Reflections

The 21st NAREA Summer Conference

BY: PATTY RANDALL, NAREA

B O U L D E R , C O L O R A D O

Integrating Theory and Practice in Learning

June 25–27, 2025



Boulder, Colorado



Preparing and Welcoming

As with any NAREA conference, a great deal of thoughtful and intentional work happens behind the scenes. In preparation, NAREA collaborates closely with the local host community and with Reggio Children to address everything from logistical planning to deeper pedagogical themes, including bringing the exhibition and atelier encounters to life. This work requires both a collaborative spirit to manage the details and a commitment to professional formation.

For the 2025 NAREA Summer Conference, we are fortunate to partner with an exceptional host community—Boulder Journey School and the University of Colorado Denver—that forms a working group of educators from across the community who come together to secure, install, plan, design, and conduct both the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* (*Mosaics*) exhibition and atelier.

The Boulder working group engages in a close study of the exhibition catalogue, grounding themselves in the ideas and research that shape the work long before the exhibition arrives. Their study is complemented by 2 days of in-person professional formation with educators from Reggio Emilia who arrive for the NAREA Summer Conference, further deepening a collective understanding of aesthetics, materials, and the hundred languages of children—specifically the languages of mark-making and graphics in daily contexts. Throughout, a commitment to honoring the concepts, values, and pedagogical integrity embedded within the exhibition and atelier experiences is key.







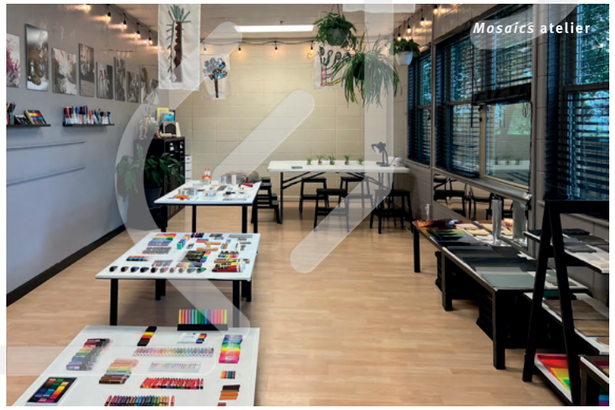


Preconference working group

The installation of the *Mosaics* exhibition and atelier inside Boulder Journey School suggests a reciprocity between the exhibition's contents and the surrounding daily life of the children, teachers, and families of the school. The exhibition atelier awaits the arrival of the conversations during the preconference working days and the conference participants, soon to arrive.

From the detailed formation extended to the Boulder working group, the 3-day NAREA Conference titled "Integrating Theory and Practice in Learning" welcomes 250 educators from across North America to eTown Hall in downtown Boulder—a community concert hall with a café that includes additional seating and livestream monitors for those who prefer a more intimate option for experiencing the presentations. In addition to presentations by Castagnetti and Tedeschi, afternoon school tours, conference ateliers, and the *Mosaics* exhibition and atelier encounters at Boulder Journey School round out the program.


Mosaics exhibition


Mosaics atelier


eTown Hall


Boulder Journey School


Participants arriving



Wednesday, June 25

8:15 **Check In** [with coffee and light snack]
eTown Lobby
1535 Spruce Street | Boulder, CO

9:00 **Welcome**
eTown Hall
Margie Cooper, NAREA standing chair

Land Acknowledgment
Liliana Flores Amara | Senior Instructor, School of Education & Human Development, University of Colorado Denver

Host Community Representatives
Alison Maher | Visionary Director, Boulder Journey School
Lori Ryan | Associate Teaching Professor and Program Lead, Early Childhood Education, University of Colorado Denver

The Right to a Future of Peace
Marina Castagnetti and Maddalena Tedeschi

Loris Malaguzzi and the Values of the Reggio Emilia Approach®
Marina Castagnetti and Maddalena Tedeschi

Mid-Morning Stretch

1:00 **Announcements and Lunch**
Bag lunches available in eTown Café
May eat in cafe area, Hall, or outside on the grounds or neighborhood

