

# Reflections

## The 14th NAREA Winter Conference

BY: NAREA STAFF

TORONTO, CANADA

### Educational Research: An Essential and Ethical Dimension in the Life of Children and Adults

March 16–18, 2023



Damasi and Filippini on their way to Junior School to support preparation of conference ateliers

### Pre-Conference Professional Development

The 14th NAREA Winter Conference, "Educational Research: An Essential and Ethical Dimension in the Life of Children and Adults," was made possible through the generous collaboration with the Ontario Reggio Association (ORA). We have been working together for several months, both to anticipate the presence of the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition and *atelier* and the NAREA conference in the Ontario province. Reggio Children remained at our side throughout the planning period, and we were joined in Toronto by Tiziana Filippini, *pedagogista*, and Consuelo Damasi, *atelierista*, along with their interpreter Jane McCall.

Many contributed to the organization and content of the conference, including a working group of educators from Ontario, British Columbia, and Atlanta, Georgia, who took responsibility for professional learning connected to the exhibition and *atelier*. The working group engaged in collaboration and virtual encounters for a few months prior to the opening of the exhibition and the NAREA conference in Toronto.

One of the highlights of the working group's experiences was being together with Filippini and Damasi the day prior to the conference opening. This occasion gave an important opportunity to exchange thoughts, perspectives, and questions regarding the exhibition and *atelier*. Among these opportunities was the description of the origin of the work that took place in the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia that was later curated into the exhibition and *atelier*. Damasi (2023, March 15) opens the session in this way:

Whenever we prepare a context that we want to offer to the children, it's very important for us, first and foremost, to start with some questions in our minds. The first question we have to ask of ourselves: In this context that I want to offer the children, what can they potentially encounter and what might that context solicit in them? How will the new contexts that we are offering to the children advance their knowledge?

Damasi explains that prior to the research on graphics and narration that is the foundation of the *Mosaic* exhibition, the Reggio educators found that they had inhabited experiences of



Damasi and Filippini discuss set up of *ateliers* with working group members

mark-making so often in the daily life that they began to take these experiences for granted. They stopped seeing these explorations and the connections that children make between drawing and storytelling. The research in the infant-toddler centers and preschools over time that is featured in the exhibition helped them to look at graphics and narration with a very different vision.

Regarding the intentions of the educators during this research, Damasi (2023, March 15) explains, "I don't want you to think that we were trying to anticipate the children's actions. What we were trying to do is to produce more sensitive antennas for the children during their work." She asks the working group members to prepare mixed palettes of mark-makers (tools) and mark-receivers (supports), which would put them in the position of thinking about possible relations between them. Damasi also suggests that they imagine they've been invited to participate in an *atelier*, actually living it as they prepare it.

Damasi suggests the working group find the conceptual aspects of their explorations and decide what kinds of tools and supports to offer to others working with these concepts. She shares that it would be interesting to explore concepts that they encounter in the exhibition and construct a palette of tools and supports around them. Damasi also asks the group to identify the dialogue between the mark-makers and mark-receivers.

Filippini (2023, March 15) explains that these concepts "orient us in creating a context in which the graphic and narrative of the children can be nourished and informed." Then she says, "I always keep the relationship between the concepts I choose and the children in mind. I process my thoughts through the lens of my knowledge of the children." After dialogue with the working group, Filippini adds, "The more I know as a teacher, the more I can welcome the different strategies of the children. I must master the potentialities to create contexts in which the children are free to choose their strategies."

On Wednesday evening, the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition and *atelier* opening took place with Ontario educators, government officials, funders, and community members. Following a reception, visitors toured the exhibition and *atelier*.



