Reflections

The 17th NAREA Winter Conference

BY: NAREA STAFF

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Creativity as a Collective Right: Learning in Relationship and Context

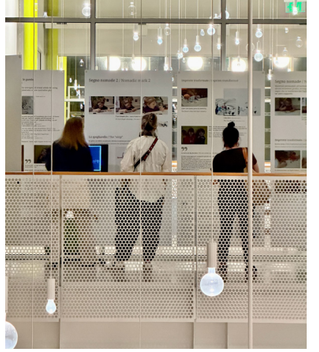
March 5–7, 2026





Valentina Violi, Jane McCall, and Filippo Chieli











Mosaics exhibition + atelier

Community

More than six years ago, Louisiana Children's Museum in New Orleans brought to NAREA a bold and hopeful idea to bring the *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* Exhibition + Atelier (*Mosaics*), alongside the NAREA conference, to their city. Although NAREA conferences have been held in 28 North American communities since 2005, this is a new connection. From the start, our collaborative conversations center on a shared purpose of investing professional learning resources from Reggio Emilia with the community.

In the years that follow, New Orleans faces profound trials that test, but do not diminish, the spirit of its community. The disruptions of COVID-19, the devastation of storms such as Hurricane Ida, and persistent economic inequities place enormous pressure on children, families, educators, and schools. Yet, those who have chosen this work demonstrate extraordinary resilience: they adapt, persist, and maintain the belief that quality education is a right, not a privilege and that a quality childhood is also a right, not a privilege.

Through challenging years, momentum in New Orleans is sustained through partnerships and perseverance. The Louisiana Children's Museum (LCM), partnering with Agenda for Children and St. Martin's Episcopal School, expand into a broader host community, including nine schools and community centers. A steering committee with representatives from each organization plans for the exhibition, atelier, and the 17th NAREA Winter Conference. It is no surprise this community reflects their creative efforts through their chosen conference title, *Creativity as a Collective Right: Learning in Relationship and Context*.

When the dates for the conference finally arrive, we once again see the way Reggio Emilia's philosophy empowers communities to develop their own identities through collaboration, reflection, and research rather than by following prescriptive models. As New Orleans' vibrant culture intertwines with the values and principles of Reggio Emilia, the conference demonstrates how creativity, inquiry, and shared learning inspire educators, children, and communities alike. Over the three-day conference, 180 participants from 25 U.S. states, two Canadian provinces, and 4 countries including Italy, Mexico, Canada, and the United States join in plenary sessions, reflective discussions, school tours, and encounters with the *Mosaics* at the beautiful LCM—an architectural splendor.

Creativity as a Collective Right

In his opening remarks of the conference, Filippo Chieli shares that in preparing for the conference, he and Valentina Violi return to a central question: What does it mean to share work honestly, in a way that reflects who they (the children, families, and educators of Reggio Emilia) are presently? While in dialogue with NAREA and colleagues prior to the conference, they considered not only the content they could offer, but also the feeling they hope to create together. What they bring to share with participants is not a polished or finalized narrative but living work—work that continues to evolve through relationships with children, families, and one another. As part of an ongoing experience in Reggio Emilia, they carry both what they have already thought and what they are still in the process of understanding, recognizing that knowledge is never static but always in motion.

Chieli emphasizes that they do not come with a singular truth to offer. They do not claim to hold *the answer*, nor do they seek to present a definitive model to be replicated. Instead, they strive to be true to themselves. He explains that this means speaking from lived reality as educators working with real children and real families, grounded in the complexities and possibilities of everyday life. In sharing their work, they aim to offer an authentic portrait of who they are today, shaped by their context, their questions, and their ongoing commitments.

What feels most essential, then, is not certainty but vitality. Chieli explains that they bring energy and enthusiasm, not as performance, but as a reflection of their belief in the work and in the potential of education as a shared, creative endeavor. It is an alive, relational, and continually unfolding spirit that is hoped to be expressed. In this way, the exchange moves beyond the transfer of knowledge and instead invites connection, reflection, and the possibility of imagining new paths forward together.

