

Reflection On

The 19th NAREA Summer Conference

BY: NAREA STAFF

A T L A N T A , G E O R G I A

Crossing Borders: Affirming Rights

July 13–15, 2023



Marco Spaggiari, Moira Nicolosi, and Jane McCall



Margie Cooper



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Introduction

The 19th NAREA Summer Conference begins with a gathering of about 165 participants from four countries: Bermuda, Canada, Italy, and the United States. There are 18 U.S. states and one Canadian province represented in the spacious Ceremonial Courtroom at the Georgia State University College of Law, where we will spend our days together.

For this conference, we are pleased to welcome Moira Nicolosi and Marco Spaggiari, as well as their interpreter Jane McCall, from Reggio Emilia, Italy. For Nicolosi, it is her first time in Atlanta, Georgia. She was born and grew up in Reggio Emilia, attending the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. Nicolosi worked for Reggio Children, then the Reggio Children – Loris Malaguzzi Center Foundation from 2005–2014. In 2014, after participating in the process of public examinations, she became a *pedagogista* for the municipality of Reggio Emilia. Nicolosi is the reference for all the families and children with special rights who come into the infant-toddler centers and preschools.

Spaggiari is an artist and an *atelierista* for Reggio Children, and this is his second visit to Atlanta. He also works as a bridge between the Loris Malaguzzi International Center, where one of the municipal preschools is located, and visiting study groups.

In addition, he works in the primary school at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center which welcomes children up to the age of 11. Spaggiari holds a degree in visual arts from the *Accademia di Belle Arti* of Bologna, Italy. He is particularly interested in finding connections between languages and the disciplines that are talked about generally in schools. Spaggiari tells us he began working with children 10 years ago. This highlights the kind of choices made in the Reggio Emilia educational system to employ *atelieristas* who do not have a background in teaching with children because they know that working collegially, that experience will mature.

As we settle into our comfortable chairs, there is some laughter in the courtroom where we are all meeting as we pretend for just a moment to be a judge, lawyer, or jury member, saying “silence in the court” or “I object.” Margie Cooper, the standing chair of NAREA, begins by welcoming the participants.

The Experiences of the Working Group: Designing and Conducting Ateliers

Before this session begins, we look back to the preparation that brings us to today. Three months before the conference, a working group of those who will design and conduct the conference *ateliers* was assembled, educators from Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool (PPP), Project Infinity, and NAREA. These participatory *ateliers* will be inspired by the exhibition *Bordercrossings: Encounters with Living Things/Digital Landscapes* and created in the classroom spaces of PPP. Preparing and conducting the *ateliers* will be a rich professional development experience for the working group members.

The day before the conference, Spaggiari and Nicolosi gather with the working group to offer opportunities for dialogue and encounter. Cooper begins by asking those working group members who were very recently in Reggio Emilia to share their experiences in the *ateliers* there. Candace Dupree (2023, July 12) describes the “tenacity of the educators in Reggio Emilia to stick with their work through disequilibrium.” Others share how they noticed the abundance of time to think and valued the opportunity to move slowly and explore.

The working group members encounter many and varied ideas about designing the *ateliers*. Spaggiari (2023, July 12) reminds us, “It is very important to share about work with children among teachers. Being able to discuss things is very important.” Spaggiari explains the importance of creating a plan for the *atelier*, including elements such as a title, the structure of the *atelier*, and concepts that may be explored. He encourages the group to create generative questions to ask both before and after the *atelier* experience.



Working group meeting

During the pre-conference working group session, Spaggiari, Nicolosi, and the working group members meet in the five *atelier* spaces. Walking from one *atelier* to the next, Spaggiari and Nicolosi reflect and comment on each setting, asking for the conductors of each *atelier* to share their group’s intentions and interpretations of the space. This is a powerful and somewhat unfamiliar form of professional development. There is a mixture of excitement and anxiety while Spaggiari and Nicolosi view the newly designed *ateliers*. Everyone feels a bit vulnerable and unsure as they enter each space, wondering and waiting to see what impressions they will have.