Opening night visitors

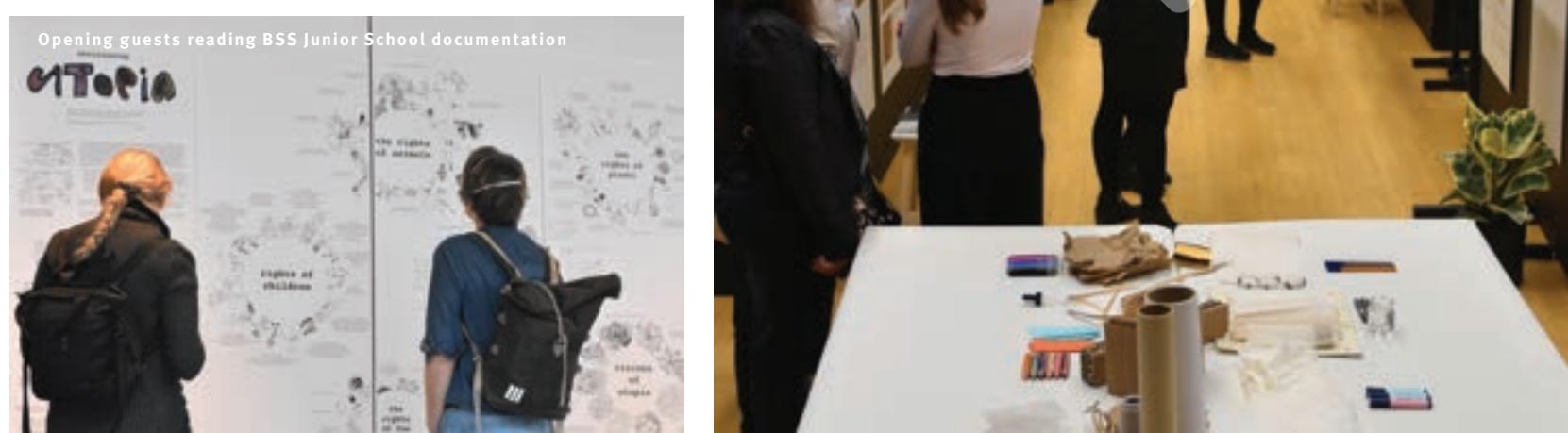


Callaghan and Filippini offer comments to opening guests.

Opening night visitors



Guests listen to opening remarks.



Opening guests reading BSS Junior School documentation

## Conference Begins with Land Acknowledgment

Situated in the warm and inviting Bishop Strachan School (BSS) in Toronto, more than 200 participants joined conference organizers. Michelle Taylor-Leonhardi (2023, March 16), an ORA director and *Anishinaabekwe* from Curve Lake First Nation, offers the land acknowledgment that the BSS Junior School uses, based on the research of the school community:

We would like to acknowledge the land that we are gathered on and that BSS is located on. We are on the traditional lands of the Windat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. This land is the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the plants, animals, and water in and around the Great Lakes. Today the meeting place of Toronto is the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. We are grateful to have the opportunity to learn on this land. We recognize the enduring presence of the Indigenous peoples on this land.

