

Reflections

The 20th NAREA Summer Conference

BY: NAREA STAFF

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Advocating for the 100 Languages as an Educational Right for Children, Families, and Educators

June 27–29, 2024



Explora Science Center and Children's Museum of Albuquerque



Professional exchange with Reggio educators and local working group



National Hispanic Cultural Center History and Literary Arts Building

The Pleasure of Summer Learning

And just like that, the 20th NAREA Summer Conference makes its mark. Celebrating 2 decades of summer learning, NAREA brings Reggio Emilia perspective to North American early childhood educators, advocates, and policymakers through our traveling conferences.

The generous contributions of Marina Castagnetti, former teacher of Reggio Emilia's Diana Preschool, and Isabella Meninno, current *atelierista* of the International School located in the Loris Malaguzzi International Center, with Jane McCall as interpreter extraordinaire, met an audience of 295 persons from 3 countries, 25 U.S. states, and 2 Canadian provinces.

We convene in Albuquerque, New Mexico, welcomed by a hard-working group of educators from New Mexico, along with their colleagues from Arizona. For months prior to the conference, local educators collaborate with NAREA staff to imagine the presence of the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition + *atelier* (*Mosaic*) and the possibilities of the conference offerings in their community.

Before the conference participants arrive, the local working group of 20 persons is gifted a unique opportunity by NAREA, in collaboration with Reggio Children: 2 days of professional exchange connected to the *Mosaic* conducted by Castagnetti and Meninno. As an occasion to compare different perspectives, to approach materials and concepts from a variety of points of view, and to interrogate the working experience of the *atelier* conductors, the conversations are lively and probing.

The presence of *Mosaic* in New Mexico underscores the fluidity of opportunity each host community is afforded. Never imagined as a static artifact, *Mosaic* opens dialogue specific to the desires of a *particular* place in North America, connected to specific concepts and experiences curated by children and adults of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. For the early childhood community throughout North America, deepening our comprehension of children's processes of communication and expression is crucial to deepening our roles as educators who offer opportunities and materials. The New Mexico working group is poised to take advantage.

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Baji Rankin



Christine Sims



Carlotta (Penny) Bird

Land Acknowledgement

Following the 2-day local immersion with *Mosaic*, the conference opens to a full house in the auditorium of the National Hispanic Cultural Center. Official greetings are expressed, and Baji Rankin shares a land acknowledgement. My name is Baji Rankin, and I am deeply humbled to offer this land acknowledgement today by making visible, and honoring the indigenous people of Isleta Pueblo, Sandia Pueblo, Santa Ana Pueblo and Tiwa peoples, the original inhabitants of this land we call Albuquerque where our gathering of the 2024 Summer North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) Conference is meeting today, Friday, and Saturday. Thank you.

I also acknowledge all the 23 federally recognized Tribal Nations in New Mexico with around six Indigenous language families spoken who continue to live on and care for the unceded, stolen land that we now call New Mexico. I occupy land in Taos, the land of the Red Willow People of Taos Pueblo. I also spend time in Albuquerque, the Indigenous lands of the Isleta Pueblo, Sandia Pueblo, Santa Ana Pueblo and Tiwa peoples. I go back and forth along the Rio Grande valley corridor. I honor and acknowledge the Indigenous people all along this lifeline of water and I also honor all Indigenous people throughout the state of New Mexico – including all the contemporary Pueblo, Diné, and Apache tribes and nations, each with their own unique languages, cultures and histories. They were and continue to be stewards of the land as they also make significant contributions to our state now, in myriads of different ways, including the Zia sun symbol, sacred to the Zia Pueblo, celebrating the circle of life of all people.

I honor the Indigenous people of New Mexico by buying jewelry and pottery from the tribes and pueblos in which they are crafted. I buy gas at pueblo gas stations along the way. I also am committed to learning and telling stories and history that allow me, and us, to understand the past that is all too often forgotten and that continues to impact the present and future. While I acknowledge the violence of the past and present, I also focus my attention on the continued resistance of the Indigenous peoples of this land and I work and participate with joy and openness and love of learning when and where I can to support the wonderful work going on that celebrates and strengthens the Indigenous cultures and languages of this land.