Valentina Violi invites us into a shared inquiry: *What do we mean by creativity?* She frames creativity not as a fixed trait, but as a dynamic and evolving process. Drawing from linguistic and psychological perspectives, she defines creativity as the capacity to create with intelligence. She describes it as a set of dynamic intellectual processes that include sensitivity to problems, the generation of ideas, and the ability to analyze, synthesize, and reorganize existing knowledge in new ways. In this sense, creativity is not reserved for exceptional moments; rather, it is embedded in everyday thinking and learning, shaped through relationships and experiences.

Violi builds on this understanding by referencing the work of Salvatore Arieti (1976), who distinguishes between two forms of creativity. The first is *ordinary* creativity, which enhances daily and personal life. The second is a more *transformative* form that introduces innovation and shifts paradigms, ultimately influencing the collective life of a community. This distinction expands the meaning of creativity by positioning it as both an individual and social force. Violi explains that, in Reggio Emilia, educators make explicit their recognition of the full potential of children by making children visible within the community. In this way, the concept of community is seen as an inclusive space in which both children and adults actively contribute to cultural and social life. Making children's participation visible is essential, as it affirms children's presence not as future citizens but as current protagonists whose perspectives shape shared understandings and collective possibilities.

In the days together, Chieli and Violi illustrate the elevation of children's and adult's creative expression as a shared and visible right. Through collaboration and a commitment to listening, educators create spaces where children's ideas are welcomed into the life of the community. This orientation positions children as active participants whose contributions are valued within society. Recognizing children in this way invites a shift in how communities imagine participation, voice, and belonging. It is through children's curiosity, inventive thinking, and emerging perspectives that new possibilities take shape, offering pathways for communities to grow in thoughtful and unexpected ways.



Conference participants

Gratitude

NAREA strives to work in relationship with communities across North America and in Reggio Emilia, to think together, learn together, and build meaningful connections that sustain work with children and adults. These efforts are grounded in ongoing professional learning and in advancing the Reggio Emilia Approach in diverse contexts. Creative thinking is recognized not as an added skill but as a fundamental element of being human—essential to imagining and enacting change within communities.

The *Mosaics* exhibition and atelier, alongside the conference, become more than events; they become acts of solidarity and creative expression. Together, the host community, NAREA, and Reggio Children envision and design spaces for educators to gather with shared purpose and professional dignity. Engagement with the Reggio Emilia Approach reaffirms a collective responsibility to honor the rights of children, families, and educators. In doing so, hosts strengthen not only individual practice but also the social fabric of the community, demonstrating that even in the face of challenge, educators and advocates remain steadfast advocates for possibility, equity, and hope. To all who make this possible in Reggio Emilia, New Orleans, and throughout North America—we are grateful.

Participant Comments for Violi and Chieli

"Thank you for reigniting my passion for what I do." —CELENA MARTINEZ

"This was my very first NAREA event and I left feeling so motivated, with greater clarity of what Reggio looks like and feels like, and with a deep respect for the time taken to share personal experiences with us and the analysis of children's observations that will help me take our center to a new level of learning and joy of children." —VERONICA BENT

"We had the perfect match between location and experts and were lucky to have you both as guides for this experience! I appreciated the balance of new information to prompt brainstorming and improvement in our individual work and reminders of fundamental concepts we all believe are crucial to our practice. I am grateful for how available and open you were and the sincere joy that was evident when you shared personal examples." —HOLLY DALFERES

"I thoroughly enjoyed my time with you both. The value you place on children, and the level that you lift them up to, is the first step in making this world a better place. Every child in the world deserves to be looked at through the lens of your eyes." —JENNIFER COLLINS

"I left the conference with a better understanding of the Reggio Approach: local history and culture's impact, starting with The Image of the Child is critical, how the lens (topic/question researched) impacts a study's direction, how the municipal governing body influences topics, and more. Americans often get caught up on the look and feel of the room, but the educator's view of the child, reflection, and intentionality are core to the approach." —ERICA PIPER

REFERENCES

Arieti, S. (1976). *Creativity: The magic synthesis*. Basic Books.



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[1–2] **Participants with speakers**

[3–4] **St. Martin's school tour**

[5] **Casual conversations and browsing Reggio Children publications**