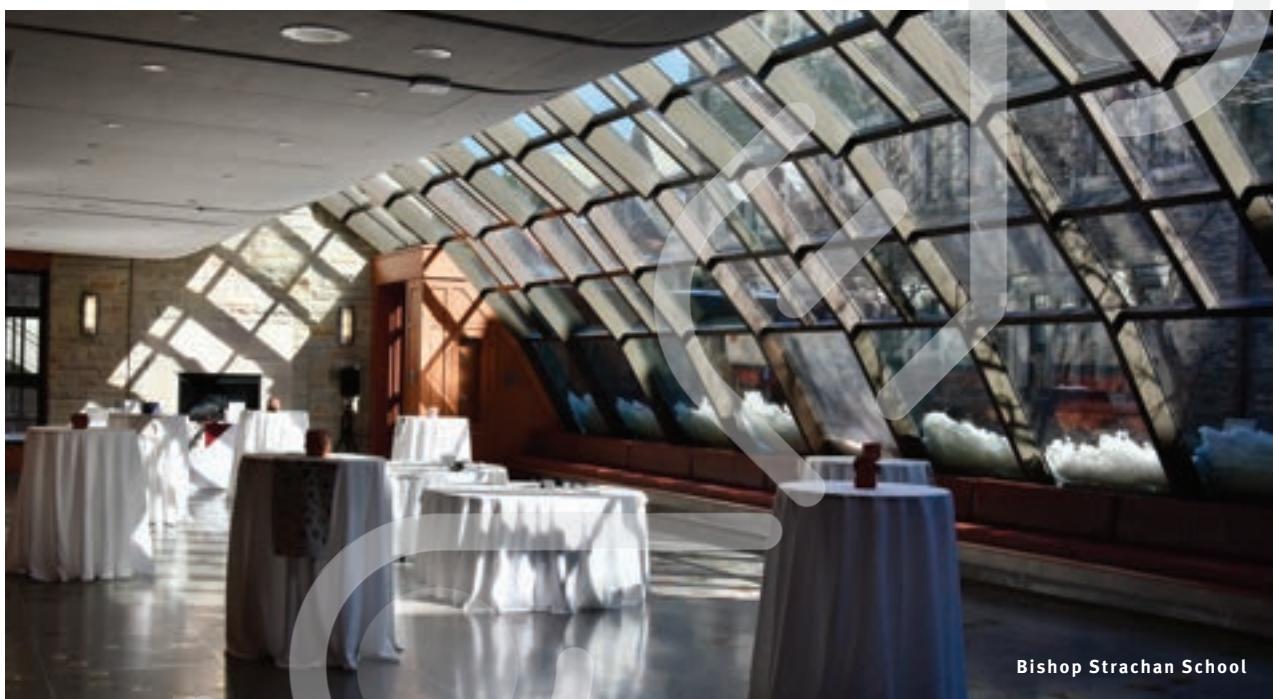
Then Taylor-Leonhardi's grandmother Mary Taylor shares traditions of the Curve Lake First Nation culture, including the process of becoming a woman, which her granddaughter Kenni-Dee Leonhardi is currently experiencing. She describes the seed which passes through generations of women and the teachings that are part of this life-cycle observance.

Karyn Callaghan (2023, March 16), NAREA board member and ORA president, welcomes participants on behalf of NAREA and ORA, saying,

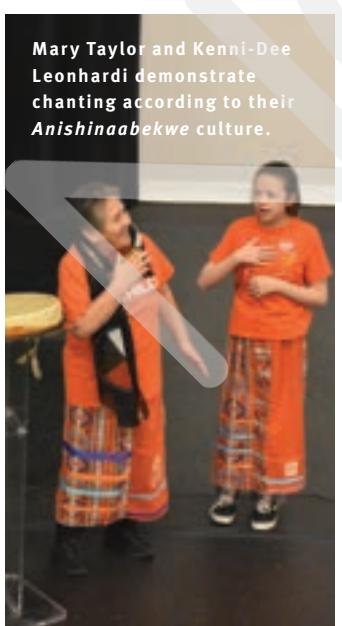
We have the great honor of hosting this conference and the exhibit that you'll be seeing today. We really cherish this relationship that we have with NAREA and with Reggio Children. It has been long-term and very fruitful, and we really feel that solidarity, the shared mission, the shared desire to see a transformation in our world, to make it so much better for children.



Bishop Strachan School



Bishop Strachan School



Mary Taylor and Kenni-Dee Leonhardi demonstrate chanting according to their *Anishinaabekwe* culture.



Callaghan welcomes participants on behalf of NAREA and ORA



Speakers Filippini and Damasi and interpreter McCall

## Research as a Motor of Change

With that, Filippini (2023, March 16) offers her presentation, “Research as a Motor of Change: An Attitude That Runs Through Children’s Way of Doing” in dialogue with the participants. She asks, “What does it mean to create a school in which children are welcome, in which the nature of their way of learning can really be respected?” She continues, “Because if I want to respect the uniqueness of each child, I have to understand who they are.”

Making a connection with the title of her presentation, Filippini explains that the adult’s role is understanding how children are learning, which is where you can find the motor of change that belongs to an attitude of ongoing research to better understand, never believing that you understand completely, because the more you understand, the more you know there is something more.