2:00 **The Image of Child and the Idea of Learning**
Marina Castagnetti and Maddalena Tedeschi

5:00 **End of Day**

Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material
Exhibition + Atelier
BOULDER JOURNEY SCHOOL | 2:00 – 5:00 THURSDAY
Exhibition Room 3 Atelier Studio
NAREA Book Shop eTown Lobby
8:15–5 WEDNESDAY & 8:15–2:30 THURSDAY



Thursday, June 26

8:15 **Morning Coffee** [with light snack]
eTown Lobby

9:00 **Welcome**
eTown Hall | A Story of NAREA

The Hundred Languages of Children and Adults in Daily Learning Contexts
Marina Castagnetti and Maddalena Tedeschi

Mid-Morning Stretch

1:00 **Announcements and Lunch**
Bag lunches available in eTown Café
Group 2 will be dismissed first. Group 1, please remain until group 2 has exited.

Group 2 *please see back of name tags*

1:40 **Load Buses**
Meet in front of eTown at passenger loading zone – departing for Boulder Journey School (BJS)
There will be 2 buses, please board either for an approximately 10 minute drive

2:00 **School Tour and Exhibition + Atelier Encounters**
Boulder Journey School • 1519 Yarmouth Ave | Boulder, CO
BJS faculty will welcome you as you begin your self-guided tour of the classrooms, common areas, outdoor learning spaces, meeting rooms, and the Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material Exhibition + Atelier.

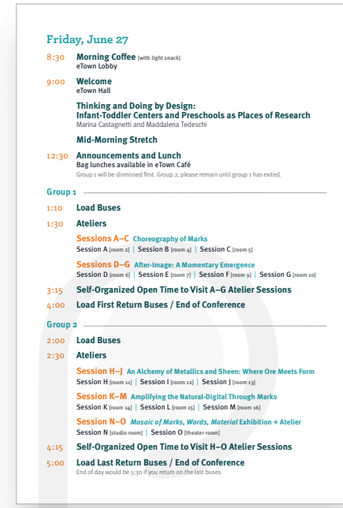
4:00 **Load First Return Buses / End of Day**
Meet at drop-off location – returning to eTown
It is not mandatory to return to eTown. We will convene again in the morning.

Group 1 *all details are the same as above, except for times*

2:30 **Load Buses**

3:00 **School Tour and Exhibition + Atelier Encounters**

5:00 **Load Last Return Buses / End of Day**
End of day would be 5:30 if you return on the last buses



Friday, June 27

8:30 **Morning Coffee** [with light snack]
eTown Lobby

9:00 **Welcome**
eTown Hall

Thinking and Doing by Design: Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools as Places of Research
Marina Castagnetti and Maddalena Tedeschi

Mid-Morning Stretch

12:30 **Announcements and Lunch**
Bag lunches available in eTown Café
Group 1 will be dismissed first. Group 2, please remain until group 1 has exited.

Group 1

1:10 **Load Buses**

1:30 **Ateliers**

Sessions A–C Choreography of Marks
Session A [room 2] | Session B [room 4] | Session C [room 5]

Sessions D–G Alter-Image: A Momentary Emergence
Session D [room 6] | Session E [room 7] | Session F [room 9] | Session G [room 10]

3:15 **Self-Organized Open Time to Visit A–G Atelier Sessions**

4:00 **Load First Return Buses / End of Conference**

Group 2

2:00 **Load Buses**

2:30 **Ateliers**

Session H–J An Alchemy of Metallics and Sheen: Where One Meets Form
Session H [room 11] | Session I [room 12] | Session J [room 13]

Session K–M Amplifying the Natural-Digital Through Marks
Session K [room 14] | Session L [room 15] | Session M [room 16]

Session N–O *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* Exhibition + Atelier
Session N [studio room] | Session O [theater room]

4:15 **Self-Organized Open Time to Visit H–O Atelier Sessions**

5:00 **Load Last Return Buses / End of Conference**
End of day would be 5:30 if you return on the last buses


