

# Reflections

## The 4th NAREA Fall Conference

BY: NAREA STAFF

I N D I A N A P O L I S , I N D I A N A

### Children and Adults: Research Learning Together

October 5–7, 2023



Butler University College of Education

“Choosing to host an exhibition with *atelier* from Reggio Emilia, in this case *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*, is an act of service for and with one’s community.”

### A Conference of Committed Educators is Held in Indianapolis

A beautiful fall in Indianapolis is made even more beautiful through the gathering of 185 dedicated early childhood educators, accompanied by the remarks and shared research brought from Reggio Emilia, Italy, by Claudia Giudici and Sara De Poi, through the translation of Jane McCall.

Long before the days of the 2023 NAREA Fall Conference, a working group from Butler University, St. Mary’s Early Childhood Center, and Butler University’s public laboratory schools join NAREA to co-organize and welcome participants from the United States, Canada, and Italy—hailing from 17 states, 1 province, and 1 municipality.

Choosing to host an exhibition with *atelier* from Reggio Emilia, in this case *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*, is an act of service for and with one’s community. It means choosing to add to the often-unsung work load we shoulder as early childhood professionals to deepen our collaborations and knowledge-building. In this case, the Indianapolis Reggio Collaborative has many years of effort and accomplishment on which to stand. Their early work coalesced years earlier when hosting *The Wonder of Learning* exhibition at the Indiana

Statehouse. As we can read in their article included in this issue of *Innovations*, their collaborations and collegiality led to important evolutions in Indiana’s early childhood landscape.

Our first moments meeting the site of the exhibition and conference are shaped by the strong impression of a spectacular mid-century modern building that will be our place of convening in Indianapolis. Named “Butler South Campus,” it is home to the Butler University College of Education (BU COE). Purchased in 2018 from a seminary, that still retains some space, the building is designed around a large, outdoor courtyard with human-sized windows framing it. Openness and natural light combine to offer a sound metaphor for transparency and exchange, hallmarks of Reggio Emilia’s infant-toddler centers and preschools.



Butler University College of Education

The *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition and *atelier* are installed in a large, light-filled room. The care with which the exhibition and *atelier* have been received and installed is immediately evident. Senior Lecturer Cathy Hartman of Butler University, navigator of the organizational and inspirational vision of bringing *Mosaic* to Indianapolis, is both an inspirational leader and doer, like so many in our sector. It is a pleasure to witness the in-person connecting of the Indianapolis working group and the speakers from Reggio Emilia for the conference, Claudia Giudici and Sara De Poi, with interpreter Jane McCall. Preconference Wednesday is filled with professional learning and exchange, concentrating on the themes of the exhibition and *atelier*. By day's end, the working group, joined by working group colleagues of former conferences who have traveled in to lend a hand, collaboratively both edits and adds to *atelier* sections within the exhibition space, leaving them ready to greet conference participants arriving the next day. The importance of this kind of work is multi-layered, certainly. However, as Giudici (2023, October 7) articulates, "We consider the 100 languages to be multiple forms of access to knowledge." This is true, as the working group attests, for both children and adults. Going further, Giudici adds,

All languages possess a capacity and a necessity for expression. . . . If we put at the center of our processes of constructing knowledge and learning all the different languages that we have available to us with equal dignity and without hierarchy, then we are guaranteeing all children have the right, the possibility, and the dignity of learning.

Within these words, we understand again the importance of offering adults opportunities to think with the languages of mark-making and narrative through a rich palette of curated materials—a palette awaiting all who wish to grow in their understanding of wider learning paths with children.

