

Reflections

The 15th NAREA Winter Conference

BY: NAREA STAFF

L I V E S T R E A M

Transforming Early Childhood Education: What Do We Know About Learning?

March 7–8, 2024



Conference speakers and participants Zoom gallery view



Romina D'Antonio, Annalisa Rabotti, and Samanta Gaspari

Designing the Conferences

The 15th NAREA Winter Conference is a carefully planned event that begins months in advance. The NAREA staff collaborates closely with the Reggio Children staff to design a program that maximizes the value of the time spent together. Every aspect is prudently considered, from selecting titles and speakers to the flow of the two days. This thoughtful planning, conducted through calls, emails, and shared documents, ensures that the details are tailored specifically for a livestream conference, offering a high-quality experience for all attendees.

The livestream option offers an affordable, time-efficient way to delve into the Reggio Emilia Approach. This unique format, uncommon prior to 2020, provides a concentrated study of the approach over 1 1/2 days, featuring direct insights from Italian educators. This specialized opportunity allows registrants to pose their most pressing questions and engage in a dynamic exchange with the speakers. This platform enables speakers to tailor their presentations to the North American audience and gauge their interpretation of the Reggio Emilia Approach in real time.

The 15th NAREA Winter conference commences with the virtual presence of over 140 North American educators, representing two Canadian provinces and 31 states in the United States of America. The participants span a broad spectrum of experience with the Reggio Emilia Approach, with an intriguingly even distribution across various categories. A quarter of the participants are relatively new to the approach, studying it for less than 2 years, while another quarter have been studying for 2 to 5 years. Similarly, a quarter of the participants are in the study for 5 to 10 years, and the final quarter continues their 10 to 20 yearlong research of the approach.

NAREA is pleased when participants bring their unique backgrounds, ways of thinking, and wonderings into the dialogue. Conferences like this help NAREA achieve its mission of offering innovative initiatives to inspire, promote collaboration and exchange, and advocate for children's rights. The participation of educators in the conference is a crucial part of this mission, and we look forward to the insights and discussions that will shape the future of early childhood education.



“Transforming Early Childhood Education: What Do We Know About Learning?” is the conference title that sets the path for us. The title includes an aspiration and a question that accompany us throughout our time together. It also asks: What must we know to transform early childhood education more in keeping with what we know about human learning? Choosing speakers who talk passionately and eloquently on this is paramount to the realization of the conference. We are well-served in this regard by three speakers, Annalisa Rabotti, Romina D’Antonio, and Samanta Gaspari, along with interpreters Jane McCall and Alessandro John Prandi.

Annalisa is a *pedagogista* in the pedagogical coordinating team of the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. She collaborates with Reggio Children on publishing projects and in professional learning journeys through participation in seminars and workshops in Italy and abroad. She coordinates the preschool and primary school at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center, working on professional development design, participation, and education design in both schools. In addition, she is a member of the scientific committee established by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. This conference is Annalisa’s first time presenting at a NAREA conference. Her experiences highlight the role of the *pedagogista* as a collaborator, an educator with diverse interests, and one who works in a world of children and adult education.

Romina is a current teacher at the Robinson preschool. With a background in arts and humanities, coupled with her experiences in the preschool, she brings the perspective of a teacher working in the schools each day to the foreground. Teachers around the world relate to others who face the same joys, concerns, challenges, and pleasures that they do, making her a perfect fit for the conference.

Samanta is a part of the working group of the Gianni Rodari infant-toddler center. She participates in professional development and learning groups, such as “Learning Contexts at the Infant-Toddler Center” and “The Culture of Families.” These professional development opportunities increase her theoretical and practical awareness of an educational project comprising relationships, listening, and constant exchange. As part of her collaboration with Reggio Children, she develops and presents various experiences to national and international study groups on the language of digital technologies, communication, and participation of families in the educational project.

The selection of three Reggio educators with varied professional roles and involvements underscores the decisions made in Reggio Emilia and by NAREA when forming a professional learning opportunity. NAREA co-chair Margie Cooper welcomes the group, saying, “This is always so interesting. We are always a mix of people, not just from different locations but also from different backgrounds, different experiences, and different settings. As Reggio has taught us, it’s in the differences that we find value and strength” (Cooper, 2024, March 7).

