

Perspectives on NAREA

The Sixth NAREA Winter Conference—Exploring Possibilities: Viewing all Children as Citizens, Researchers, and Innovators of the World

By Patty Randall and Lauren Curling



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The Broad Street Ballroom, located in the Financial District near Ground Zero in Manhattan, served as the venue for 450 of the participants. St. Francis College in Brooklyn was the second venue, where a group of approximately 250 participants enjoyed a smaller group atmosphere. The four speakers from Reggio Emilia—Claudia Giudici, Veà Vecchi, Marina Mori, and Chiara Spaggiari—made great efforts to offer presentations in both venues; thus, a complex

We are pleased to share that 700 participants from more than 26 states and provinces in North America and 3 countries participated in the Sixth NAREA Winter Conference, “Exploring Possibilities: Viewing all Children as Citizens, Researchers, and Innovators of the World,” on March 12–14, 2015 in New York City. This NAREA initiative was organized in collaboration with New York City Encounters with Reggio Emilia, Teaching Beyond the Square, Beginnings Nursery School, and Williamsburg Northside School, with the support of Reggio Children. Due to the high demand, participants gathered in two different venues, one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn, where they participated in plenary sessions and school visits and encountered the exhibit “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children.”



Claudia Giudici, Lorella Lamonaca, Marina Mori, Chiara Spaggiari, and Veà Vecchi

The four speakers from Reggio Emilia—Claudia Giudici, Veà Vecchi, Marina Mori, and Chiara Spaggiari—made great efforts to offer presentations in both venues; thus, a complex system of sharing took place over the three days of the conference and all participants heard the voices and experienced the perspectives of all of the Reggio educators.

—Patty Randall and Lauren Curling

system of sharing took place over the three days of the conference and all participants heard the voices and experienced the perspectives of all of the Reggio educators. Participants shared reflections, ideas, and questions each day.

During the three days of the conference, we experienced presentations that included:

- “The Reggio Emilia Approach to Education: Children Seen as Citizens and Active Protagonists of Their Growth and Learning Processes”
- “The Hundred Languages of Children: Educational Research and Educational Documentation”
- “An Active Action of Listening as the Premise and Context of Every Educational Relationship”
- “Participation as an Attitude that Generates a Culture of Solidarity, Responsibility, and Inclusion”



This NAREA winter conference was complex in terms of the experiences presented by the Reggio educators as well as in its organization and planning. Because we were in New York City and traveling between many locations in



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Manhattan and Brooklyn, subway passes were available to participants who requested them by a certain date along with guides for those who were not comfortable navigating the subway on their own.



Jane Racoosin and LeeAnn Valvano



Margie Cooper

The participants at Broad Street Ballroom began the conference with a welcome by Margie Cooper, NAREA standing board chair, and Jane Racoosin, director of Beginnings Nursery School and Teaching Beyond the Square.

Margie Cooper

Good morning. We can sense your excitement to be together for three days in what will hopefully become a moment that we will remember with fondness and appreciation and as a challenge to our thinking as educators whose choice in life has been to work inside early childhood places, wherever they may be and however that is defined, in order to offer a contribution to giving more quality to the lives of young children and their families, our colleagues, and our community. It is often a thankless job. It is often a not well-understood job or choice but it is, in my opinion, the most essential contribution to our society—making strong investments of love, of rigor, of thinking, of wonder, and of citizenship. So while it is not my purpose to thank you, I still thank you because I know

We appreciate when schools have the courage—no matter where they are in their journey of being a school—to open their doors and show others the inside of their school, the ideas that they are working on, and the ways they are struggling. This is a strong, essential, and crucial act of exchange that builds up our collective capacity.

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how hard you are all working and we are all working, and until others begin to thank us, we will thank ourselves and know that we have created a sisterhood and a brotherhood that have made important contributions to society.

