

Global Learning Journey

Italy | Pistoia

Municipality of Pistoia Education and Training Service

BY: JUDITH ALLEN

J U D I T H A L L E N



Judith served as editor of *Innovations* for over 20 years and was the NAREA exhibit project coordinator for 11 years, managing *The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition in collaboration with Reggio Children and host communities during its tour of North America. She was a NAREA founding board member and supported professional development initiatives for NAREA and Wayne State University, where she worked for 17 years. She is currently the NAREA communications and exhibitions coordinator.

A System of Municipal Early Childhood Schools and Centers Deeply Rooted in History

Known in ancient times as Pistoria, this walled city northwest of Florence is the site of cathedrals, palaces, and churches that date back to the 12th century. Pistoia's history surrounds you as you walk its streets. Steeped in Tuscany's culture of storytelling, architecture, and art, the town's legacy speaks to a deep reverence for beauty, a culture of care, and the enduring strength of community. The culture of the child and the culture of early childhood education is closely tied to the culture of the community, the culture of its citizenry, and the history of the city. In Italy, early childhood education funds are funneled through the municipalities. Pistoia's local government embraced this opportunity by developing a network of infant-toddler centers and preschools that reflect the desires of the community for quality, access, and participation.

In 1964, the municipality of Pistoia opened its first preschool (kindergarten) for children from 3–6 years. In 1972, the city opened the first infant-toddler center (nido) for children from 0–3 years, and in 1987, the first AreaBambini (children's area) was opened, AreaBambini Gialla, as well as the Casa degli Orsi playspace. The first babies and parents center opened in 1996. Currently in Pistoia, there are seven preschools, six infant-toddler centers, and four AreaBambini that are managed directly by the municipality, while one public infant-toddler center and one play area are managed through a contract with the municipality.

AreaBambini are specific to Pistoia. AreaBambini Rossa, the red children's area, includes one play area for children aged 18 to 36 months (Spazio Gioco) and one children's and parents' center (Spazio Piccolissimi). AreaBambini Blu (the blue children's area), AreaBambini Verde (the green children's area), and AreaBambini Gialla (the yellow children's area) are for children aged 4 to 8. The children's areas are thematic workshops; the blue area is dedicated to art and play, the green area is dedicated to nature and exploratory processes, and the yellow area is dedicated to storytelling.



Gothic and Romanesque architecture dating back to 12th century

Renzo Berti (2004), a former mayor of Pistoia, wrote about children and the city:

It is actually difficult to make cultural progress if our concept of children is the historical one of seeing them as weak subjects to defend and protect [—] think rather in favour of giving greater space and visibility to the idea of children as the possessors of rights to be expressed and actively implemented in building the future. (p. 5)

Annalia Galardini was the founder of early childhood services in Pistoia in 1972 and the longtime director of education, social services, and cultural affairs. Donatella Giovannini was once the pedagogical coordinator of Pistoia’s municipal early childhood programs. Galardini and Giovannini (2001) commented on the value of public education systems:

We have found that public systems work best to serve young children and families when they are deeply rooted in the local community. Therefore, public administrators have tried to establish community relationships based on connections, debate, and collaboration. (p. 99)

A Global Learning Journey in Pistoia

The NAREA Global Learning Journeys (GLJ) offer educators an opportunity to step outside the routines of daily practice and be immersed in values-driven systems of early childhood education outside North America. NAREA’s second GLJ took place in Pistoia in April 2025 and included 22 participants from the United States and one from Turkey. During the week, the participants had the opportunity to meet with educators in the municipal system and as a group and visit two preschools, two infant-toddler centers, and two children’s areas.



TOP ROW: Kristen, Rose, Samantha, Ariel, Lynette, Lisa, Stephanie, Viradel, Sheela, Kristie, Danielle, Kristen
SECOND ROW: Alethia, Elif BOTTOM ROW: Elizabeth, Nicole, Cinzia, Laura, Sylvia, Krysti, Stephanie, Linda, Judy, Muffin, Jessica

The Vision of the Child, the Family, the Teacher, and the Community

On the first day of the study week, the GLJ participants met with Clarissa Menici, the pedagogical coordinator for the municipal early childhood program, at the Municipal Education and Training Service, which is in the Villa Baldi Papini. She opened her remarks by declaring that Pistoia’s 0–6 early childhood program is a cultural, social, and educational project. The pedagogical approach that they have developed is inspired by many philosophies and approaches, including those of Loris Malaguzzi and Maria Montessori. Menici shared a holistic, systemic vision of the child that considers children as citizens with the right to be protagonists in their education. Everyone who inhabits the municipal schools and centers, including teachers, school assistants, and cooks, watches over the children’s well-being.