The conference unfolds with an appreciation for the work of all involved, each with unique perspectives, organizers, speakers, interpreters, participants, and the children, families, and teachers in Reggio Emilia. Sara Porpora, one of the organizers from Reggio Emilia tells us,

I work with my colleagues on the professional development initiatives that Reggio Children organizes online and in person, in collaboration with many partners around the world, like NAREA. I am really glad that you are so numerous and thank you all for the time and resources you are dedicating to attend this seminar. Thank you so much for all the hard work you carry out supporting and promoting an idea of quality education in your country. (Porpora, 2024, March 7)

The Daily Life in the Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools



Annalisa begins the morning by pointing out that within the title, we encounter complex key words and ideas. The idea that the everyday life we live together is culturally constructed by weaving together the people we encounter, the children and families, into relationships and experiences attuned to children is key. She shares an image of children as natural researchers saying,

Children’s hands have words in them, and it is we adults who must learn to decipher those words. For the children, doing things is a continuous action of knowing, of knowing more. It’s a way, starting from their sense of wonder, of giving shape to their curiosity, of constructing and building questions, and of seeking solutions always, as I said, from the starting point of a sense of wonder. We believe that a fundamental matrix of children’s learning is experience. (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)

She describes the work of a small group of children from the Arcobaleno infant-toddler center as they remember their experiences with the falling petals of a tree. The children’s work with wire, combined with their words, gives different accounts using metaphors. She explains that when educators observe and actively listen to children, it is apparent that young children and adults hold an ecological vision to build relationships and connections and make sense of the world.

Annalisa affirms that Reggio believes in giving time and attention to how children construct their daily lives. By doing so, teachers get closer to how children think, know, and consider so that they can design beautiful learning environments that become contexts for learning. She states,

These are contexts where we all look together, we all research and look for things together. That curiosity of the children is the same curiosity that the adults have working with them. The adult’s hands offer, the children’s hands interrogate. (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)



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Continuing, Annalisa reminds us that children love to stay in unknown spaces and experience the wonder of what they are living. Young children seek to participate in life with others in everyday life, the quotidian. She stresses the importance of adults turning their awareness to how children build learning processes, relationships, and empathy for the world surrounding them (Rabotti, 2024, March 7). To highlight her point, she shares a quote from Loris Malaguzzi:

All people—and I mean scholars, researchers, and teachers, who in any place have set themselves to study children seriously—have ended up discovering not so much the limits and the weaknesses of children but rather their surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities linked with an inexhaustible need for expression and realization. (Gandini, 2012, p. 53)

She links a specific image of children, full of potential, talents, and curiosities, born researchers, to the teachers who design learning environments, with them in mind. She underscores that just because we are all born with a genetic heritage does not ensure we will reach our potential. It requires rich lived experiences and working with others to build shared meanings. It requires teachers who honor the time it takes for children to construct their learning, children and teachers who participate in the process of interrelated exchange, and educators who “prefigure” or imagine beforehand a daily life built together with children. Annalisa uses quotes to elevate key points. She draws on the work of Jerome Bruner:

Most learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. It is this that leads me to emphasize not only discovery and invention but the importance of negotiating and sharing. (Bruner, 1986, p. 127)

As a *pedagogista*, Annalisa constructs a mental image for us that includes a daily life where children and adults are eager and willing to acquire knowledge, a day is well-thought-out yet flexible, learning contexts are designed for children, and strategies, practices, and tools are created to recognize and give visibility to the

research and learning done by children and the adults who work with them. This mental image sheds light on the role of the teacher in observing, documenting, and interpreting the children’s and adults’ work. She gives a framework that includes critical factors of the educational project of Reggio Emilia, which is foremost a systemic organization built on relationships between all things that is complex and malleable, embracing the ongoing design of daily life.

“There is an emphasis on what the children do, that is to say, how their hands and thoughts work together. Although we are looking at what children do, we are very, very interested, above all, in why they do it. The questions that we have in mind when we’re observing and making documentation are: How [do] children acquire knowledge? How [do] children process knowledge and organize it? How [do] children carry out research and how teachers can increase their own knowledge together with children?” (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)

The Atmosphere of the Schools

Samanta explains that by sharing documentation via videos, presentations, and micro-stories, they hope to give participants a view into the “climate or atmosphere” in the schools of Reggio Emilia. A school’s climate comprises many positive encounters, experiences, and conditions, but that is not the entire picture. She states, “We hope that all these dimensions of research, these doubts and uncertainties, these questions and emotions are something that will be conveyed to you” (Gaspari, 2024, March 7).