Designing exhibition and conference *ateliers*



Spaggiari (2023, July 13) refers to this experience when he says, “There is a sensation of feeling a bit naked when you present your work or try to discuss your work with people you don’t see every day. You feel that you’re stripped bare in front of people, showing them how you’ve been thinking and working. I know that it’s not easy to do that. So, I’d like to thank you all. It’s not particularly easy to be in an education environment where you’re not used to working with these kinds of *atelier* contexts. This kind of dialogue can be uncomfortable, and so, I wanted to say thank you very much to all of you for making this reciprocal, formative time together possible.”

Working group members learn greatly as they gather in each other’s *ateliers*. Spaggiari (2023, July 12) reminds us that *ateliers* are not an exhibition creating “fascination for fascination’s sake.” He advises us not to describe areas in the *ateliers* to participants but to let them discover independently, keeping materials mixed and not too neatly displayed. He calls attention to asking participants in the *ateliers* for “words that can be used as a relaunch, as a method of uncovering concepts and of illuminating the circularity in conversations.”

Spaggiari (2023, July 12) advises that we consider what the digital tools can offer. What are their possibilities? For example, he states, “Pen microscopes create worlds that are invisible to the human eye. They can focus on one detail and lose vision of the whole. They can transform colors or present in only black and white.” Spaggiari emphasizes avoiding the use of the same tool to offer the same possibilities. Digital tools can transform and see beyond what is visible.

At the end of the day, the working group members return to their *ateliers* with renewed energy and ideas for transformation. Educators huddle around notebooks with their notes to consider what they might do to further prepare for the conference *ateliers*.

The Right to Differences: The Values and Principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach

Nicolosi (2023, July 13) begins the morning by sharing the values that support the experience of education in the day-to-day life of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia:

We believe that we can share the values when we say it’s not a model. We can share with you the values that we work with. They are the values that each one of us can take home and interpret in our own life, our educational context, our social context, our cultural context, and our political context.

She affirms the universal right to education that belongs to all human beings, a right that welcomes differences. As such, the community is responsible for designing and running services for young children. Nicolosi (2023, July 13) discusses the importance of being contemporary, considering the times that we are in, and renewing ourselves constantly, not being stagnant:



The Right to Differences

It’s important for us to be able to read the contemporary life that we’re part of because we, as educators, have a responsibility to constantly renew ourselves. And the way that we renew ourselves is through our dialogue with the children that we work with and with the families that come into the school, fully respecting the children and adults that we meet every day in our work.

We’re all educators and so, this aspect of being capable of reading the times that we are living is very important for all of us as educators. It’s important for us to be able to read the contemporary life that we’re part of because we, as educators, have a responsibility to constantly renew ourselves. And the way that we renew ourselves is through our dialogue with the children that we work with and with the families that come into the school, fully respecting the children and adults that we meet every day in our work.

The infant-toddler centers and preschools of the municipality of Reggio Emilia have a long and rich history. Nicolosi explains how the schools’ identity has been defined and redefined over the years in an osmotic relationship between the schools and the community. The life of the city is inseparable from the life of the children and the infant-toddler centers and preschools. Nicolosi (2023, July 13) says, “So, we affirm constantly this universal right—the right to a life, the right to a future, the right to beauty, the right to knowledge, the right to play, and the right to relations.”

Nicolosi shares the relationship the Reggio educators have with the Italian Ministry of Education and the tenacity across 60 years for them to persuade the national government to draft national guidelines for educational services for birth to 6-year-olds, but they succeeded.

Nicolosi (2023, July 13) offers an excerpt from the guidelines,

Each child is a unique and unrepeatable subject with their own relationship with the world and a personal story that takes shape in a family context and starts from that into the social environment. Children are the bearers of universal and of specific rights. In particular, they have the right to quality education from birth. Education services for early childhood, alongside the primary role of the family represent a fundamental resource for children’s rights.

Spaggiari (2023, July 13) shares visual micro-stories of children creating their own maps of meanings through experiences and how they share those meanings. He draws attention to how children are capable of forming theories as they work:

Through their imaginaries and their knowledge, the theories they formulate are provisional theories that are not static but constantly