### Participants Gather

Arriving to the hum of Shelton Auditorium's lobby on the opening day, a favorite aspect of every NAREA conference is once again on display. Participants are finding friends and colleagues within the crowd, sharing hugs, laughter, and anticipation of what Reggio-inspired educators in North America have come to expect—a deep and meaningful contribution by our colleagues from Reggio Emilia. There are, however, always bonus gifts from the local community, like excerpts from the lovely greeting from Brooke Kandel, dean of the College of Education, who graciously welcomes all convened and expresses words of gratitude to Butler colleagues who brought this initiative to fruition, finally giving introduction to Dean and Professor Emerita Ena Shelley.



Hartman greets working group inside exhibition.



De Poi and McCall with working group



Conference participants arrive.



BU COE Dean Kandel



BU COE Dean and Professor Emerita Shelley



From left, McCall, De Poi, and Giudici

### Dean Brooke Kandel

Thank you to Dr. Ena Shelley, the former dean of the College of Education here at Butler University, without whom we would not be gathering for a NAREA conference nor would we be enjoying this beautiful physical space, which is the home of the College of Education. I want to take this opportunity to provide a brief introduction of Dr. Shelley. Many of you know her very well, and I acknowledge this abbreviated introduction will not do justice to her long and incredibly impactful career as an educator and more personally as my mentor. Dr. Ena Shelley is dean and professor emerita at Butler University where she served as the dean of the College of Education for 14 years. During her 37 years at Butler, she was a beloved teacher, a valued colleague. She was the founder of the IPS Lab School, based upon the principles and practices of Reggio Emilia. In addition to years of accolades from colleagues and students, Dr. Shelley received the Butler University Distinguished Faculty Award, and she received the AACTE [American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education] Edward C. Pomeroy Award for Outstanding Contributions during her time in teacher education. During her time as dean here, Dr. Shelley transformed the College of Education through her creative problem-solving, attention to relationships, and truly visionary leadership. Her influence and legacy live on at Butler University and beyond, and it is my pleasure to invite her to share comments at this time. (Kandel, 2023)

**Dr. Shelley transformed the College of Education through her creative problem-solving, attention to relationships, and truly visionary leadership.** ”

Dean Emeritus Ena Shelley

Thank you, Dean Kandel. There's nothing I like more than saying Dean Kandel. Well, good morning everyone. I look out and I see a lot of familiar faces. Welcome to all the new faces to Butler University. I do want to thank Brooke for her exceptional leadership, her dedication. I always knew she would be the dean, and here she is. She's fabulous. And Cathy Hartman, oh, my goodness. To have someone who was once your undergraduate student and to watch her career grow, she's done so many things in her career, and then to see this, I'm just in awe of her, inspired by her, and grateful to her. I also want to thank Margie Cooper for her wonderful leadership with NAREA and how much she has guided this whole process and been so supportive. I've known her for a long time. We were both 12 when we met. It's fabulous to be with Margie again. And I also want to thank a new friend Patty Randall from NAREA, who was on all of the Zoom calls and gave us so much guidance that we needed and detailed support. So, thank you to all of those people.

I want to begin with *buon giorno* to our Italian colleagues, Claudia, Sara. We are so glad you are here. Now I know that Jane McCall, who is their interpreter, doesn't like attention. I'm sorry, Jane, but I have to say this. You have a fan club at Butler University. We have all watched you when we've been in Reggio and just enjoyed you so much, and we just are in awe that she could take all this language and translate it so quickly. Plus, you're just joyful, so we're so glad you're here. Thanks.

My comments today, it's really a story of gratitude to Reggio Children and NAREA. And all of what I'm going to share with you that has happened is because of Reggio Children and NAREA. To fully appreciate the significance of hosting this exhibit, I'm going to share a little bit of history. In 1998, I had a sabbatical leave. I had read everything I could find about Reggio Emilia, and I visited programs around the country that were on the Reggio journey. That is where I first met Judy Kaminsky with NAREA in Detroit. She was at the Merrill-Palmer Institute. I went to Chicago Commons, the St. Louis Collaborative, a private school in Arlington, Virginia, and the Boulder Journey School in Boulder, Colorado. And then I made my first of seven visits to Reggio Emilia. That first study trip was life-changing for me. It took me some time to figure out why was I so emotional while I was there. I was in tears. I was like, what is wrong with me? I wondered what was going on with me. And I finally figured it out. Everywhere I looked, everything that I believed that should be happening for children was visible every place I looked including . . . [in] a storefront where there was a project the children had done. You'd go into the park, and you see their work, and you can just feel the voices and what had happened with that work. It was so obvious to me that the interests and wellbeing of all children was woven into the fabric of this culture. The rights of children are central to their culture.

