

PERSPECTIVES ON NAREA

Can We See a Threshold as a Promise? Reflecting on the 13th NAREA Winter Conference

Affirming Children's Rights in a Changing World: Embracing Responsibility, Community, and Creative Thinking

by NAREA Staff

With anticipation of the experience to come, 190 educators from three Canadian provinces and 28 U.S. states wait for the beginning of the 13th NAREA Winter Conference, "Affirming Children's Rights in a Changing World: Embracing Responsibility, Community, and Creative Thinking." Three educators from Reggio Emilia, Italy—Alessandra Braglia, Chiara Ferrarini, and Alessandro Mainini—join the conference participants and NAREA board and staff members along with interpreter Jane McCall for a virtual experience of intensive professional development. Alessandra Braglia is a *pedagogista*, Chiara Ferrarini is a teacher, and Alessandro Mainini is an *atelierista* for the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers - *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Of the almost 200 participants, over half are participating in a NAREA initiative for the first time. NAREA Standing Chair Margie Cooper welcomes these new colleagues and suggests that perhaps some are new teachers who began working during the pandemic.

Alessandra begins the conference with her presentation "Reggio Emilia's Educational Project in a Responsible and Participatory Community," when she refers to education as a force for emancipation. She introduces the concept of boundaries, border areas, and thresholds and emphasizes the value of inhabiting these actual and metaphorical spaces. Following Alessandra's presentation, Chiara shares the presentation "Inhabiting Borders in a Changing World." Chiara notes that if we want our schools to be living things and places of transformation, it is necessary to recognize and understand the historical context we are living in. She states that the pandemic is our current reality, which has forced us to stay within the boundaries of our home and schools. But it's also an opportunity to explore the places within those borders to find new possibilities.



Alessandra Braglia (*pedagogista*)



Chiara Ferrarini (*teacher*)



Alessandro Mainini (*atelierista*)



Jane McCall (*interpreter*)



Dialogues between clay, light, and drawing at preschool

The second day of the conference focuses on "Bordercrossings Between Languages in the Encounter with Trees," a research project that explores how very young children encounter trees with their bodies and features the participation of every infant-toddler center and preschool. Alessandra presents the work of children ages 24–36 months in this project at the *Arcobaleno* infant-toddler center in "Dialogues Between Infant-Toddler Children and the Language of Mark-Making and Drawing." Alessandra believes that this experience is one more way that children hold together the mind and the body, which is their way of continually showing us how human beings learn. Alessandro shares the story of 5-year-old children at Paola Freire preschool in relation to this project in "Dialogues Between Clay, Light, and Mark-Making and Drawing in Preschool." He asserts that living beings and the processes of living beings are of particular significance. Alessandro believes that schools have the responsibility to consider these incredibly urgent issues in the debates of our time.

There were times on both days of the conference for participants to share their reflections and questions for the Reggio educators, offering them the unique experience of dialogue with educators who have different roles and perspectives in the Reggio Emilia educational project.

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Affirming Children's Rights

The 13th NAREA Winter Conference was incredibly poignant, thought-provoking, and timely. More than presentations, the time was a favorable opportunity to affirm children's rights as a call to solidarity, generate evolution in education, and build an attitude of hope during a challenging time. Who could ignore that early childhood educators are experiencing strong emotions? Two years of living with a global pandemic, cultural reckonings materializing across North America, and shocking acts of war and barbarism happening to children and families in Ukraine are a reality the world is facing. Yet, within this reality, educators in Reggio Emilia and North America came together in an act of positive resistance to engage in reflection, interpretation, and thinking for a hopeful future.

In her welcome, Margie Cooper offers a quote from Carla Rinaldi in *One City, Many Children*:

“Undoubtedly 2020 was a very emotional year, and therefore capable of very heavily conditioning the individual and collective equilibrium of an entire community”.

I giorni del Covid (The Covid Days)
Luca Vecchi, mayor of Reggio Emilia

Quote from Luca Vecchi, Reggio Emilia mayor

Reggio Emilia, A History of the Present, giving us a clear view of the possibilities within our grasp if we choose to act, “The future, the time to come, does not arise but is constructed with the strength of reasoning, and the strength of passion” (Cavallini, 2010, p. 25). Carla’s words remind us that we have an active role as educators of young children in co-constructing a world yet to be, based on the affirmation of children’s rights. To affirm implies a conviction based on evidence or experience, knowing that there is truth within. Through the contributions of Alessandra Braglia, Chiara Ferrarini, and Alessandro Mainini, we encounter the truth of the children living in the schools and communities of Reggio Emilia. They bear witness to a promising vision of humanity and community, one that highlights the capabilities of all children and the values of differences and transformation (Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 7, 10; Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2017, p. 17; Edwards, 2012, p. 147). As Alessandra shares, “The fabric of relations is a sort of a sap or lymph that flows through the schools and community” (Braglia, 2022).

