and feelings turned toward the future, seemed so much stronger than those that called one to halt and focus upon the present. It seemed that difficulties did not exist, and that obstacles were no longer insurmountable.**

**LORIS MALAGUZZI**

*The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*  
1993, p. 49

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Valentina shares some ways educators are staying connected with children and families



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