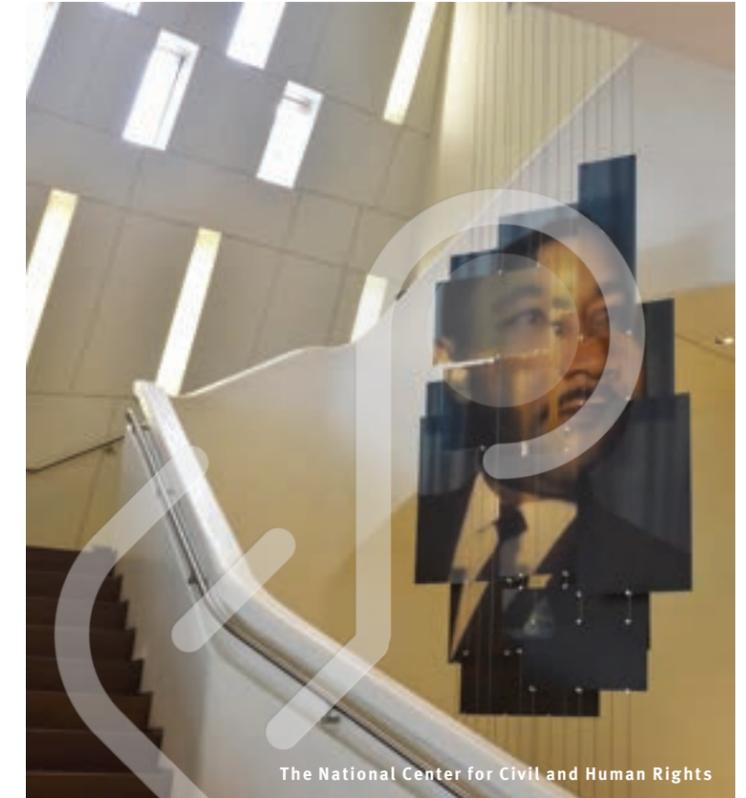
becoming. The children have the courage, through hearing, listening, and seeing, what other children experience. They have the courage to change their theories, to adapt them, and to modify them.

Nicolosi and Spaggiari remind us of the value of taking time with children, not rushing or hurrying. A story is shared about a child who was offered a context for mark-making and drawing. This child was more interested in how her hands created a shadow on the paper and how the shadow moved. Rather than redirecting and hurrying the child towards mark-making, they gave the child an entire morning to play with the light—touching it, tracing it, interpreting it. The following day, in the same context, the mark-making tools enriched her experience.

Spaggiari shares a story about a child who had trouble drawing something, and he asked the teacher for help. The teacher invites him to ask his friend sitting near him. This illustrates the teacher’s role as an observer and one who encourages communication between the children so they can autonomously find solutions rather than consulting an adult.

Touring the National Center for Civil and Human Rights

In the afternoon, participants walk to visit the National Center for Civil and Human Rights (NCCHR). This center features exhibitions on the history of the civil rights movement in the United States and offers stories from the struggle for human rights around the world today (National Center for Civil and Human Rights, 2023). Interactive exhibitions are available for participants. For example, visitors are invited to participate in a lunch counter sit-in simulation and place themselves in the shoes of non-violent protesters in 1960. Visitors close their eyes and wear headphones to listen to the threats given to the protesters while sitting with their hands down on the countertop. During this conference, we are considering children’s rights and the rights of all human beings, and this visit to the Center on the first afternoon of the conference is a powerful and thought-provoking experience.



The National Center for Civil and Human Rights

Spaggiari at The National Center for Civil and Human Rights





The National Center for Civil and Human Rights

The Right to Knowledge: The 100 Languages and The Culture of the *Atelier*

On the second day of the conference, Spaggiari talks about the experience of visiting the NCCHR. He shares that, in his experience, a museum is for observation with little tactile experience, but the work of the Center is to “responsibilize” us, allowing us to shift and move things and participate actively in some way to consider the future. He mentions a phrase he saw that resonated with him strongly, “the immense power of the common people” (National Center for Civil and Human Rights, 2023). In response to that quotation, Spaggiari (2023, July 14) says,

We are never ordinary. We are all extraordinary. So, when is it that we go from being ordinary to becoming extraordinary? It’s when we are capable of organizing ourselves, and it’s when we are animated by deep urgencies. And this is something that has to do also with the capacity that everyone of us has of moving towards knowledge. I think an *atelier* is not a place, it’s

I think an *atelier* is not a place, it’s a world. It’s one of those worlds that makes it possible for human beings to move towards knowledge if the human beings in that space of the *atelier* are moved by deep urgencies. ”

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Spaggiari (2023, July 14) shares that he saw reason and dreams come together in the Center, “Obviously, part of Martin Luther King’s iconic discourse of ‘I have a dream’ is the question: How can we take dreams away from people? No way, the hundred is there. No way.”