Samanta shares that she and her colleagues desire to give participants an immersive and transparent experience that includes the many dimensions of research. This drive to be transparent accompanies us throughout the 2 days and illustrates their commitment to building understanding and awareness of their schools in authentic ways.



Samanta Gaspari

Designing Daily Learning Contexts at the Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools

designing
daily
learning contexts



Rodari infant-toddler center

Using images and verbal descriptions, Samanta begins her presentation by inviting participants to enter the virtual journey into the Rodari infant-toddler center. She defines why educators chose the school’s name, how they considered the history of the building, and how they worked with architects, teachers, *pedagogistas*, and families to create a new version of the school in 2002. Recounting the school environment, she makes connections between the architectural elements and the history and principles of Reggio Emilia. She explains,

The historical relationship that there has always been in this place of greenery and with the outdoors has meant an interpretation of what we call the park of the school. The gardens or the park of the school has been interpreted as an observatory for observing children’s learning and for observing the life outside the school, and for constructing and building empathy with living things and with natural phenomena. Every classroom, every space in the center has a form of continuity with the outdoor garden. . . . There is a sort of border and non-border which is always creating relations between indoors and out. (Gaspari, 2024, March 7)

Using images of daily moments, she emphasizes how the spaces reflect the image of the children and their families while giving space to hold traces of the children’s research. These spaces create a diffused *atelier* where organized materials, flexible work, and the environment support the children’s learning and are in relationship with their learning processes:

Thinking in terms of the potential of the architecture of this center and thinking of our desire to make our whole context a place where the dialogue between different subjectivities is encouraged and supported, we can see spaces throughout the center, not just the classrooms, not just the winter gardens, but all the spaces creating favorable conditions for sociality, for socializing, and for relations. (Gaspari, 2024, March 7)

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Equally as necessary, the spaces hold potential for supporting children’s and adults’ relationships while maintaining a level of a particular type of complexity and richness. It is a complexity that invites us to observe the children, be in ongoing discussions, and develop an attitude of research. The research serves as a stimulus to build curiosity and innovation, as it also calls to mind the importance of valuing time. Samanta introduces us to an Italian term, “*accoglienza*,” a welcoming time, typically at the beginning of the year. That particular period requires us to think about time respectfully and with intention. It is an interval of creating spaces with a sense of waiting and expectation, like the Italian word “*attesa*,” which holds both meanings. What she makes clear is that “*accoglienza*” is not a static time. Rather, it is a time when many things are happening in the infant-toddler centers and preschools.

Transitioning from Samanta to Romina, the speakers’ tag-team strategy provides new viewpoints while staying attached to the design of daily learning contexts. Romina follows the thread by presenting images from the Robinson preschool. She begins,

The name of the Robinson school was not a casual choice. The name is a testimonial to the adventure of the city which has always invested and continues to invest, even though very often this is terribly hard work, to continue this investment for all our futures, through education from very early years. (D’Antonio, 2024, March 7)

The name is a testimonial to the adventure of the city which has always invested and continues to invest. ”

She uses the school’s history to ground us in the work of the 3-year-old children. Romina explains how the staff works together synergistically: the auxiliaries, the *atelierista*, the *pedagogista*, and the teachers. The concerted effort by all adults to welcome the children and their families at the beginning of a new school year produces a sort of harmony. Romina gives us insight into what she and her colleagues think and do as they prepare to welcome different individuals into the group. Thinking about how children and adults build relationships and form a group is a high priority for all educators. They know that establishing a group takes time and requires multiple adjustments and many strategies for organizing spaces and times to be together. Everything they do is about the care or “*cura*,” as Romina says in Italian. She shares that it is a time to meet and think about contexts they can offer children that present a light touch based on the information from parents and conversations they have with the children at the beginning of the year. The spaces, prepared with

palettes of materials that offer flexibility and fluctuation with an image of intelligent, curious, and eager children in mind, generate many questions and varied encounters. It is a time for keen, open-ended observations of the adults, who regard the individual and the group, honoring the children’s ways and time for working in new contexts. Those observations show where the children’s interests lie, how the children explore with their bodies, how they enter learning contexts, and how they participate in daily life. All begin to formulate into a thread that can be followed by the collective.