We are NAREA, the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, and this is our largest conference after 10 years of hosting conferences in communities around North America. Perhaps, if you look out of the corner of your eye, you can feel a little bit of the stress and the pressure—such a big undertaking by a very small group of people who are trying to modify, on a daily and sometimes hourly basis, a way to make it possible for many people to come together. We were quite surprised in August when usually everyone is taking a breather and getting ready to get back into the academic year, the winter conference in New York was sold out! We have some experience answering phone calls from people who have missed other conference registration possibilities and have had to tell them that when the conference is full, it is full. So far, even though we are working on it, we have not figured out how to add a second layer suspended in a space so it is really a mathematical reality! But someone on the New York City host committee had this terrific idea to have a second venue—to have two conferences at the same time! So this morning while I am greeting you, in another location, St. Francis College, there is another group. But this also means that we had to change our usual, comfortable way of being together as a group because now we have two groups. My NAREA board co-chair Barbara Acton is greeting what we call “the St. Francis group” at this moment. Also in that venue, there are two additional representatives from Reggio Emilia who decided to play the game with us.

At this time, I’d like to ask some of my fellow board members, as some are at St. Francis

College, to please stand up and wave, and I’ll say hello for you: Jen Kesselring from Oklahoma; Karen Callaghan from Ontario; Angela Ferrario, Dave Fernie, and Lella Gandini from Massachusetts; Jennifer Strange and Brenda Fyfe from Missouri; Susan Redmond from South Carolina; and Jen Azzariti from Washington, DC. They are here to welcome you to the conference. If there is anything we can do for you, please let us know.

Now I would like to extend a heartfelt expression of appreciation to the amazing local host community in New York City who has worked with us—as we took on this crazy idea of hosting two conferences—to ensure that we have the support of volunteers and also of local schools that will be welcoming you tomorrow. I think if you read the welcome letter, you will see NAREA’s point of view about how much we appreciate when schools have the courage—no matter where they are in their journey of being a school—to open their doors and show others the inside of their school, the ideas that they are working on, and the ways they are struggling. This is a strong, essential, and crucial act of exchange that builds up our collective capacity. Thank you very much to those schools. And now, I would like to welcome Jane Racoosin, who will say a few words from the point of view of the local community.

Jane Racoosin

Thanks, Margie, and welcome to New York! It has been 20 years since “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit opened in the Scholastic Gallery in Lower Manhattan and 20 years for the exhibit to return to the “cooler” borough of Brooklyn! We are excited to host the new iteration of the exhibit, “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children,” as well as the NAREA conference this weekend. In only 8 weeks, the exhibit has touched over 3,000 educators, parents, children, and political figures and opened the eyes of many others new to the Reggio Emilia approach.

This is a critical moment in the United States in terms of how education is viewed, with heated debate around standards, testing, and opinions about what kinds of educational programs will best serve our children. There

is also increasing recognition, especially with the recent focus on the expansion of universal pre-k programs in New York City, of the value of early childhood learning and its influence on children’s development and future success. This exhibit has the potential to reach beyond the 8 million people who reside in the New York metropolitan area and to provide a vision of early childhood education that is deep, invigorating, and relevant to all children.

This exhibit, as many of you know, could not have come to North America if not for the guidance and support of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance and Reggio Children. Thank you to both of these organizations. And bringing it to New York City once again would not have been possible without the generous donors of Teaching Beyond the Square, an educational nonprofit founded by Beginnings Nursery School. Along with Teaching Beyond the Square, a group of individuals and educational organizations joined together to create our host committee, New York City Encounters with Reggio Emilia, who worked for the last year to organize the exhibit’s presence and related professional development initiatives. If you are a part of New York City Encounters with Reggio Emilia, please stand up to be recognized.

This conference in New York City is the largest NAREA conference in history with 700 enthusiastic participants. Thank you to the staff, teachers, children, and parents of Williamsburg Northside School for allowing us to house the exhibit for 5 months and for hosting the reception this afternoon. Thank you to Beginnings Nursery School staff and parents who dedicated endless hours—truly endless hours—of their time this year to welcome the exhibit into their hearts and minds. Thank you to the Blue School, Williamsburg Northside School, Plymouth Church School, Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, Tribeca Community School, Children’s Museum of the Arts, and Beginnings for opening their doors for our visits this week. We look forward to three wonderful days of hearing from Claudia Giudici, Veà Vecchi, Chiara Spaggiari, and Marina Mori, as well as interpreters Lorella Lamonaca and Leslie Morrow, who will support their conversations with all of you. Thank you.