Conference auditorium

Welcoming by Liliana Flores Amara, Andrea Sisbarro, and Lori Ryan





Land Acknowledgment

As the conference opens, Liliana Flores Amara (personal communication, June 25, 2025), senior instructor in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver, remembers and honors the ancestors of the local community in a land acknowledgment that pays respect to the legacy, resilience, and contributions of those who came before us. This act of remembrance affirms their enduring presence and the significance of their ancestral ties to the land. She shares:

> I invite you to consider your own connection to the land that you are currently on, as well as the lands of your ancestors. Take a moment to close your eyes and think about all the people who helped you be here in this moment right now. It could be significant others, caregivers nurturing your babies, those taking care of your pets, parents, grandparents, chosen family, teachers, mentors, especially our dear friends in Reggio who have joined the ancestors—all helping us to guide our future ancestors, our children. May our intentions for a better world for our children, now and in the future, reach the hearts of those who need it most.

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Following a Thread

We wanted to give ourselves a message—a very important message in this very important moment, during this 21st Summer Conference, organized by NAREA. We wanted to give ourselves a gift and reflect together for a few moments about the rights of children and that very first, essential, primary right that all children have: to live in peace. (M. Castagnetti, personal communication, June 25, 2025)

> **From the beginning of the conference, we sense the speakers grounding our time together in the essential—the importance of educators affirming the rights of all children.**

From the beginning of the conference, we sense the speakers grounding our time together in the essential—the importance of educators affirming the rights of all children. Castagnetti and Tedeschi use the metaphor of a large, tangled ball of threads to describe how, over the course of the conference, we gradually pull apart and unravel those threads together. Their intention—to continue weaving the threads of thinking and doing into a coherent ensemble—is anchored by one unifying concept that M. Castagnetti (personal communication, June 25, 2025) shares:

> The rights of children are born and die every day. The rights of children are born and die in people's thinking, in the images that we have around us, in the institutions that we have in our society and in the politics in the world around us. . . . Very often, children are not the first of our thoughts when we think about the culture and rights; they are the last. . . . It's important for us to affirm this right of all children to be considered as persons, subjects bearing rights, full citizens from their birth and authors of their own lives.

Reggio Emilia is—and has always been—a visionary city, with a cultured way of thinking and an active, engaged community. Its story includes passionate women and men shaped by inequality, war, and a deep desire to weave a new fabric of society and education. It is a city that values participation and involvement—of both children and adults. It is a city filled with many voices: children, educators, atelieristi, pedagogisti, and families—all protagonists of the experience. The speakers share that they, as well as the city, feel the responsibility to continually re-actualize the commitment to recognizing the rights of children in today's world.

By sharing the history of the Reggio Emilia Approach, they invite us to reflect upon the traces woven throughout—evidence we can gather, interpret, and carry into our own contexts.

Whether they share videos, still photographs of children's learning, educators' notes, or PowerPoint presentations documenting the research of children and adults, we see how Castagnetti and Tedeschi make the work of children and educators visible. They reveal the *confronto*—the coming together of minds and









ideas—and show the depth of children's involvement in their schools, along with the active participation of children, families, educators, and the wider community. M. Castagnetti (personal communication, June 25, 2025) recalls:

> Every day, the doors open in these infant-toddler centers and preschools, and every day this involvement and curiosity of many different biographies of people, children and adults together, all with an attitude of constantly researching the meanings of the world around us and renewing our thinking together, has led to what is known in the world as the Reggio Emilia Approach.

We feel privileged to encounter such exceptional documentation that is both historical and forward-looking, highlighting the ongoing nature of the construction of knowledge, culture, and history in the preschools, centers, and city.