With two short videos, one dedicated to clay and the other to the language of color, Romina gives a glimpse into spaces of a “diffused *atelier*,” an *atelier* that has broken its boundaries and exists throughout the school, where children’s personal boxes and drawers live alongside tables of research and mini-*ateliers*, where children and adults train their eyes and minds to see variety, connection, inclinations, and questions. Each presentation adds a layer to our knowledge of their daily lives with children.

This is a way that we have to empower the building of relationships and also to have the children be co-constructors, to be themselves active builders of the experience. We believe that this active participation from the children, their contribution literally, physically, through the materials, how we build the environment, is extremely important in the building of their learning development. (D’Antonio, 2024, March 7)

The Hundred Languages in Children’s Learning Processes



The second day of the conference falls on International Women’s Day, and Margie Cooper references a quote from Amelia Earhart. Earhart’s full sentiment states, “Everyone has oceans to fly, if they have the heart to do it. Is it reckless? Maybe. But what do dreams know of boundaries?” (Museum of Flight, Seattle, WA)

Before the presentations commence, Margie underscores a statement from the previous day, underscoring for her the essence of Reggio Emilia’s approach, which is to use our minds, relationships, and imagination to form the daily lives of our desire. Annalisa’s statement encourages us all to flex our minds and bodies to activate possibilities. She says,

It is so, so necessary for adults to become even more competent when it comes to listening, for instance, but even more so in using our imaginations, becoming imaginative, figuring out new ways every time. Whenever we are facing challenges, we need not rely specifically on what we know, what we have already experience with, but rather figure out new ways. (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)

The speakers invite us to see how the hundred languages intertwine with children’s learning processes. For Loris Malaguzzi, it was a pedagogical, ecological, and systemic theory based on relationships, having several branches, which speak to countless options to communicate, express, represent, analyze, and interpret what and how we learn. Annalisa suggests that every process of learning, from their point of view, has in it the breath of a reciprocal relationship between adults and children. She references a poem by Loris Malaguzzi, citing poetry as a particular language he used, in this instance, to recognize and legitimize each person’s employ of multiple languages to know the world, to make unique connections, and to interpret life’s meaning. Annalisa tells us,

“Whenever we are facing challenges, we need not rely specifically on what we know, what we have already experience with, but rather figure out new ways.

We are thinking of a form of learning legitimizing all of us to know the world, to learn and to research in our own ways and in a form of learning that doesn’t separate the body from the mind, because our body *is* mind. For us, the body *is* the mind and the mind *is* body. . . . The one hundred languages is a theory of learning based on experience, on practice, on our discoveries. Through the experience and practice and our discoveries, it’s a way of also formulating hypotheses. . . . It’s legitimate to make errors and all of these things are keeping alive that desire we have to know, to understand, to discover, and to learn.” (Rabotti, 2024, March 8)

Using a video that highlights children’s learning processes, typically offered to parents at the Gianni Rodari infant-toddler center, Annalisa underscores the value of the *atelier* to children and adult learning. She speaks of a constant dialogue in the *atelier* between the children’s minds, hands, and materials. Seeing the *atelier* as a symbol of a school, community, and culture with a deep desire to be inclusive, relational, relatable, and hopeful. Recognizing the innovative, creative, and varied spirit of the *atelier* diffused throughout the schools, she recalls Loris Malaguzzi’s wish that creativity would become the constant companion of children and adults, offering multiple and varied opportunities to help all of us grow and learn.

Samanta joins the conversation by sharing a presentation and video focused on “Playing with Doubles: Children and the Digital Environment.” The idea of transforming spaces, environments, learning contexts, and materials with and through technology and creating amplified and generative contexts was ever present in the images she shared. She shows how children encounter and interpret the experiences with curiosity, ingenuity, doubt, and interrogation. While explaining the children’s ways of making sense of what is happening, she says,

This coming and going, coming and going between the two spaces, gives rise to many different kinds of movement, many different gestures, and we can see the postures of the children are showing us how they are interrogating and questioning what is happening. (Gaspari, 2024, March 8)

Annalisa connects the world we saw in the presentation to *progettazione*. She explains that an essential element of *progettazione* is what they define as prefiguration, all the thinking, planning, designing, and talking with colleagues that occurs as they are trying to figure out and imagine a learning context. In that way, by trying things out for themselves, a teacher is in a more substantial situation to understand what the children might encounter, what might happen, what complexities and challenges might arise, and how they, as teachers, might observe more, listen better, and imagine new possibilities.



