

Voices: Conversations from North America and Beyond

Reflections on the 9th NAREA Winter Conference – “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy”

Sarah Felstiner



Sarah Felstiner is the curriculum director at Hilltop Children’s Center in Seattle, WA, where she has worked for over 20 years as a classroom educator and administrator. During that time, Sarah has supported Hilltop’s transformation from a traditional neighborhood daycare to an internationally recognized school of inquiry and professional development. Sarah participated in a study tour of the schools in Reggio Emilia in May of 1993. In the 25 years since that transformative visit, she has continued to explore the implications of the experience of the Reggio Emilia preschools and infant-toddler centers for her own program and for the American context. In particular, Sarah has focused on possibilities for supporting children’s authorship of their own curriculum and on opportunities for engaging families in studying their children’s learning.

Though I have been exploring ideas from the municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia for a long time, I stepped into the conference hall with a mix of anticipation and curiosity. The title of the conference, “Constructing a Culture of Shared Values for Children and Childhood: Honoring Diversity, Differences, and Democracy,” was rather dense, and I was interested in uncovering what it might mean. In his opening remarks on the first day, Tom Drummond, a representative of the Washington Collective, host of “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit and the 9th NAREA Winter Conference, declared, “We are together in an aspiration for democracy” (March 22, 2018). This helped set the tone for the conference. Then, in the first minutes of the opening session, the presenters, Paola Cagliari and Ivana Soncini, introduced the premises for the week’s presentations, which had equally provocative subtitles: “Knowing the Knowledge of Children and Adults,” “Participating in What?,” and

“Learning in a Group and with a Group.” I knew then that we were in for three intensive days of complexity, thoughtfulness, and storytelling.

Paola Cagliari began by unpacking the notion of **participation**, which she described as “both a strategy for working and a value of working.” Paola asserted how essential it is for educators “to give value to every diversity” and “the fact of schools democratically welcoming all children is a premise, but it isn’t sufficient. It is not enough for activating. . . processes of valuing difference and of working with knowledge in democratic ways. We have to ask ourselves: Do schools really, truly promote this process of participation, this process of constructing knowledge?” She also shared this quote from *pedagogista* Elena Maccaferri: “Participation means children are the active participants in their own learning processes and that children are citizens right from the beginning” (March 22, 2018).

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Also on the first day, Ivana Soncini began to examine the notion of **context**, declaring the importance of “shifting our gaze from individuals onto the context they are living in and experiencing before judging the person.” She went on to highlight the hypotheses of the adults as a living part of the learning context, which can be “organized . . . [to] encourage and solicit this . . . exercising of strategies.” She described the way in which context can be aspirational, “a space of the possible” (March 22, 2018). This idea of context was woven through the conference, generally referring to a learning context, which includes the setting, people, and beliefs of each classroom and school community, as well as the social and political history and climate in which those learning contexts exist.

Through the videos and stories that Paola and Ivana shared, we saw the sincerity with which each child’s experience is considered, challenged, and celebrated. Paola called out the “singularity of [each] human being . . . each unique in their way of thinking and of doing.” She later described context as “a space of potentials and a space in which differences and diversities are expressed.” I agree with and

aspire to this view of each “human becoming” (as Paola so beautifully put it) as unique and full of possibility (March 22, 2018). And I am actively trying to complicate my own understanding of the social contexts operating in our country, which can erase that uniqueness and interrupt that sense of possibility.

Many children encounter a world that does not honor their uniqueness, but instead pre-judges them based on their gender, ability, skin color, and other attributes. Children’s and families’ experiences are impacted by both institutional and implicit biases, both inside and outside of school settings. Through the three days of the conference, I felt a curiosity about how to understand “context” in a way that includes these very real forces acting on each of us and on all of us.

In the eye-opening and heart-warming stories that Paola and Ivana shared, I heard a thread of describing diversity in terms of both multiplicity and individuality. Here in the United States, I believe that our context is strongly influenced by enculturated biases and constructed systems that limit multiplicity and individuality, because people are grouped by their

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characteristics and then stifled or privileged by those biases. I believe that in order to live up to Malaguzzi's vision that "all children have the right to live in utopias" (Soncini, March 22, 2018), we must confront these systemic oppressions, including those related to our youngest citizens. Part of working toward diversity and democracy is to make those systems transparent and to engage children in considering the impact of those systems on their own lives and the lives of others. The goals of anti-bias education challenge us to support children in appreciating their own identities and the identities of those unlike themselves. In an anti-bias approach, we acknowledge children's natural capacity to notice unfairness and disequilibrium and to take action toward equity.

Fortunately, this obligation to engage children in beginning to understand and confront bias dovetails well with our goals for children's social learning. As Ivana described on the third day of the conference, learning in groups and with groups naturally brings children into a space of encountering and considering multiple perspectives. She said, "[E]ach single human being works in a process of constant re-equilibration of our knowledge, and there's a constant reforming of that equilibrium, a re-equilibration, only if we encounter people who think something different than the way we think." She described a productive "socio-cognitive conflict" that I believe is precisely what anti-bias education is built upon. She went on to say, "[A]dults are capable of creating contexts

where the children are interested in observing each other—creating contexts where reciprocal or mutual observation is very interesting, very stimulating . . . Communication is channeling everything that is happening in the group, where judgment is suspended . . ." (March 24, 2018). For me, this resonated directly with the goals of anti-bias education.

By the end of the third day, with all these concepts swirling in my head, I began seeking a way to consolidate the notions of diversity, individuality, and group—of context, participation, and democracy. Though nobody who knows me would list "math" as one of the languages I use most fluently, for some reason what popped into my head was a simple mathematical formula, a pared-down way to hang on to the big ideas of the conference:

Context + Participation = Democracy

If we attend to the **context** (both the learning contexts we help construct and the societal contexts we inhabit), and we seek avenues and opportunities for full **participation** by children, families, and educators, then we have laid the groundwork for democracy. While certainly a gross over-simplification of the three days of thinking we did together, for me, this formula felt particularly poignant, because as we sat in the closing hours of the conference, a remarkable thing was happening outside the building.

The last day of the conference fell on March 24, a day when students in Seattle (and many other places around the country and the world) took to the streets to advocate for their right to safe schools and safe lives. These children were naming the conditions of their context and actively participating in seeking change. The capacity and bravery of these children gives me hope for our democracy. Elena Maccaferri's declaration that "children are citizens right from the beginning" was affirmed in the presentations of the Reggio educators and by the students declaring their rights.