In Reggio Emilia, educators continually reflect on environments that welcome multiple encounters at once, affording children the opportunity to experience spaces in their own ways. This practice reflects their strong image of children, education, and knowledge building. The presentations offer examples that confirm how children perceive differences around them and how they inhabit and transform spaces through their thinking and relationships. Above all, the environments of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio are relational spaces. Over time, generations of teachers in Reggio deepen this sensitivity. Their research shows that it is often the immaterial aspects of environment and architecture that most influence the quality of relationships that children form within a space. Children's multisensory and interdisciplinary ways of interacting with the world remain central factors that educators consider as they design for children's learning. M. Castagnetti (personal communication, June 26, 2025) shares:

> When we're thinking about our spaces in the infant-toddler centers and preschools, very often the softer qualities of architecture, the smells, the perfumes, the colors, the shades, the lights, the different kinds of lights, and the different kinds of sounds and acoustics are all qualities that we take into account.

From this kind of thinking, the atelier is born and continues to evolve. Today, all spaces of a center or school are considered spaces for learning. Hallways, bathrooms, stairwells, and doors hold the same possibilities as an elaborated atelier if given their due. It is in defining and designing this *due* that the idea of participation comes into play. The children, teachers, families, spaces, materials, immaterial elements, and relationships all participate in the design and *cura*—or care—for the spaces around them and the things contained within them. It is about maintaining a gaze on the connections between people and things, which in turn fosters a sense of well-being.

Tedeschi explains that the role of the pedagogista is to encourage educators to delve into the context of the contemporary world, to look to culture and to connect it with theory. She urges educators to also seek out scientists within their own communities, as well as those around the world, whose work can inspire ideas for study. In an article entitled "The Documentation and Educational Research Center of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia, Municipality of Reggio Emilia,"



Filippini and Castagnetti (2006) state:

> We believe that it is essential to be aware that yours is one of the many points of view about education and, in order to be able to compare ideas, you have to know what others think. If you really believe in dialogue and the comparison of ideas, if you believe that listening is the basic structure of our learning, then you have the responsibility to listen to the perspective of others. This is necessary in order to have a dialogue with others, to widen your possibilities, to enrich yourself, and to better discover and understand your own identity. The differences may help you to better understand your own point of view. (p. 5)

This commitment to seeking diverse perspectives reflects a foundational belief within the Reggio Emilia Approach: meaningful education is rooted in dialogue, reflection, and openness to the ideas of others. Listening to multiple voices—not only within one's immediate context but also across disciplines and cultures—broadens the scope of educational inquiry and deepens understanding.

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This inclusive mindset extends to how Reggio educators draw inspiration from a wide range of thinkers beyond the field of education. From Italian architect Bruno Zevi (1948), who describes spaces as dynamic and living, to pioneer neuroscientist Harry Francis Mulgrave (2013), who declares that we are all embodied beings that interact with environments and cultures, numerous noteworthy individuals serve as resources and references for educators' thinking and work with children and families. M. Tedeschi (personal communication, June 26, 2025) shares examples of children's and teachers' research influenced by these pioneers and offers them as "germs of ideas" for educators to intentionally reflect on in their own spaces and contexts.

In the connection with the themes of this conference, Castagnetti and Tedeschi offer insights that help us think about mark-making and drawing so we can build on our experiences and deepen our research with graphic languages. They recognize Rhoda Kellogg's (1969) extensive research on children's drawing which, when combined with the contemporary research within the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* exhibition and atelier, overturns traditional theory that children's marks before age 3 have no meaning. Drawing, they emphasize, belongs to every human and has been practiced for thousands of years. It is a highly accessible, transversal, and egalitarian language. Through images of children's drawings, we follow their learning processes of representing themselves. We see the pleasure in gestures, storytelling, self-expression, repetition, learning, and research.

Everyday experiences in the Reggio preschools, such as one child's passion for an ensemble of lines and another's creation of a leaf, reveal the potential that arises when one creates a mental construct and then transfers it—onto paper in these cases. In these moments, children encounter concepts such as dimension, spatial orientation, and creation. M. Tedeschi (personal communication, June 27, 2025) shares the importance of analyzing these encounters, stating:





> I think we have to investigate, more and better, this idea of the product that is a theory—a drawing very often is a theory. We have to investigate the relationship between the final theory in the product and the relationship of how it is constructed—evaluating the children but also evaluating ourselves and our capacity for offering children opportunities for making representations of their theories in drawings. . . . We're still working with the same trajectory of looking at the ways in which the language of drawing is interwoven and works together with the language of words, with narrative storytelling, and how through complex argumentation, the children tell us in words some of their thoughts as they're drawing.