After an exchange with the participants, Annalisa reminds us that although children have a right to beautiful spaces and children have a right to intelligent play, what they are working towards are contexts that function well and solicit generative thinking, questions, and actions that lead children to individual and collective research. She shares a presentation entitled “A Clay Tree and Three of Us: Learning and Relations” as evidence of such a context. The teachers in the presentation are following how children

make agreements when invited into a challenge. She reminds us that learning is not linear for the children or the adults. Learning is challenging when you combine your thinking, questions, and strengths with others. The idea of your thoughts uniting with another and another and another, to arrive at a beautiful unknown, motivates children and teachers to work rigorously, creating a circularity of learning together.

Supporting participants by sharing examples in various languages, such as verbal, visual, imaginary, and poetic, brings our attention to the children and the adults. At times, the focus is laser sharp, saying this is what we believe. Other times, it is an invitation to sit with a thought, to try it out, to make mistakes, and to find new ways of working together. There is no recipe for designing provoking, collaborative, and generative learning contexts, so we must always interpret what we heard, saw, and felt throughout the conference. As the conference comes to an end, Samanta thanks us and said,

I think that there also has to be an effort that we make as educators, as human beings to dream more, not just play more, but to dream more of the future and imagine more of the future. I think that educators are bringers of future. And that is why we have to have this optimism, this imagination for the future, and this dream. (Gaspari, 2024, March 8)

Adult Exchange to Build Understanding

The speakers invite participants to share feedback, comments, and questions to begin a conversation about the presentations, videos, and images we encountered. This invitation illustrates the collaborative way Reggio educators work and the intention the speakers have from the beginning to be in exchange with the participants in real time. When the questions and comments are reviewed, Annalisa expands on the organization around the dates for the summer and the beginning of the year, as well as information connected to the working hours for teachers to meet with families, dedicated to professional development and organizing documentation and the care of the environment:

[Malaguzzi] always stressed how organization is actually an active part of the learning process of education. It’s not just a consequence of how we educate, but also of making choices when it comes to organizing our activities. It means taking extra care in building those relationships between the professionals, the families, the children, and the entire community at large. (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)

RG

RaKay Gross 11:15 AM

I notice how intentional everything is and how the teachers are completely engaged with the children and engaging in the activities the children are doing. I'm wondering how much time teachers have in their classroom without children. Are they setting up experiences for children during this time? Are they needing to communicate with parents throughout the day?

MC

Mara & Cindy 11:27 AM

As I'm listening, it is occurring to me that prioritizing the building of rapport among adult colleagues in a school is critical, too. Do you have any suggestions for how to go about building that in an intentional, productive way?

QE

Qamara El-Amin 12:43 PM

How often do teachers and children meet together in the classroom? Is it a part of the daily routine to gather as a group once everyone gets adjusted to the classroom, or do teachers interact with a group of children based on the provocations set in the classroom and out in the yard?

I think that there also has to be an effort that we make as educators, as human beings to dream more, not just play more, but to dream more of the future and imagine more of the future. I think that educators are bringers of future.

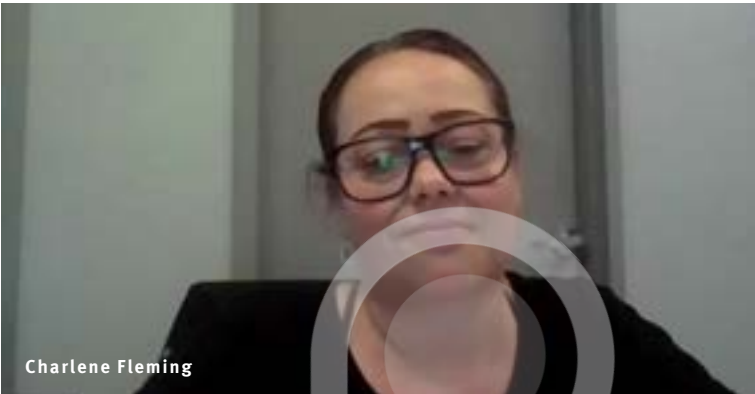
Together, Annalisa, Romina, and Samanta respond to the multiple comments and questions. One theme they notice in the comments is connected to the way the Reggio educators create a “sense of harmony and calmness” visible in the videos. Samanta reflects on the responsibilities of a professional adult within a school. She notes the inherent risks and challenges, the importance of time with children and families, and the delicate nature of establishing relationships. Giving concrete reminders of what we viewed in the videos of very young children learning to walk who were encountering stairs and a slide, she underscores the value of storytelling to families as a way for them to see the children taking steps toward working things out.

