Reflections

The 16th NAREA Winter Conference

Bordercrossings Exhibition and Atelier Preconference Working Group

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HAMILTON, ONTARIO

Children and Adults Researching in the Daily Life

March 20-22, 2025



The first North American *Bordercrossings* atelier | Atlanta, 2023

Introduction

The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) endeavors to bring professional learning opportunities to communities throughout Canada and the United States. Although we offer a variety of opportunities, multiple annual conferences are a highlight for many.

One of our core beliefs is that North American educators have a right to encounter the history, philosophy, experience, and research of the children and adults of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia through first-person accounts by those who are part of that education project. Recognizing that many professionals in our early childhood sector will not have the means, financial or otherwise, to travel to Reggio Emilia, NAREA collaborates to bring representatives to as many North American communities as possible. Another core belief is that building one's knowledge in this approach is supported by access to multiple points of view through a variety of educators over time—in person and through publications.

In activating these beliefs, NAREA's 43 conferences have welcomed 44 educators from Reggio Emilia to 26 communities across 2 decades. More than 12,000 early childhood professionals have participated, thanks to our collaboration with Reggio Children and local hosts that make them possible.

In addition to representatives from Reggio Emilia, NAREA conferences often include the presence of a travelling exhibition of children's and adults' research. The two current travelling exhibitions—*Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* (*Mosaics*) and *Bordercrossings: Encounters with Living Things/Digital Landscapes* (*Bordercrossings*)—have a host-designed atelier complementing the research featured in each exhibition. Those who bring an exhibition and conference to their community create an opportunity to deeply engage with the research contents and concepts offered by the children and adults of Reggio Emilia.

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To support this engagement, NAREA and Reggio Children extend support throughout the planning period. Conference calls, documents, and webinars are rich with information to lend a host; however, the presence of conference speakers that arrive days before the conference begins is a unique contribution. The speakers engage with the host working group by discussing, analyzing, and reimagining possibilities for their atelier by reflecting on the exhibition themes and research. This deepening opportunity supports the host working group in their roles as conductors inside the atelier during their hosting period and beyond. These preconference days are complimentary for the host, supported by funding from NAREA.

A Working Group Meets the *Bordercrossings* Exhibition

NAREA's 2025 winter conference, with the co-presence of the *Bordercrossings* exhibition and atelier, takes place in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. The conference is hosted by Affiliated Services for Children & Youth (ASCY)—a nonprofit agency funded by The City of Hamilton Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the County of Haldimand Norfolk. The Hamilton preconference working group includes ASCY staff; Reggio-inspired educators from the wider community; NAREA representatives; working group participants from previous host communities in Greenville, South Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia; and Reggio Emilia representatives Moira Nicolosi, pedagogista, Marco Spaggiari, artist and atelierista, and Jane McCall, interpreter. The group convenes for two days to both deepen their perspectives on the contents and concepts of the exhibition and to engage in the development of the accompanying atelier.


Preconference working group

On this occasion, the working group gathers at The Italian Cultural Center, the venue for the exhibition and atelier. The *Bordercrossings* exhibition is beautifully installed in one of the large classrooms at the venue. The perimeter walls are piped and draped with black fabric, which both camouflages the classroom identity and visually emphasizes the panels of the exhibition.

Meeting the exhibition as a working group allows for heightened understanding of the research undertaken by the children and adults of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. Attending to the why and how of the research included in the exhibition underscores dispositions, collaborative working styles, and openness to uncertainty that has been cultivated over decades of effort and forward motion within the Reggio Emilia collective of professionals.

Through an introduction by Nicolosi, the group learns that the research journeys represented through the banners of the exhibition represent three years of evolved work among five infant-toddler centers and ten preschools within the public early childhood system. To better understand the origin of this particular research topic, it is useful to consider the ongoing participation and dialogue of Reggio Emilia's pedagogical coordinating group within the municipal system.


Working group interpreting exhibition banners


Nicolosi introduces the exhibition


***Bordercrossings* exhibition**
Hamilton, Ontario

Pedagogical Coordination in Reggio Emilia

Gunilla Dahlberg writes that "to create change, Malaguzzi from the start constructed an intelligent organisation by building into the schools different supportive structures, previously unknown in education, for example the roles of 'pedagogista,' and 'atelierista'" (Dahlberg, in Cagliari et al., 2016, p. x).

