

Perspectives on NAREA

The Eleventh NAREA Summer Conference – Bridging Partnerships on the Path of Learning: Embracing History, Identity, and Culture in Our Settings

By Patty Randall



Patty Randall is the NAREA projects and events coordinator and director of educational practices at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool in Atlanta, GA.



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city filled with bridges and a strong history of change and innovation, greeted 220 participants of the Eleventh NAREA Summer Conference on June 18–20, 2015. The conference was held in collaboration with Reggio Children and the Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative at the beautiful Heinz History Center, Mueller Education Center. After a short walk from the Westin Conference Center and Hotel, participants entered through a museum focused on the history and current life of Pittsburgh, reminding us that we were in a particular place at a particular time for a particular reason: “to build a diverse community of advocates and educators to promote and defend the rights of children, families, and teachers of all cultures through the collaboration of colleagues inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy.” (NAREA mission statement)



As participants arrived, they added to the collection of materials for the atelier session. The table soon became filled with an assortment of materials from across the North American contexts. Teachers placed Post-it notes on the donations to give them a sense of identity. “What did you bring?” could be heard as participants walked to the collection table.



From left, Margie Cooper, Carolyn Linder, and Barbara Acton greet participants

Barbara Acton and Margie Cooper, NAREA co-chairs, opened the conference with a warm welcome. Local host Carolyn Linder, (with the Agency for Jewish Learning at that time, now with the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh), also offered her greetings:

We are truly honored to welcome you here this morning and to have been selected as

the host city for the Eleventh North American Reggio Emilia Alliance Summer Conference, “Bridging Partnerships on the Path of Learning: Embracing History, Identity, and Culture in Our Settings.” We are equally honored and excited to be hosting “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibition, which will be opening next month at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, as we look forward to these initiatives leading to an increased focus on the quality of early education programs in our community...

Almost 20 years ago, a group of organizations and individuals formed a partnership to bring an earlier and smaller version of “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibition to Pittsburgh. This group was composed of administrators and educators from early childhood centers of excellence that were studying the principles of the schools of Reggio Emilia, higher education faculty, members of the broader education and arts communities, and others committed to bringing the highest caliber of early education to children and families.

The Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative is a new partnership dedicated to bringing “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibition to Pittsburgh for the first time. This new initiative stands as a testament to the serious and long-standing commitment that Pittsburgh and the region has to a continued dialogue with the Reggio Emilia schools and principles. The number of organizations and individuals that have come together to bring this exhibition to Pittsburgh has grown considerably, and some of the original Reggio Pittsburgh Project members are also active in this effort. At this time, I would like to please ask members of the Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative to stand so that I can personally

thank them for their ongoing support and deep commitment to this work.

Pittsburgh is proud to rank among the top places to live, work, and visit in the United States. Our city is consistently recognized with accolades from major travel and financial organizations as one of the most livable cities with one of the most viable economies. We have been honored as a first-rate city for livability, culture, and economy for several years. For those of us who call Pittsburgh home, it is more than just a great place to work; it is the place that we have chosen to raise our children and to build our future. From the moment that you arrive, you can sense the excitement here—the energy of a steel town transforming itself into one of the hottest new spots on the business, innovation, and technology map—and we strive to include education on that list.

The name Heinz is often associated with the city of Pittsburgh as this city has been the global headquarters for the Heinz Company for well over a century. Pittsburgh-born pop artist Andy Warhol often depicted Heinz products in his iconic images. The Andy Warhol Museum, the largest museum in the country dedicated to a single artist, is generously and graciously offering complimentary admission to the museum tomorrow evening for all NAREA Summer Conference participants.

It is particularly fitting then that we are gathered today at the Senator John Heinz History Center, an educational institution that engages and inspires a large and diverse audience with links to the past, understanding in the present, and guidance for the future by preserving regional history and presenting the American experience with a Western Pennsylvania connection. We can draw inspiration from Senator Heinz's words, "What makes a society thrive are citizens determined to see shared ideals realized—realized not just for the select few but as our pledge says, 'for all!'"