So, I returned from my sabbatical, made significant changes in my curriculum course and then realized, "Oh, I've got to place students in practicum settings. Where am I going to place them that they can see the practices of Reggio Emilia? How do I do that?" Well, I knew some wonderful educators who were doing really good work, but I wanted to introduce them to Reggio. So, it started with educators from, at that time, the Early Learning Center in Warren Township. That's a school district here in Indianapolis. St. Mary's Early Childhood Center, the Early Childhood Center in Warren Township, and we [Butler] formed a learning collaborative where we read and studied together. How would we do this kind of practice? Where does one begin? So, the Reggio Collaborative became a pretty strong, tight-knit group.

We applied, and we were awarded the opportunity to host *The Wonder of Learning* exhibit in 2009. It was placed on three floors of the Statehouse for 6 months. We had all kinds of professional development work that went on in that 6-month stay. We would not have been able to host this exhibit if it hadn't been for the family foundation of the Estridge family. You have to have financial support. Now it's 2009. There were two states east of the

Mississippi River that had no early childhood legislation, Mississippi and Indiana. With the exhibit in the Indiana Statehouse, the legislators had to walk through that exhibit everywhere they went. And fortunately, there were some who took us up on our offer to educate them about early childhood and what this exhibit was about. The timing was perfect, because I met this gentleman named Jeff Kucer, vice president of PNC Bank. PNC Bank had just launched their national program of Grow Up Great. I took him through the exhibit. He said, "I think I have 30 minutes," yet 2 1/2 hours later, we were still in the exhibit, and he became a huge supporter, but most importantly, with his influence in the business world, he was key to helping us get legislation passed. We had to bring the business community into the conversation as well. The theme for the exhibit's stay in Indiana was, and I quote, "social justice and advocacy for the rights of children and their families." It is the responsibility of adults to advocate for the rights of all children. At the closing ceremony of the exhibit, a Declaration of the Rights for Indiana's Children was presented to Senator John Day to be read to the state legislature. The principles and practices of Reggio Emilia align beautifully with the College of Education's continued work on diversity, equity, and inclusion and advocating for the rights of *all* children and *all* families.

So why am I giving you this history? Well, there's more. In the late 1800s, a lady named Eliza Blaker came to Indiana, and she brought kindergarten to this state and early

childhood. And she started a teacher training school, which in 1930 became Butler University College of Education. And we have all her professional belongings in our rare books room, and in examining some of her letters, I discovered in the late 1890s and early 1900s, she was writing the state legislators for funding in early childhood education. It only took Indiana 120 plus years to get it done, but it would not have happened had it not been for the Reggio exhibit. So, to my Reggio Emilia colleagues, your handprint is in the history of Indiana and your handprint will always be on my heart. I'm so appreciative.

Reggio educators have taught us about image of the child, that every child is capable, competent, worthy, full of potential. The College of Education was dedicated to this vision and without the exhibit, the legislation and the creation of the Butler Lab Schools that some of you are going to see would never happen. When we opened Lab School 60, we were fortunate to have our colleagues from St. Mary's preschool classroom in the school, and that was due to the Roberts Family Foundation. When the wait list for School 60 became so large, we got a phone call from the superintendent, "So, would you consider opening a second school?" That was never our intent to open schools, but I wanted to serve as many children as we could. He said, "What about IPS school #55?" and I said, "the Eliza Blaker School?" It's named after Eliza Blaker. I just looked up to the heavens and said, "Eliza, we're getting it done bit by bit."