Filippini (2023, March 16) agrees with Taylor’s words about the continuity between the generations, that there are threads that connect us, but there are also big changes from one generation to the next. The society around us is continually changing. She asserts,

That’s why we always have to be in the mood to be curious, to encounter children in their uniqueness. If the school wants to be able to educate in a way in which children are citizens and a part of the society they live in, the school must continually update itself. The school also has the responsibility to take a position on what’s happening in society and to share its culture with the community.

Filippini (2023, March 16) shares a video of the daily life in a municipal preschool in Reggio Emilia. She suggests to participants what they could be thinking about while watching as a guide for their reflections following the video. In response to some of the reflections, she shares,

Children enter the school year in September, and we spend a lot of time in the first month focused on becoming a group, getting to know each other, adults and children, children and children, children and environment, materials, and tools. That is the first goal, which doesn’t happen in a vacuum.

In the morning assembly, Filippini (2023, March 16) explains that teachers present issues to the children and they all decide how to proceed together. All the children participate in the conceptual aspects of their work at one time or another. She asks, “How can the contexts we propose facilitate the encounter between the subject of the inquiry and the children?” The challenge is how the children represent the subject according to their own strategies, how they build relationships in order to represent something, and how they develop the capacity to observe and understand the identity of the subject they want to represent.

## Relationship Between Pedagogy and Arts

Building on Filippini’s remarks, Damasi (2023, March 16) offers a presentation, “Pedagogy and Arts: A Transformative Dialogue,” through which she discusses Loris Malaguzzi’s perspective on schools, society, and the culture of the *atelier* and *atelierista*:

Loris Malaguzzi felt that the schools have to be equipped with instruments and tools that would help them to understand more about the anthropological, social, cultural, and artistic changes that were taking place in society. What he imagined in his mind could help us to do that was the introduction of the *atelier* and the *atelierista*.

On this topic, Damasi says that the *atelier* brings with it a culture that enters into dialogue with pedagogy, bringing a political,

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social, and ethical dimension. She continues, “Up until that moment in time, words had a monopoly on education. Words were the only language that was used to transmit knowledge in schools.”

In her discussion on the role of the *atelier* and *atelierista*, Damasi (2023, March 16) explains that they are interested in seeing the process that the children go through, how

they work together, the strategies they use, and the research they activate. She shares the beauty of witnessing children moving from one code to another and taking apart a code and restructuring it in another code. She concludes her presentation with these words:

The culture of the *atelier* has brought with it a sense of great care and attention for contexts that we prepare for children, care taken with the proposals that we make for children, care and attention for the different languages, and expressive techniques that we propose with the children.

In their afternoon breakout presentation, Filippini and Damasi share research from four infant-toddler centers and seven preschools that contributed to the exhibition in “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material: Backstory to the Research.” Conference participants also had the option of experiencing one *atelier* on either Thursday or Friday afternoon: “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material Exhibition and Atelier,” “Mark-Making with Infants and Toddlers,” “Black and White Palette,” or “Ephemeral Marks.”



Participants listen and dialogue with the speakers.

### A Day of Experiences in the Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers, *Ateliers*, and Outdoor and Affinity Group Experiences

After Filippini’s presentation “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material: Sharing a Few Experiences From the Reggio Emilia Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers,” which introduces the exhibition, Damasi (2023, March 17) discusses the evolution in the study of graphics and narration:

Malaguzzi knew that when children use the language of mark-making and drawing, how much that language weaves together or is interconnected with the language of words and narratives, of stories. Verbal language isn’t only present when children speak, and the graphic language is there before children start making marks on paper. We know that graphics, signs, and marks are an integral part of children’s experience from birth.

Filippini (2023, March 17) shares the words of Malaguzzi on the role of relationships in mark-making and drawing:

It is our conviction, also regarding mark-making and drawing, that children continuously reconstruct their ideas in relation with other children. And we are convinced that mark-making and drawing, too, must be read in many interpretive versions, because though it is true drawing, painting, and sculpting have their own processes of genesis and development, it’s equally true that they draw on languages that are different from them.

She comments on the reciprocal relationship between graphics and words, how words and mental images nourish and inform each other and how graphics, materials, and mental images nourish words. Filippini also offers the observational focuses or questions of the project and the observational tools used to share the work with colleagues.