This morning features a video “A Story of NAREA” that shares the history of NAREA and relates to the Center visit. Cooper (2023, July 14) says, “We hope that the story of NAREA helps put something underneath you, the feeling that you’re not alone because sometimes it certainly feels like you’re trying to do something that’s impossible.”

Nicolosi (2023, July 14) speaks about the right to education, especially considering differences among us. She says, “What kind of education do we construct if we don’t turn our faces away, if we play our own part in encounters with others, in our relations with others?” She reminds us that children learn to adopt an attitude of listening from adults, not because we tell them they have to listen, but because we are the models that surround them, and we offer them ways of seeing this with others. She says,

We must always be aware that we are watched by children. The children are watching us. They’re watching how we do things. They are listening to the words that we use. And they borrow from us, they constantly borrow from our way of doing things, from the words we use. We can offer them possibilities for being close to each other and ways of being together with each other.

Spaggiari (2023, July 14) tells us that *ateliers* are worlds where people can inhabit the hundred languages and that educators can learn more about how to share those hundred languages with others. He says,



Cooper introduces “A Story of NAREA” to conference participants



It's not that I'm an artist and you maybe feel like you're not an artist and can never be one. No, you can actively exercise and practice your sensibility towards the hundred languages, because we know that the hundred languages are housed within everybody.

He tells us that a certain kind of preparation is necessary to support the hundred languages. It is not something to improvise or be spontaneous about. It is the process of becoming more knowledgeable about something. This means turning to different sources, different points of view and theories of human knowledge. Spaggiari says (2023, July 14),

Think how important it is to declare, for all educators thinking about this kind of context, why? Constantly, why have I given the children this? Why have I done this? Why are we working with this? Why is this proposal being worked with? It is always very important to know why.

Constantly, why have I given the children this? Why have I done this? Why are we working with this? Why is this proposal being worked with? It is always very important to know why. ”

Seeking the pleasure of learning and thinking together is a very important part of working in the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. Spaggiari (2023, July 14) quotes Loris Malaguzzi who tells us,

The art of research is already in the hands of children highly sensitive to enjoyment of wonder. The pleasure of learning, of knowing, and of understanding is one of the first fundamental sensations every human being expects from experience they confront alone or with others.

Spaggiari shares an experience with children. He tells us (2023, July 14), “If we offer children a wealth, a richness of intelligent materials and contexts that they can organize, then the children will give us extraordinary things back.” He describes an experience where they used spinning tops with a group and remarks how the children learn about numbers without directly teaching them, “Whether we teach them or not, the children know that numbers exist. . . . So, numbers can be used to indicate how fast something is going, the velocity. They can be used to say how

many turns the top makes.” The experiences with the tops evolved into creating a sort of board game, creating symbols and a game board. Again, Spaggiari (2023, July 14) quotes Malaguzzi when he says, “Either education is a research situation—and research produces new pedagogy—or it is simply the provision of a service given to small children and subjecting them to a message that in some way has already been prefabricated or pre-codified.”

Participant Discussion Groups

Nicolosi now shares an opportunity for circularity, an exchange of ideas for conference participants. She asks everyone to form groups of up to 12 people to talk for approximately 90 minutes over lunch and to use these prompts for discussion: Which aspects of the work that we've shared do you feel to be closest to your own experiences and education? Which do you consider the most problematic, meaning that they might be points you intend to work on in the future in your own educational experience with colleagues?

After lunch, our Reggio colleagues and the conference participants reconvene. Nicolosi explains that questions from participants will not be answered in a linear way but woven into their presentation. There are some common wonderings from these questions such as curiosity about parent participation. Nicolosi and Spaggiari describe, for example, how parents work with the cooks and how they come on the weekends for maintenance tasks or to repair items. Educators also meet with all the parents of a class as a group and share documentation for discussion. They invite parents to city-wide events, generating a sense of being part of something larger than just the school. For example, Nicolosi introduces *Reggionarra*, a city event for storytelling that is popular in Reggio Emilia.