I am deeply honored to work with the Adobe Think Tank, an Indigenous-led community in which I am learning and growing. I celebrate the work of ATT where we gather together as a diverse group of people—Indigenous people along with other people of color and people of colonial descent—to work together to highlight, strengthen, and revitalize the Indigenous languages and cultures of New Mexico, with a huge focus on the young children of New Mexico. Thank you. (Rankin, 2024, June 27)



Gigi Yu



Host Community Welcome

Gigi Yu follows the land acknowledgement with further greetings and introductions of the host community.

My name is Gigi Schroeder Yu, and I am an assistant professor in art education at the University of New Mexico and co-founder of the Collaborative Teachers Institute. I would like to introduce you to the NM *Mosaic of Marks, Words, and Material* exhibition and NAREA conference organizing committee: Dr. Baji Rankin, Dr. Pam Remstein, and Dr. Sarah McKinney. Collectively we represent the Collaborative Teachers Institute and New Mexico Reggio Emilia Exchange. In collaboration with NAREA, we would like to extend a warm welcome to Albuquerque! We especially welcome Isabella and Marina, who we have already learned so much from.

We are grateful for the support of our funders the Brindle Foundation, Kellogg Foundation, and the New Mexico Early Childhood Department. With their support we were able to bring the exhibition to Explora Museum for three months and also fund 41 scholarships for New Mexico educators to attend the NAREA Conference.

We are also grateful for the collaboration of four different museums: National Hispanic Cultural Center, Natural History Museum, the Albuquerque Art Museum, and of course Explora for hosting our experiences over the next few days of the NAREA conference.

I would also like to thank the 20 *atelier* group members, who have already spent several hours and days planning for their time with you. These working group members represent artists/educators, early childhood educators, program directors, higher education faculty, and advocates from New Mexico and also our extended family of colleagues from Arizona.

It was exactly 10 years ago that Albuquerque was the host of the NAREA 2014 summer conference and the *Wonder of Learning* exhibition. So much has happened since, amazing opportunities, sometimes setbacks in our educational endeavors, but as a community we have remained committed to collaborations with each other and to study of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

So today, we are very excited to embark on the theme of this year's conference: Advocating for the Hundred Languages as an Educational Right for Children and Families. What do educational rights mean for us today? Over the next few days, we will come to know the meaning of rights much more deeply than it does for us today. We will consider the rights to indigenous language revitalization, artistic and expressive languages, diverse immigrant languages, the right to diversity of culture, and the right to belonging and participation.

Over the next few days with each other, may we grow in our understanding of the hundred languages as multiplying because of the interactions with each other and our context and be understood as rights for children, educators, and families. Enjoy the conference! (Yu, 2024, June 27)



Marina Castagnetti, Jane McCall, and Isabella Meninno

Liberty is Friends with Peace Because They're Both the Same

As the speakers commence, the concepts and ideas inherent within Reggio Emilia's original approach to early education begin to flow. From Reggio Emilia, the words of 5-year-old Laura give us pause as we reconnect with a vision of early education that lives far beyond the often-narrow sightedness of many of today's politically driven efforts such as kindergarten readiness. "Liberty is friends with peace because they're both the same." Castagnetti sets the tone for our days as being within the "spirit of critique and solidarity and a sense of freedom and liberty" (Castagnetti, 2024, June 27).

Within a presentation of the long, postwar history of Reggio Emilia, combined with key values of its approach to early education, Castagnetti reminds us that every beginning calls us to revisit our image of children. She shares,

For his entire life, Loris Malaguzzi returned over and over again, re-elaborating the image of child. Children are at the center of the educational project. Each one of us in this room, when we say the word child or children in our minds, possesses different images and ideas of who and what children are based on our own experiences and our own thinking developed over time, which orients and gives direction to choices in education.

We believe that since we all have our own ideas, it is necessary to open to others and elaborate our ideas together with other educators. We discuss continuously and read research of others. We've chosen to work with an image of children as competent from the day they are born. We say that children are competent because they have the tools to build up know-how and knowledge, biologically equipped with discovering and communicating. All children are born equipped to build knowledge of the social context they are born in, that they live in, that they build their relationships in.



For children, they live in a condition where everything is completely new for the first time. What children encounter around them provokes wonder and marveling. For children, nothing is ordinary or banal. Everything is given value through this gaze of curiosity and discovery and remembering and connecting things together to build meanings.