On Friday afternoon, there are opportunities to participate in *ateliers* and breakout sessions, one an outdoor experience presented by BSS educators and the other two affinity group sessions, one organized for Francophones, those whose first language is French.

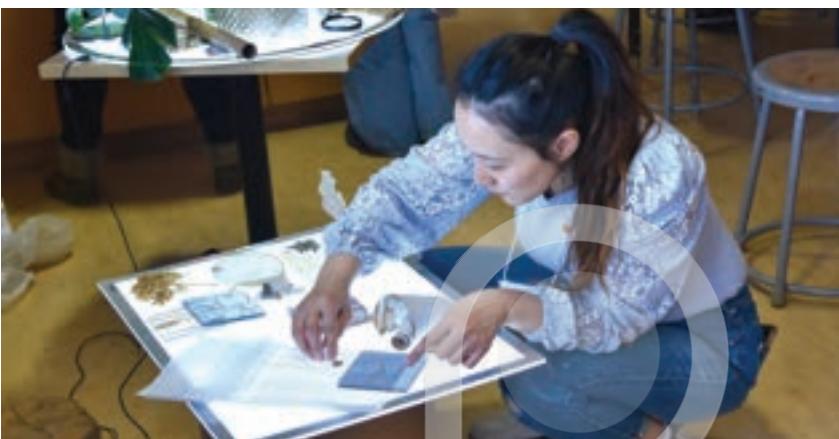


Black and White Palette *atelier*



Black and White Palette *atelier*

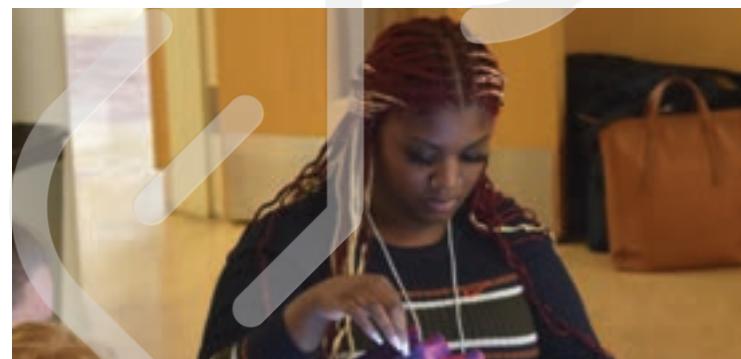
Ephemeral Marks atelier



Francophone and English-speaking affinity groups



Mark-Making for Infants and Toddlers atelier



In Dialogue with a Ravine breakout session



Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material exhibition and atelier

## Schools as Research Workshops

On the final day of the conference, Filippini (2023, March 18) begins the day with a synthesis of Damasi's presentation the day before for those who spent the afternoon in *ateliers*. She shares that in Reggio Emilia, they're constantly thinking about how to communicate the intelligence and research of the children. They wonder how to make children's creativity and strategies visible. She adds, "We keep a very close relationship between thinking and doing in our dynamic of communication. This way of thinking about communication really helps you to get a clearer idea and a clearer focus on your own role as an educator."

Filippini (2023, March 18) begins the shared presentation "The Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centers as Research Workshops" with a strong message from Malaguzzi to leap over the wall of the obvious, the banal, which the educators of Reggio Emilia hold close. She says, "Only if we keep searching for a new way to look at new questions and a new answers to the problem of life are we able to accompany the children on the journey of the learning process.... The wall is the mental barrier that we all have, a stratified way of thinking, of looking." The Reggio educators see this analogy as a way to escape standardization and "assume an interpretive paradigm with an ecological approach, in which interdependency and interconnection are the ways we try to make sense of the world around us."

Filippini (2023, March 18) advises, "You have to listen to understand and then make new proposals, new thoughts, new awareness, and new strategies so you don't lose your vision, and dialogue and relationship are valued. That's why we say infant-toddler centers and preschools are research laboratories." She believes the learning process "intertwines with

the cognitive, playful, aesthetic, spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions. It's a process of construction of subjectivity that feeds on the richness of the variety of context, situation, and strategy." She concludes her presentation with the premise that the child by itself does not exist. The isolated mind does not exist; it's relational and better because of it.