This conference is an opportunity for early childhood educators to gather and learn about the world of early childhood education inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy and would not have been possible without the tireless and devoted work of many to whom we give our sincerest thanks, beginning with NAREA and especially Margie

Cooper, standing chair, and the other NAREA board members who join us this morning, Barbara Acton and Jennifer Strange, with whom I have the distinct privilege of working through the Pittsburgh Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative. A very special thank you to NAREA's conference coordinators, Patty Randall and Lauren Curling, and to translator Leslie Morrow.

We would also like to thank Jennifer Azzariti, NAREA board member and *atelierista*, who coordinated the *ateliers* for the summer conference. Jennifer has carefully organized the *atelier* sessions with the support of the Cyert Center for Early Education studio teachers Barbara Moser and Suzanne Grove from Pittsburgh and Journeys School studio teacher Erin Smith from Jackson, WY. They have planned the *ateliers*, and gathered and organized materials for the past several months, and we all look forward to Saturday afternoon's experience.

We would like to express our appreciation to Carla Freund, director, Cyert Center for Early Education, for organizing a devoted cadre of volunteers to assist over the course of the three days—and to all of our local volunteers, thank you! A very special thank you to our esteemed speakers: Deanna Margini, *pedagogista*, and Filippo Chieli, *atelierista*, Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, who have graciously traveled to Pittsburgh to share with us their experiences and insights.

I would like to end with a quote from one of Pittsburgh's most beloved neighbors, Fred Rogers:

If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet—how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.



Filippo Chieli, Leslie Morrow, and Deanna Margini

After the welcoming remarks, educators began the work of learning together. The first day was dedicated to plenary sessions with presentations given by Deanna Margini and Filippo Chieli. The presentations on the first day included "The Reggio Emilia Approach to Education: Its History and Its Social, Cultural, and Educational Context" and "Children and Their Extraordinary Potentialities and Competence."

Deanna Margini shared her insights on Loris Malaguzzi as she spoke about the Reggio Emilia approach to education:

We could say that Reggio Emilia could be defined as having a vocation as an educating city. Along this path entered Loris Malaguzzi with his particular intelligence. Loris Malaguzzi was a sort of non-academic educator who rolled up his sleeves and worked side-by-side with teachers in the schools, who discussed and sometimes argued with administrative people on the rights of children and the rights of teachers and parents. (personal notes, June 18, 2015)

A strong thread wove throughout the plenary sessions on the first day and was reflected in Deanna and Filippo's words. Deanna said:

It is not enough to just offer care and affection. Added to that must be a learning context that is varied and rich. The adults have to start from curiosity—the curiosity of the children to understand—areas where children's cognition is manifested. . . . It is not enough to observe and document. The teacher has to ask: "What am I going to do next? What choices will advance the situation?" Teachers, over time, offer different opportunities to advance. (personal notes, June 18, 2015)

Filippo referenced Loris Malaguzzi's words:

Teachers are like explorers using maps and compasses; they know the direction, but they know that every year, the terrain, climate, and seasons change; the children add new

directions and the order of times and problems can change. Destinations are important and will not be lost from sight; but more important is how and why I reach them. That is precisely why it is essential for both adults and children to be able to re-trace their steps or, rather, their knowledge processes through an attitude of re-cognition made possible by observation, documentation, and interpretation. (personal notes, June 18, 2015)



Deanna and Filippo established an open dialogue with the participants on the first day that continued throughout the three days of the conference. During the course of the plenary sessions, the speakers requested comments, which were collected throughout the three days. Deanna and Filippo challenged themselves to address these wonderings throughout the conference.

The first day was a "deep dive" into the work of the schools in Reggio Emilia. One participant shared, "The passion in the room was amazing. It was impressive to hear from the educators from Italy about their schools in their own voice." Another commented, "I absolutely sponged up whatever Deanna and Filippo shared with us, and I am in awe of what they offer children!"

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—Filippo Chieli (referencing Loris Malaguzzi's words)

It is not enough to observe and document. The teacher has to ask: "What am I going to do next? What choices will advance the situation?"

—Deanna Margini



Day one concluded with the largest NAREA Dine-a-Round to date. Forty participants gathered at a local favorite, Lidia's, for Italian fare and fellowship. It was a night filled with interesting conversations and new alliances. From this time together, new ways for educators of school-age children to meet emerged.