Alessandra draws the participants’ attention to the origins of the Reggio Emilia Approach and weaves the underpinnings of the approach throughout the two days. She speaks of the dance between theory and practice, people and contexts, and the past and future as she gives multiple examples with genuine enthusiasm and encouraging energy. Her introduction gives us a foundation on which to build our thinking while reminding us of our responsibility to create conditions that offer ways of being together and finding shared values and ethics. Alessandra shares,

Loris Malaguzzi is the *pedagogista* who gave us the foundation for our work. He is a person capable of inhabiting the boundary areas. . . . His way of looking at theory was not only pedagogical. He had a very epistemological approach. His vision was born of interpreting situations as they happen. His gaze was in constant evolution. He was capable of creating an interface between very many different areas of the sciences, constantly seeking connections with other experiences of education and culture. . . . This is education not seen solely as the legacy of the infant-toddler centers and preschools but as the legacy of the entire community of the city of Reggio Emilia. For us, telling the story of the infant-toddler centers and preschools is a way of standing at the crossroads and telling the story of all the people who have passed through them. It is the story of a city and a community. (Braglia, 2022)

Central to the Reggio Emilia Approach is the interpretation of research. Loris Malaguzzi referred to research as connective tissue, as an attitude and a guarantor of freedom.

Central to the Reggio Emilia Approach is the interpretation of research. Loris Malaguzzi referred to research as connective tissue, as an attitude and a guarantor of freedom. This is not often the meaning commonly assigned to the term, and it is a strong choice of words that conveys the importance of a type of research that represents one of the essential dimensions of life of children and adults alike, a knowledge-building tension that must be recognized and valued. Shared research

between adults and children is a priority practice of everyday life, an existential and ethical approach necessary for interpreting the complexity of the world, of phenomena, of systems of coexistence, and is a powerful instrument of renewal in education. (Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 11–12)

For Loris Malaguzzi, the language of the educational project of Reggio Emilia is entirely related to the real world the children and adults inhabit. Such language seeks to energize and honor the reality encountered in research, not evade it.

We know that children are natural researchers and are well versed in the concept of change. From the moment a child is born, the research on how to live in the world, make connections, empathize with others, and build relationships begins. Continuous change is a natural phenomenon of life. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus asserted that “life is in flux” (Mark, 2010), meaning all things change. Think of all the changes in one’s life—physical, emotional, cognitive, and societal. We are not the same person we were even one day ago. We have changed since then. So why do we try to maintain the status quo in education and society when it goes against our nature? When schools celebrate children and teachers as researchers, competent in navigating the ever-evolving world around them, they affirm children’s rights. They orient this approach to education through what Loris Malaguzzi called “a directional axis” (Castagnetti, 2022), which shows us another way to do school. Alessandra offers insight into this image of research:

In our approach towards education, we try constantly to be close to people and close to their context, and that necessitates a constant form of research. We’re constantly researching the values and the rights of our educational approach in order to learn new ways of enacting them. (Braglia, 2022)

The powerful commitment to affirming children’s rights is evident in the daily life of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of

Reggio Emilia. It is essential to note that the approach to education in Reggio is not based on rules that can be followed by other schools, because life is constantly changing and being renewed. Sometimes we misinterpret the role of a school or teacher and offer experiences and environments in the same way over the course of years. It seems a stronger interpretation to think of affirming children’s rights in daily life in a rich and varied research environment and thinking of the teacher as a thoughtful, creative, innovative researcher of children’s ways of knowing. When schools embrace this approach, we see this concept rippling through the whole school environment and into the larger community and educational landscape. Alessandra asserts,

We look to ensure the rights of our children in every aspect of our daily lives. We feel that our educational services in Reggio Emilia have a political vocation. They have a political way of seeing the world. It’s important to offer a plurality of possible opportunities for people to be able to participate in their own ways in this educational project. (Braglia, 2022)

In today’s world, it seems imperative that education embraces the necessity to continuously prepare for change, for flexibility, for variety, for differences, and for uncertainties and to find strategies and encounters to envision the best way of affirming the rights and well-being of all children and adults.