Participant discussion groups

Spaggiari shares the story of a request for each school to create a narrating chair where a storyteller sits. He tells how the project began with many children contributing designs, then adults working to identify common threads in the designs. Threads discovered are liberty of expression, transformation, and being able to be assembled. They discovered through weeks of working that the children wanted people to listen to a story. They didn't just want a storyteller in a chair, so, the chair design would have to include spectators. In the end, the children create a chair and the families help move it to the city and set it up.

Spaggiari also describes a project involving falling objects such as marbles, paper airplanes, balls of paper, and balls with fourth grade children. They work together on strategies to measure speed, time, and trajectory. The children design a form to keep track of their results as they drop objects from differing locations. Spaggiari (2023, July 14) comments,

If children have a great curiosity and interest and a great drive to find out in the experiment what things happen, why should adults give them a pre-formed sheet of paper to collect their results on? Why not let them invent their own worksheets for collecting their results?



The Right to Subjectivity: Border-Crossings Between Nature and Digital in the Encounter with Living Subjects

Nicolosi (2023, July 15) begins the third day of the conference with an answer to a question. She mentions that people often ask what kind of recognition is given to individual children in their learning. She says,

It is one of our objectives to narrate the story of each subjective child's work or progress through school but also to tell the story of the group that they are part of. When we talk about the story of a group, we're thinking of a group in which each individual or subjective child will recognize their contribution of thinking and work that happened in that group. So, we would tell the story of the group with the objective that each member of the group will recognize themselves in that story.

Nicolosi shares a story of a group of children who engaged in research combining nature and digital over a 3-year period. In fact, the research and study of nature and digital was ongoing as a formative project across the system of preschools and infant-toddler centers for 4 to 5 years. This common area of research is shared not only within the educators in one school but across all the infant-toddler centers and preschools, creating shared common knowledge as they review documentation together. The study with this particular group of children began with adult conversations and meetings that occurred from September to February. Nicolosi reminds us that when adults work with concepts, they take quite a long time to prepare and to exchange knowledge and find out what their ideas are before they are introduced to the children.

The study begins with the investigation of a forsythia plant, an investigation of life, something they interacted with physically. Over the 3 years, the children study interweaving, creating a forsythia bush in clay, then drawing and digitally projecting it. Then clay was placed on the interior courtyard wall where an ivy plant interweaves with the clay. As the children continue their study, they work empathetically, putting themselves in the shoes of the branch of ivy that wants to see things outside of the school. The children consider how the ivy can go into town and how to make that journey visible. Adults accompany children as they collect photographs of what they think ivy might encounter on the way to town and eventually decide that a video would be the best way to show the ivy's journey. While thinking about how the ivy will travel to town, children consider using a skateboard, a scooter, or a remote-controlled car. Ultimately, they decide to use a bicycle with a camera attached to ride into town to collect the story of the trip. The very bumpy video gives the delightful perspective of the ivy going to town. This is a very condensed version of the 3-year project but illustrates how research continues from year to year with a group of children.

Children even expand it further, saying that "if the ivy leaves a trace of itself in the places that it has passed through, then the road will become more beautiful. If the road gets more beautiful, perhaps also cars would stop driving on it" (2023, July 15). This was shared with the City Childhood Council. Nicolosi explains that every year, one of their challenges is a lack of respect outside the school for the safety of children, especially where cars are concerned. These are the words of one of the mothers in the City Childhood Council: "We feel the need to contaminate the city with the power of children's ideas and respect the places where they live and play." So, after some discussion, an idea was born to paint an ivy branch on the road, what they called an "urban tattoo," in the hope that if this was from the children, perhaps people would be more respectful of their right to safety. After lots of dialogue and work with city officials, the urban tattoo was created and celebrated by a gathering of citizens. Spaggiari (2023, July 15) said, "What struck me most with this idea was watching how a generative idea that came from the children was translated and transformed into politics."

Bordercrossings Exhibition/Atelier and Participatory Ateliers

The conference ends with encounters with the Bordercrossings exhibition and atelier and participation in five related conference ateliers:



Bordercrossings exhibition



Bordercrossings atelier

Crossing Borders: Seeing Through Different Eyes

Gabriela Garcia, NAREA and Project Infinity | Becky Saylor, Peachtree | Susan Redmond, First Baptist Day School

Our atelier offered several invitations centered around digital tools and natural and open-ended materials, offering opportunities to capture unexpected details. The working group members intentionally selected materials to offer participants opportunities to immerse themselves with all their senses and investigate concepts such as perspective, light transformation, distance, microworlds, and macro worlds.