Children are capable of relations, every gesture made is intended to form a relation or look for a relation around them. We know that as human beings, all of us have a complex system of neural connections in our brains, a sophisticated system enabling us to recognize. Mirror neurons are connected with our human empathy which makes us capable of understanding and feeling other people's intentions and feelings. It's very important for educators to have in their minds this important reality for physical and mental structures that orient us to research.

We know that children, through their lived experiences, are capable of evolving more and more capable strategies for research.

We know that children, through their lived experiences, are capable of evolving more and more capable strategies for research. They have lots of questions to ask and form provisional, possible answers to those questions, seeking new ways of experimenting and trying out new explanations or theories about the world. These children are capable of building complex structures for building knowledge. They see analogies and similarities in things. We now know they think in metaphor and produce symbols. These are children who are constantly building new knowledge, not waiting for adults in order to understand the world around them.

It is very important then, if you are an adult working with children, to have an optimistic gaze on children. Instead, around the world in different cultures, we begin measuring and quantifying what they know and what they don't know. We [in Reggio Emilia] chose early on to see children and to look for the value in children of what they are capable of thinking and doing and researching. Children for us are active protagonists of their own growing and developing. In our educational project, we are oriented by this idea of children's many, many potentials. That they have the right to express those potentials and to have those potentials recognized by the adults—adults who are capable of expressing children's thinking, processes, and elaborations. (Castagnetti, 2024, June 27)

While it is often easy to find adults who share this image of children that Malaguzzi works so tirelessly to express, it is much more difficult to find schools, administrations, and governments willing or able to translate this rich image of young children into reality. Governments willing to fund resources for continual research *between* children and adults are scarce. The

municipality of Reggio Emilia, whose overall budget allocates 16% to its system of infant-toddler centers and preschools, is seemingly unparalleled. Perhaps this is where Reggio Emilia excels the most—turning vision into 6 decades of reality.

The story of citizens building a school, "brick by brick" with stones from the river and scraps of metal from an abandoned German tank is widely known within the Reggio-inspired community. That first act of postwar investment in children and families seeds the idea of schools for young children as a common good of the *community*, not only of families. The idea of a school takes root as a place not only of recovery, but of permanent possible renewal for the community, a place with the capacity to produce culture.

Castagnetti remarks that "every change in education has a cost—economic, energy, and work" (Castagnetti, 2024, June 27). It also takes ingenuity, imagination, and willingness to take risks outside the status quo. As she suggests, *schools are born of desire*. One example is recounted from the period prior to the 1971 opening of the first municipal preschool, Robinson. A municipal administrator notices that regulations standing in the way of desire were tied to buildings made of bricks or stone. He suggests, instead, that the school be made of wood since there were no rules in place restricting them. Such ingenuity proves to be the way forward.

Perseverance and continued human ingenuity in Reggio Emilia continue changing taken for granted landscapes. This is certainly the case in the example of Reggio Emilia’s municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, and the advocacy work of the city in continually dignifying human rights. In introducing herself, Meninno reflects on her first moments entering the schools of Reggio Emilia as an artist from another city,

From that first moment I began learning, I also had to begin studying. I had to learn to discuss things. I had to learn to show people things, to propose things, and to defend my ideas with others. Above all, I had to learn to transform through the dialogue with the children and colleagues. I had to learn to put them together, *confronto*, with other people’s ideas, bartering my ideas with other people’s ideas. For me, this has always been one of the most beautiful kinds of work there is in the world. (Meninno, 2024, June 27)

We in North America gather at conferences and travel to Reggio Emilia in search of learning that will take us closer to the depths of Reggio Emilia’s education project. We see in the story of the city official’s work-around more than 60 years ago and Meninno’s introduction that it is more art than science that brings new visions for education to life, that the foundation of every advance we seek is within ourselves in relationship with others. Caring for and educating human beings is complex. In schools for young children, our work must be viewed as a profession with professional skills in permanent growth. As in any professional discipline, to construct our work to be worthy of children, we must be willing to study and think again, and again, and again.