Embracing Community: Developing a Gaze That is Sensitive to Others

We as schools have tried to work with hope and build hope. We’ve tried to rise to the challenge and build a new horizon that we can work towards together. We have tried to build the hope to have school all together, to be in the same place for school and the various challenges that come with that. For us, the meaning of education has been to develop a gaze that is sensitive towards others. The meaning of education for us is to create a time for life, for freedom, and for freeing ourselves together. (Ferrarini, 2022)

From the threshold of an affirmation of rights, we see the children and educators in Reggio Emilia step into the community. In the images and words the speakers share, we discover that their commitment to building relationships, connections, variety, and complexity offers opportunities within the schools and communities. This perspective of being in a relationship that interweaves schools, community leaders, citizens, and a city contributes to a community that is experiencing constant growth, change, and renewal. It highlights the need for contextualization of thoughts and actions and, at the same time, promotes the potential of children and adults (Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia). Chiara relates,

For us, education is a collective construction. It's a way of opening our gaze and opening our listening to the context around us, to others, and to the world. The infant-toddler centers and preschools are part of a framework that we work within, a framework that, in part, has been formed by the thoughts of the citizens, teachers, and parents who have passed through them. (Ferrarini, 2022)

These collective thoughts have nourished and sustained the municipal educational project in Reggio Emilia for almost 60 years.

Biology shows us that one of the particularities of being human lies in the social structure of coming together that occurs through languaging, individual identity, and the circularity of the social human dynamic. Reflecting on this structure allows us to see a world created with others. In addition, biology confirms that we can grow in our understanding of the world through experiences and encounters that empower us to see the other person and open space for him or her to co-exist alongside us in daily life (Maturna & Varela, 1987).

Correspondingly, the educators in Reggio Emilia are in the process of creating a new charter of the City Childhood Council. Alessandra shares that they are considering the title "Manifesto of [or for] Participation." It is envisioned as a touchpoint for exchange and giving attention to the collective efforts within the infant-toddler centers and preschools and lived out with the parents, teachers, and citizens of the community. Alessandra explains,

We feel it's important to always be in the moment. The participation of the families is not something that we can take for granted, just as we can never take for granted that the rights of children are automatically respected. (Braglia, 2022)

Reflecting on the conference, it makes sense that our colleagues from Reggio Emilia—Alessandra, Chiara, Alessandro, and Jane—do not read from a rigid script. Instead, they exchange thoughts, share work, collaborate, clarify, laugh, build upon each other's ideas, and support one another. We can imagine that this way of working is a cultural characteristic found throughout Reggio Emilia, beginning with the children and flowing through the adults who inhabit the city. This characteristic, so firmly rooted in the values of the people, is a proclamation of citizens who are dedicating their lives to improving the quality of education and life for all who have lived in the community for generations and for those newly arriving within their borders. It is an assertion that challenges and changes and holds within it the beginnings of new possibilities that when lived together have the potential to move humanity forward.

Often, thinking about the educational project in Reggio Emilia causes us to consider our own contexts in North America. We are confronted by the unadulterated willpower the people of Reggio Emilia have for supporting a unique community construct and wonder if we might learn from their examples (Barazzoni, 1985; Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010; Gandini, 2012). Perhaps if we adopt a proclivity for giving visibility to the rights of children, families, and educators, being fearless in crossing boundaries, and continuing to grow in our understanding, we might help create a future that holds children and childhood in high esteem. It may be that working to see others as colleagues, sources of inspiration, builders of knowledge, and worthy of our time and attention shows us another way of creating schools and societies that are transformational and creative. Chiara shares with us,