However, as generative as Malaguzzi's introduction of new roles is the continual embrace of a collegial and collective style for all the roles within Reggio Emilia's system of infant-toddler centers and preschools. Tedeschi (2024) comments that, "the trait of working in a dimension of collegiality and a plurality of viewpoints is, we believe, a fundamental condition for inhabiting the complexities of education (p. 309). She underscores that a dialogic mindset "does not come about only through frequenting a collective context, but by making this condition structural in our thinking" (Tedeschi, 2024, p. 309).

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Building an understanding of the style pedagogistas construct within the pedagogical coordinating group is paramount for North Americans when searching for insight to frequent wonderings, namely: How can I craft generative research questions to stimulate children's research? While North American early childhood educators *do* value the intelligence, competence, and potential of young children, we organize ourselves more typically in stand-alone centers and schools where even if a pedagogista is included, she, too, often works alone. The dialogic mindset and the structural organization in Reggio Emilia resists leaving anyone in isolation. Instead,

> within each center and school, the educators and staff work as a collective to provide high-quality services. To accomplish this, they depend on their assigned *pedagogista* and the rest of the coordinating team for support in making choices and decisions and interacting with families and the public. (Cagliari et al., 2012, p. 136)

This is not to suggest that teachers are passively waiting for direction from the pedagogista connected with their infant-toddler center or preschool, rather, it is to suggest that the presence and ongoing cultivation of a collective style, a style that brings together different perspectives and points of view, supports more vibrant, generative thinking and contributes to the sense of "*reciprocal formazione*" (formation) and "*collective care*" (Giamminuti, 2024, p. 6).

Beyond the ongoing relationship within the centers and schools, the pedagogical coordinating group connects with all aspects of the city's educational system, which include "other social, health, cultural, and school educational structures" (Cagliari, 2024, p. 47). In ever widening theaters, the pedagogical coordinating group acts as a "cultural and pedagogical link between many aspects of the educational project at the local, national and international levels" (Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers—Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, p. 16).

The various circles of participation by the pedagogical coordinating group positions them to continually consider contemporary realities by discussing, debating, and choosing relevant research topics to propose to the collective of infant-toddler centers and preschools. Spending precious time together to construct shared insight and perspective is perhaps an attitude inherited from the ways of Loris Malaguzzi who, in an address to the Assembly of School Management Committees in 1981, said,

> we need to understand more, we need to exchange points of view more, we need to search more. . . . We need to read more, read the meaning of life more closely, and shifts that are taking place in individual subjectivities and the great objectivity of things: large things, large changes, large questions, and large worries that accompany our reflections and attempts at reasoning in these times. (Malaguzzi, 2021, pp. 15-16)

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A Tension Toward Research

So then, we begin by hearing how *this* research between nature and digital emerged. M. Nicolosi (personal communication, March 18, 2025) shares:

> There was a time when we saw that digital technology was continuing to become more and more pervasive in everybody's daily lives, including in the children's daily lives. So, when you see that something has become very pervasive, that something is diffused in people's everyday lives, we feel that there is a responsibility on the part of schools to process that culturally, to make an elaboration of that phenomenon culturally, and construct that elaboration together. That is to say, we don't want to be passive, we don't want to be passively subjected to a cultural phenomenon; we want to take it in our hands, try and make sense of it, and have a sort of critiquing eye looking at it. So, we don't just want to be passively subjected to things, but to actually work with them and try to put together our cultural response.

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By defining a shared research focus for the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, multiple pathways, points of view, and insights are collectively activated. It is observable to the reader of the exhibition, or the exhibition catalogue, that such shared research elicits its rich visibility for the unique directions and contributions of many children and adults, which is coherent with a strong sensibility for reciprocal *formazione*.