Annalisa Rabotti, *pedagogista* and presenter during NAREA’s winter conference, shares a similar perspective when she offers,

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)

Even as we become more and more capable and comfortable with flexing our imaginations and figuring out actionable ways to address our challenges, Castagnetti remembers Loris Malaguzzi’s wisdom and leadership in recognizing another essential element. She makes a critical link between vision and organization, “Utopia, change, and desire go together, but we can’t have those changes, we can’t achieve our utopia without concrete organization, without changing the organization, the structure of the way we run things” (Castagnetti, 2024, June 27). All schools of childhood have the same hours in a day and days in a week and weeks in a year. It is up to us to build together days and weeks and years deserving of children and families, to use our liberties by improving.

So, if building organization in better coherence with vision is part of the work, perhaps the greatest indicator of Reggio-inspiration is the degree to which adults convene to reflect, interpret, propose, and act based on the particular children in



their care. This style is quite opposite to models and curriculums favored by contemporary overseers of early childhood education, whether government, corporate, private, or philanthropic. Overseers, too often, aim for standardization within a static model rather than welcoming human ingenuity, professionalism, and coherence within a particular image of children and teachers. Malaguzzi (1991/2016) spoke of his dislike for “prophetic pedagogy” saying it

knows everything beforehand. . . . and has no uncertainty, it is absolutely imperturbable, it contemplates everything and prophesies everything and sees everything . . . to the point that it is capable of giving recipes for the parts of action, minute by minute, hour by hour, objective by objective, five minutes by five minutes. This is a coarse and cowardly thing, which is humiliating to teachers’ ingenuity and a complete and visible humiliation of children’s ingenuity and potential. (pp. 421–422)

If Reggio Emilia’s experiences are our inspiration, we must recognize their contemporary educational project is thought as a living organism in which all the parts intertwine. Each gives quality to the others, adding to the complexity of the system. The system of excellence is grown from within, rooted in an interest “in how children learn, how they organize their knowledge, how they build their knowledge, how they research in the world, and how we adults can increase our knowledge of how children do these things” (Castagnetti, 2024, June 27).

The Atelier is a Very Adventurous Story

Meninno, too, gives nod to the connection between vision and action in her considerations about the *atelier*. She suggests,

The *atelier* is a very adventurous story, and the *ateliers* were born from an extraordinary intuition that Loris Malaguzzi had. As we all know, it’s one thing to have a very good idea or an intuition, and it’s a completely different thing to make it concrete, to turn it into reality. To have a revolutionary act is something extraordinary, but every revolutionary act needs time to filter like the sediment in a river, to pause and turn into culture. It’s only when this sedimentation takes place, when the powder goes down and forms a layer, that we can say we have begun building something, constructing something. . . . Initially, when it was born, the *atelier* was considered to be a room in the school, a space in the school. But over the years, the *atelier* diffused out into the entire school. And so, the *atelier* is something that has changed and modified our spaces. I like to think of the school as a kind of gulf, a harbor or a bay with lots of little islands of materials, of tools, and of thinking. (Mennino, 2024, June 27)

“**To have a revolutionary act is something extraordinary, but every revolutionary act needs time to filter like the sediment in a river, to pause and turn into culture.**”

Using the subject of nature as example, Meninno comments on the ways children are prone to view themselves in connection with all living organisms. This way of children situates their curiosity and activates their research using what she refers to as their “system of ideas” constantly under construction. For example:

The minute that the children begin together to try to understand the secret life of a flower, that is the minute that they begin to understand the life of the universe and how the universe is working. This is something quantum physics teaches us. It’s something geometry teaches us, it’s something architecture teaches us. (Meninno, 2024, June 27)

The way of the school will either support or diminish this way of children. To sustain the children’s way, she suggests schools have an important role, which is to

help the children learn how to defend their idea and how to share it with others, how to communicate it. The more materials I have available to me, the more different ways I can transcribe my ideas into different forms and the more ways I have of communicating them. (Meninno, 2024, June 27)

“The beauty of children is their openness to the ideas and points of view of others, their willingness to let go of an idea that doesn’t work any longer.

And the beauty of children is their openness to the ideas and points of view of others, their willingness to let go of an idea that doesn’t work any longer.

With Castagnetti’s and Meninno’s deep reach into Reggio Emilia’s history, values, and experiences, the conference continues with two days of stories from the work of children and adults, and much more.