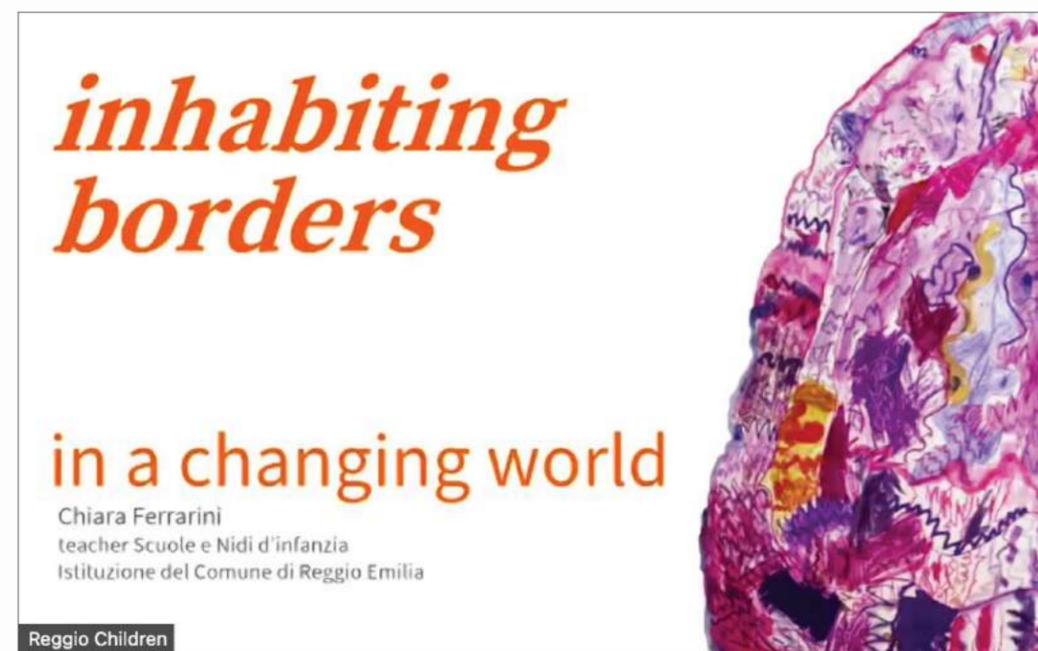
Human beings are transformational and creative. We wanted to tell you the story of how our school and our system took this opportunity during the pandemic to explore the possibilities within our borders. Our desire was to continue working with schools of quality and to continue to remain interrelated and have relations with each other. Another desire was to build up what is perhaps an emerging competence, the competence for hope. (Ferrarini, 2022)

Embracing Creative Thinking

How much consideration do educators in North America give to creative thinking? For example, do we share the many ways children encounter nature—walking through leaves, exploring seed pods, hearing bird songs, breathing in cool air, or tentatively tasting the mint from the garden? There are myriad ways children encounter and interact with the natural world using all their senses. Within the ordinary life of children, we find an extraordinary dimension of creative thinking. We have to be open and eager to see and listen to their innovation and imaginaries. Alessandro offers his advice on how to do this:

When we as educators want to offer children contexts that are closer to the areas in which they're researching, thinking about, and investigating, we offer them contexts that are full of intentions. They're not just happenstance contexts. They don't just happen by chance. They're not casual. They're full of lots of intent and thoughts on the part of the teachers. First and foremost, it is the adults who are engaged in research, adults who are designing and trying out the context that they will then offer the children, simulating perhaps the work that they think the children might be able to do in these contexts. If we are constantly engaged in

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Inhabiting borders in a changing world

keeping theory and practice together, then we are constantly reflecting on our theory as we practice and constantly reflecting on our practice when we think in terms of theory. (Mainini, 2022)

It seems that Alessandro suggests that the creative thinking of children is supported by a teacher who is alongside them, thinking inventively with vision and cleverness. Additionally, we realize once again the importance of holding theory and practice together. The educators in Reggio Emilia never move one forward without the other. It is a strategy that educators in Reggio Emilia use to advance the knowledge of children and adults as well as to grow and learn professionally.



Photo by Nicolò

Alessandro passionately shares the concept of the diffused *atelier*, an outward expression of theory and practice in tandem that nourishes creative thinking, saying,

The diffused *atelier* is an idea and a value that is intimately connected in time and space. It is an idea that is intimately connected to the hundred languages. A diffused *atelier* reflects the hundred languages, the languages of expression, many of which come from the world of the arts but which weave together or graft

onto other languages. . . . The languages flow and weave together in processes that are circular. It's a spiral of recursive ability, of returning to the same things. Through the co-participation of children and adults together, we look for strategies in order to find solutions to the challenges we encounter. A diffused *atelier* is a way of constantly being aware of the aesthetics of learning. Aesthetics is always an act of knowledge. . . . Introducing diffused *ateliers* into our places of learning is a way of underscoring an approach that strongly believes in relationships with others and with things and among things, always connecting the relations between the people, the spaces, the environments, and the concepts that are contained within all the possible relationships and connections that can be made between those things. (Mainini, 2022)

Clearly, the audacious message we receive from devoted Reggio Emilia educators is one that embraces relationship, variety, multiple perspectives, and respect for all humanity. It is transparent that the Reggio Emilia Approach is not a linear method we can copy. The challenge for us is to navigate a world filled with shortcuts and easy answers to complex issues in education. As Reggio-inspired educators in North America, the more we go to the source of the Reggio Emilia Approach by participating in conferences, exhibits, *ateliers*, and study groups hosted in collaboration with Reggio Children, the more we envision and act upon the image of childhood and education that is anchored in values, principles, and dispositions that create a landscape of connection, innovation, beauty, joy, and meaning (Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010).