However, it is important to note that research does not emerge *only* from the pedagogical coordinating group. Topics also emerge in the day-to-day life: from children's interests, from adults' interests, from events or situations that come along by chance. For example, in *The Fountains*, Loris Malaguzzi (1995) recounts the story of a beginning in this way:

> It is during the class assembly that the idea of "what to do" begins to take shape. What this idea will turn out to be, if and when the children do decide on it, will only be known after a hundred tosses and rebounds. Sometimes the idea is not satisfactory or does not gain consensus. But not to worry. . . .
>
> In this project, the initial idea was to create a freshwater lake for the thirsty birds that inhabit the school grounds.
>
> If the birds are thirsty, then they must also be hungry. And if they're hungry and thirsty, then perhaps they are tired, too. New ideas now emerge and are added to the original ones. Suggestions are made for houses and nests in the trees, swings for baby birds to play on, elevators for the elderly ones. Then ferris wheels and rides with music. And then—everyone laughs—water skiing for the birds, providing them with tiny slats of wood for skis. Then come the fountains, which have to be big and real, and spray the water up really high. (pp. 10-12)

Within the *Bordercrossings* exhibition, however, the research topic does emerge from the pedagogical coordinating group, which then extends out to 15 infant-toddler centers and preschools. There is not only time to think together before taking up the research with children, but a responsibility to do so—collectively. Adults generate questions through shared perspective and wondering. For example, these are some of the questions created in the prefiguring period as described when the exhibition was first on display in the Loris Malaguzzi International Center in February 2016.

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- What does real life investigation mean?
- What is nature for us?
- What is nature for the children?
- Where and how do we encounter nature in school?
- What questions, learning, and theories stem from this encounter?
- In encounters with real life investigation, what relationship with technologies?
- How might we amplify our imagining?
- Are certain characteristics essential to be able to define an environment as digital?
- How much does co-operation between children change in a digital environment and in what way?
- How, and in what ways can the language of computer programming enter into everyday life in preschools without being forced?
- In the digital environments we make available to children in school, do they bring all their intelligences and their languages into play?

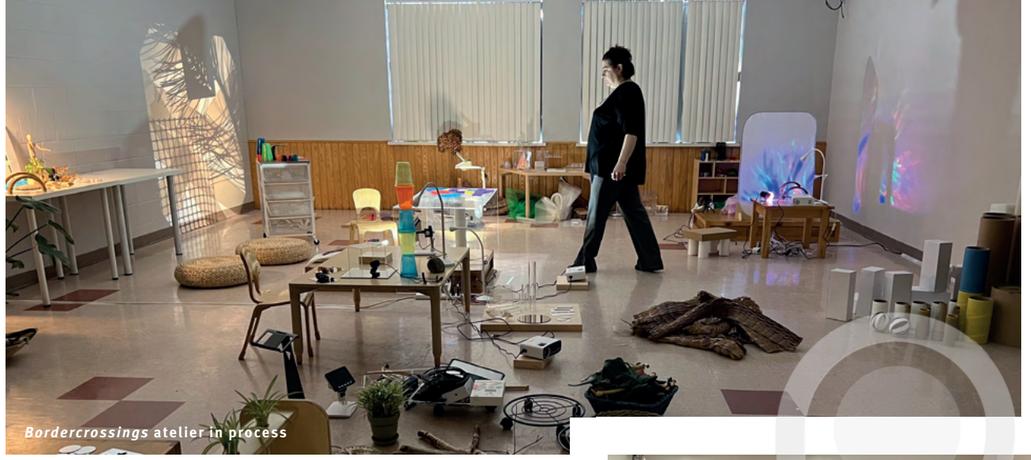
Taking time to explore the contents of this exhibition helps us move closer to the children's and adults' processes, which in turn stimulates our thinking in relation to the possibilities for designing an atelier.

An Atelier in the Local Community

To create contexts for exploration and learning within a space designated for an atelier takes perspective and patience, but more important, familiarity with the aims and possibilities offered by the research, the space, and the available materials. Tables, platforms, shelving, web cams, digital microscopes, tablets, computers, projectors, objects from nature, fabrics, objects that beckon curiosity, extension cords, tools, and inspiration were gathered in advance by the host community but awaited definition and intention.

As shared in the catalogue for the exhibition, the task of our working group is to consider the atelier for its potential research.