The *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* [exhibit] is an opportunity, a provocation for each of you to explore the connection between drawings and words and rich thoughts that children create. You will experience art as a language that supports the image of the child and empowers their learning and your learning. I will conclude with two quotes by Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia schools, and a quote that many Americans know by Fred Rogers. Malaguzzi (1998) said, "Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water" (p. 83). "We don't want to teach children something they can learn by themselves. We don't want to give them thoughts that they can come up with by themselves. What we want to do is to activate in children the desire and will and great pleasure that comes from being the authors of their own learning" (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 3). Mr. Rogers (1994) said, "Our society is much more interested in information than wonder, in noise, rather than silence" (2:23).

And I feel that we need a lot more wonder and a lot more silence in our lives. As you experience the exhibit and the *atelier*, think about what you as an educator can learn from children. Try to speak more with questions and engage in the power of wonder. What is the child expressing, feeling, thinking, wondering? And make time for silence and reflection. I wonder what will come from this incredible opportunity of hosting this exhibit. May the gift of this experience enhance your life in service to our young children and their families. *Grazie.* (Shelley, 2023)

“May the gift of this experience enhance your life in service to our young children and their families.”



Conference auditorium



De Poi and Giudici

## Adult Learning

Settling into a large auditorium to focus on one’s own professional learning is not the routine, daily experience of teachers actively working inside schools or of other early childhood education devotees. University faculty, parents, and administrators, too, live demanding roles that are often overwhelmed by lack of time for deepening one’s own learning by choosing to consider perspectives brought from 5,000 miles away. It is with deep and abiding gratitude that NAREA recognizes the efforts of so many from Reggio Emilia who for nearly 20 years have woven into their demanding roles time to collaborate with NAREA and conference hosts on suggested topics, time to collaborate with one another in the development of presentations, and time to pull away from Reggio Emilia on a long journey to North America. On this occasion, it is Claudia Giudici, Sara De Poi, and interpreter Jane McCall we sincerely thank.

## Living and Learning Within a Group

Several important conceptual themes are woven across the 3 days of this fall conference. In addition to our considerations of the 100 languages, other underpinnings of Reggio Emilia’s experiences emerge in bold words and images. One of these conceptual nodes seems crucial not only to children’s and adult’s learning but also to the improvements of society so many years to enlarge. This has to do with the fundamental ways we interact with one another. How do we share differences of opinion in productive rather than destructive ways? How do we find beauty in the ideas of others? How do we share responsibility for the path ahead of us with others? With whom do we feel we belong? How do we move into the *we* out of the *me*?

Thinking about the far-reaching dividends of learning in a group suggests that intentional and creative relations between adults and children in the early years could be an asset we in North America could develop in broader and deeper ways. Giudici (2023, October 5) shares,

The documentation that Sara and I have put together for this particular conference here in Indianapolis was chosen with the intention of looking more deeply at the very many different ways in which we can learn in a group, with a group, and the

learning of a group. Learning to work together as a group is a very long process, and this process of learning to work together as a group is a process in which adults have a very elevated responsibility. Children are social. What I mean by that is from their very birth, human beings, children, are oriented towards relations and this is something that we know now has been confirmed by the neurosciences. But even though children are social beings, working in groups is difficult. It’s hard work. It’s a dimension of working in which the rules for the group to function are something that we have to learn over time. It’s necessary when we’re working as a group for all of those people involved, whether they’re children or adults, to learn together, partly on the one hand with their attention on what we what are learning and another part of their attention on the dynamics of that process. . . . For us, the group, that is to say “learning with,” is a culture of education. . . . The group or learning with is a choice that we make of an ethical nature. It is a choice of a cognitive nature, and it is a choice in terms of societal values.