The morning of the second day focused on the presentation by the Reggio educators entitled "The Hundred Languages of Children: Creative Processes of Learning, Educational Documentation, and Research." During his presentation, Filippo shared:

The metaphor of the hundred languages developed by Loris Malaguzzi speaks of the hundred ways children come to know and urges us to expand and broaden the expressive horizons—always searching for the expressive side of languages. The metaphor has more to do with developing ways of relating with other people and other things. (personal notes, June 19, 2015)



The rain held off and participants were able to take lunch onto the patio where they had time to network with other educators. Educators of school-age children, many who had been at the Dine-a-Round the night before, requested a moment to gather together in order to see if there was interest in discussions related to the Reggio Emilia approach beyond the preschool years. The group from the Sturgeon School Division in Alberta expressed the desire to be involved in future school-age initiatives. The time together was appreciated, as this participant's comment reflected: "Thank you for the wonderful opportunity to learn, work, and share with NAREA members!"

Following lunch, the co-curators of exhibits in the Heinz History Museum gave presentations as a cultural offering from Pittsburgh, including: "How Pittsburgh Changed the World – Pittsburgh: A Tradition of Innovation," "Glass: Shattering Notions," and "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." Then conference participants were free to visit the corresponding exhibits in the museum.



As educators visited the Heinz History Museum exhibits, the educators from Reggio Emilia were busy being interviewed. Deanna reflected on her experience on the pedagogical team in Reggio and discussed the responsibility in relation to education in a city with a diverse population of citizens. Filippo offered his perspective as an *atelierista* on the efforts to bridge history, identity, and culture through the schools and citizen *ateliers* in Reggio Emilia. Later, participants joined in the experience by sharing reflections on the conference and their anticipation of the upcoming school year.

Participants and speakers were delighted that the Warhol Museum gave complimentary evening admission to attendees of the NAREA conference. A few were lucky enough to see Rolling Stones guitarist Ron Wood enjoying the museum as he was in town for a concert.

The last day of the conference began early for the *atelier* facilitators. Wagons full of materials traveled from the Heinz History Center and the Cyert Center for Early Education at Carnegie Mellon University to the University Center at Carnegie Mellon. Meanwhile, Deanna and Filippo continued to share their work in the plenary session in their final presentation, "Making Learning Visible: Responsibility, Inclusion, and Participation in the Life of the School and Community." As the morning drew to a close, the group reflected together on the experience:

"This was a superb conference. It gave my fellow teaching partners a starting point for our journey of becoming a Reggio-inspired school." "The Reggio Emilia presentations were inspirational. This approach can transform the way we educate in this country—through sounds, music, and all art languages—opening the eyes of the community as we enjoy life and learn together." "This was one of the most informative conferences I've attended. I enjoyed the rich cultural experiences and hearing directly from *Pedagogista* Margini and *Atelierista* Chieli."



The Reggio Emilia presentations were inspirational. This approach can transform the way we educate in this country . . . opening the eyes of the community as we enjoy life and learn together.

—2015 NAREA Summer Conference participant

North America



Penny Fahlman (Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative), Margie Cooper, Barbara Acton, Carolyn Linder, Deanna Margini, Filippo Chieli, Carla Freund, and Judy Abrams (Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative)

It is with special gratitude that we thank our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, Italy, Deanna Margini and Filippo Chieli. We are grateful for the Reggio Emilia Pittsburgh Initiative and their work in hosting the conference. We further extend our appreciation to the educators and families from the Cyert Center for Early Education for all they have done to shape and host the 2015 NAREA Summer Conference. It was a pleasure being with educators from a variety of contexts for three intensive days dedicated to building a new future based on a strong and competent image of children, their families, and their teachers.

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-Patty Randall

We had an early departure for the afternoon experiences, which included the *atelier* sessions, a school visit to the Cyert Center for Early Education at Carnegie Mellon University, and the opportunity to tour the “She Who Tells a Story” exhibit at the Carnegie Museum of Art. The *atelier* sessions and school visit offered further opportunities to be together and to reflect on history, identity, and culture in our settings.

The three days came to a conclusion with a lovely reception held at the Cyert Center for Early Education. Margie Cooper toasted to “a place of love and effort, of optimism, of research, and of innovation that shows us all that children matter, adults matter, the future matters, and the care we affect with one another is what will take us to the future we all dream of!”