A Gift Marking 20 Years of Learning Together

Margie Cooper, Karyn Callaghan, and Brenda Fyfe, representing the NAREA board, share a video story spanning NAREA’s 2002 founding to present day. The story highlights the participation of 11,000 persons in 40 NAREA conferences, including more than 800 host scholarship recipients and 43 different speakers from Reggio Emilia. It further links the connection between conferences and exhibitions, giving an overview of 3 exhibitions produced and managed in collaboration with Reggio Children for use by 25 distinct North American communities.

The story goes on to share other professional learning opportunities offered through NAREA, including its service as a book distributor of Reggio Emilia publications and maintaining a dialogue of professional exchange through the periodical *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange*. The consistency of this work and the work evolving in local North American communities supports the interest of thousands of schools for young children. As evidenced by a 2021 census, more than 2,800 self-declared Reggio-inspired schools now exist in all states and provinces of the United States and Canada.

Very kindly, these efforts are celebrated by Castagnetti who remarks, Thank you, thank you. As I was saying yesterday, from this small town, all this great energy that Isabella and I are feeling these days. So, you can imagine, we live in a small city, and you see this incredible energy from a different place going out into the world, a place where Isabella and I work every day. It feels very emotional to see the energy of people in the different places in the world. What has happened over the years, I travel very often and meet people like yourselves, all these people who are so interested, so curious, so full of passion. And everywhere I go, I feel at home. When I go home, people say, “How was your trip; how was everything?” And I say, “Ah, I felt completely at home.” And they say, “How can you feel at home in that different place? This is your home.” But it isn’t true, because to encounter the intelligence and curiosity and passion of other people,



their interests, and to work together and see that other people want to do research in a similar way to you, you feel so attuned. You feel in tune with the people and the place. And that you realize how much we can do together by trying to be in tune and collaborate together.

This is the 20th NAREA conference. We are giving a symbolic gift to the NAREA board. What we’ve brought from Reggio Emilia are books that have to do with the beginnings, the very early beginnings of our work, the catalogues of those early beginnings of the work. The original catalogue of the exhibition *L’occhio se salta il muro*. So, NAREA has built up an enormous legacy and these original catalogues, which are very difficult to find, is a series of catalogues from that exhibition. So, this is history, it is archaeology, but it is also future. It’s a return to the future. And we have the bag from the exhibition as well. Thank you so much. A big hug to all of you. (Castagnetti, 2024, June 28)