Participants meet with Menici and interpreter on first day of visit.

The schools and centers are available to everyone in the city. They prioritize families who have children with special needs and socioeconomic issues. When there is a child with special needs in a classroom, an extra teacher supports the whole group. The idea is to be inclusive so that these children can participate with the others. According to C. Menici (personal communication, April 7, 2025), “Our idea of the child, our vision, our concept of the child is as a competent and autonomous child who is learning in a social context under a very watchful and supportive eye.”

On the second day of the week, the GLJ educators visited the AreaBambini Verde, which is located in the countryside and focuses on nature. Alessandra Gonfiantini, one of the educators at the green area, introduced the visitors to this children’s area for 5- to 8-year-olds. She said that the teachers think, create, organize, and plan a number of specific projects every year. They usually do not offer the same projects as the year before. A. Gonfiantini (personal communication, April 8, 2025) stated, “We like to be stimulated by changes. . . . We listen to our children, what comes up. We seize what the children offer, questions they ask. It’s different every time.”

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Donatella Fanfani and Gonfiantini introduce AreaBambini Verde.



Cappellini presents projects at Spazio Gioco in AreaBambini Rossa.

The visiting educators spent a day at the AreaBambini Rossa, which has two spaces for children. The red area was opened in 1996 when Galardini was the director of the municipal early childhood program. Educator Deborah Cappellini described how innovative this children’s area was then and is now. The visitors learned that the projects that the children do in Spazio Gioco have been designed specifically for them. D. Cappellini (personal communi

cation, April 9, 2025), who also supported the organization of the study week, offered:

We’ve always rejected the idea of having prepared workshops or courses that are the same for everybody. This is a strong message that we’re giving to the children: This is about you; this is about what you feel like doing. And we’re also saying to the parents, “We must observe the children. We have to listen to the children and let them tell us whether this is a good process or not.”

In her reflections following the study week, Kristen Blomgren (personal communication, May 1, 2025) of Children’s Garden Montessori School in Denver, Colorado commented,

It was a true honor to attend the NAREA Global Learning Journey and be able to experience Pistoia, Italy. It is a magical city with such high regard for maintaining the key importance of community. The journey invigorated and enriched my own educational philosophy because of their respect for each individual child and family, while utilizing innovative approaches to early childhood education.

The Quality of the Spaces

The educators within the Pistoia municipal system believe that all of the spaces in the schools and centers should communicate something about their idea of the child, how they relate to families, and how the educational community works together. Galardini and Giovannini (2001) wrote:

Our challenge has been to invent and perfect new strategies and to construct new environments for children that promote experiences of relationship and learning. Today, we have accumulated a wealth of knowledge and pedagogical practice that are in a constant process of adaptation and organization. (p. 89)

In her role as pedagogical coordinator, Menici is responsible for ensuring the quality of the spaces, making sure that every area has been carefully considered and that materials are chosen with intention. Educators in Pistoia prefer recycled and natural materials, which support creative thinking, exploration, and imagination. “Loris Malaguzzi . . . considered that space was the third educator, and we adhere to this idea,” C. Menici (personal communication, April 7, 2025) asserted.

Marta Grassi introduced the participants to Nido Il Faro on the last day of the study week. The outside space wraps around the school, and there is a new, large space outdoors given to the center by the city. This has encouraged the teachers to think

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Discussing indoor and outdoor spaces at Nido Il Faro

further about what they’re doing with the space outdoors. Rethinking how they are working in the outdoors has given educators the energy to think about changes they want to make indoors. M. Grassi (personal communication, April 11, 2025), who discussed the educational spaces at length, said:

There is a very deliberate choice in the Pistoia centers to characterize each space differently, depending on who works there and what their particular interests and skills are. Each place should reflect something of the people that are here every day. . . . The space should reflect something about their personalities.