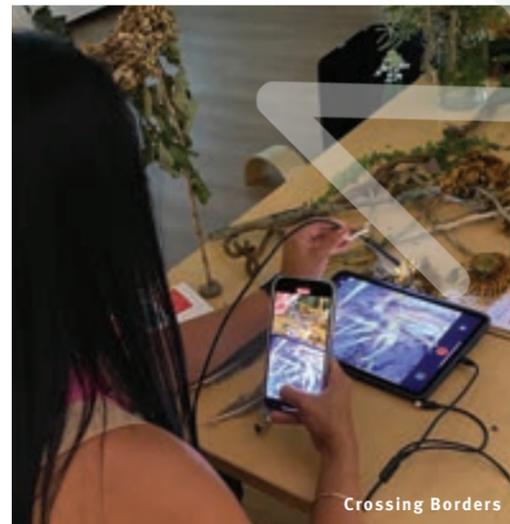
The digital microscope and an endoscope offered possibilities to go beyond what our eyes can see and capture unexpected details that are not visible to the naked eye. A selection of spotlights, flashlights, lamps, an overhead projector, and a light table invited participants to play with light, shadows, and color, developing a dialogue between all the elements and experimenting with concepts such as distortion, transformation, and intensity. We notice how participants capture their observations with their own digital devices and share their discoveries. In a particular area constructed with blocks, plastic animals, and lights producing shadows, we watched how a participant experimented with a digital tablet and the stop-motion app and created a short film.



Crossing Borders



Crossing Borders



Crossing Borders

Ethereal Environments: Reality Crossing into Imaginary

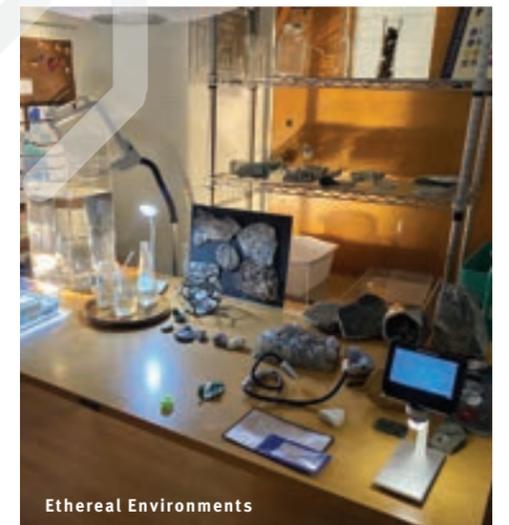
Kym Cook and Calie Hixenbaugh, Peachtree

We offered an experience with light, digital tools, materials, and investigating reflective properties. We proposed sort of a game to our participants: As you explore the interactions between these materials, let's photograph our various discoveries of reflections to collect digitally. What if we created our own library of reflection images? We had a photo album drop link, so the participants could instantly add to the collection. Once the experience had been proposed, attendees were eager to learn about the digital tools, manipulate the materials, and engage with their whole environment to find reflections to record. Ultimately, we had dozens of interpretations of reflections, and we shared our discoveries with each other, thinking about how to bring some of this thinking to our own learning contexts.

A favorite part for us was when Marco came in to engage with a shimmering paint and water provocation for some time. There is something intrinsically inviting about light and shimmer. It can captivate all of us!