Romina addresses questions related to documentation of the morning assembly. As she paints a picture of a morning assembly, she highlights the critical aspects of the adult’s thinking that are present, such as flexibility, welcoming, and variability. Other questions center on the presence of children with special rights. While Romina lays out the organization of the teachers working in the class, she stresses,

Teachers are in support of the entirety of the class. We train ourselves to imagine situations that keep into account the different connotations, the specificities, the peculiarities of that specific group of children. We have to learn how to understand the complexity and work within it with respect to the differences of all of the group. (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)

In response to a question related to the complexity, hardship, and demands of working with children, Romina reminds us that children in Reggio are much like children we work with. She describes a broader picture of a teacher, one who works with challenging situations and one who works to be a competent listener, relationship builder, solution-finder, and innovative thinker, a teacher who lets go of old ways of doing things and grabs onto something not done before. She says,

If we base our work on the fact that we want to entrust the children and respect them, to empower their potential, it means that we also have to provide them with the opportunity to change, to grow, to evolve through these phases of their own development and to mature, as we do with them as well. (Rabotti, 2024, March 7)



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Participants’ Reflections

“I want to thank them [Annalisa, Romina, Samanta] for their time and talents. I learned more from all of them in the day and a half than I have from other conferences or workshops on the philosophy of Reggio.”

– JENNY STAHL

“NAREA conferences continue to be the highest quality professional development opportunities I’ve experienced throughout my career. While key aspects of the philosophical underpinnings remain consistent, I find that different elements stand out or carry greater meaning depending on the current context and realities of where I am in my career. The relevance and reflection these conferences promote are unmatched. I wish this level of PD [professional development] was the norm rather than the exception.”

– KATIE WALTERS-KROHN

“This was my first NAREA conference, but I have been studying the Reggio Emilia Approach for years. I learned so much from the conference! The freedom the children have is inspiring. It was heartwarming at the end to know there is not much difference between all of us. We all want the same thing for our children.”

– BRENDA CUBERO

“This was a wonderful conference with a wonderful format being livestreamed and interactive.”

– MICHELLE RIVARD

“My point of resonance was Annalisa’s sharing of the ‘silent’ questions children propose through their hands, as a motivation to focus on in becoming more deeply attuned to children’s way of learning. Also, the concept of ‘re-signifying’ or giving new meaning in shared in-depth encounters between children. Samanta’s beautiful portraits of interrelationships of indoor to outdoor environments, and the profound interactive learning dynamics that are supported. Romina’s focus on ‘welcoming’ will replace our [focus of] ‘orientation.’”

– BERNARD BROWN

“I really valued listening to each presenter share their work, knowledge, and research. I was particularly moved by their closing statements. They really tied together the importance of the content of the two days of sharing. Their statements were moving and inspirational. I hope for more people to make the connections between how and why we are working with children and its global impact for the future.”

– TRACY KOHLI

“I am very new to learning about the Reggio Emilia Approach, although I have heard about it a little from my supervisor. I was thoroughly impressed with its educational philosophy, and how it lives in the classrooms. I love the open space, freedom, and autonomy children have in the classroom. Thank you for sharing your expertise and experience using a lot of visuals.”

– AYUMI SHINOHARA

Thankful

We thank our colleagues from Reggio Emilia, the children, the families, the educators, and community who tirelessly give of their time and efforts to share the educational landscape we have come to know as the Reggio Emilia Approach with educators around the world. To Annalisa Rabotti, Romina D’Antonio, and Samanta Gaspari with interpreters Jane McCall and Alessandro John Prandi, we express our heartfelt gratitude for bringing their openness, honesty, intelligence, and compassion to those of us who attended the conference. On behalf of NAREA, we send best wishes for your continued professional growth and personal well-being. We invite you to join us virtually or in person for our next professional learning endeavor.

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