Gonfiantini explained to the visiting educators that while working with nature at the AreaBambini Verde, there is no barrier between the outside and the inside. The children and the teachers move from one to the other, without regard to the weather. A. Gonfiantini (personal communication, April 8, 2025) offered, “The outdoor surroundings for us obviously are extremely important. We’re lucky to be on this beautiful hill with a beautiful view.”



Exploring indoor and outdoor spaces at AreaBambini Verde

Next, the educators visited the Marino Marini Kindergarten, which was named for the famous Pistoian artist, who financed the opening of the school. His expressive, abstract sculptures of horses inspired the children and the teachers. The educators in Pistoia assume children can appreciate an artist’s work through their senses and imagination. While discussing the school’s focus on art, Lorella Capecchi (personal communication, April 8, 2025) remarked:

We never waste an opportunity to go outside, whether visiting an exhibition museum or just spending time outside. It gives the children the opportunity to see different things. . . . One of our goals is to be sure that children meet what is beautiful to look at culture in general.



Introducing the culture of Marino Marini

Supporting Relationships and Cooperation

Menici also works with the teachers to support relationships and to encourage cooperation between children. The Pistoia educators believe that every moment of the day has educational and social value. Galardini and Giovannini (2001) wrote, “The quality and organization of space and time in the educational setting can encourage exploration, support the development of abilities, help maintain concentration, and give a sense of belonging and well-being to a young child” (p. 90). They confirmed the importance of a sense of belonging to the community, “We submit that the task of adults—teachers and parents—is to transmit to children a sense of belonging to a community with a history” (p. 104).

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Sharing the educational context of Parco Drago

The educators visited Parco Drago Kindergarten on the first day of the study week, where Sylvia Lazzerini discussed the process of the 3-year-old children’s transitions during the first months of school. Before the school year begins, the teachers have a meeting with the parents of each section to get to know them. After the first week of school, the teachers have individual meetings with every child’s parent. S. Lazzerini (personal communication, April 7, 2025) explained:

For 3-year-olds, who are in school for the first time, on the first day, the parent will stay with her child all the time. The second day, the parent is there, but at a certain moment, she leaves so the child can be on her own. It’s very gradual, how the child starts school with the parents not too far away for the first days.

At Spazio Piccolissimi in AreaBambini Rossa, they welcome children with special rights and their parents. D. Cappellini (personal communication, April 9, 2025) commented:

My job is to offer them a situation where they can be in a relational dialogue with other families. What we want to do is create an environment where parents, just by talking to other parents and sharing things together, can feel better about their own problems.

The role of the teacher at Spazio Piccolissimi is to listen and to observe, to bring out the parents’ competence at the right moment and never in an intrusive way. The teachers try to guide parents in a direction so that they feel competent in what they are already doing. Teachers also facilitate dialogue between the parents.



Meeting about services for families at AreaBambini Rossa

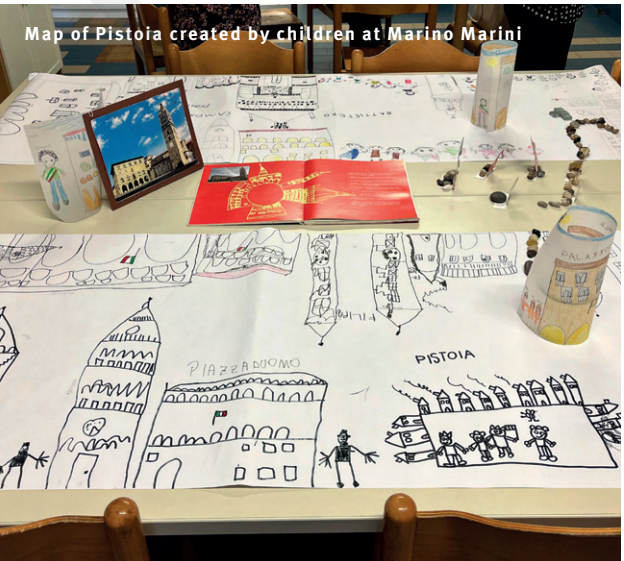
At Spazio Gioco in AreaBambini Rossa, educators have a specific goal: giving value to children playing children’s games and to the ways in which they spontaneously wish to play. D. Cappellini (personal communication, April 9, 2025) asserted:

We wish to accompany and give value to the children’s spontaneous approach to play and his relationship with others, to accompany them and encourage them. . . Everything we suggest remains a suggestion. There’s never anything imposed. . . We want the child to try to find his own way. By doing this, we wish to give value to what the child continuously wishes to do, what he feels he’s ready to do, and to encourage him to grow and be confident in his own choices.