Ethereal Environments



Ethereal Environments



Ethereal Environments

Water and the Digital World: Crossing Thresholds and Making Connections

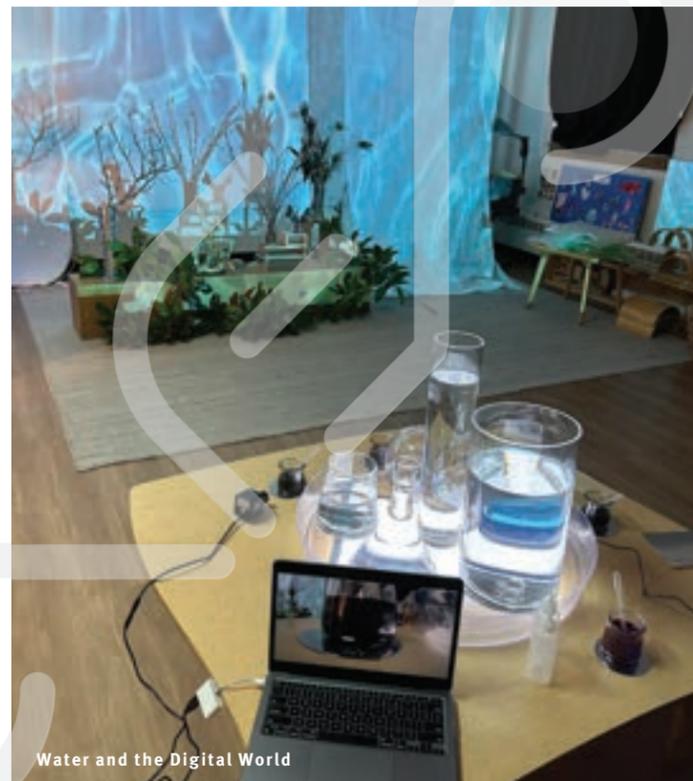
Nora Thompson, NAREA | Jessica Vailes, Peachtree | Katie Yarrow, First Baptist Day School

In our *atelier*, we offered a place for research to explore what happens when light, digital tools, and water meet. We began with asking participants: What are some words that come to mind when you think of water? When you consider using digital tools to explore water, what questions arise? We offered provocations for exploration, working in small groups and then meeting together as one large group at the end:

- A table with varied water filled vessels and light
- A gigantic leaf with a water mister and a container of tadpoles in water with an endoscope and digital microscope
- A light table with projections of light and translucent, sometimes ephemeral, materials such as water on stones
- A projector that interacted with a second projector at right angles, going also under a loft

Participants shared possibilities, questions, and wonder:

- “I use water every day and digital technology every day, but never together. How does that work? Where do I start?”
- “I’m wondering about the water-filled vessels on the light table. How will the light/reflection go through the varying containers?”
- “If I add water to the leaf, will the projection change?”



Beyond the Surface: Navigating the Unexpected Landscape

Gigi Yu, NAREA and University of New Mexico | April MacClane, Peachtree | Julie Fayssoux, First Baptist Day School

Our *atelier* offered participants explorations of contrasts in layers, levels, and varying textures while manipulating natural materials juxtaposed with human-designed lines and shapes. As conductors, we gathered natural materials representing our drastically different New Mexico, South Carolina, and Georgia contexts. The materials spoke to the complexity of textures, colors, and shapes that can only be discovered in the natural world.

One participant commented that the variations and contrasts discovered during playful explorations brought joy and a realization of the importance of giving time to discover without predetermined agendas. Looking up closely and underneath natural materials with digital microscopes created unexpected compositions and narratives, at times referred to as other worlds. Another participant reflected on the exchange between micro and macro imagery displayed on the screens and how it allowed for negotiation among those working together. There was a joyful hum throughout the room as we all were in awe of the surprising landscapes projected on the large and small screens.



Storytelling: Digital Graphics

Candace Dupree and Belinda Parr, Grant Park Cooperative Preschool | Erin Braznell, First Baptist Day School

In this *atelier*, we used digital microscopes, projectors, and light and shadow to explore our world and design story-inspiring digital landscapes, exploring how digital tools can make the otherwise imperceptible visible as they reveal often overlooked possibilities in everyday and unusual materials. Through our process of inquiry and creation, we crafted immersive worlds rich with narrative potential. Concepts we encountered included micro/macro, scale, perspective, real/imaginary, visible/not visible, distortion, variety, connections, and narrative.



With Appreciation

We are grateful for the participation of our colleagues Moira Nicolosi and Marco Spaggiari and to interpreter Jane McCall. Their professionalism, delightful sense of humor, and openness to share the experiences of children and adults in the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia enriched us all.

Thank you to the children, families, and educators of Project Infinity for their generosity in sharing their work, environments, and innovative approach to education, for hosting school tours, the *Bordercrossings* exhibition and *atelier*, and conference participatory *ateliers*, and for their support over the years.

On behalf of NAREA, we thank all the participants for sharing reflections, asking important questions, and spending three busy days in dialogue and exchange together in Atlanta. We hope to see you next time!



School Visits



School Visits

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