Snapshots

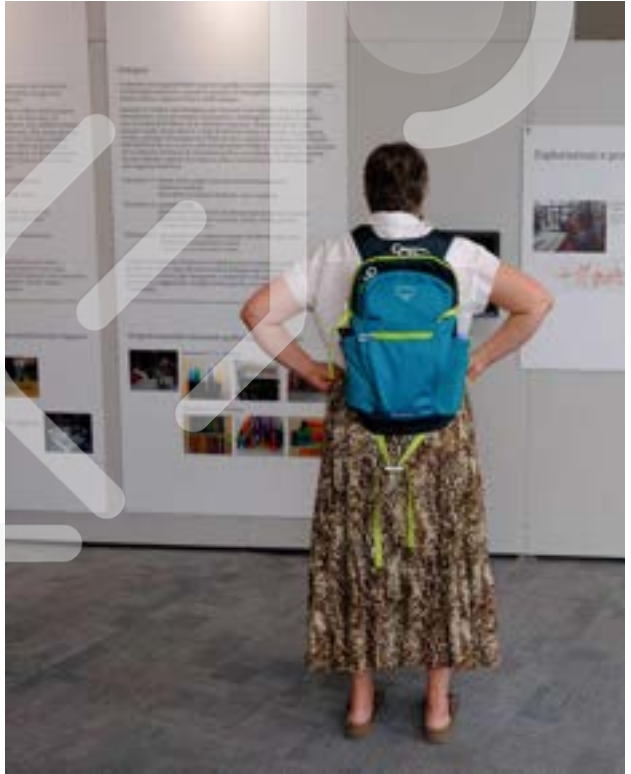




Participants from Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool



Participants encountering the exhibition



Participants from Scuola Creativa and The New School-West with Isabella Meninno



Participants from Child-Parent Centers



Participants gathering outside



Participants exploring *atelier* materials



Participant Reflections

NAREA and Reggio Children thrive on participant comments and suggestions through a post conference survey. It supports our thinking in terms of future content and initiatives. As an organization that has chosen to travel to communities rather than have a central home for conferences, we always trust participants to appreciate that circumstances from place-to-place shape the logistics of conferences in ways that we cannot standardize. We believe that the differences of every local community are a resource, rather than a wrinkle. Where we invest significant funds is in the cost of bringing educators and interpreters from Reggio Emilia. We want registrants to hear directly from a variety of experienced representatives of Reggio Emilia, knowing that not all educators in North America have yet visited Reggio Emilia or will have enough opportunities to build up their learning from multiple occasions to learn directly in relationship with Reggio Emilia representatives. Here’s a sampling of comments from participants.

Presenters

“I appreciate you taking time away from your homes and families to visit us and share your invaluable knowledge and experiences. What you shared with me, and the other dedicated early childhood advocates and educators, is motivating, inspiring, and worth more than gold! Thank you!”

– M. TRAN

“I really liked that they shared how they continue advocating for children’s rights. I am working to become an advocate for children as never before because they deserve it!”

– F. SANJUANA

“I have been in education for 40 years now . . . and have never felt so inspired as I did attending this conference! I wanted it to last longer and continue to hear you speak, watch your videos and see the amazing work your children and teams are doing. Thank you! Highlight of my summer!”

– J. RIVERA

“I truly appreciate this amazing introduction to your work. It was very inspiring and refreshing to hear from you both. I especially appreciated hearing from Isabella about her current work with children. Too often our professional development and teacher education comes from people who haven’t been actually in the classroom for years so it feels unrealistic. Thank you both for your time and effort.”

– K. HEIFNER

“Marina, thank you for the inspiration, reminding me ‘living in relationship with children you must have an optimistic gaze.’”

– D. FLETCHER

“I couldn’t have been more thrilled with the content and experience—it was truly inspirational.”

– K. FORBES

Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material Exhibition + Atelier

“It is simply magical.”

“Seeing the documentation and the children’s own words helped cement the importance of doing this with my children at school and making it readily available to the children, parents, and other teachers.”

“Each time I experience this exhibit, I see another layer and then go home and pour through my book again. The videos bring to life the work of the children and teachers together.”

Future Content Suggestions

“Teacher training, support, hiring processes, how they maintain the culture through their practices”

“I continue to be interested in the process of documentation and how to make this an ongoing and manageable reality.”

“After such an in-depth look at clay, I feel very prepared to take that and translate it into my school. I would love to see the same thing with another medium like paint or paper.”

“I would like to learn more about the HOW. How do we set up the environment, how do we train the teachers, how in a more step by step way to create this type of school in our own communities.”

Gratitude

NAREA is grateful for every occasion to come together with so many vibrant and curious participants whose work is elevating the image of children and adults in society. Thank you for your participation and ongoing work.

We are grateful to live in a time when the Reggio Emilia of today exists. We grow through their generous availability to continually communicate and make visible traces of every angle of their early education project. We express our deep gratitude to Marina Castagnetti, Isabella Meninno, and Jane McCall for their years and years of experience that gave the Albuquerque conference a beautiful voice, leaving us with inspiration and an “optimistic gaze,” that we heard expressed in the presentations.

Finally, we could not have been together if not for the New Mexico host community and their availability and support in bringing the Mosaic exhibition + atelier to Albuquerque, which gave all of us the opportunity for a rich professional learning.

Following this article, read more about the history and experiences of New Mexico’s Reggio-inspired community and its intersection with our summer conference and the Mosaic exhibition + atelier through reflections of the New Mexico planning team. NAREA conferences, held in communities throughout North America, bring to light, again and again, the intelligence and determination local and regional early childhood working

NAREA conferences . . . bring to light, again and again, the intelligence and determination local and regional early childhood working groups consistently contribute.

As this current issue of Innovations suggests, early childhood theory and practice are permanent questions. Each generation of educators and advocates carry forward new insight and comprehension for welcoming very young children and their families into the world. This takes serious commitment, like that of New Mexico’s Reggio-inspired community. For NAREA’s part, we are grateful to continually meet our North American colleagues and to offer resources in collaboration with Reggio Emilia for deepening our collective work.

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