On the role of the educator within these research laboratories, Filippini (2023, March 18) says, "We prefer to have the role in which we are with the children, available to the children, listening to them and trying to support what is going on so that they can invest, be engaged, and be motivated." She concludes with this insightful statement: "The purpose of teaching is not to produce learning but to produce learning conditions."

In response to one of the final questions from a participant regarding parents having different values than the school, Filippini notes the history and culture of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools,

These schools were born from the desire of citizens around the region to invest in the education of children, to try to build a society different than the one before, hoping for a way of living in a community as a citizen with a sense of belonging, with the capacity to invest in the idea of democracy.

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could attend because the dialogue is inside the school and not between schools with different orientations. Filippini (2023, March 18) ends the morning with these words:

We call it a pluralistic vision, the opportunity, no matter how far or distant we are, to continue the dialogue, not because everyone has to believe the same. Differences will be always there. We think that no matter the differences, respect has to be there along with a capacity to negotiate, to mediate.

## School Visit and Exhibition

On Saturday afternoon, a tour of BSS Junior School is offered, and the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition and *atelier* is open for visitors. NAREA is grateful for the behind-the-scenes organization of Reggio Children, which enables our conferences; the wise and open contributions of Tiziana Fillipini, Consuelo Damasi, and Jane McCall; the generosity of the hosts, ORA and BSS, and the active participation of those attending who were continually in dialogue with the speakers, with each other, and with NAREA staff. We hope these days together were meaningful for all.



## Hearing From the Voices of Conference Participants

We appreciate the rich and complex responses we received to the survey we sent to participants.

### On the contributions of Damasi and Filippini:

Meaningful, inspirational. It's so important to work with bigger thinking (conceptual, social justice, changing the world and how we think, perceive and engage), as the educational system and dominant thinking is so instrumentalized. My work has been motivated by change thinking and process-based practices for decades. I feel like I've met kindred spirits.

— SOPHIE EDWARDS

The insights and deep reflections both Consuelo and Tiziana provided during the conference altered my thinking in so many ways. They challenged my thinking. They provoked my previous understandings. . . . I am beginning to truly understand the importance of working intensely with the materials and understanding their qualities and properties before offering them to children.

— JULIE KELLY

Consuelo and Tiziana were inspiring and encouraging. While they spoke with knowledgeable insights from years of working with children and parents and other educators in Reggio Emilia, their ability to connect with the North American audience was because of their openness, honesty, and generosity of spirit.

— ERNEST BLAIS

I appreciated that gentle nudge to reflect on the gap between what we think and what we do and to remain true to our own values but open to other ways of thinking.

— KATE DANIEL

The Reggio Emilia Approach values what children say and do, and you can tell how mindful Consuelo and Tiziana are with their word choices. They spoke about the relation children have between learning and teaching, the type of teacher you see yourself as, and learning about my role and the impact it has on daily life of the children.

— ALEXANDRA LOPEZ

### On the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition and atelier:

I was truly moved by this exhibition and the journey that was experienced by both the children and the adults responsible for collecting and organizing the data.

— JENNIFER AGRO

This was a beautiful and inspiring exhibition. It really exemplifies what children are capable of doing.

— GABRIELLA GREENWELL

I yearn to express to the teachers in my school in their hundred languages how beautiful and thoughtful this work is.

— APRIL CROW

### On experiences in the ateliers:

It was so fun exploring the *atelier* with my own hands. It gives you a different perspective when you can actually touch and use the materials. It got my mind going about how children would feel.

— ANTONETTE VELASQUEZ

Very fun and important to get to play with the ideas. I really saw the value of taking the concepts we were hearing about in the presentations into the classroom. I don't think I would have had as meaningful a learning opportunity without the hands-on experience.

— HANNAH MCFARLANE

Loved seeing all the materials and having them accessible for all to use. Use of materials offers a new, fresh meaning.

— ANGELA IRELAND



ORA board



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