Harold Göthson and breakout session participants



Vea Vecchi and Leslie Morrow

Following Margie’s and Jane’s welcome was a session by Reggio educators Vea Vecchi and Chiara Spaggiari. After lunch, we traveled to Williamsburg Northside School to encounter the exhibit “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children.” In addition to the exhibit, two breakout sessions were offered for those who had encountered the exhibit multiple times. Mara Krechevsky from Project Zero offered a session entitled “Making Learning Visible: Understanding, Supporting, and Documenting Children as Individual and Group Learners” to a standing-room-only crowd. Harold Göthson from the Reggio Emilia *Institutet* in Stockholm, Sweden, shared his work in “What Can We Learn from Reggio Emilia and the Swedish Experience?” to a devoted group who stayed into the evening. A lovely reception, hosted by the local community, was held in the gymnasium.



Chiara Spaggiari



Mara Krechevsky



Claudia Giudici and Lorella Lamonaca



Marina Mori, Chiara Spaggiari, Vea Vecchi, and Leslie Morrow



The second day for the Broad Street group began with visits to local Reggio-inspired schools, which included Beginnings Nursery School, the Blue School, TriBeCa Community School, Stephen Wise Free Synagogue Balfour Brickner Early Childhood Center, and Williamsburg Northside School. In addition to the school visits, the Children’s Museum of the Arts was also an option. After a busy morning, participants returned for lunch and the afternoon began with “A Story of NAREA.” Before participants viewed the video about the work of NAREA, Margie Cooper offered these comments:

NAREA offers participation in a movement for those who feel connected to a strong and competent image of children, but also of teachers, of parents and families, and of communities. We believe that children have capacities to be respected and valued as early as their first minutes of life and that we are a result of what they teach us. We know there are those who believe or promote the idea that children are a result of what we teach them.

I have spent time in Reggio Emilia with Harold Göthson of the Reggio Emilia *Institutet* in Stockholm, Sweden since we both serve on the board of directors of the Reggio Children-Loris Malaguzzi Center Foundation, which is a four-year-old foundation in Reggio Emilia with a big vision for the world around this idea of who is the child and who are we.

Harold talked about the image of schools as places that honor questioning, not knowing but creating meaning—places where questions are widened as opposed to narrowed—places where truths are seen as temporal, both historically and culturally—places where changing opinions is free. And in the Italian National Guidelines, which is the national document that guides the orientation of infant-toddler centers, pre-schools, and primary schools, the Italian national government says this to its teachers and its citizens:

The school curriculum is the expression of freedom of teaching and school autonomy and, at the same time, it delineates the choices of the school, community, and its identity. Designing the curriculum is the process through which educational research and innovation are developed and organized.

So, who is NAREA? We are NAREA. We believe in a sort of oasis of possibilities by coming together, exchanging our work, exchanging our thinking, and exchanging our questions and where the freedom to change opinions is ever-present.

Following “The Story of NAREA,” Claudia, Marina, Chiara, and Vea offered a collaborative presentation and engaged in dialogue with the participants at Broad Street Ballroom.

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In the evening, the first ever NAREA “Dine-A-Round” was held in a local restaurant. Fabbri-ca in Brooklyn was the gathering spot for 30 educators who spent the evening enjoying the

fabulous food and discussing issues in education. Participants appreciated the warm atmosphere and the opportunity to be in dialogue together.



On the first day, participants at St. Francis College in Brooklyn were welcomed by Barbara Acton, NAREA board co-chair, and LeeAnn Valvano, director of parent relations and special events at Beginnings Nursery School and the Wonder of Learning NYC exhibit liaison. The morning was spent in a plenary session with Claudia Giudici and Marina Mori. After lunch, participants traveled to one of three school visits: Beginnings Nursery School, Williamsburg Northside School, or Plymouth Church Preschool. Some participants in the St. Francis group also joined the Dine-A-Round experience in the evening.