Perhaps too much within our North American education constructs, we think of *group* not as *learning with* but more simply as a collection of children in a classroom to which teachers must teach. Instead, within a Reggio-inspired lens, a sense of group seems to be a responsibility teachers must strive to create. If humans are social and learning is social, a bedrock of our teaching asks us to craft conditions for learning and relating, to closely observe children’s reactions in those conditions, and to continually modify conditions with the aim of building a true learning group among children—and adults. If we listen carefully to the excerpts continuously shared by our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, we will often note teachers actively turning children’s attention back to the group,

i.e., Did you see what she was doing? Do you want to tell your friends what you think? Do you think your friend could help you with that? The whirring energy of human potential is elevated within a collaborative, meaningful, joyful connection among others. For Reggio-inspired educators, analyzing and enacting ways of combining children might serve as a strategy for generating research that is carried not only by adults, but also by children of a group—children who often reveal to us ways of living in the moment, carrying questions forward, and innovating twists along a learning journey.

De Poi (2023, October 5) enlarges our reflections on learning in a group by sharing traces of an investigation of the human form, a subject that has been used for research with the children for many decades. First, however, she reflects on inherent risks when subjects or topics are well-known by adults:

When you work with an area for many, many years and become expert, especially adults think they don’t need to learn anymore. They’ve nothing left to learn. . . . For us, this is a great risk because it can lead to working in a very routine way. It can lead to that attitude of replicating—we’ve always done it this way so we’re going to carry on doing it this way. But the world changes. Children change. We change. And so, we believe it’s very important always to find moments, time, situations where we can re-update, renew our thinking about the sense of meaning of what we’re doing and the why. Why are we doing these things?

She underscores the crucial period before work with children begins when adults convene to think and reflect together on the subject or topic being considered, the children in particular, the possibilities observed, and the conditions for learning they ultimately choose to offer. She shares that those adults

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take the time to reflect together, to express the questions that they have, and to try and formulate some answers, always aware that the answers are momentaneous. They're not fixed answers inscribed in rock. They're answers that might change as we move along. But this time of asking questions and trying to formulate some answers with each other is very important, because it gives the work a direction. It gives it an orientation.

So, when we talk in terms of learning in a group, of group learning, this is where it starts. It starts even before we encounter the children that we're going to be working with. It starts with a group of adults thinking and reflecting together. If we think of the journey of work that we're embarking on, these reflections, when we say they give the adults an orientation, obviously the conversations that we have about the area we're going to be working with mean that afterwards with the children, we will use certain words that will give us a certain way of being with the children during their explorations. It means that we might choose to work with certain languages and not others. It means that the kinds of observations and documentations that we make will have an orientation.



Ephemeral Marks participatory atelier



Centering Humanity and Justice in our Work With Children breakout



Black and White Palette participatory atelier



Collaborative Group Work

### The Tools of Inquiry and Design Thinking

Do we think teachers of young children are intelligent, capable beings? Do the processes of conversation, questioning, and projecting described above seem possible? Programmatic ways of working, which surround us like weeds, would seem to suggest that teachers of young children, particularly, cannot be trusted to observe, suggest, or co-design with other adults and children the content of the daily life in infant-toddler centers and preschools. This is a marked contrast to the approach taken by the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. In description, Giudici (2023, October 7) suggests that the design approach, *progettazione*, is at the heart of the daily life,

because we believe that teachers are not mere executors of programs that have been thought up by other people independently of the children that those teachers are

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working within this moment and time who have their own interests and their own curiosities. So, it is fundamental for us to work with observation, to work with documentation, because it is observation and documentation that makes it possible for us to design our work. To design work in the way that educators in Reggio Emilia do, “is a way of being the most respectful that we can be and the closest that we can be to children’s ways of thinking and proceeding.” So, the persistent curiosity we in North America have for what to observe, when to observe, how to observe, and why to observe can be fed, it seems, if we grapple with the purpose of observation and documentation as tools of designing contexts, experiences, and questions through which our children will profit through engagement in these offerings. This is not easy or every team of educators the world over would be so engaged. But we can say it is possible.