The concept of *confronto*—the act of putting two or more heads together to think, share ideas, question, compare, exchange, and be in dialogue—is discussed. We are asked why this process might be so important. As we reflect for a few moments, Tedeschi affirms that the goal is to create favorable conditions that encourage children to exchange ideas, to lend and borrow knowledge. It is in these moments that children's thinking sharpens and refines, encouraging them to move forward with greater clarity. With that clarity comes excitement and pleasure, sparked by the materials, spaces, and tools they encounter. We are reminded once again of the pleasures of drawing—pleasure that nurtures well-being, strengthens relationships, and supports learning. M. Tedeschi (personal communication, June 27, 2025) explains:

> People ask us, where do these ideas start? Where do they come from? What's the genesis? What's the birth of this? Sometimes it's in the air around you. You can choose, as a group of people, to work with it and think of it. How can this be an idea that might be interesting to work with in this very different context with the children in the schools. What can we take from it?

Reggio Emilia's strong ethical commitment to creating educational environments that are amicable, transparent, and deeply engaged with the community is visible in each presentation. Emphasizing the importance of opening the doors of schools and centers, actively reaching out to the community, and making educational work visible and accessible to the public, Tedeschi describes the city as a rich container of ideas, stimuli, and thought-provoking experiences—resources that educators can draw upon and explore collaboratively. Equipping oneself as an educator within the culture of the city and contextualizing educational processes within it provides opportunities that Reggio educators intentionally embrace. Whether it is a research project recalling a neighborhood school that attaches children's poetry to surrounding trees, bushes, and park benches for elders to read; a much larger research initiative that includes the giant mural of the perfume girl and traces of children's drawings visible in shops, restaurants, and hospitals; or the celebration of Loris Malaguzzi's birthday with the "Night of Stories," all of these examples illustrate the investments Reggio Emilia makes in the rights of children by staying connected through thinking together, building relationships, and engaging in dialogue. M. Tedeschi (personal communication, June 27, 2025) points out:

> What you can see is the common thread running through all. This is the point of view, different points of view, different schools, different languages, but there's this constant relationship with the city and the very, very different possibilities that it offers.

These examples not only illustrate how Reggio Emilia integrates learning into the life of the city but also reflect a deeper educational philosophy—one that views research as an ongoing, relational process grounded in curiosity and cultural context. In NAREA's periodical *Innovations*, Tedeschi (2022) offers insight into Reggio educators' ideas about research. She states:

> Research, in our view, is characterized by certain other distinctive features: the inclination towards curiosity, the predilection for relationships, and the ability to inhabit the culture and to feel the vibrations of the context in order to always be close to the contemporary world. The attitude of research is nourished by transversal and interdisciplinary references, seeking to delineate the particular mindset that has always sustained our experience, believing that research must be kaleidoscopic; that is, it requires many concurrent and connected perspectives. (p. 5)

This reflection in *Innovations* reinforces the perspective we hear throughout the conference—framing research not as a fixed method but as a living, interdisciplinary orientation, one that is deeply attuned to place, time, and the voices within it. Tedeschi's words, like the community research projects she describes, remind us that education is most powerful when it is participatory, contextual, and constantly evolving.

We draw inspiration from the generosity and vision of those in Reggio Emilia. Their commitment to a multifaceted, relational view of learning, thinking, and doing challenges us to remain open, curious, and deeply connected to the communities we serve. Through this shared lens of research, connection, and dialogue, we feel empowered to reimagine what is possible in our own educational contexts. M. Castagnetti (personal communication, June 25, 2025) reminds us on the first day of the conference:

> As educators with daily lives with children, we would like to make a commitment to the life of the present and the life of the future of children, of children's right to beauty, to play, to relations, and to knowledge. All of us can strengthen our respect towards others and towards ourselves. We aspire to living together, respecting others, respecting ourselves with a critical spirit in solidarity with each other, in liberty and freedom, and in peace.