On the second day, the St. Francis group began the day with “The Story of NAREA,” which was followed by a collaborative presentation by Claudia, Marina, Chiara, and Vea. After lunch, the participants traveled to the exhibit venue at Williamsburg Northside School where they had the same options as the Broad Street Ballroom group: encounter the exhibit or participate in a breakout session with either Mara Krechevsky or Harold Göthson. The local community hosted a reception at the exhibit venue for the St. Francis group as well.

The final day at St. Francis also began with mimosas and “A Taste of New York” and the Story Pirates delighted the group. The morning also included a plenary session with Claudia and Chiara while the afternoon included the options of an open house at Reggio-inspired schools or a final session with all four Reggio educators at the Broad Street Ballroom.



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Marina Mori

The final day at Broad Street Ballroom began with two special offerings from the host community: mimosas and “A Taste of New York: Story Pirates,” which everyone seemed to enjoy immensely. Vea and Marina’s session focused on the active action of listening. After lunch, participants had the option to stay in the ballroom for a collaborative presentation by all four Reggio educators on participation as an attitude or join an “open house” of Reggio-inspired schools, which included the Blue School, Williamsburg Northside School, Beginnings Nursery School, and TriBeCa Community School.



Barbara Acton



Claudia Giudici, Marina Mori, and Lorella Lamonaca



During the final session in Manhattan, the educators from Reggio Emilia shared current work being developed for the Milan Expo in May 2015. Vea Vecchi reminded the crowd, “Never divide the emotional part from the cognitive part. Children do not do it; artists and scientists do not do it. We do not do it if we continue to see a puddle as full of stars!”

The conference concluded with participants sharing reflections and questions with the panel of Reggio educators. It was particularly moving when the panel was asked to reflect upon their memories of Loris Malaguzzi. The audience was fully engaged as Vea, Marina, Claudia, and Lella Gandini reminisced about their experiences with the founder of the Reggio Emilia educational project.

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The following comments from 2015 NAREA Winter Conference participants represent the spirit and richness of the presentations by our Reggio colleagues:

“I appreciate listening to the Reggio educators share their experiences and insights through photos and narrative. Every presentation leaves me breathless in one way or another.”

“It was a privilege to be able to participate and learn from the remarkable women from the schools of Reggio Emilia as they shared their experiences and called us to share their vision of young children.”

“Having so many Italian educators in one place was amazing.”

“The speakers from Reggio Emilia were incredible, and I can’t imagine a NAREA conference without their strong voices, advocacy, testimonies, and documentation videos.”

“I have been very fortunate to have participated in several NAREA winter and summer conferences. What I appreciated most from this year was the addition of Chiara. I thought she brought a unique perspective from a new educator. It brings hope to systems that are already established but face the ongoing reality of welcoming a new faculty member.”

“I am always inspired by the words and passion brought forth from the ‘matriarchs’ of this beautiful educational culture. I also appreciated that from day one, the conference began with intentional richness.”

We wish to express our gratitude to our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, Italy—Claudia Giudici, Vea Vecchi, Marina Mori, and Chiara Spaggiari—as well as Harold Göthson from Sweden and Mara Krechevsky from the United States, for their contribution to the 2015 NAREA Winter Conference. We further extend our appreciation to the educators and families from Beginnings Nursery School and Williamsburg Northside School for all they have done to organize and host the conference. It was a pleasure thinking and wondering together—700 strong—as we work to construct a better future for our children, our communities, and ourselves.

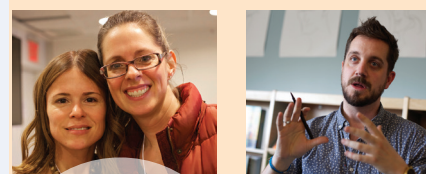


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