The Value of Continuity

Another responsibility for Menici is to oversee and to promote the continuity of the early childhood program for children, aged 0–6. According to C. Menici (personal communication, April 7, 2025), children that move from the infant-toddler center to the preschool “will find something familiar, something in which they grow and evolve in their autonomous ability to interact.”

The Marino Marini educators believe in continuity for children and families, from the 3-year-old section to the 4-year-old section to the 5-year-old section. They like to observe the children, and they try to follow children’s interests and suggestions. Teachers frequently use books with the children, which often become the starting point for projects. This interest in books is shared among educators at all of the municipal schools and



centers. L. Capecchi (personal communication, April 8, 2025) told the story of a project, inspired by a book about memories, that focused on the memories of the children and of the parents. She offered, “There was a very special experience when they taped what the children had said about their memories, and small groups of parents listened to what the children said. They were very moved.”

In her reflection, Jessica Vailes (personal communication, June 2, 2025) of Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool in Atlanta, Georgia, asserted:

There is such a strong sense of collaboration between educators, families, and the municipality. This shared responsibility for the education and well-being of young children creates a sense of continuity and mutual respect that extends beyond the classroom. . . One of the most striking elements of this experience was observing how books are not only used as educational tools but are also central to long-term projects, serving as a catalyst for sustained learning and deep exploration. Books are not seen as stand-alone resources. Instead, they are deeply integrated into the curriculum as springboards for inquiry. Educators curate books intentionally, choosing literature that invites wonder, poses questions, and opens doors to meaningful dialogue.

The Role of Documentation in the Relationship with Families

C. Menici (personal communication, April 7, 2025) characterized working with the parents and families of the children as one of the most profound aspects of their work. She emphasized that teachers must “work very hard with the families to earn their trust. And the relationship of trust is fundamental. It’s reciprocal.” By documenting their experiences, the educators not only show families the work of children, they also build shared memories for children, teachers, and families, and this encourages families’ participation in the life of the school. For educators in Pistoia, it is important for children to see their families taking care of the space that they inhabit during the day and giving value to the place where they spend so much of their time. Carolyn P. Edwards et al. (2014) wrote:

[Pistoia] has put forward a strong concept of the responsibility of public administration to create ways and means to enhance family participation in educational services. Pistoia has pioneered a system of diverse services and resources to reach out across the generations and segments of the city and communicate children’s needs and a positive view of childhood. (p. 2)

About documentation and family participation at Nido Il Grillo, Ilaria Meggiorin (personal communication, April 10, 2025) shared:

Documentation, for us, is fundamental for every age group. When parents come with their children, we want them to see what’s happening, what we do together. We

care a lot, and it’s one of our main goals to have a good relationship with families. The families get involved, and documentation is an important tool to make the families interested and feel part of the project. Reaching out to the families and having them feel involved is our main goal. Documentation illustrates how important it is to show that family is always present here. You will see their photos on the wall. That helps the little ones, especially when they first come to the center, during the adaptation period.

Kristen Jordan (personal communication, May 22, 2025) of The Hudson School in Hoboken, New Jersey reflected:

For me, one of the most important takeaways from this visit was the way everyone talked about children being part of the community, current citizens, and how that informs the work that is done in the schools and centers. Building relationships and trust with families is crucial and helps to define so much of the work that happens in the centers. It was interesting to hear that one goal for documentation is to create shared memories among the children, and it is also an important tool for building relationships with the families and the broader community. In this way, others have an understanding of what is happening and why.

Raising Awareness of the Culture of Childhood

As a pedagogical coordinator, Menici is also responsible for actively promoting the city’s early childhood services and for raising awareness of the role Pistoia’s schools and centers play in children’s growth and development. C. Menici (personal communication, April 7, 2025) offered, “Within our community of Pistoia, by documenting our work with children, we are making known, first of all, the potential and the competence of young children.” Galardini (2004) confirmed the relationship between the children and the community:

We believe that working for the smallest citizens means working for something bigger, because through children many divisive problems regarding life together in a community can be faced, such as family roles, educational choices, the question of city space and time. (p. 18)

The 5-year-old children at Parco Drago Kindergarten studied the concept of traveling. They began by exploring their house and the neighborhood around it. How do they get from their home to school? Where is the school? What’s the area around it like? They walked around the area of the school. Then they discovered the city of Pistoia and identified different buildings, piazzas, theaters, and other things that the city has to offer. S. Lazzerini (personal communication, April 7, 2025) concluded, “The idea is that children are citizens. The children are part of this world.”