Crossing the Thresholds

We believe our approach to education has a capacity for transformation in its DNA. This means that in times like the times we have been living recently, times of great change, perhaps our point of view is already predisposed and tends towards a capacity for transformation. (Braglia, 2022)

The speakers often refer to borders, thresholds, and transformation throughout our time together, and we realize the use of these terms is intentional and intriguing. In North America, educators are familiar with borders that keep people out, thresholds that cause uncertainty and imbalance, and transformation that is unclear. Yet, the work that the speakers offer us demands that we embrace different definitions of the words. Perhaps if we think of the words often used by poets, artists, and writers to open themselves up to new potentials, it would give us the disposition to walk bravely across the borders and thresholds in our contexts with the children and adults we care deeply about.

The Irish author John O'Donohue (2007) writes, We are also often surprised by change that seems to arrive out of nowhere. We find ourselves crossing some new threshold we had never anticipated. Like spring secretly at work within the heart of winter, below the surface of our lives huge changes are in fermentation. We never suspect a thing.

Then when the grip of some long-enduring winter mentality begins to loosen, we find ourselves vulnerable to a flourish of possibility and we are suddenly negotiating the challenge of a threshold. . . . No threshold need be a threat, but rather an invitation and a promise. (pp. 65-66)

It might be useful for us to think of one of the roles of teachers as a bridge-builder. As we face a world always in transformation, we can look to the Reggio Emilia Approach and our time together with the children and families in our communities as needed material to create bridges that traverse borders, boundaries, and thresholds in order to open up new paths. Fortunately, we are not alone and can be inspired and comforted knowing that the educators in Reggio Emilia are inviting us to join them in seeing the threshold as a promise.

“How can we look at this difficult moment together? How can we inhabit this border moment and find ways together of going across the boundaries that are there” (Ferrarini, 2022)?

Once Again, We Learn About the Value of the Conference from the Participants:



Lella Gandini



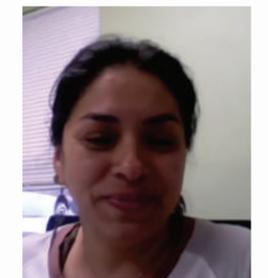
Barbara Valenzuela



Brenda Fyfe



Cierra Price



Edda Reeves



Jiwon Choi



Katie Boyagian



Abigail Laub



Peter Brown



Sheri Fry

“I was impressed that so many diverse people came together to plan and find places and unique ways to get children communicating in and/or out of their homes and still followed the rules of the pandemic.”

“Reggio Emilia is a wonderful approach that shows how it is possible to respect children’s voices.”

“It was my first time attending a NAREA conference, and I will be attending many more in the future! It was an amazing conference with great content.”

“My reflection is ‘everything in the space should have a possibility.’”

“The NAREA conferences are always about process and the documentation of the process.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed the conference. I am inspired to continue the work with parents and children in observing, documenting, and thinking about how their child learns so that when they are at the school, they have a sense of community. I also loved the way the clay alphabet was explained. It helped me to see the different ways children use materials as languages that the children express themselves. Thank you.”

“As always, the Reggio educators offered much to think about. Alessandra was especially good at responding to audience questions. I very much appreciated how the Reggio educators demonstrated their commitment to the values and principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic. They offered an alternative view of the pandemic, that is, an opportunity to think differently, to figure out how to stay in relation to one another despite being apart.”

“I loved the presentations. I think the conference could have been enhanced by using the breakout room feature for discussions after each presentation. It would have been nice to share with each other what we were learning.”

“I appreciated how the educators from Reggio tied in the projects to what the children were learning and shared how to use the outdoor space as a laboratory instead of just a playground.”

“The presentations were inspiring. The presenters were insightful when answering questions. The conference really brought to light how important reflection is in ECE.”

“My heart was moved because the themes dwelt in continuous attentiveness to the other, from the attentiveness of the teacup holding snacks to the concept of thresholds that welcome and connect, the educators of Reggio Emilia ‘feel you are not falling into nothingness. There are always other people there catching you so you do not feel alone.’ If we could all be moved to lean towards creating contexts of attentiveness and care of the other, it may be a way to earthly peace.”



Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool educators

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