> A learning environment is not simply a container or background: organising the spaces of a school means organising a metaphor for knowledge, giving centrality to learners. . . . Therefore we think of designing contexts where children can experiment with increasingly sophisticated research structures, ask questions, formulate hypotheses, find forms of experimentation for those hypotheses, and construct theories as provisional explanations for the phenomena and things around them. (Bonilauri & Tedeschi, 2019, p. 14).



Bordercrossings atelier in process

It is reasonable to accept that an atelier space designed for adult experimentation must also strive to make similar considerations. Spaggiari and Nicolosi offer their familiarity and experience to support the working group by initially shaping the materials and instruments on hand into five distinct workstations. Each station is designed to support different possibilities of exploration by adults who will encounter the atelier during its presence in Hamilton. However, the workstations are left incomplete to include the participation of the working group. The contexts are not random but instead connect with the research focus of the exhibition. Like the banners and working notebooks, the atelier *is* the exhibition. The exhibition catalogue declares that weaving

> the reading and viewing of an exhibition with spaces dedicated to exploration, promotes a 'strategy of understanding' which, as well as being in tune with that of the children—who never separate thought from action—is part of our way of communicating, and supporting new and different forms of comprehension, reflection and interpretation. (Vecchi et al., 2019, p. 103)

The working group, separated into five smaller groups, meets the first physical draft of the designed contexts within the atelier. Each small group is accompanied by a working grid, which includes a thumbnail photo of each of the five stations and a column below each thumbnail to record considerations for the possibilities the tools and materials offer, keeping also in mind phenomena that can be investigated.

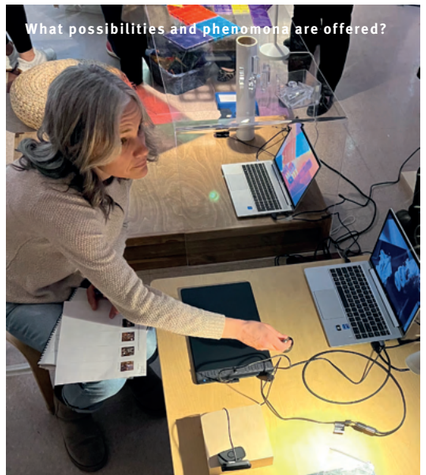
As each small group rotates from area to area generating lists of words in response to the prompt, the conversations are lively, full of interpretations and negotiated meaning. The day ends with each group having generated a first draft of a working grid containing their shared thinking on the possibilities for exploration offered by each workstation.



Bordercrossings atelier in process



Working group meets atelier first draft



What possibilities and phenomona are offered?



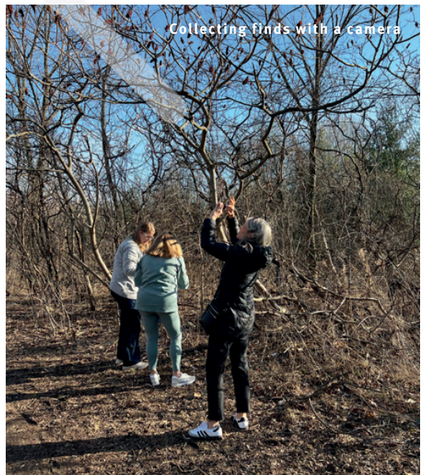
Working group at Red Hill Valley Trail



Jane McCall, Marco Spaggiari, Moira Nicolosi



Searching for nature finds



Collecting finds with a camera

The group reconvenes for a second day at Red Hill Valley Trail to collect items from nature that might be added to the workstations explored the day before. Spaggiari reconnects the group's thinking to the theme of the exhibition and offers two suggestions for our collections. One is to gather digital photographs with our phones, and one is to gather physical finds without removing them from living vegetation.

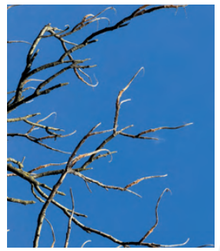
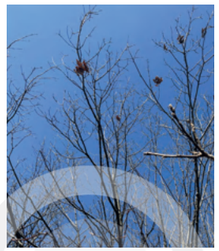
Guiding both collections are noticing different phases of life, passages of time, colors, textures, tracks produced by a living being, parts of a whole. The group is encouraged to observe with careful attention—not simply to see a tree and take a photo but to *look* at the tree and "try to consider its parts, from the roots to the trunk to the branches to the twigs to the buds coming out" (M. Spaggiari, personal communication, March 19, 2025). Before the group disperses into the woods, another mission is added: "We're going to be thinking about finds for studying in those areas you saw yesterday but we're also thinking about whole environments, so we're also looking at quite large things that could have an impact in that whole space" (M. Spaggiari, March 19, personal communication, 2025).