With Appreciation

We express our deep appreciation and respect for Marina Castagnetti, Maddalena Tedeschi, Jane McCall, and the citizens of Reggio Emilia. Their commitment, insight, and generosity inspire us to look to the future with optimism. Through their meaningful contributions to our thinking, we feel more confident and better prepared to do just that.

Conference Participant Highlights

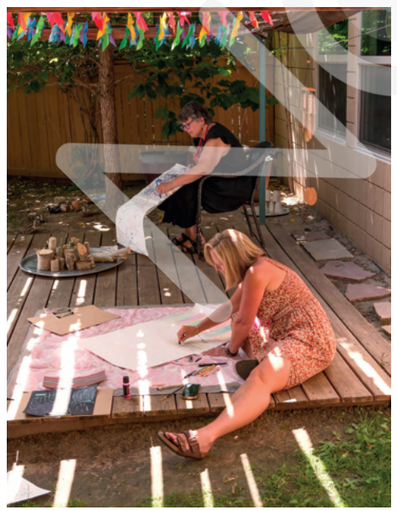








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Conference Participant Comments

"I previously believed I had a solid understanding of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, but attending this conference revealed how much more there is to learn. Hearing firsthand about the rich history and the central focus on the rights of children offered a new and meaningful perspective. It deepened my appreciation for the approach and has given me much to reflect on as I continue teaching this philosophy to college students and preparing them to thoughtfully implement it in their own practice."

– HEIDI GONZALEZ



"I enjoyed being part of the conference and seeing the relationships that the presenters had with each other. Their love of the work they do was contagious. The videos were very helpful to be able to visualize what they were trying to communicate."

– ROSEMARY BELL



"I left the conference feeling greatly inspired to bring Reggio Emilia into all parts of my school's programs. Much of the content was review (the history of Reggio), but it was told from a different lens. The quotes were particularly powerful."

– KATE SHIRK



"I certainly learned a lot from Marina and Maddalena. I like their general message of respect for children, for others, and for ourselves as we try to put our heads together (confronto) in understanding the hundred languages. I am very grateful to them for sharing their knowledge of and experience with the Reggio Emilia Approach."

– MELANEY BALBA



The pleasure of learning together

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Remembering and Honoring

The North American early childhood community says goodbye to a remarkable woman who helped bring the Reggio Emilia Approach to life—Lella Gandini. Her passing leaves a profound impact on our North American community, and her legacy invites us to carry forward a vision for the possibilities of bettering the lives of young children through Reggio-inspired theory and practice.

NAREA benefitted from Lella's years as consultant, board member, associate editor and associate editor emeritus of *Innovations*. During the summer conference, the below memento was shared with participants to remember and honor her. Her many contributions are the subject of a 2023 article in *Innovations*, available to read on the NAREA website, entitled "Dissemination: Planting Seeds."

REMEMBERING & HONORING **LELLA GANDINI**

1934–2025

With unbounded gratitude for her life, we remember and honor Lella Gandini. She worked tirelessly in the United States, Canada, and beyond to engage the minds of early childhood educators. Her singular contributions introduced, inspired, and challenged our views of what might be possible for children, families, teachers, and communities. Her early publications on the approach, fostered by her close relationship with Loris Malaguzzi and his colleagues, opened a path of study for many in the English-speaking world. Lella is remembered by all who knew her for her kindness, warmth, and intelligence.

In her honor and in celebration for all she shared, we redouble our efforts for welcoming, esteeming, and encouraging.

The message that comes from the schools for young children of Reggio Emilia is, therefore, a message of hope for the future.

The Reggio Emilia Approach: A Message of Hope for the Future, *Rechild*, 1, p. 6



Images featuring Lella Gandini | Including Amelia Gambetti, Jerome Bruner, and Lester Little

From its beginning in 1992, she served on the editorial board of *Innovations*, later becoming associate editor and then associate editor emeritus. She served on the board of NAREA from 2011 until her passing.