St. Mary's Early Childhood Centers



IPS | Butler University Lab Schools

School tours snapshots

## The Lingering Question of the Differences Between Montessori and Reggio Emilia

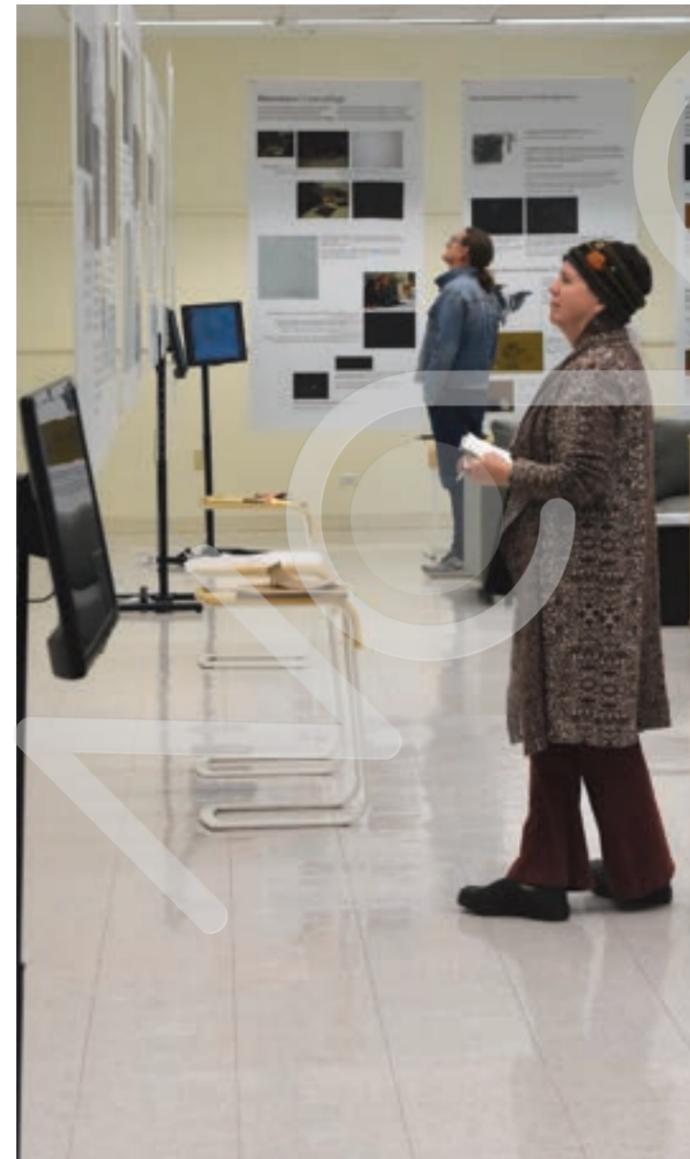
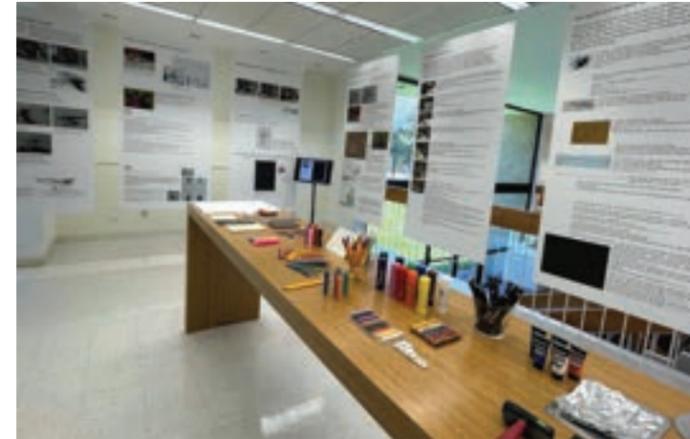
In an effort to weave together the above conceptual topics from the fall conference, excerpted from many, many brilliant examples brought to life through words and images of the ongoing work of children and adults in today's Reggio Emilia, a response by Giudici (2023, October 7) to a participant's question about the difference between the Reggio Emilia Approach and Montessori might contribute food for thought to all of us on this journey of building understanding for children, learning, and the role of adults in that equation, particularly as it concerns learning with a group:

Certainly, there are points in which the Reggio Emilia approach and its development of theory and experience is connected to the expressions of Maria Montessori, and there are points which may seem close. Obviously, we could take weeks discussing the difference so, I'm going to be very schematic. . . . Certainly, one of the things they have in common is the centrality of children's research in constructing knowledge and learning processes. But Maria Montessori, partly because of the historical period in which she was working, was very centered on the child, but not as interested in the group. And obviously we have over the last few days, but we could take a lot longer, been looking at group learning, with the group and of the group, et cetera. The whole aspect of creativity and the expressive potential of the 100 languages is more marginal in Maria Montessori, if not perhaps from a more technical point of view. So, there is an alignment up to a point, but the 100 languages that we work with is not an issue of learning techniques. For us, learning techniques are important, but technique is always at the service of a dimension of expression and communication. An area where Maria Montessori was particularly far-sighted was in the designing of spaces. And for Reggio Emilia, again, spaces and their design of spaces and buildings is very important. We've called spaces the third teacher. In Maria Montessori, what you see is a designing of spaces that is sort of made to measure for children. It's an idea of child, it's measured to children. Our spaces in Reggio Emilia, I think, are always designed to be challenging for children's intelligence and curiosity. So, our spaces are always designed with the children's proximal zone in mind so that they push children to advance and move forward with their learning. So, when I'm speaking of spaces, I'm including furnishings and materials and tools that are included in them. Something that we find is very crucial in Reggio Emilia, and perhaps because of the historical time for Maria Montessori was less so, for us families and the parents have that very central role. In our educational project in Reggio Emilia, we talk of three protagonists—the children, the teachers, including *atelieristas* and *pedagogistas*, and the parents or families. So, these are just some starting points for thinking about the differences. I said I was going to be very brief and schematic about that, and I have been. These are just some starting points for thinking.



Participants reviewing Reggio Children publications from NAREA shop

Mosaic exhibition and atelier





Giudici and De Poi with United Way of Greater Houston educators from Houston, TX



De Poi and Giudici with Blueprints for Learning educators from Spokane, WA, largest participant group



Working group participants

## Conference Encounters

In addition to the rich presentations each morning, a few excerpts of which are shared above, conference participants engaged in a constellation of small group discussions, participatory *ateliers*, visits to schools, breakout sessions, and book browsing. These features offer layers of perspective, generate insights and inspiration, but most of all, new questions in the minds of participants. The story of these encounters is told through the photographs within this article.

## Gratitude

As a final note, the troubled times surrounding us, most dramatically in Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine, remind us that gratitude is a mindset that opens our collective eyes to the resources of group learning and of experiencing the gifts and talents and ways of seeing the world of the “other.” Gratitude does not come in a single size or at a single time. It is not reserved for billionaires or expected only from the strugglers. Gratitude is the yearning for a better future for all by all. Thank you to the educators, past and present, of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, and thank you to the educators of North America and beyond who are transforming the daily life inside schools for young children in so many different locales throughout the United States and Canada. Carla Rinaldi comments that the theory of the hundred languages is not only a theory of a psychological and pedagogical nature but is above all a political and cultural theory, a theory exalting the value of plurality and pluralism, of differences and dialogue between differences. Pluralism as a premise for all discussion on quality and democracy. (2021, p. 167)

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