At AreaBambini Verde, when they have events inside the city, they try to include the participation of citizens. A. Gonfiantini (personal communication, April 8, 2025) declared:

A child is a citizen of his own city. He’s part of the city, so it’s good that he knows the city, what he can do there, what services there are. If you move around the city in the morning, usually you will meet at least one group of small children from our schools. For us, it’s part of our vision of the school. School is not only inside four walls. Children learn a lot by going out; it opens up the ways they learn. They learn to live differently.

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Support for the Work of Educators

Menici’s role as pedagogical coordinator also requires her to support the projects organized by the schools and centers. The school year begins with a meeting, where everyone discusses their goals and projects and how they can work together. She discussed the importance of dialogue between teachers, both daily and in monthly meetings, when they share, discuss, and organize projects. About the relationship between those who work in the schools and centers, C. Menici (personal communication, April 7, 2025) said:

There isn’t a sense of somebody on high deciding what projects people are going to do and telling the teachers to do it. These are things that we share, we come up with together. . . . And my role is very much one of support and enabling that to happen.

In addition to their time with children, teachers have 150 hours to participate in formazione (professional development), to meet with families, and to develop documentation. Of these 150 hours, the city of Pistoia requires educators to use 40 hours for formazione. Even those who do not work in city-run schools and centers participate.



Meggiorin and Camilla Comodo greet participants in outdoor context of Nido Il Grillo.



During the visiting educators’ final meeting with Menici, she described the meeting they will soon have with teachers from each school and center to discuss their thoughts on the professional development they have had this year. What were the strong points? What were the weak points? What is their feedback? With these questions in mind, Menici and Federica Taddei, the director of the Municipal Education and Training Service, will meet to discuss what they can do better and what they can address the next year. The training about continuity is mandatory for teachers of 3-year-olds and 5- to 6-year-olds, as are the trainings that concern inclusivity for children with special rights. Edwards and Gandini (2001) wrote about the culture of teacher development in Pistoia:

The professional culture of teacher development in Pistoia clearly contained room for frank discussion, shared decision making, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, individual and group risk taking, mistakes as well as successes, and problem solving that moved the system continually forward. (p. 197)

In her reflection, Krysti Adams (personal communication, May 2, 2025) of Giving Tree Learning Center in Indianapolis, Indiana shared:

Allowing ourselves to just be in this period of change itself without trying to immediately find a fix for every issue that arises, giving ourselves time to look at problems from different perspectives, and collaborating on solutions has the potential to make us a stronger team.

Stephanie Smith (personal communication, May 22, 2025) of Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool in Atlanta, Georgia reflected:

I left Pistoia energized and motivated to continue this very important work we are doing in early childhood education. Our study group agreed we are inspired by Pistoia’s programs, centers, preschools, and unique AreaBambini and to keep advocating for honoring the value of childhood and the importance of presuming competence.



Expressing gratitude to Menici at conclusion of final meeting

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Farewell lunch for participants and interpreters

SAVE THE DATE
April 13–16, 2026 will be our second Global Learning Journey to Pistoia. Visit NAREA website for more information: www.reggioalliance.org

Expressions of Appreciation

At the end of the final meeting with the pedagogical coordinator, the GLJ group thanked Menici for her generosity in sharing the work of the municipal early childhood education program in Pistoia and for her dedication to the rights of children. She offered thanks to Taddei, who was promoting their work in Sardinia. Appreciation was also expressed to interpreters Alisa Wood and Veronique Germain for helping the visiting educators understand and engage throughout the week.

Thanks were also extended to the group of GLJ educators—for their participation, their open-mindedness, and their positive attitudes. In Pistoia, with its varied educational spaces, the fabric of the landscape serves children by offering public spaces as vibrant extensions of the classroom. Rooted in a rich tradition of storytelling, collaborative learning, and shared history, the community embraces its role in the education of every child. Families, educators, and citizens come together to create relationships, as learning is woven through daily encounters, in collective memory, and with joyful participation in a variety of services.

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