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The park is bountiful, offering many, different objects from nature to photograph or gather. As searchers conclude, making their way out of the woods, one magnificent find was admired by all—a large jumble of branches intertwined, seemingly the skeleton of a mysterious shrub or a tangle of branches that rounded themselves into a sphere.

Branches and buds seeking the sun



The working group returns to the exhibition and atelier, invigorated. Bags of found items, photos on phones, and comments fill the room. Remarks like these bounce around:

What a beautiful day for this time of year!
Did you see what they found?
Wow, where did you find that?
Oh, we collected some of those, too!
That is so cool!

Being outside, searching with purpose, moves our thinking, strengthens the body/mind connection for the themes of the atelier, and gives new food for thought in further elaborating the workstations.

Being outside, searching with purpose, moves our thinking, strengthens the body/mind connection for the themes of the atelier, and gives new food for thought in further elaborating the workstations. To re-enter the flow of the previous day's experiences, we take time for each of the five small groups to share with the whole group the words they generated the day before when filling in the grid. M. Spaggiari (personal communication, March 19, 2025) highlights that this strategy is used often in the work of children and adults in the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools by stating:

> This is what we would call in Reggio Emilia a re-cognition, where we're all sitting together in the large group and the smaller groups are telling the large group what they did and we're kind of forming shared imaginaries. So, your imaginary is what is inside your imagination. Everyone has an imagination, but we all have different imaginaries inside.


The find of finds!

The many words offered by each small group generates a nuanced discussion about *languages* as expressed and interpreted within Reggio Emilia's experience. Asked to consider which languages are present in a particular workstation and what could be done with those languages yields awareness not only for different points of view within the working group but for one's own knotted thought. Such a discussion sustains curiosity and mental gymnastics more than, for example, a handout of a predetermined list, already sorted by someone else's effort. The discussion feeds our actions as we return to the workstations to embellish and enrich each one with natural materials collected from the park. Each group elaborates one workstation, making adjustments that integrate and stimulate further possibilities for the adults who will visit the atelier during the conference and beyond.

Our field's collective search for understanding ways to think about learning contexts for young children is the subject of decades of research by developmental psychologists, neuroscientists, pedagogists and others. For nearly a half century, for example, American educators have benefitted from Vygotsky's (1978, 1987) pioneering Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, which posits that knowledge is collaboratively constructed during social interaction and internalized by making sense of it within one's cultural context. His work supports our understanding of processes of internalization in human thought and understanding going so far as to state "All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)." Our active experience as a working group brought such perspective to life through the experiences that we lived together, just as the style of work in Reggio Emilia brings them to life inside the infant-toddler centers and preschools daily.

If we are to synthesize the working group experience in a single question, it might be: How do we curate the environment so that it asks questions and invites different perspectives and possibilities around a subject of research? As the working group comes to its temporal finish, the conference days that follow offer opportunity to continue our encounters with the themes, contexts, and examples Nicolosi and Spaggiari have prepared.

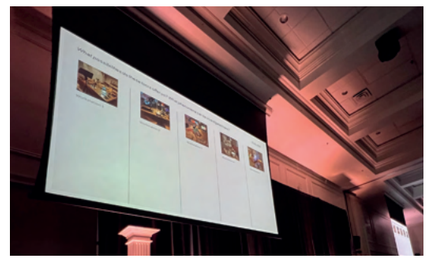
How do we curate the environment so that it asks questions and invites different perspectives and possibilities around a subject of research?

The Winter Conference Begins

The very next day, the working group blends with 240 enthusiastic conference participants. Many are early in their careers and beginning to educate themselves about Reggio Emilia's philosophy and experiences. Nicolosi and Spaggiari offer a rich program over 3 days highlighting the interconnected approach of children and adults engaged in mutual research in the everyday life of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, while touching on themes connected to the exhibition and atelier.

In the conference presentation titled *The 100 Languages and the Culture of the Atelier*, the presenters weave in a restitution of the working group's preconference experience, which further defines the intentions of the presence of the exhibition and atelier. M. Spaggiari (personal communication, March 20, 2025) remarks that

> when an atelier and exhibition travel around from one place to another, if it comes from Reggio Emilia, the intention is not to export something culturally. . . . It's not a cultural export. No, it's a dialogue. It's a seed. It will put its roots down in that space and turn into something new, into something different. It's a process making an atelier of the place, with the people of the place. It's a democratic process based on negotiation . . . you become more aware of the thoughts that other people are having, and they have the opportunity for their thought to come out and encounter yours. For us this is a way of generating educational contexts.


Giving visibility to the efforts of the preconference working group





This way of thinking about educational contexts, quite distant from approaches that operate from a mistaken belief that children (and adults) only learn from being taught, is what gives rise to the beautiful stories of imagination, inventiveness, learning, and the social construction of life that intrigue us when we meet the experiences and philosophies of Reggio Emilia. May we all keep striving in our collective pursuit to gain perspective from the generosity of a city that puts ideas into actions, grounded in the notion that children and adults bear rights.

May we all keep striving in our collective pursuit to gain perspective from the generosity of a city that puts ideas into actions, grounded in the notion that children and adults bear rights.

Thank you to our host, ASCY, who made this experience possible for the Hamilton, Ontario community and beyond. Thank you to those who participated in the working group and conference. Thank you for the depth and breadth generously shared by Moira Nicolosi, Marco Spaggiari, through the remarkable Jane McCall, interpreter. For information on hosting the *Bordercrossings* exhibition and atelier, please contact narea@reggioalliance.org.



Moira Nicolosi, Marco Spaggiari, Jane McCall



Conference participants encounter the *Bordercrossings* atelier



Conference participants encounter the *Bordercrossings* exhibition

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Contextualizing the Exhibition and Its Catalogue

If one has not encountered this exhibition and atelier, these introductory passages situate and give context to the research within the exhibition. For more insight into the details of the research within the exhibition, the catalogue by the same name is an invaluable resource and is available through NAREA.



Metaphors, Utopias, and Imaginings

Like Alice with Rabbits, March Hares, Gryphons, Lobsters dancing the Quadrille, Mock Turtles and Mad Hatters, children here venture into the unforeseen and the world's plurality, and deal with its changing and surprising complexities, whether in encounters with living things, or the creation of digital landscapes and the discovery of unexpected phenomena.

The aim of the exhibition is to imagine a digital poetic, to research into how new media involve children and adults, the ways they create meaning, how they modify communication and the exchange of knowledge to produce metaphors, utopias, and imaginings for possible futures.

Encounters with Living Things

The relation between children and the world, between children and nature, is explored in vital ways producing unexpected visibilities, original theories, and previously unseen contexts that welcome the seemingly somewhat paradoxical word pare of digital nature.

The freer and more vital knowledge of nature is interwoven with the codified knowledge in schools, enriching the meaning of educational experience, and promoting thinking that is structurally ecological, thinking of nature as thinking of self.

Digital Landscapes

Technology enters the everyday, not dominating, not replacing, but mixing with other languages. It enters as an environment, not strictly instrumental and functional, but rather as the connector of multidisciplinary learning and explorations, supporting children's ways of knowing, inaugurating new environments of socialization and sharing, in which each child's "mental" world finds a possible representation.

In the digital environments we are exploring as with all scuola and nido educational contexts, children act as authors and constructors of their own learning and of their own individual and collective imaginations, eliminating an idea of centra/centralizing and anesthetic technology and making another one visible, a generative, amplifying technology in dialogue with the perfume of moss and the growth of life.

The digital has the potential to transform teaching-learning contexts, offering children's thoughts and theories new modes of representation, proposing a dimension of culture capable of merging the abstract with the artisanal.

Children simultaneously act on plural levels of representation in these digital contexts, exercising for a form of hybrid, integrated, flexible thinking.

What we aspire to is a connected and synthetic [from synthesis] form of intelligence, not narrowly discipline-based, but capable of being constructed in the research into meanings, on the borderlines between different languages.

